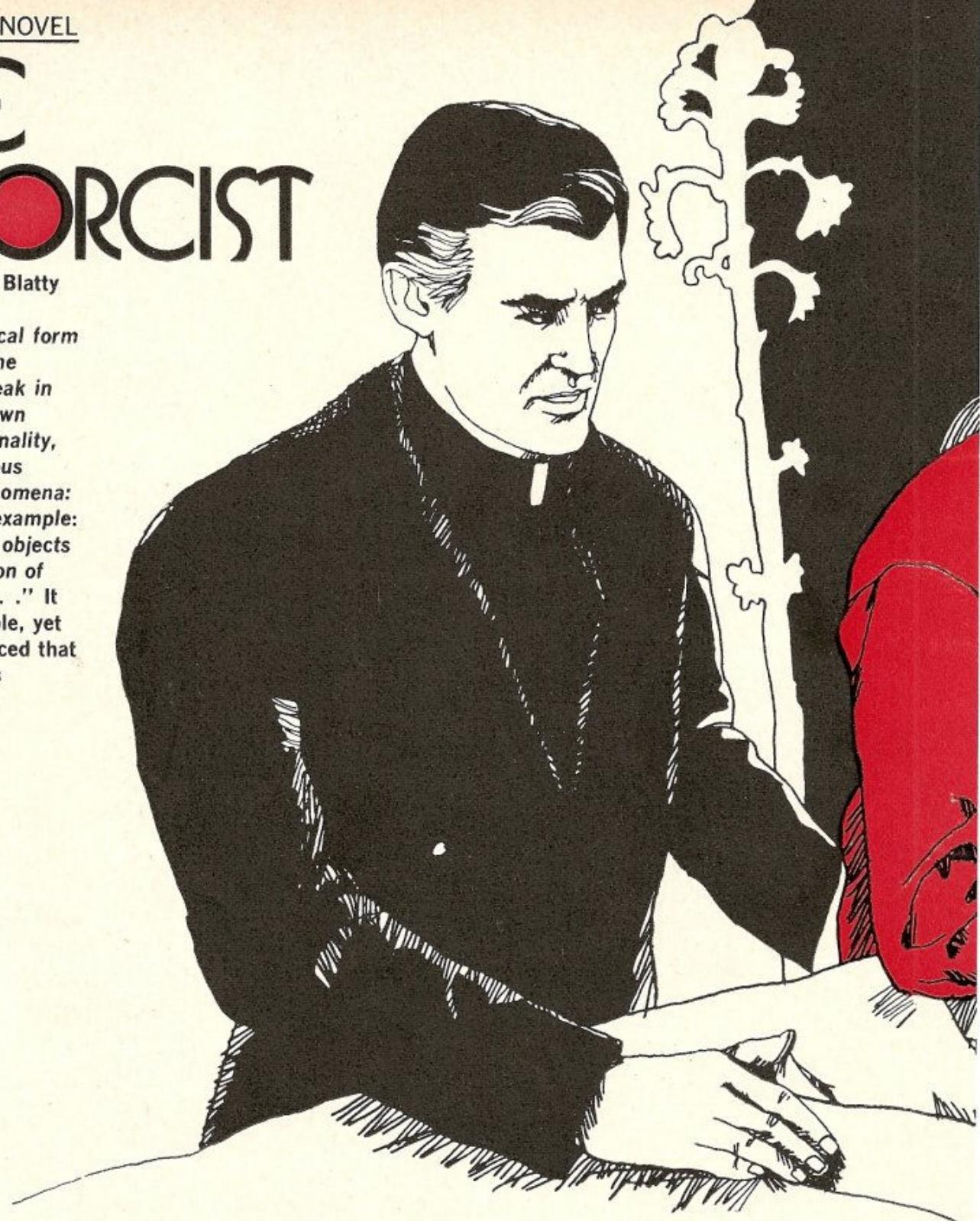


# THE EXORCIST

by William Peter Blatty

*"In the demoniacal form of possession, the 'demon' may speak in languages unknown to the first personality, or manifest various paranormal phenomena: telekinesis, for example: the movement of objects without application of material force . . ." It seemed impossible, yet Chris was convinced that her daughter was possessed!*



□ The rented house was a brick colonial gripped by ivy in the Georgetown section of Washington, D.C. Across the street was a fringe of campus belonging to Georgetown University, to the rear a sheer embankment plummeting steeply to busy M Street and, beyond, the muddy Potomac. Just after midnight on April 1 the house was quiet. Chris MacNeil was awake in bed, going over her lines for the next day's filming; Regan, her daughter, was sleeping down the hall; and asleep downstairs in a room off the pantry were the middle-aged Swiss housekeepers, Willie and Karl. At approximately 12:25 A.M. Chris glanced from her script with a frown. She heard rapping sounds. They were odd. Muffled. Rhythmically clustered.

She listened for a moment, then dismissed them; but

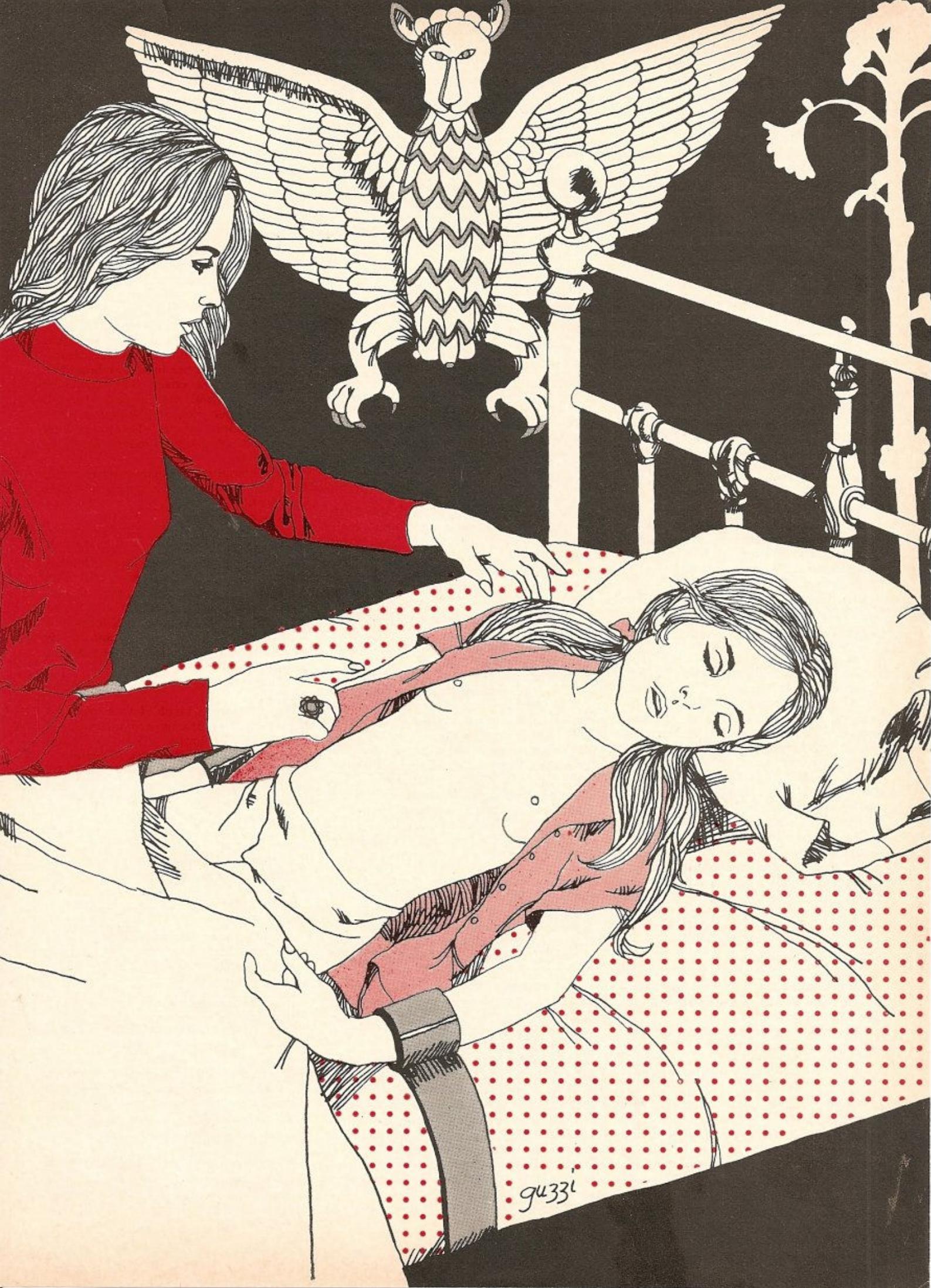
when they persisted she could not concentrate. She slapped down the script on the bed, went out to the hallway and looked around. The sounds seemed to be coming from Regan's bedroom.

She padded down the hall and the rappings suddenly became much louder and faster. Then, as she pushed on the door and stepped into the room, they abruptly ceased.

Her pretty eleven-year-old was asleep, cuddled tight to a large, stuffed, round-eyed panda. Chris moved softly to her bedside. "Rags? You awake?"

Regular breathing. Heavy. Deep.

Chris shifted her glance around the room. Dim light from the hall fell pale and fractured on Regan's paintings and sculptures and on more stuffed animals. She flicked



a quick glance to the ceiling. There! Faint scratchings.

Rats in the attic, for Pete's sake! Rats! She sighed, relieved. And then noticed the cold. She went to the window. Closed. She touched the radiator. Hot.

Puzzled, she moved to the bedside and touched Regan's cheek. It was smooth as thought and lightly perspiring.

She looked at her daughter, at the turned-up nose and freckled face, and on a quick, warm impulse leaned over the bed and kissed her cheek. Then she returned to her room and her script.

For a while longer, Chris studied. The film was a musical-comedy remake of *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*. A subplot had been added dealing with campus insurrections. Chris was starring. She played a psychology teacher who sided with the rebels. The company had completed the interior scenes in Hollywood; all that remained were a few exterior scenes on the campus of Georgetown University; shooting would start tomorrow. It was Easter vacation and the students were away.

She turned to a page that was curiously ragged. She smiled. Her English director. When especially tense, he would tear a narrow strip from the edge of the handsomest page and then chew it, inch by inch.

Dear Burke!

She yawned, made a mental note to have Karl set traps for the rats in the morning. Her fingers relaxed, the script slipped loose. She let it drop and slept.

The phone!

She leaped awake with her heart pounding, and answered. The assistant director.

"In makeup at six, honey."

"Right."

She put on a robe and padded quickly down to the kitchen.

"Ah, good morning, Mrs. MacNeil."

Gray, drooping Willie was squeezing oranges, blue sacs beneath her eyes. She wiped her hands on a paper towel and started moving toward the stove.

"I'll get it, Willie." Chris poured coffee, then moved to the breakfast nook. And smiled warmly as she looked at her plate. A blush-red rose lay on it. Regan. That angel! Many a morning when Chris was working, Regan would slip out of bed, come down to the kitchen and place a flower, then grope her way back to her sleep. Chris looked up from the coffee and lighted a cigarette. Willie brought juice and Chris remembered the rats. "Where's Karl?" she asked.

"I am here, madam."

Lithe as a cat through a door off the pantry. Commanding. Deferential. "Yes?" he breathed by the table. Glittering eyes. Hawk nose. Bald head.

"Hey, Karl, we've got rats in the attic. Better get us some traps."

"There are rats?"

"Karl, I heard them last night," Chris said.

"Maybe plumbing," probed Karl; "maybe boards."

"Maybe rats! Will you buy the traps and quit arguing?"

"Yes, madam!" Bustling away.

Chris sipped at her coffee. A strange man. But, like his wife Willie, hard-working; very loyal; discreet.

In her room, Chris dressed in her cos-

tume sweater and skirt. She glanced in a mirror and solemnly stared at her short red hair that looked perpetually tousled, at the burst of freckles on the small, scrubbed face; then crossed her eyes and stuck out her tongue at herself. Then sagged. Ah, what a life! She picked up her wig box and walked out to the tree-lined street.

She entered the main gates of the campus and her depression diminished, and by the day's first shot, she was almost herself: She started an argument over the script.

"Hey, Burke. Take a look at this, will ya?"

"Oh, you do have a script, I see! How nice!" Burke Dennings, eyes gleaming with mischief, tore a narrow strip from a page of her script. "I believe I'll munch," he cackled.

They were standing on the esplanade in front of the administration building. Here and there a few spectators dotted the lawn, mostly Jesuit faculty. Dennings put the paper in his mouth; his breath smelled faintly of the morning's first gin.

A sly, frail man in his fifties, he spoke with a British accent so clipped and precise that it lofted even his crudest obscenities to elegance.

"Now then, tell me, my baby, what's wrong?"

The scene in question called for Chris to run up the steps, point to the main administration building and shout, "Let's tear it down!"

"It just doesn't make sense," said Chris.

"Well, it's perfectly plain," lied Dennings.

"Why the heck should they tear down the building?"

"Shall we summon the writer? I believe he's in Paris!"

"Hiding?"

"F---ing!" said Burke, eyes glinting.

"Oh, Burke, you're impossible," Chris exploded. She was looking at a nearby Jesuit, checking to see if he'd heard Burke's obscenity. Dark, rugged face. In his forties. Something sad about the eyes; something pained; and yet warm and reassuring. He'd heard. He was smiling. He glanced at his watch and moved away.

"I say, shall we get on with it?"

She turned, disconnected. "Yeah, sure, Burke."

At four o'clock Burke dismissed the company for the day. Chris walked homeward tired. At the corner of Thirty-sixth and O, waiting to cross, she glanced diagonally across the street to a Catholic church. Holy Something-or-other. Staffed by Jesuits.

She crossed. As she walked on, a young priest rushed by from behind her, hands in the pockets of a nylon windbreaker. He took a right, turning into a courtyard behind the church.

Chris paused, watching him. He seemed to be heading for a white frame cottage. A screen door creaked open and still another priest emerged. It was the one who had smiled at her earlier. Only now he looked grave as he put his arm around the young priest's shoulder in a gesture that was gentle and somehow parental. He led him inside and the screen door closed with a squeak.

Chris wondered if Jesuits went to confession.

Once home, she walked into the kitchen.

"Hi, Chris, how'd it go?"

A pretty blonde in her twenties sitting at the table. Sharon Spencer. For the last three years she had been tutor to Regan and social secretary to Chris.

"Oh, the usual crock." Chris sauntered to the table and began to sift messages. "Where's Rags?"

"Downstairs in the playroom, sculpting. She's making a bird. It's for you."

"Yeah, I need one," Chris murmured. She moved to the stove and poured a cup of hot coffee. "How'd the lesson go?"

Sharon frowned. "Had a bad time with math again."

"Oh? Gee, that's funny."

"I know; it's her favorite subject," said Sharon.

"Hi, Mom!"

Regan was bounding through the door, slim arms outstretched. Red ponytails. Soft, shining face full of freckles. Beaming, Chris caught her in a bear hug, then kissed the girl's cheek with smacking ardor. She could not repress the full flood of her love. "Mmum-mmummmum!" More kisses. Then she held Regan out. "Wha'dja do today? Anything exciting?"

"Oh, lemme see." Regan swayed gently back and forth against her mother. "Well, I studied."

"Uh-huh."

"And I painted."

"Wha'dja paint?"

"Oh, well, flowers—you know. Daisies? Only pink. And then—oh, yeah! This horse!" She grew suddenly excited, eyes widening. "This man had a horse, you know, down by the river? Oh, Mom, you should've seen him! And the man let me sit on him! Mother, can't we get a horse? I mean, could we?"

"We'll see, baby. Where's the bird you made?"

Regan looked blank for a moment, then turned to Sharon and grinned, her mouth full of braces. "You told," she said in shy rebuke. "It was a surprise."

"Oh, Rags, that's sweet. Can I see it?"

"No, I still have to paint it. When's dinner, Mom?"

"Hungry?"

"I'm starving. Can't we go to the Barbecue Shoppe?"

Chris smiled fondly.

"Run upstairs and get dressed and we'll go."

"Oh, I love you!" Regan said, and ran from the room.

"Honey, wear the new dress!" Chris called after her.

Chris reached for her mail, began sorting through it.

"Mom, I can't find the dress!" Regan called from upstairs.

"I'll be up in a second!" Chris called back. She got up. "Got a date, Shar?"

"Yes."

Chris motioned at the mail. "You go on, then. We can catch all this stuff in the morning." She went upstairs to Regan's bedroom. Regan was standing in the middle of the room staring up at the ceiling.

"What's doin'?" Chris asked her, hunting for the dress. It was a pale blue cotton. She'd bought it the week before, and remembered hanging it in the closet. But the hunt for the dress proved

fruitless.

"See, Mom? It's not there."

"Yeah, well, put on the navy. It's pretty."

They were back before seven. Regan made a dash for the basement playroom, eager to finish the sculpture for her mother. Chris found Willie brewing coffee in the kitchen.

"Oh, Willie, have you seen that dress that I got for Rags last week?" she asked. "The blue cotton?"

"Yes, I see it in her closet. This morning."

"You didn't pick it up by mistake with the cleaning?"

"It is there in the closet."

"No, it isn't. I looked."

About to speak, Willie tightened her lips and scowled at the coffee. Karl had walked in.

"Good evening, madam." He went to the sink for a glass of water.

"Did you set those traps?" asked Chris.

"I set them, of course; but the attic has no rats."

When Chris went upstairs for her robe, she discovered Regan's missing dress. It lay crumpled in a heap on the floor of her closet.

Chris picked it up. What was it doing in here? She carried the dress into Regan's bedroom, put it on a hanger and slipped it on the rack. She glanced at Regan's wardrobe. Nice. Nice clothes. Yeah, Rags, look here, not there at the daddy who never writes.

As she turned from the closet, she stubbed her toe against the base of a bu-

#### WHERE TO BUY FASHIONS PAGES 150 TO 157

PAGE 150: ADRI FOR BARLAN—Bloomingdale's, New York; Joseph Magnin, San Francisco.

PAGE 151: JOHN ANTHONY—Saks Fifth Avenue, all stores.

PAGE 152: MR. MORT—Burdine's, Miami; Back Street, Tustin, California. Lower left: ADRI FOR CLOTHES CIRCUIT—Bonwit Teller, New York; Burdine's, Miami.

PAGE 153: Left: FIFTH ADDITION—Burdine's, Miami. Right: CIRA—Bloomingdale's, New York.

PAGE 154: JON HAGGINS—Altman's, New York.

PAGE 155: Upper left: GREAT TIMES—Bloomingdale's, New York; L. S. Ayres, Indianapolis; Burdine's, Miami. Upper right: Concept VII—Macy's, New York; Maas Bros. of Florida, Miami; Giorgio's, Beverly Hills.

PAGE 156: JON HAGGINS—Bloomingdale's, New York. Upper left: KASPER FOR JOAN LESLIE—Jordan Marsh, Miami.

PAGE 157: GUNTER FOR PROJECT II—Saks Fifth Avenue, all stores. Upper left: V & J—Bloomingdale's, New York; Nan Duskin, Philadelphia.

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reau. Oh, wow, that hurt! The bureau was out of position by about three feet. No wonder I bumped into it, she thought. Willie must have vacuumed.

She went down to the study with a new script that her agent had sent and had just started reading when the doorbell chimed. Burke Dennings. A lonely man, he dropped by often. Chris smiled ruefully as she heard him rasp a greeting to Karl, whom he continually baited.

He entered and went straight to the bar.

"Pub crawling again?" Chris asked.

"Oh, now, don't be silly!" snapped Dennings. "I've spent the entire evening at a bloody tea, a faculty tea!"

Chris leaned on the bar. "You got smashed at a tea?" she asked dryly, "with some Jesuits?"

"No, the Jesuits were sober."

"They don't drink?"

"Are you out of your bloody mind?" he shouted. "They swilled! Never seen such capacities in all my life!"

"Hey, come on, hold it down, Burke! Regan!"

"Yes, Regan," Dennings whispered. "Where the hell is my drink?"

"Will you tell me what you were doing at a faculty tea?"

"Bloody public relations; something you should be doing!"

Chris handed him a gin on the rocks.

"God, the way we've been mucking their grounds!" the director muttered piously, the glass to his lips. "Oh, yes, go ahead, laugh! That's all that you're good for, laughing and showing a bit of body."

"I'm just smiling."

"Well, someone had to make a good show."

"I guess maybe I should ask a couple of them over," Chris murmured. She was thinking about the sad Jesuit she had noticed that afternoon.

"Ask who?"

"Well, whoever." She shrugged. "The big wheels; you know, priests." To improve Burke's disposition, she asked him to tell her about the tea. Drunk or sober, he was the best raconteur she knew. Under her questions he grew charming and funny, seemed to pass beyond the threat of drunkenness.

"Beg pardon, madam. You wish something?" Karl stood attentively at the door to the study.

"Oh, hullo, Thorndike," Dennings said with a giggle. "Or is it Heinrich? I can't keep it straight."

"It is Karl."

"Yes, of course it is. Damn, I'd forgotten. Tell me, Karl, was it public relations you told me you did for the Gestapo, or was it community relations? I believe there's a difference."

Karl spoke politely. "Neither one, sir. I am Swiss."

"Oh, yes, of course," the director said nastily. "And you never went bowling with Goebbels, I suppose." He stood up abruptly. "You might call a taxi for me—Karl."

After he had gone Chris said to Karl, "Sorry. For the umpteen-eighth time, I apologize for Burke."

"I pay no attention."

"I know. That's what bugs him." She started downstairs.

"Hi ya, Rags, whatchya doin' down there? Got the bird?"

"Oh, yes, come see! Come on down, it's all finished!"

The playroom was paneled and brightly decorated. Easels. Paintings. Phonograph. Tables for games and a table for sculpting.

"Hey, that's great!" exclaimed Chris as her daughter handed her the figure. It was not quite dry, and it looked something like a Worry Bird. Its body was orange, its beak was striped green and white. A tuft of feathers was glued to the head.

"Do you like it?" asked Regan.

"Oh, honey, I do, I really do! I'll leave it here to dry and then I'll put him in my room."

Chris was setting down the bird when she noticed the Ouija board.

"You playin' with that?"

"Yep. Here, I'll show you." Regan was moving to sit by the board.

"Well, I think you need two people, honey."

"No, you don't, Mom. I do it all the time."

Chris pulled up a chair. "Well, let's both play."

Hesitation. "Well, O.K." Regan had her fingertips positioned on the white planchette, and as Chris reached out to position hers the planchette made a swift, sudden move to the word "no" at the top of the board.

Chris smiled at Regan. "You don't want me to play?"

"No, I do! Captain Howdy said 'no'!"

"Honey, who's Captain Howdy?"

"Oh, you know. I make questions and he does the answers."

Chris felt a dim and sudden concern. The child had loved her father deeply, yet never had reacted visibly to her parents' divorce. And Chris didn't like it. Maybe Regan cried in her room; Chris didn't know. But she was afraid Regan was repressing emotions that might one day erupt. A fantasy playmate. It didn't sound healthy. Why "Howdy"? For Howard—her father's name?

"Why do you call him 'Captain Howdy'?"

"Cause that's his name."

"Says who?"

"Well, him."

"And what else does he say to you?"

Regan shrugged. "I'll show you. I'll ask him some questions."

Her fingertips on the planchette, Regan stared at the board with eyes drawn tight in concentration. "Captain Howdy, don't you think my mom is pretty?"

One second . . . five . . . ten . . . twenty . . .

"Honey, maybe he's sleeping."

"Do you think?"

"I think you should be sleeping."

"Already?"

"C'mon, babe! Up to bed!" Chris stood up and Regan followed her up the stairs.

Chris tucked her into bed, blew her a kiss from the door and returned to the study, where she settled down to read the script. Halfway through, she saw Regan coming toward her.

"Hi, honey. What's wrong?"

"There's these real funny noises, Mom. Like knocking. I can't go to sleep."

"Honey, sleep in my bedroom and I'll see what it is." Chris led her to her own bedroom and tucked her in. Then she climbed the narrow, carpeted stairs that

led to the attic. Nothing else except the rat-traps. Six of them. Baited. The room was spotless. Even the air smelled clean and cool.

"There is nothing."

Chris jumped from her skin. "Oh, good Lord!" she gasped. "Karl, don't do that!"

He was standing on the steps. "Very sorry. But you see? It is clean."

"Yeah, it's clean. Thanks a lot." She glanced at the pitched roof. The street was shaded by big old trees, and the branches of a massive basswood canopied the entire front of the house. Was it squirrels after all? It must be. Or branches. Right. Could be branches.

The house was quiet until morning.

Next day the filming went smoothly. Sharon came by the set, and during breaks between scenes she and Chris handled items of business: a letter to her agent (she would think about the script); an acceptance to an invitation from the White House; a wire to Howard reminding him to telephone on Regan's birthday; plans for a dinner party on April 23.

Early in the evening Chris took Regan to a movie, and the following day they drove around to points of interest. The Lincoln Memorial. The Capitol. The cherry trees around the Tidal Basin. Then across the river to Arlington National Cemetery and the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. Regan turned solemn, even a little sad. She stayed quiet during the drive home, and her mood persisted all the rest of the day and through Monday.

On Tuesday, Regan's birthday, it seemed to break. Chris took her along to the filming and the cast and crew sang "Happy Birthday" and brought out a cake. Regan seemed quite gay. But after dinner and the opening of presents the mood seemed to fade. No word from Howard. Chris placed a call to him in Rome and was told by a clerk at his hotel that he couldn't be reached. He was somewhere on a yacht.

Chris made excuses. Regan nodded, subdued, and went downstairs to the basement playroom where she remained until time for bed.

The following morning when Chris awakened she found Regan in bed with her, half-awake. "My bed was shaking," she explained.

"You nut!" Chris kissed her and pulled up her covers. "Go to sleep. It's still early."

What looked like morning was the beginning of a long night.

In New York City Father Damien Karras was attending a meeting of the American Psychiatric Association. As principal speaker, he delivered a paper entitled "Psychological Aspects of Spiritual Development." At the end of the day he enjoyed a few drinks and dinner with some other psychiatrists, but left them early. He would have to see his mother.

He walked to the crumbling brownstone apartment building on Manhattan's Lower East Side. Her greeting was joyful. A shout. A kiss. She rushed to make coffee. He sat in the kitchen and listened to her talk. Mrs. This, Uncle That. Still in immigrant accents.

At a quarter to eleven he kissed her good-bye, promised to return as soon as

he could, and left.

Back in his room at Fordham University he gave some thought to a letter he was writing to the Jesuit head of the Maryland province. Once before he'd requested a transfer to the New York province in order to be closer to his mother; requested a teaching post and relief from his psychiatric duties. In requesting the latter, he'd cited as a reason unfitness for the work.

The Maryland provincial had taken it up with Karras during the course of his annual inspection tour of Georgetown University. He had been sympathetic about Damien Karras' mother, but firm about the priest's suggestion of unfitness: the evidence was to the contrary. But Karras had pursued it.

"Well, it's more than the psychiatry. I'm having problems of my own. I mean doubts."

"What thinking man doesn't, Damien?"

The provincial had not pressed him to discuss his doubt, for which Karras was grateful. He had promised to consider the earlier requests, but thus far nothing had been done. Karras sat at the desk now with pen above paper, then wrote the letter and climbed in bed.

He awakened at 5:00 A.M. and went to the chapel. He secured a host from the ciborium, then returned to his room and said Mass.

"*Et clamor meus ad te veniat,*" he prayed with murmured anguish. "Let my cry come unto Thee . . ."

He lifted the host in consecration, with an aching remembrance of the joy it once gave him. But when he tucked the host inside his mouth, he swallowed the papery taste of despair.

When the Mass was over he polished the chalice and carefully placed it in his bag. He rushed for the 7:10 train back to Washington, carrying pain in a black valise.

Early on the morning of April 11, Chris made a telephone call to her doctor in Los Angeles and asked him for a referral to a local psychiatrist for Regan. Beginning on the day after Regan's birthday—and following Howard's failure to call—she had noticed a sudden and dramatic change in her daughter's behavior and disposition. Insomnia. Irritability. Fits of temper. She kicked things. Threw things. Screamed. Wouldn't eat. In addition, her energy seemed abnormal. She was constantly moving, touching, turning, tapping, running and jumping about. Doing poorly with schoolwork. Inventing fantasy playmates and eccentric attention-getting tactics.

"Such as what?" the physician inquired.

Chris started with the rappings. Since the night she'd investigated the attic, she'd heard them again on two occasions. Both times the rappings had ceased the moment Chris entered Regan's room. She told him that Regan also "lost" things in the room: a dress, books, shoes. She complained that "somebody" moved her furniture. It was clearly Regan who was doing it all.

"You think she's doing it in her sleep?"

"No, when she's awake. To get attention."

Chris mentioned the matter of the shaking bed, which was always followed

by Regan's insistence that she sleep with her mother.

"Well, that could be physical," the internist ventured.

"No, I didn't say the bed is shaking. I said that she *says* it's shaking. Listen, should I take her to a shrink?"

He gave her the name of a Washington internist, Dr. Samuel Klein. "Have him look her over, and forget the psychiatrist for now."

"Are you sure?"

"Check the body. That's first. Then we'll see."

While Regan sat crossly in an examining room, Dr. Klein seated Chris in his office and took a brief case history. He then excused himself and gave Regan a complete examination. After that he sat and talked to her, observing her demeanor. He then returned to Chris and started writing a prescription.

"She appears to have a hyperkinetic behavior disorder."

"A what?"

"A disorder of the nerves. We don't know yet exactly how it works, but it's often seen in early adolescence." He ripped the prescription from the small blue pad and handed it over. "Now, this is for some medication."

She eyed the paper. "What is it? A tranquilizer?"

"A stimulant."

"Stimulant? She's higher'n a kite right now!"

"Her condition isn't quite what it seems," explained Klein. "It's a form of overcompensation. An overreaction to depression."

"Depression . . ." Chris murmured. She was thoughtful. "So you think it's all nerves?"

His answer puzzled her. He asked her if she'd ever known Regan to swear or use obscenities.

"Never," Chris answered. "Where'd you ever get such a notion?"

For a moment he eyed her consideringly, then ventured, "Well, she let loose quite a string just now."

"You're kidding! Like what?"

"Well, specifically, Mrs. MacNeil, she advised me to keep my goddamn fingers away from her ----."

Chris gasped with shock. "She used those words?"

"Look, I doubt that she even understood what she was saying," he said soothingly. "Try the stimulant and we'll see what develops. And I'd like to see her in two weeks."

By the night of her dinner party, Chris had failed to observe any noticeable improvement in Regan. There were subtle signs, in fact, of a gradual deterioration: increased forgetfulness, untidiness, and one complaint of nausea. And a new attention-getting ploy: reports of a smell in Regan's bedroom. Chris took a whiff one day and smelled nothing.

"What's it smell like?"

Regan wrinkled her nose. "Well, like something burning."

Chris made up her mind that she would temporize, at least until the appointment with the doctor. She was also preoccupied with arrangements for the dinner party. She'd invited an interesting mixture. In addition to Burke Den-

nings, she expected a senator and his wife; two actors from the movie; two Jesuits from Georgetown; her next-door neighbors; and Mary Jo Perrin, a plump, gray-haired Washington seeress whom Chris had met at the White House dinner and liked immensely.

"Hey, Shar," Chris asked now. "Which priests are coming?"

"I'm not sure, yet. You invited the president and the dean of the college, but the president is sending an alternate. He has to go out of town." Sharon rummaged through scraps of notes. "He's sending his assistant, Father Joseph Dyer."

As Chris greeted her guests, wearing a lime-green hostess costume with long belled sleeves and pants, her depression over Regan began to lift. She filled her plate from the steaming buffet and scanned the room for Mary Jo Perrin. There. On a sofa with Father Wagner, the Jesuit dean. Chris drifted to the sofa.

"Oh, come on, Mary Jo!" the dean said, smiling. He turned to Chris. "Mary Jo has been telling me there once was a Jesuit priest who was also a medium."

"And he doesn't believe me!" said Mary Jo. "The man even used to levitate! He was very, very famous in the nineteenth century. In fact, he was probably the only spiritualist of his time who wasn't ever clearly convicted of fraud. When he turned twenty-two he joined the Jesuits and promised not to work any longer as a medium, but they threw him out of France nevertheless."

"Say," Chris said suddenly to Father Wagner. "There's something I've been meaning to ask you. Do you know that little cottage that's back of the church over there?"

"Holy Trinity?"

"Yes, right. Well, what goes on in there?"

"That's where they say Black Mass," said Mrs. Perrin.

"She's kidding," said the dean.

"Yes, I know," said Chris. "Who is that priest I keep seeing there? You know—sort of dark?"

"Father Karras," said the dean. "He's our psychiatric counselor." He put down his wineglass regretfully. "Had a pretty rough knock last night, poor guy. His mother passed away."

"I'm sorry," said Chris.

"He's taking it pretty hard. She was living by herself and was dead for a couple of days before they found her."

"That's sad," Chris murmured. Then she looked up. "I've heard of Black Mass, of course. What exactly is a Black Mass?"

"Oh, basically, it's a travesty of the Catholic Mass," explained the dean. "Devil worship. Joe Dyer can tell you more about it than I can. Where's Joe?"

The young priest turned from the buffet. "You called, great dean?"

"He's the only leprechaun in the priesthood," said the dean with an edge of fondness. He sipped at his wine. "Joe was talking about Black Mass just last week."

Father Dyer came over with his plate. Chris glanced at him. "I thought I'd get the scoop on what goes on at a Black Mass," she said. "You're supposed to be the expert."

"No, not really," said Dyer. "In fact, most of what I know I've heard from Father Karras."

"Ah. That's the dark priest at Holy Trinity?"

"Yes. He did a paper on Black Masses once. You know, from the psychiatric side. In brief, a Black Mass is just a collection of perversions. Obscenities. Blasphemies. It's an evil parody of the Mass where, instead of God, they worshipped Satan and sometimes offered human sacrifice—" Dyer's eyes shifted suddenly to a point in the room behind Chris. "Well, now, I think we have a visitor, Mrs. MacNeil," he cautioned, motioning with his head.

Chris turned. And gasped on seeing Regan in her nightgown, urinating onto the rug. She swept her up in her arms.

"I'm sorry!" she said to her guests. "She's been sick, she must be walking in her sleep."

She took Regan upstairs to her bathroom, bathed her and changed her nightgown. Regan's eyes were vacant and clouded. Chris tucked her into bed and the girl fell asleep immediately.

Then Chris returned to the living room and gave her guests a brief account of Regan's illness. When she mentioned the rappings and the other "attention-getting" phenomena, Mrs. Perrin listened intently.

"Well, I have a six o'clock Mass tomorrow morning," said the dean a moment later. It triggered a general departure.

The last to leave was Mary Jo Perrin. Chris asked her if she thought Regan should continue to use the Ouija board, and described her Captain Howdy fixation. "Do you think there's any harm in letting her use it?"

Mrs. Perrin frowned and looked down at the doorstep. "I would take it away from her," she said quietly.

Chris retired to her room, settled wearily into bed, and almost instantly fell asleep. Then awakened to hysterical screaming at the rim of her consciousness.

"Mother, come here, come here, I'm afraid!"

Chris raced down the hall to Regan's bedroom. Whimpering. Crying. Sounds of bedsprings.

Regan lay taut on her back, face stained with tears and contorted with terror as she gripped the sides of her narrow bed.

"Mother, why is it shaking? Make it stop! Oh, I'm scared! Mother, please make it stop!"

The mattress of the bed was quivering violently.

After his mother's funeral in Brooklyn, Father Damien Karras arrived in Georgetown in time for dinner, but had no appetite. He paced inside his cottage.

Shortly after ten Joe Dyer appeared with a bottle of Scotch. He displayed it proudly: "Chivas Regal!"

"Where'd you get the money for it?"

"I stole it."

Karras smiled and said, "I believe you."

"Greater faith I have never seen. Would you like to absolve me now or later?"

"Just pour," said Karras, "and we'll absolve each other."

Dyer was good for him; made him laugh. Dyer drank very little, but continually replenished Karras' glass, and when he thought Karras was numb enough for sleep he made him stretch out while he sat at the desk and continued to talk until Karras' eyes were closed.

In the middle of the night Karras awakened in tears. He had dreamed of his mother. Standing at a window high in Manhattan, he'd seen her emerging from a subway kiosk across the street. She stood at the curb with a brown paper shopping bag, searching for Karras. He waved. She didn't see him. She wandered the street. Buses. Trucks. Unfriendly crowds. She was becoming frightened. She returned to the subway and began to descend. Karras became frantic, ran to the street and began to weep as he called her name, picturing her helpless and bewildered in the maze of tunnels beneath the ground.

He waited for his sobbing to subside, but the tears would not cease. This was like childhood, this grief.

Regan lay on her back on Dr. Klein's examining table. Taking her foot in both his hands, the doctor flexed it toward her ankle, then abruptly released it. The foot relaxed into normal position. He repeated the procedure several times, with no variation in the result. He seemed dissatisfied. When Regan abruptly sat up and spat in his face, he instructed a nurse to remain in the room and returned to his office to talk to Chris.

When Chris had first arrived, he had reported his suspicion that the shaking of the bed had been caused by a seizure of clonus—a disorder that caused an alternating tensing and relaxing of the muscles.

"Well, the test was negative," Dr. Klein told her now, explaining that in clonus the alternate flexing and releasing of the foot would have triggered a run of clonic contractions. As he sat at his desk he seemed worried, however. "Has she ever had a bad fall?"

"No, not that I know of."

"Sleepwalking history?"

"Not until now."

"She was walking in her sleep at the party?"

"Well, yes. She still doesn't know what she did that night. And there's other stuff, too, that she doesn't remember."

"What?"

Sunday. Regan still sleeping. An overseas telephone call from Howard: "How's Rags?"

"Thanks a lot for the call on her birthday."

"I was stuck on a yacht. Now lay off me. I called her the minute I was back in the hotel."

"You talked to her?"

"Yes. She didn't tell you? That's why I thought I'd better call you. What the hell's going on with her?"

"What are you getting at?"

"She just called me a son of a bitch and hung up."

When Regan had finally awakened, Chris now told Dr. Klein, she had no memory whatever of the telephone call.

"Then perhaps she wasn't lying about the moving of the furniture," Klein hypothesized. "Perhaps she moved it with-

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toms of schizophrenia. But temporal lobe would also cover the convulsions. There's one thing that bothers me, though . . ." He trailed off with a puzzled frown.

"What's that?"

"Well, I thought I heard signs of dissociation: 'my pearl' . . . 'my child' . . . 'my flower' . . . 'the piglet.' I had the feeling she was talking about *herself*."

Chris and Sharon were leaning against the balustrade when the two men emerged. Chris's eyes were red.

"She's sleeping," Klein told her. "She's heavily sedated. She'll probably sleep right through until tomorrow."

"Thank God," Chris said weakly. "But what's wrong?"

"Well, we still think it's temporal lobe," Klein answered.

"What the hell are you talking about!" Chris erupted. "She's been acting like a psycho, like a split personality!"

It was the neurologist who responded. "There haven't been more than a hun-

dred authenticated cases of split personality, Mrs. MacNeil. It's a rare condition. Now, I know the temptation is to leap to psychiatry, but any responsible psychiatrist would exhaust the somatic possibilities first. That's the safest procedure."

"O.K., so what's next?" Chris sighed.

"A lumbar tap," answered the neurologist.

"Go ahead," Chris murmured. "Do whatever you have to."

Klein called his office and instructed an assistant to deliver the necessary equipment and medication to the house. When he'd finished the call he turned to Chris and asked what had happened since last he saw Regan.

"Well, Tuesday," Chris pondered, "there was nothing at all. Last night, again, nothing. Then this morning it started."

She'd been sitting in the kitchen, Chris told the doctors, when Regan ran screaming down the stairs, shouting that Captain Howdy was chasing her, punching her, shoving her, threatening to kill her. "There he is!" she had shrieked, pointing to the kitchen door. Then suddenly Regan had stood in the middle of the kitchen with arms extended and had begun to spin rapidly like a top, continuing the movements for several minutes until she had fallen to the floor in exhaustion.

"And then all of a sudden," Chris finished in distress, "I saw this—hate in her eyes. This hate." She burst into sobs.

A short time later, after the arrival of the equipment, Klein anesthetized Regan's spine and removed some spinal fluid. He carefully stowed the tubes of fluid in his bag, wrote a prescription for soluble Thorazine and disposable syringes and gave it to Chris. "Have this filled right away."

Chris handed it to Sharon. "Do that for me, would you? I'd like to go with Dr. Klein while he makes the tests."

Klein ran a number of tests in his laboratory while Chris watched, but failed to find anything abnormal.

"Here we are again," Chris murmured bleakly.

For a while Klein brooded. Then he asked, "Do you keep any drugs in your house? Amphetamines? LSD?"

"No, there's nothing like that."

Klein nodded and stared at his shoes, then looked up and said, "Well—I guess it's time we consulted a psychiatrist, Mrs. MacNeil."

Chris was back home at exactly 7:21 P.M. At the door she called, "Sharon?" There was no answer.

She went upstairs to Regan's bedroom. Regan was still heavily asleep. Not a ruffle in her covers. But the window was wide open. Sharon must've opened it, she thought. She closed it. Where was Sharon?

She returned downstairs just as Willie came in. "Hi, Willie. Where's Karl?"

Willie made a gesture of dismissal. "He lets me see a Beatles movie. By myself. He goes to something else."

At 8:01 Chris was in the study when Sharon walked in carrying several packages and flopped in a chair.

"Where've you been?" asked Chris.

"Oh? Didn't Burke tell you?"

"Burke Dennings was here?"

"I couldn't get the druggist to deliver, so when Burke came around, I thought, Fine, he can stay here with Regan while I get the Thorazine." She shrugged. "I should have known he'd leave."

"Yeah, you should've. Let's go and eat."

"What happened with the tests?" Sharon asked as they walked slowly to the kitchen.

"Not a thing. All negative," Chris answered dully. "I'm going to have to get her a shrink."

At 9:28 the front doorbell rang. Willie answered. It was Karl. As he passed through the kitchen en route to his room, he nodded a good evening and remarked that he'd forgotten his key.

"I can't believe it," Chris said to Sharon. "That's the first time he's ever admitted a mistake."

They passed the evening watching television in the study.

At 11:46 Chris answered the phone. It was the young director of the second unit. He sounded grave.

"Have you heard the news yet, Chris?"

"No, what?"

"Burke's dead."

He had fallen down the steep flight of steps beside Chris's house, fallen all the way to M Street, where a horrified pedestrian had watched as he tumbled. A broken neck. This bloody, crumpled scene his last.

The telephone fell from Chris's fingers and she wept silently, standing unsteadily. Sharon ran and caught her, supported her, led her to the sofa. Later, they talked. Reminisced about Dennings. Chris now laughed, now cried. "Poor Burke . . . poor Burke . . ."

Some time past midnight Chris was standing moodily back of the bar, her elbows propped, head lowered, eyes sad, waiting for Sharon to return from the kitchen with a tray of ice.

"I still can't believe it," Sharon was saying as she entered the study.

Chris looked up and froze.

Gliding spider-like close behind Sharon, her body arched backwards in a bow, with her hands on the floor and her head almost touching Sharon's legs, was Regan, her tongue flicking quickly in and out while she hissed like a serpent.

"Sharon?" Chris said numbly, still staring at Regan.

Sharon stopped. So did Regan. Sharon turned and screamed as she felt Regan's tongue snaking out at her ankle.

Wherever Sharon moved, Regan would follow.

The next day: Friday, April 22. While Chris waited in the hall outside the bedroom, Dr. Klein and a noted neuropsychiatrist were examining Regan. The doctors observed for half an hour. Flinging. Whirling. Tearing at the hair. Regan occasionally grimaced and pressed her hands against her ears as if blotting out sudden, deafening noise. She bellowed obscenities. Screamed in pain. Then at last she flung herself face down and moaned incoherently.

The psychiatrist motioned Klein away from the bed. "Let's get her tranquilized," he whispered.

The internist nodded and prepared an

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injection of Thorazine. But the dosage proved inadequate. He injected another and they waited.

Regan grew tractable. Then dreamy. Then stared in sudden bewilderment. "Where's Mom? I want my mom!" She wept.

Chris ran to the bed and hugged her. Kissed her. "Oh, Rags, you're back! It's really you!"

"Oh, Mom, he hurt me!" Regan sniffled. "Make him stop hurting me! Please? O.K.?"

Chris glanced to the doctors with a pleading question in her eyes.

The psychiatrist turned to Regan. "Can you tell me what's wrong?"

"I don't know," she answered. "I don't know why he does it to me." Tears rolled down from her eyes. "He was always my friend before."

"Who's that?"

"Captain Howdy! And then it's like somebody else is inside me! Making me do things!"

"Well, all right, then; let's try something, Regan. A game." He reached in his pocket and brought forth a shining bauble attached to a silvery length of chain. "Have you ever seen movies where someone gets hypnotized?"

She nodded.

"Well, I'm a hypnotist. Now, if I hypnotize you, Regan, I think it will help you get well. The person inside you will come out. Would you like to be hypnotized?"

"O.K.," she said softly. "But only a little."

"Would you close those shutters for me, Sam?" the psychiatrist asked Dr. Klein. "And pull the draperies?"

When the room was dark, the psychiatrist began to swing the bauble back and forth with an easy movement. He began to intone the hypnotic ritual. Within a very short time, the girl was in a trance.

"Are you comfortable, Regan?"

"Yes." Her voice was soft and whispery.

"Is there someone inside you?"

"Sometimes."

"Captain Howdy?"

"I don't know."

"If I ask him to tell me, will you let him answer?"

"No!"

"Why not?"

"I'm afraid!"

"If he talks to me, Regan, I think he will leave you. Do you want him to leave you?"

"Yes."

"Let him speak, then. Will you let him speak?"

A pause. Then, "Yes."

"I am speaking to the person inside Regan, now," the psychiatrist said firmly. "If you are there, you too are hypnotized and must answer all my questions." For a moment he paused to allow the suggestion to enter her. "Come forward and answer, now. Are you there?"

Silence. Then something curious happened: Regan's breath turned suddenly foul. The psychiatrist smelled it from two feet away.

"Are you the person in Regan?" he asked.

She nodded.

"Who are you?"

"Nowonmai," she answered gutturally.

"That's your name?"

She nodded.

The psychiatrist attempted another approach. "When I ask you questions, you will now answer by moving your head: a nod for 'yes,' and a shake for 'no.' Do you understand that?"

Regan nodded.

"Are you someone Regan has known?"

Regan shook her head, no.

"Are you someone she's invented?" No.

"You're real?" Yes.

"Part of Regan?" No.

"Do you like her?" No.

"Do you hate her?" Yes.

"Do you blame her for her parents' divorce?" No.

"Has it something to do with her parents?" No.

"But you're punishing Regan?" Yes.

"You wish to harm her?" Yes.

"To kill her?" Yes.

"If she died, wouldn't you die, too?" No.

The answer seemed to disquiet the psychiatrist, and he lowered his eyes in thought. In the smothering stillness, Regan's breathing rasped. The psychiatrist's eyes gleamed sharply with speculation.

"Is there something she can do that would make you leave her?" Yes.

"Will you tell me what it is?" No.

Abruptly the psychiatrist gasped in startled pain. Regan had kicked him hard in the groin.

Chris flung open the shutters. Turned. Saw Regan and the doctors writhing on the bed in a tangle of shifting arms and legs, in a melee of grimaces, gasps and curses, of howling and yelping and hid-

eous laughter, with Regan oinking, Regan neighing, Regan talking some strange language, then Chris watched helplessly while her daughter's eyes rolled upwards into their sockets and she wrenched up a keening shriek of terror.

Regan crumpled and fell unconscious.

Slowly and carefully, the doctors untangled themselves and stood up. They stared at Regan. After a time, the expressionless Klein took Regan's pulse. They left the room and went down to the study.

For a time, no one spoke. Chris was on the sofa, Klein and the psychiatrist sat near her in chairs. The psychiatrist sighed and looked at Chris. "Did you recognize the language she was speaking?" he asked her.

Chris shook her head, white-knuckled fingers clutching and unclenching on a balled-up handkerchief.

"Well, it's somewhat confusing," the psychiatrist said evasively. "It's highly improbable that she's faking."

Klein nodded in agreement.

"We think so for a number of reasons," the psychiatrist continued. "For example, the abnormal and painful contortions; and most dramatically, I suppose, the change in her features when we were talking to the so-called person she thinks is inside her. You see, a psychic effect like that is unlikely unless she believed in this person. Do you follow?"

"I think I do," Chris answered, squinting her eyes in puzzlement. "But one thing I don't understand is where this person comes from. I mean, you keep hearing about 'split personality,' but I've

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never really known any explanation."

"Well, neither does anyone else, Mrs. MacNeil. We use concepts like 'consciousness,' 'mind,' 'personality'—but we don't really know yet what these things are." He was shaking his head. "Regan hasn't any history of schizophrenia and the EEG didn't show up the brain-wave pattern that normally accompanies it. So I tend to reject schizophrenia. Which leaves us the general field of hysteria, perhaps caused by guilt."

"But what would she have to feel guilty about?"

"Well, a cliché answer," the psychiatrist responded, "might be the divorce. Children often feel that they are the ones rejected, and assume full responsibility for the departure of one of their parents."

"Where does this new personality come in?"

"Well, again, it's a guess," he replied. "Assuming that it is conversion hysteria stemming from guilt, then the second personality is simply the agent who handles the punishing."

"And that's what you think she's got?"

"As I said, I don't know," replied the psychiatrist, still evasive. "It's extremely unusual for a child of Regan's age to be able to pull together and organize the components of a new personality. But the really striking thing," he noted, "is the new personality's apparent precocity. It isn't a twelve-year-old at all. It's much, much older. And then there's the language . . ."

"So what's the bottom line?" Chris asked.

"At the moment," the psychiatrist told her, "a blank. She needs two or three weeks of really concentrated study in a clinical atmosphere; say the Barringer Clinic in Dayton."

Chris was in her bedroom that afternoon packing for Dayton when Karl appeared. There was someone to see her—a detective. He handed her a business card. William Kinderman, it announced. Lieutenant of Detectives. And tucked in the lower left-hand corner: Homicide Division.

Kinderman was sagging in the entry hall, the brim of his limp and crumpled hat clutched tight with short fat fingers freshly manicured.

Chris approached. The detective extended his hand with a weary and somehow fatherly manner. "I'd know that face in any lineup, Mrs. MacNeil."

"Am I in one?" Chris asked him as she took his hand.

"Oh, my goodness, oh, no," he said. "No, it's strictly routine."

"What is it? Burke? Burke Dennings? Was he killed?"

"A man so important, we just couldn't pass it. Did he fall? Was he pushed?" Kinderman shrugged. "Who knows?"

"Listen, come on in the study," Chris said anxiously.

Kinderman followed her into the study, glancing at his wristwatch as if he were anxious to get away to some appointment.

"Since poor Mr. Dennings was filming in this area, we wondered if he might have been visiting someone on the night of the accident. Now, other than yourself, of course, did he have any friends

on this street?"

"He was here that night," Chris told him.

"Oh? Near the time of the accident?"

"When did it happen?" she asked him.

"Seven-oh-five," he told her.

"Yes, I think so."

"Well, that settles it, then." He nodded. "He was drunk, he was leaving, he fell down the steps. Just for the sake of the record, can you tell me approximately what time he left the house?"

"I don't know," Chris replied. "He came and left while I was out. I was over at a doctor's office in Rosslyn."

"How do you know he was here?"

"Oh, well, Sharon, my secretary, was here when Burke dropped by. My daughter was sick and Sharon left him here while she went to pick up some prescriptions. By the time I got home, Burke was gone."

"And between the time your secretary left and the time you returned, who was here in the house with Mr. Dennings beside your daughter?"

"No one. Willie and Karl were—"

"Who are they?"

"They're my housekeepers. They'd taken the afternoon off, and when I got home, they weren't back yet."

"So only your daughter would know when Dennings left?"

"No, she wouldn't know. She was heavily sedated."

"That's her room?" Kinderman was thumbing toward the ceiling. "With that great big window looking out on those steps?"

Chris nodded.

From the pocket of his jacket Kinderman extracted a crumpled scrap of paper and a toothmarked, yellow stub of pencil. "Now, just a name or two. The housekeepers? John and Willie . . . ?"

"Karl and Willie Engstrom."

"Karl. That's right, it's Karl. Karl Engstrom." He scribbled the names in a dark, thick script. "Now, the times. You said the housekeepers got home at what time?"

"Karl, at exactly 9:28. I remember I looked at the clock in the kitchen when he rang the doorbell and said he'd forgotten his key."

"And Mrs. Engstrom? They went and came together?"

"No, she went to see a Beatles film," Chris answered. "She got in a few minutes after I did."

"Why did I ask that? It wasn't important." He folded up the paper and tucked it away. "Well, that's that."

Later that evening, while Dr. Klein was injecting Regan with a heavy dose of tranquilizer in preparation for the journey to Dayton, Lt. Kinderman stood brooding in his office. He shut his eyes and recalled his conversation with the district pathologist on the night of Dennings' death.

"It could have happened in the fall?" he'd asked the pathologist.

"No, it's very unlikely. Of course, he was drunk and his muscles were doubtless somewhat relaxed. Perhaps if the force of the initial impact were sufficiently powerful and—"

"Could another human being have done it?"

"Yes, but he'd have to be an excep-

tionally powerful man."

Sighing, Kinderman reached for a scholarly work on witchcraft and turned to an underlined paragraph dealing with ritualistic murder. He read it slowly, and when he had finished he frowned at the page and shook his head. Then he left his office and drove to the morgue.

"Dennings," the detective said.

The morgue attendant nodded. Kinderman followed him, hat in hand, to rows of refrigerated lockers.

They halted at Locker 32. The expressionless attendant slid it out. Slowly and gently Kinderman pulled back the sheet to expose what he'd seen and yet could not accept.

Burke Dennings' head was turned completely around to face backwards.

On Wednesday, May 11, back from Dayton, Chris and Sharon put Regan to bed, installed a lock on the shutters, and stripped all the mirrors from her bedroom and bathroom. A gloomy Dr. Klein came by and drilled them in proper procedures for administering emergency Sustagen feedings to Regan during her periods of coma. He inserted the nasogastric tubing. "First . . ."

Chris forced herself to grip at the words the doctor was saying and push away others she'd heard at the Barringer Clinic: ". . . syndrome of a type of disorder that you rarely see anymore except among primitive cultures. We call it somnambuliform possession. In times gone by, when belief in the devil was fairly strong, the possessing entity was usually a demon. . . . In some types of somnambuliform possession, the new personality is malevolent, hostile to the first personality. Its primary aim, in fact, is to damage, torture, and sometimes even kill it."

A set of restraining straps was delivered to the house and Chris stood watching, wan and spent, while Karl and Sharon affixed them to Regan's bed and then to her wrists. Karl straightened up and looked pityingly at the ravaged face. "She is going to be well?" he asked.

Chris abruptly slumped to a chair and began to sob into trembling hands. "Oh, I hope so! I hope so!"

Sharon came up beside her and kneaded her neck with a comforting hand. "Hey, O.K. It's O.K."

Chris wiped at her face with the back of a sleeve. "Yeah, I guess so."

She let Sharon take her downstairs, where she drank a cup of black coffee. Then on an impulse she went to the study. The clinic doctor's words followed her: ". . . Your daughter must have known about possession, believed in possession, and known about some of its symptoms, so that now her unconscious is producing the syndrome. If that can be established, you might take a stab at a form of cure that's autosuggestive. I think of it as shock treatment in these cases. It's a very outside chance, but since you're opposed to your daughter's being hospitalized, I'll—"

"Name it, for God's sake! What is it?!"

"Have you ever heard of exorcism, Mrs. MacNeil?"

The books in the study were part of the rented furnishings and Chris was unfamiliar with them. Now she was scanning the titles, searching, search-

ing . . .

The doctor had continued: "Exorcism is a stylized ritual, now out of date, in which rabbis and priests tried to drive out an evil spirit. The Catholics alone haven't discarded it yet, although they keep it pretty much in the closet as sort of an embarrassment. But to someone who thinks that he's really possessed, the ritual's evidently rather impressive. It used to work, in fact—although not for the reason people thought, of course; it worked purely by the force of suggestion."

"Are you telling me to take Regan to a witch doctor?"

"Well, as a desperate measure, perhaps to a priest. That's a rather bizarre little piece of advice, I know: even dangerous, in fact, unless we can definitely ascertain that Regan knew about possession, and particularly exorcism, before this all came on. Do you think she might have?"

"No, I don't."

Chris's eyes darted quickly to a title on the bottom shelf. The volume on witchcraft that Mary Jo Perrin had sent her. She plucked it out from the shelf and turned the pages to the table of contents. The title of a chapter pulsed like a heartthrob: "States of Possession."

She opened to the chapter on possession and began to read.

"What is known is the following: that various people at various times, have undergone massive transformations so complete that those around them feel they are dealing with another person. . . . In the demoniacal form of possession, the 'demon' may speak in languages unknown to the first personality, or . . ."

There! Regan's gibberish! An attempt at a language? She quickly read on.

". . . or manifest various paranormal phenomena, telekinesis, for example: the movement of objects without application of material force. . . ."

"Chris?"

She kept reading, absorbed. "Shar, I'm busy."

"There's a homicide detective wants to see you."

"Oh Sharon, tell him to . . ." She stopped. "No. Tell him to come in."

He came in, his hat brim crumpled in his hand. "So sorry. You're busy. I'm a bother. How's your daughter?"

"No change."

"Ah, I'm sorry, I'm terribly sorry." Kinderman was hulking by the table now, his face expressing concern. "Ah, you're reading?" He was glancing at the book on witchcraft. "For a film?" he inquired.

"Just reading."

"I'm sorry. You're busy. I'll finish. As I said, I wouldn't bother you, except . . ." He looked suddenly at Sharon, who had escorted him in. "Excuse me—you're the secretary?"

"Right," said Chris. "This is Sharon Spencer."

"A pleasure," Kinderman said. "Perhaps you can help," he added. "On the night of Mr. Dennings' demise, you went out to a drugstore and left him alone in the house, correct?"

"Well, no, Regan was here," Sharon

said.

"Dennings came to see Mrs. MacNeil?"

"Yes, that's right."

"Very good. And you left at what time? You remember?"

"Let's see—I was watching the news, which goes on at 6:30. Then Burke came along just ten, maybe twenty minutes after that."

"So a median," concluded the detective, "would have put him here at 6:45."

"And so what's this all about?" asked Chris.

"Well, it raises a question, Mrs. MacNeil." Kinderman turned to eye her. "To arrive in the house at, say, quarter to seven and leave only fifteen minutes later . . ."

"Oh, well, that was Burke," said Chris. "Just like him."

"Was it also not his custom to travel by taxi? He'd call a cab from the house when he left?"

"Yes, he would."

"Then one wonders how he came to be walking on the platform at the top of the steps. And one wonders why taxicab companies do not show a record of a call from this house on that night," added Kinderman. "I'm so sorry, but the matter has now grown serious."

"In what way?" Chris asked.

"The report of the pathologist, Mrs. MacNeil, seems to show that it is still possible he died accidentally. However, the position of Dennings' head and a certain shearing of the muscles of the neck would—"

"Oh, God!" Chris winced.

"Yes, it's painful. I'm sorry; I'm terribly sorry. But this condition never could happen, you see, unless Mr. Dennings had fallen some distance before he hit the steps; for example, some twenty or thirty feet before he went rolling down to the bottom. So a clear possibility, plainly speaking, is maybe . . . Well, first let me ask you if perhaps Mr. Dennings was in your daughter's room that night?"

"Why do you ask?"

"Might your daughter remember?"

"No; I told you before, she was heavily sedated. Why are you asking all this?"

"Well, a clear possibility is that the deceased was so drunk that he stumbled and fell from the window of your daughter's bedroom."

Chris shook her head. "No way. No chance. Burke used to direct when he was smashed. How could he stumble and fall out a window?"

The detective lowered his head and shook it, frowning at the crumpled paper in his hands. "Strange . . . so baffling." He exhaled wearily. "The deceased comes to visit, stays only twenty minutes without even seeing you, and leaves all alone here a very sick girl. And speaking plainly, Mrs. MacNeil—as you say, it's not likely that he would fall from a window. Besides that, a fall wouldn't do to his neck what we found except maybe one chance in a thousand." He nodded at the book on witchcraft. "You've read in that book about ritual murder?"

Some prescience chilling her, Chris shook her head.

"Maybe not in that book," he said. "However—forgive me, I mention this only so maybe you'll think just a little

bit harder—but poor Mr. Dennings was discovered with his neck wrenched around in the style of ritual murder by so-called demons, Mrs. MacNeil."

Chris went white.

After Lt. Kinderman had left, Chris sat numbly alone in the library.

She dropped her glance to the book on witchcraft.

Don't look!

Yet she took a deep breath, opened it, and tried to focus on a page. ". . . demonic possession . . . case of an eight-year-old girl . . . four strong men to restrain her from . . ."

Chris turned a page, stared—and froze. She did not move, did not blink, did not breathe as the image of an open window in Regan's bedroom the night of Dennings' accident rushed headlong back into her memory—called back by a sight that was numbingly familiar. A narrow strip had been shaved from the edge of the page. A moment later she sprang up at the sounds of a commotion in Regan's bedroom: rappings—resonant, massive, like a sledgehammer pounding in a tomb—and Regan screaming in anguish, imploring.

Chris raced up the stairs, toward the bedroom, heard a blow as she ran, someone crashing like a boulder to the floor and her daughter crying, "No! Oh, no, don't! Oh, no please!" and Karl bellowing . . . No! No, it wasn't Karl! Someone else! A thundering bass that was threatening, raging!

Chris burst into the bedroom, gasped, stood rooted in shock. The rappings boomed, shivering through the walls. Karl lay unconscious on the floor near the bureau. Regan, on a bed that was violently bouncing and shaking, clutched a bone-white crucifix in raw-knuckled hands. She stared at the crucifix with terror, eyes bulging.

"Oh, please! Oh, no, please!" she was shrieking as her hands brought the crucifix closer.

"You'll do as I tell you, filth!"

The threatening bellow, the words, came from *Regan*, her voice coarse and guttural, bristling with venom, while in an instantaneous flash her expression and features were hideously transmuted into those of the feral, demonic personality that had appeared in the course of hypnosis. And now, as Chris watched stunned, faces and voices interchanged with rapidity:

"No!"

"You'll do it or I'll kill you!"

Regan now, eyes wide and staring, mouth agape and shrieking. Then abruptly the demonic face once more possessed her, a stench choked the room, an icy cold seeped from the walls as Regan's piercing cry of terror turned into a guttural, yelping laugh of malevolent spite and triumphant rage.

Chris watched in horror, her hands to her cheeks. Then she rushed at the bed, grasped blindly at the crucifix, at Regan, who was still screaming. But Regan smashed a blow across her chest that sent her reeling across the room and crashing into the wall.

Chris crumpled to the floor in a daze. Her vision blurred as she tried to raise herself, faltered, was too weak. She started to crawl painfully toward the

bed, eyes still unfocused, limbs aching, past Karl. Then she cringed and shrank back in incredulous terror as she thought she saw through the fog her daughter's head turning slowly on a motionless torso, rotating monstrously, inexorably, until at last it seemed facing backwards.

Chris screamed until she fainted.

Chris was standing on the Key Bridge walkway, elbows on the parapet, waiting, while homeward-bound traffic moved sluggishly behind her, while drivers honked horns and bumpers nudged bumpers. Impatiently, she flicked ash from her cigarette and glanced toward the District of Columbia end of the walkway. Someone was hurrying toward her: khaki pants and blue sweater.

"Mrs. MacNeil? I'm Father Karras."

Chris frowned, puzzled.

"I should have told you that I wouldn't be in uniform," Karras said. "Sorry. I thought it would be less conspicuous. You seemed so concerned about keeping this meeting quiet."

She hesitated. "You're a friend of Father Dyer's, that right?"

"Yes, I am."

"Did he tell you about the party at my house? About my daughter?"

"No, I didn't know you had one."

"Priests keep a pretty tight mouth, then. That right? I mean, like confession? You don't talk about it? I mean, what if a person, let's say, was a criminal, like maybe a murderer? If he came to you for help, would you turn him in?"

"If he came to me for spiritual help, I wouldn't. But I'd try to persuade him to turn himself in."

"And how do you go about getting an exorcism?"

He was puzzled. "Well, exorcisms just don't happen anymore, Mrs. MacNeil."

"Since when?"

"Since we learned about mental illness; about paranoia, split personality, all those things."

"What about those stories in the Bible about Christ driving out all those demons?"

"Look, if Christ had said those people had schizophrenia, which I imagine they did, they would probably have crucified him three years earlier."

"Oh, really?" Chris put a shaking hand to her forehead. "Well, it happens, Father Karras, that someone very close to me is probably possessed. She needs an exorcism. Will you do it?"

To Karras, it suddenly seemed unreal: Key Bridge; the traffic; Chris MacNeil, the movie star. As he stared at her, he could see the desperate pleading in her haggard eyes.

"Father Karras, it's my daughter," she told him huskily.

He took her wrist in a comforting hand. "In the first place," he told her in soothing tones, "the ritual of exorcism is dangerously suggestive. It could plant the notion of possession, you see, where it didn't exist before. And secondly, Mrs. MacNeil, before the Church approves an exorcism, it conducts an investigation to see if it's warranted—"

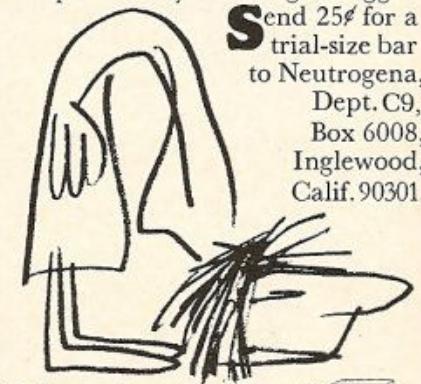
"Couldn't you do the exorcism yourself?" she pleaded.

"Every priest has the power to exorcise, but he has to have Church ap-

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proval, and frankly, it's rarely given—

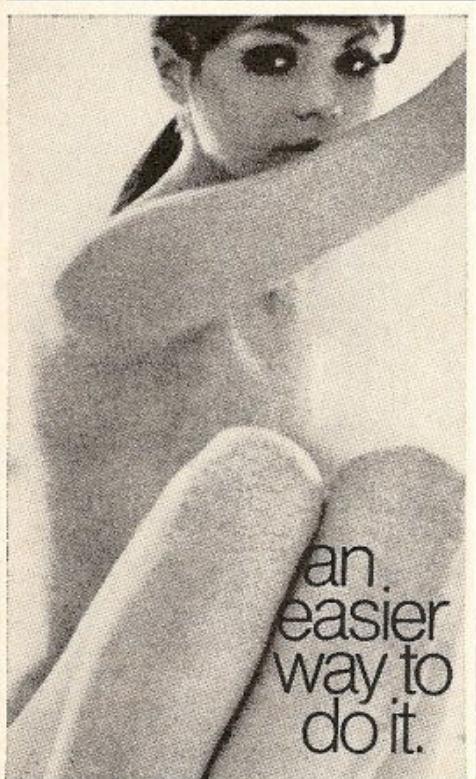
"Can't you even look at her?"

"Well, as a psychiatrist, yes, I could, but—"

"She needs a priest!" Chris suddenly cried out. "I've taken her to every god-damn doctor and psychiatrist in the world and they sent me to *you!* Now you send me to *them!* Won't somebody help me?" Chris crumpled, sobbing, to Karras' chest.

"It's all right," Karras whispered as he patted her shoulder. "It's all right. I'll go see her."

Walking behind Chris, he approached



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the house with a lingering sense of unreality. Chris opened the door, and Karras felt the chill at once. It scraped through his bloodstream like particles of ice. He heard commotion upstairs. A deep, booming, angry voice thundering obscenities and threats. It shivered through walls.

Karras glanced at Chris. She was staring at him mutely. Then she moved on ahead. He followed her upstairs and along the hall to Regan's bedroom where Karl leaned against the wall outside her door, bafflement and fright in his eyes.

"Go and take a look at her," Chris said to Karras. "I'll wait here."

Karras hesitated, then entered the room slowly, flinching at the pungent stench that hit him in the face. Quickly reining back his revulsion, he closed the door. Then his eyes locked on the creature that was lying on its back in the bed, head propped against a pillow while eyes in wasted sockets shone with mad cunning and burning intelligence, with interest and with spite as they fixed upon his. Karras glanced at the tangled, matted hair, the wasted arms and legs, the distended stomach, then looked back into the eyes.

"Hello, Regan," said the priest in a warm, friendly tone. He took a chair to the bedside and sat down. "I'm a friend of your mother's. I'd like to help you."

The eyes gleamed fiercely, unblinking. Then her lips stretched taut into a feral grin. "Well, well, well," gloated Regan sardonically, and hairs prickled on the back of Karras' neck, for the voice was an impossibly deep bass, thick with menace and power. "So it's you . . . they sent you! Well, we've nothing to fear from you at all."

"Yes, that's right. I'm your friend. I'd like to help."

"You might loosen these straps then," Regan croaked. Karras saw that her wrists were bound with a double set of restraining straps.

"Are they uncomfortable for you?" he asked.

"Extremely. They're a nuisance. An infernal nuisance." The eyes glinted slyly.

Karras saw the scratch marks on her face, the cuts on her lips. "I'm afraid you might hurt yourself, Regan."

"I'm not Regan," she rumbled.

"Well, then, maybe we should introduce ourselves. I'm Damien Karras," said the priest. "Who are you?"

"I'm the devil."

"Oh, I see." Karras nodded. "Then why don't you make the straps disappear?"

"That's much too vulgar a display of power, Karras. Moreover, if I loosen the straps myself, I deny you the opportunity of performing a charitable act."

"But a charitable act," said Karras, "is a virtue and that's what the devil would want to prevent; so in fact I'd be helping you now if I don't undo the straps."

"How very foxy of you, Karras! If only dear Herod were here to enjoy this. Undo them. Undo them and I'll tell you the future."

"But how do I know that you can read the future?"

"I'm the devil."

"Yes, you say so, but you won't give me proof."

"You have no faith."

Karras stiffened. "In what?"

"In *me*, dear Karras; in *me!*" Something mocking and malicious danced hidden in those eyes.

"Well, now, some very simple test might do," offered Karras. "For example, where is Regan? Do you know?"

"She is here."

"Let me see her."

"Why?"

"Why, to prove that you're telling me the truth."

Suddenly he found himself staring into childish eyes filled with terror, at a mouth gaping wide in a soundless, electrifying shriek for help. Then there was a blurringly rapid remolding of features. "Won't you take off these straps?" asked a wheedling voice in a clipped British accent. Then in a flash, the demonic personality returned and threw back its head in laughter.

Karras sat stunned, felt glacial hands at the back of his neck. The Regan-thing broke off its laughter and fixed him with taunting eyes.

"Incidentally, your mother is here with us, Karras. Do you wish to leave a message? I will see that she gets it."

The priest's face was now colorless. "If that's true," he said numbly, "then you must know my mother's first name. What is it?"

The Regan-thing hissed at him, mad eyes gleaming, head gently undulating like a cobra's. Then it lowed like a steer while its eyes rolled upward in their sockets.

Karras watched as the bellowing continued; then he walked out of the room.

Chris pushed herself expectantly away from the wall. "Well?"

"She ought to be in a hospital."

"I just can't do that," said Chris with quavering anxiety. "I can't have anyone else involved. She's . . ." She bent her head. "Do you think she's possessed?"

"How much do you know about possession?"

"Just a little that I've read. Some things that the doctors told me at Barringer Clinic."

"Are you a Catholic?"

"No."

"If you're looking for an exorcism as an autosuggestive shock cure, the Church won't buy it and you'll have wasted precious time." Karras tried to steady his trembling hands. "Whether it's a demon or a mental disorder, I'll do everything I possibly can to help. But I've got to have the background. It's important for Regan. Now, why don't we both go downstairs where we can talk?"

While Karl and Sharon looked after Regan, they sat in the study and Chris related the history of Regan's illness, although she carefully withheld the facts that related to Dennings. She admitted that at first she'd considered exorcism purely as shock treatment. "Now I don't know," she said. She looked at the pensive priest. "What do you think, Father?"

"Compulsive behavior, perhaps produced by guilt, together with split personality."

"Father, I've had all that garbage! How can you say that, after all you've just seen!"

"If you've seen as many patients in psychiatric wards as I have, you can say it very easily," he assured her. "Your

daughter insists she's the devil himself, and that's the same as saying she's Napoleon. You see?"

"Then explain all those rappings and things."

"You've heard of poltergeist phenomena, haven't you?"

"Ghosts throwing dishes?"

Karras nodded. "It's not that uncommon, and usually happens around an emotionally disturbed adolescent. There's nothing supernatural about it. Like Regan's abnormal strength. Again, in pathology that's common. It happens outside of possession."

"I'm tired of all these theories and speculations," she said wearily. "You tell me that you know for a fact there's nothing wrong with my daughter except in her head; that you know for a fact that she doesn't need an exorcism; that you know it wouldn't do her any good! Go ahead! You tell me! You tell me what to do!"

For long, troubled seconds, the priest was still. Then he answered softly, "Well, there's little in this world that I know for a fact." He sank back in his chair. "Does Regan normally have a low-pitched voice?"

"No. In fact, I'd say it's very light."

"Do you know her I.Q.?"

"About average."

"And her style of speech right now: how different would you say it is from normal?"

"Completely. She's never used half those words."

"Would you have any letters she's written? Compositions? A recording of her voice would be—"

"Yes, there's a tape of her talking to her father," she interrupted. "You want it?"

"Yes, I do, and I'll also need her medical records, especially the file from the Barringer Clinic. If I go to the Chancery Office to get their permission to perform an exorcism, I'd have to have substantial indication that your daughter's condition isn't a purely psychiatric problem. And just one other thing. That book that you mentioned, with the section on possession: do you think Regan ever read it prior to the onset of the illness?"

She concentrated, fingernails tapping teeth. "I can't be sure. I mean, I'm sure. Pretty sure."

"I'd like to see it. May I have it?"

"I'll get it." She was moving from the study. "Be back in a second."

Karras nodded, walked to the hall and stood motionless in the darkness, listening to the grunting of a pig from upstairs, to the yelping of a jackal, to hiccups, to hissing. He turned when the light flicked on. Chris came forward with the book and the tape.

"I'll try to come by sometime tomorrow afternoon or evening," he said. "In the meantime, if anything urgent develops, you be sure to call me no matter what time. By the way, did your daughter know that a priest was coming?"

"No. No, nobody knew but me."

"Did you know that my mother had died just recently?"

"Yes. I'm very sorry."

"Is Regan aware of it?"

"No; why do you ask?"

"Not important." He shrugged. "I just wondered." He looked at her worriedly.

"Will you please go to bed?"

"Yeah, O.K." she said softly. "Good night, Father."

He quickly left.

Half an hour later Damien Karras hurried back to his room in the Jesuit residence hall with a number of books and periodicals dealing with possession taken from the shelves of the Georgetown Library. Hastily, he dumped them on his desk. Hysteria. It had to be hysteria.

At a little after 4:00 A.M., he rose from the desk and walked wearily to a window, rubbing his eyes from hours of reading. He gulped at the coolness of the moist morning air and stood in thought. Regan had the physical syndrome of possession. About that he had no doubt, for in case after case, irrespective of geography or period of history, the symptoms of possession were substantially constant. Some Regan had not evidenced as yet, but others she had manifested clearly: the involuntary motor excitement, the foul breath, the wasting away and the distended stomach. And most significantly present were the striking changes in voice and features and the manifestation of a new personality. When possession was voluntary, as with mediums, the new personality was often benign. But in demonic possession, the new personality sought the death of its host, and frequently achieved it.

So, O.K. Regan had the syndrome of demonic possession. Now, how do you cure it?

That depended on what caused it. The Jesuit paced moodily. Sat on the edge of his desk. Considered. The indications from the clinic, Chris had told him, were that Regan's disorder might be caused by suggestion; by something that was somehow related to hysteria. And Karras thought it likely. Weren't most cases of possession caused by hysterical suggestion? Sure! For one thing, possession mostly hit women. For another, there were all those outbreaks of possession epidemics. And then those exorcists . . . Karras frowned. The exorcists themselves often became the victims of possession.

At dawn he took the tape of Regan's voice to the language lab. He threaded the tape to an empty reel, turned on the switch, leaned forward and listened.

The sweet, clear voice of Regan MacNeil: "Hello, Daddy? This is me. Ummm . . ." (Giggling, then whispered asides: "I don't know what to say!") Chris's voice in the background: "Oh, just tell him how you are, honey. Tell about all the things you've been doing." More giggling.) "Umm, Daddy . . . Well, ya see . . . I mean, I hope you can hear me O.K., and, umm . . . well, now, let's see. See, first we're in Washington, Daddy, ya know? And this house, Daddy—it's—no, wait now, I better start over. See, Daddy, there's . . ."

Karras heard the rest only dimly, through the roaring of blood in his ears, as up through his chest and his face swelled an overwhelming intuition: *The thing that I saw in that room wasn't Regan!*

Could it be? Could it possibly, conceivably be? Could the only hope for Regan be the ritual of exorcism? He could not leave it untested. He must

know.

He was carrying a tape recorder and a vial of holy water when Willie admitted him to the house. In the entry he glanced toward Regan's bedroom. Shouts. Obscenities. And yet not in the deep, coarse voice of the demon. Raspy. Lighter. A broad British—yes, the manifestation that had fleetingly appeared when he'd last seen Regan.

Chris was sitting in a chair near Regan's bedroom. She glanced up and quickly stood. "Hello, Father." There were bluish sacs beneath her eyes.

"Hello, I'd like to see her. May I?"

"Right now?" She looked tense, but she nodded. "Go ahead. Go on in."

Karras set up the tape recorder just outside the door, and stepped into the bedroom.

The stench was more powerful than the evening before. The thing on the bed was watching with mocking eyes. Full of cunning. Full of hate. Full of power.

"Hello, Karras."

The Jesuit spoke calmly from the foot of the bed. "Hello, devil."

"Who said I'm the devil?"

"Are you saying that you aren't the devil?"

"Just a poor, struggling demon. A devil. A subtle distinction. Incidentally, you won't mention my slip of the tongue to him, Karras, now will you? Eh? When you see him?"

"See him? Is he here?" asked the priest.

"In the piglet? Not at all. Just a poor little family of wandering souls, my friend."

"And how long are you planning to stay?"

The head jerked up from the pillow, contorted in rage as it roared, "Until the piglet dies!" And then as suddenly Regan settled back into a thick-lipped, drooling grin. "Incidentally, what an excellent day for an exorcism, Karras. Do begin it soon."

"You would like that?"

"Intensely."

"But wouldn't that drive you out of Regan?"

The demon put its head back, cackling maniacally. "It would bring us together."

"You and Regan?"

"You and us, my good friend," croaked the demon. "You and us."

Karras stared. At the back of his neck, he felt hands. Icy cold. Lightly touching. And then gone.

"Yes, you'll join our little family, Karras. You see, the trouble with signs in the sky, my dear morsel, is that once having seen them, one has no excuse."

Karras jerked around his head at a loud, sudden banging. A bureau drawer had popped open, sliding out its entire depth. He felt a quick-rising thrill as he watched it abruptly bang shut. *There it is!* And then as suddenly, the emotion dropped away. *Psychokinesis.* Karras heard chuckling. He glanced back to Regan.

"Very impressive." Karras nodded. "You're certainly a very, very powerful demon."

"I am."

Icy hands lightly touching his neck again. Fear? Was it fear?

"No, not fear," said the demon. It was

[continued on page 218]

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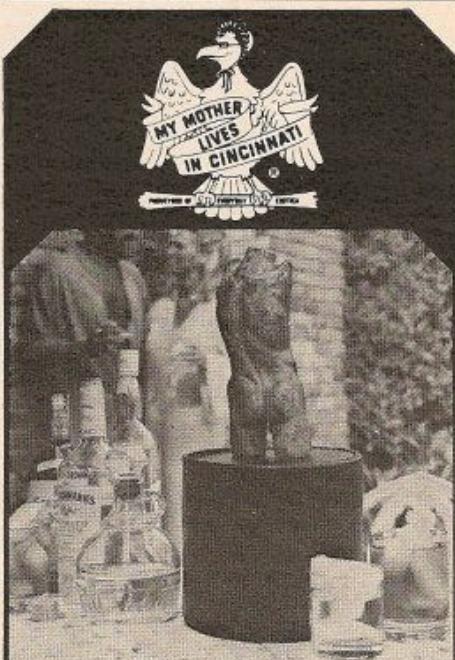
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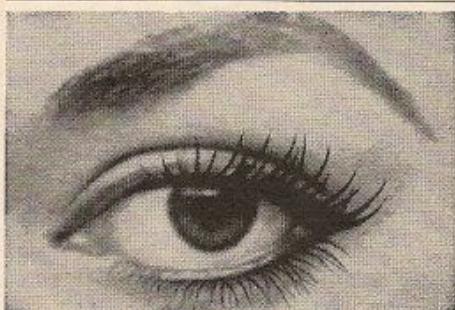


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[continued from page 215]  
grinning. "That was me."

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"Your thoughts are too dull to entertain."

"You're a fascinating person," Karras said. "I'd like to know more about your background. You've never told me which devil you are, for example. What's your name?"

"Ah, now, what is in a name, Karras? Never mind my name. Call me 'Howdy' if you find it more comfortable."

"Oh, yes, Captain Howdy. Regan's friend. Who's the person who was speaking earlier? The one with a British accent?"

"Just another good friend of the sweet honey piglet, dear Karras."

"May I speak to him?"  
"No."

Karras felt a rage sweeping through him. He slipped the vial of water from the pocket of his shirt and uncorked it.

The demon looked wary. "What is that?"

"It's holy water, devil," said Karras as he sprinkled its contents on Regan.

Immediately the demon was cringing, writhing, bellowing in terror and in pain: "It burns! Ahh, stop it! Cease!"

Then there was a silence. The demonic face had vanished and in its place were other features that were similar, yet different. The eyes had rolled upward, exposing the whites. Now there was a murmuring, a feverish gibberish. Karras leaned over to listen. What was it? Nothing. And yet . . . it had cadence. Like a language. Could it be?

The gibberish ceased and was replaced by breathing, raspy and deep.

Karras straightened. "Who are you?" he asked.

"Nowonmai," the entity answered. Groaning whisper. In pain. "Nowonmai."

"Is that your name?" Karras asked.

The lips moved. Fevered syllables. Unintelligible.

"Are you able to understand me?"

Silence. Only breathing. Deep. Oddly muffled. The eerie sound of sleep in an oxygen tent.

Karras found Chris in the kitchen. She was sitting somberly over coffee with Sharon. They looked up at him with a questioning, anxious expectancy. Chris said quietly to Sharon, "Better go check on Regan. O.K.?"

As Sharon left, Karras sat down wearily at the table.

"What's new?" Chris asked, searching his eyes.

"There were two personalities I hadn't seen before. Well, no, one I guess I'd seen for just a moment—the one that sounds British. Is that anyone you know?"

"Yeah, it's someone I knew. Burke Jennings."

"The director who—"

"Yes," she cut in.

"Was Regan acquainted with him?"

"Yes. So what did Burke say?" Chris asked.

"Just obscenities. Now, the other personality that I saw—that's the one that emerged in hypnosis once?"

"Talks gibberish?"

"Yes. Who is it?"

"I don't know."

"Have you sent for the medical records?"

"They'll be here this afternoon. They're being flown down." She took a sip of coffee. "Now, what about the exorcism, Father?"

"Well, I'm not very hopeful I can sell it to the bishop. The Church has criteria that have to be met. Here are the signs that the Church might accept: one is speaking in a language that the subject has never known before, never studied. I'm working on that one with the tapes. Then there's clairvoyance, although nowadays telepathy or ESP might nullify that one. And the last one is powers beyond her ability and age."

"Well, what about those things on her skin?"

"What things?"

"Oh, it happened at the clinic," Chris explained. "There were . . . well . . ." She traced a finger on her chest. "You know, like writing? Just letters. They'd show up on her chest, then disappear."

Karras frowned. "You said letters. Not words?"

"No, no words. Just an 'M' once or twice. Then an 'L'."

Karras shook his head. "Well, I've come across cases like that in the journals. There was one, I remember, by a prison psychiatrist reporting that a patient of his—an inmate—could go into a self-induced state of trance and make the signs of the zodiac appear on his skin."

"Boy, miracles sure don't come easy with you, do they?"

The priest rose from his chair. "Let me wait and check the records from the clinic," he said. "Meanwhile I'll edit the tapes that we made today and take them to the Institute of Languages and Linguistics. It could be that this gibberish is some kind of language. I doubt it, but maybe. And I'll ask them to compare the patterns of speech—see if they're the same as those on the tape of Regan talking to her father."

Karras threaded tape to an empty reel in the office of the rotund, silver-haired director of the Institute of Languages and Linguistics. Together they listened to the tape of the fevered voice croaking its gibberish. Then he turned to the director. "What is that, Frank?"

The director was frowning in puzzlement. "Pretty weird. It isn't any language that I've ever heard. However, it does have the cadence of speech. Why not leave it with me, Father? I'll check it."

"Fine. In the meantime, what if I gave you fragments of ordinary speech by someone apparently quite different? Could you tell if the same person might have been capable of both tapes?"

"Oh, I think so. You've got two different people on those, is that it?"

"No; the words and the voices seem totally different to me, but both are from the mouth of just one person."

"You'd like me to test them out? I'd be glad to."

When Karras returned to the Jesuit residence hall he found a message saying that the records from the clinic had

arrived. He hurried to Reception and signed for the package. Back in his room he began to read immediately, and was soon convinced that his trip to the Institute had been wasted, his hope of proving possession was vain.

"... indications of guilt-obsession with ensuing hysterical-sonnambulistic . . ."

But Regan's stigmata? The skin stigmata that Chris described was indeed reported in Regan's file. But the report also noted that Regan had hyperreactive skin and could herself have produced the mysterious letters merely by tracing them on her flesh with a finger.

He walked back to the MacNeil house. Chris was in the study, forehead in her hand. "You O.K.?" he asked softly.

"Yeah, I'm fine."

"Well, I've looked at the records from the clinic. I believe—" He paused. "Well, my honest opinion right now is that Regan can best be helped by intensive psychiatric care. There's a strong probability that her disorder is rooted in a guilt over the divorce."

"She's guilty because she killed Burke Dennings!" Chris shrieked at him, hands pressed against her temples. "She killed him! She killed him and they'll put her away; they're going to put her away! Oh, my God!"

Karras caught her up as she crumpled, sobbing, and guided her toward the sofa. "Do you want to tell me more?" he asked her gently.

Chris nodded. She wiped her eyes and mentioned Lt. Kinderman's visit. Karras had met the detective once at a funeral of a police officer. Chris went on haltingly, speaking of Kinderman's suspicions, of her certainty that Dennings had been up in Regan's bedroom; of Regan's great strength; of the Dennings personality that she had seen in Regan when Regan had turned her head around and faced backwards.

Karras said softly, "You don't know that she did it."

Chris shook her head. "I think she did it, and I think she could kill someone else. I don't know . . ."

Karras walked out into the street in brimming turmoil. Just outside the house he froze: a squad car was parked a little way down the street. Karras peered inside and recognized Kinderman. Was the detective watching the house? Was it possible he suspected someone in it? And could Regan so horribly have murdered Burke Dennings?

Karras hastened on. He had to build a case for the chancery.

In his room at the residence hall he found the tapes and a message to call the director of the Institute of Languages and Linguistics at home.

He picked up the telephone; his hands shook with desperate hope.

"Father Karras here, Frank. What have you found?"

"Well, I didn't have enough of a sampling to be absolutely accurate, Damien, but the voices on the two tapes, I would say, belong to two different people."

"And what about the gibberish?"

Frank chuckled. "Was this really some sneaky psychological testing, Father?"

"I don't know what you mean."

"Oh, I'd say it was a language, all right. In fact, it is English."



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"Are you kidding?"

"Look, put the tape on your machine and play it backwards."

"What?"

"You've got gremlins," Frank said, laughing. "Play it and I'll talk to you tomorrow. Good night, Father."

Karras hung up baffled. First he ran the tape forward. Gibberish. Then he played it in reverse. He heard his own voice speaking backwards. Then Regan—or someone—in English!

"... marin marin karras be us let us..."

English. Senseless, but English. How on earth could she do that?

He stopped the tape and rewound it. Then he sat down at the desk with paper and pencil and played the tape from the beginning, transcribing the words. When finally it was done, he leaned back and read it:

"... danger. Not yet. [indecipherable] will die. Little time. Now the [indecipherable]. Let her die. No, no, sweet! It is sweet in the body! I feel! There is [indecipherable]. Better [indecipherable] than the void. I fear the priest. Give us time. Fear the priest! He is [indecipherable]. No, not this one: the [indecipherable], the one who [indecipherable]. He is ill. Ah, the blood, feel the blood, how it [sings?]."

Here Karras had asked, "Who are you?"

"I am no one. I am no one."

"Is that your name?"

"I have no name. I am no one. Many. Let us be. Let us warm in the body. Do not [indecipherable] from the body into void, into [indecipherable]. Leave us. Let us be. Karras. Marin [?]. Marin [?]..."

Karras set down the tablet and rubbed at his face, at his eyes, at his thoughts. Not an unknown language. And writing backwards with facility was hardly paranormal or even unusual. But speaking backwards! Wasn't such performance beyond the reach of even a hyperstimulated intellect?

"I am no one. Many." Eerie. Where did it come from? "Marin ... Marin ... Ah, the blood ... He is ill ..." What did that mean? Who was Marin?

The ringing of a telephone awakened him. Groggy, he fumbled toward the light. What time was it? A few minutes after three. He reached blindly for the telephone. Answered. Sharon. Would he come to the house right away?

She met him at the door, frightened. "Sorry, Father," she whispered as he entered the house, "but I thought you ought to see this. Let's be quiet, now. I don't want to wake up Chris. She shouldn't see this."

He followed her, tiptoeing quietly up the stairs to Regan's bedroom. Inside, the Jesuit felt chilled to the bone. The room was icy. Regan seemed to be in a coma. Heavy breathing. Motionless. The nasogastric tube was in place, the Sustagen seeping slowly into her body.

Karras moved to the bed, still staggered by the cold. Yet he saw beads of perspiration on Regan's forehead.

Sharon gently pulled the top of Regan's pajamas apart, and an overwhelming pity hit Karras at the sight of the wasted chest, the protruding ribs where

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one might count the remaining weeks or days of her life. A faint redness was forming on the skin, but in sharp definition, like handwriting. He peered more closely.

"There, it's coming back," whispered Sharon.

Abruptly, the gooseflesh on Karras' arms was not from the icy cold in the room; it was from the sight on Regan's chest: bas-relief script rising in clear blood-red letters. Two words: "Help me."

"That's her handwriting," whispered Sharon.

At nine o'clock that morning Damien Karras went to the president of Georgetown University and asked for permission to seek an exorcism. He received it, and immediately afterward went to the bishop of the diocese, who listened with grave attention to all that Karras had to say.

"You're convinced that it's genuine?" the bishop asked finally.

"I've made a prudent judgment that it meets the conditions set forth in the *Roman Ritual*," answered Karras evasively. He still did not dare believe.

"You would want to do the exorcism yourself?" asked the bishop.

He felt a moment of elation; saw the door swing open for his escape from doubt, from his meeting each twilight with the ghost of his faith. "Yes, of course," he answered.

"Well, we'll see. It might be best to have a man with experience. There aren't too many, of course, but perhaps someone back from the foreign missions. I'll call you as soon as we know."

When Karras had left him, the bishop called the president of Georgetown University.

"Well, Karras does know the background," said the president. "I doubt there would be any danger in just having him assist."

"And what about the exorcist?"

"Lankester Merrin."

"Merrin? I had a notion he was over in Iraq. Working on a dig around Nineveh."

"Yes, down below Mosul. But he came back about three months ago. He's had experience in this."

"When was that?"

"Oh, maybe ten or twelve years ago, I think. In Africa. The exorcism is supposed to have lasted for months. I heard it damn near killed him."

"In that case I doubt that he'd want to do another."

"We do what we're told here."

"Well, I'll leave it up to you and the provincial."

Early that evening, a young priest searched the grounds of Woodstock Seminary in Maryland for a slender, gray-haired old Jesuit. He found him on a pathway, strolling through a grove. He handed him a telegram. The old man thanked him serenely and continued his walk through a nature that he loved. He did not open and read the telegram. He knew what it said. He had read it in the dust of the temples of Nineveh. He was ready.

Lt. Kinderman adjusted the desk-lamp

beam a fraction. Below him were transcripts, exhibits, crime-lab reports, scribbled notes. As if to help make sense of them, he had carefully fashioned them into a collage in the shape of a rose. Yet they did not make sense. One piece of evidence was missing.

He sighed and closed his eyes. Then he opened his eyes and stared at the center of the paper rose: a faded old copy of a national news magazine. On the cover were Chris and Regan. He studied the daughter: the sweet, freckled face and the ribboned ponytails, the missing front tooth in the grin. He looked out a window into darkness. A drizzling rain had begun to fall.

Karras was exhausted. After his visit to the Chancery Office he had returned to his room to sleep. But the telephone woke him up. The exorcist, the Chancery Office told him, would be Lankester Merrin. Karras would assist.

The news had stunned Karras. Merrin! The philosopher-paleontologist! The soaring, staggering intellect! Not himself, but Merrin!

When Karras had telephoned Chris to convey the news, he found that she'd heard from the bishop directly. Merrin would arrive the next day. "I told the bishop he could stay at the house," Chris said.

When Karras hung up the phone, he'd felt heavy, tormented. He himself had been the natural choice for exorcist, yet the bishop had passed him over for Merrin. Why? Because Merrin had done this before?

As he closed his eyes, he recalled that Christ, when asked by his disciples why they had failed at exorcism, had answered, ". . . because of your little faith."

The provincial had known about his religious doubts, Karras reflected. Had he told the bishop? He felt unworthy, incompetent, rejected. It stung. Unreasonably, it stung. Then, finally, sleep came pouring into emptiness, filling in the niches and cracks of his heart.

But in the evening the ring of the phone woke him, Chris calling to inform him that Regan was in a new frenzy. Back at the house, he checked Regan's pulse. It was strong. He gave Librium, then gave it again. And again. Finally he made his way to the kitchen, joined Chris at the table for coffee.

Upstairs, the raging of the demon grew louder. "Bastard! Scum! Pious hypocrite!"

Karras sipped bleakly at his coffee. Then he looked up and saw Chris staring at the ceiling. And he noticed it too: the shouts above had finally ceased.

"I guess the Librium took hold," he said gratefully.

Chiming of the doorbell. He glanced at Chris, who met his look of surmise with a questioning eyebrow.

Chris went to the door and opened it slightly, squinting out into darkness as a fine mist of rain brushed her eyes. A tall old man in a threadbare raincoat. "I'm Father Merrin."

For a moment she looked blank as she stared at the lean, ascetic face, at the sculptured cheekbones polished like soapstone; then she flung wide the door. "Oh, please come in! Oh, come in!"

He entered and stood with his head at

an angle, glancing upward as if he were listening—no, more like *feeling*, Chris thought—for some presence that was out of sight, some distant vibration that was known and familiar. Puzzled, she watched him. His skin seemed weathered by alien winds, by a sun that shone elsewhere, remote from her time and her place.

"Is Father Karras here?"

"Yes, he is. Would you like to say hello to him?"

"I should like to see your daughter first."

Chris flinched at a sudden sound from above—the voice of the demon, booming and yet muffled, croaking, like an amplified voice from a tomb.

"Merriiinnnnnn!"

Then the massive, hollow jolt of a single blow against the bedroom wall.

Chris pressed a hand against her chest. The priest still stared upward, intense yet serene, and in his eyes there was not even a hint of surprise. It was more, Chris thought, like recognition.

Another blow shook the walls.

"Merriiinnnnnnnnn!"

The Jesuit moved slowly forward. He went calmly up the staircase, slender hand sliding along the banister.

Karras came up beside Chris, and together they watched as Merrin entered Regan's bedroom and closed the door behind him. For a time there was silence. Then abruptly the demon laughed hideously and Merrin came out. He closed the door, rapidly descended the staircase and put out his hand to the waiting Karras.

"Father Karras." He clasped Karras' hand in his, searched Karras' face with a look of gravity and concern, while upstairs the laughter turned to vicious obscenities. "You look terribly tired," he said. "Are you tired?"

"Not at all," Karras responded.

"Then I should like you to go to the residence, Damien, and gather up a cassock for myself, two surplices, a purple stole, some holy water and your copy of the *Roman Ritual*." He handed his own raincoat to the puzzled Karras. "I believe we should begin."

"Right," Karras said. "I'll go get the things."

As Karras stepped out into the rainy night, Chris said to the older man, "You must be tired, Father. I'll take you to the study."

He thanked her and followed her.

Chris found Sharon in the kitchen. "What happened in Regan's room, Sharon?" she asked. "Were you there?"

Sharon shifted her faraway gaze to a point in space between disbelief and seen fact. "It was strange. They only stared at each other for a while, and then Regan . . . that thing . . . it said . . ."

"Said what?"

"It said, 'This time, you're going to lose!'"

Chris stared at her, waiting. "And then?"

But Sharon had angled her head, listening. Chris glanced upward and heard it too: the silence, the sudden cessation of the raging of the demon—yet something more. Something growing. A tension, a pulsing, like energies slowing, building up.

Karras came back carrying a card-

board laundry box. He moved quickly to the study, tapped lightly at the door, and then stopped short. Merrin was kneeling in prayer, his forehead bent low to his clasped hands. With his gaze averted, Karras moved to the sofa and soundlessly laid out the contents of the box. He took off Father Merrin's raincoat and draped it carefully over a chair. Then he put on a white surplice above his cassock. He heard Merrin rising, heard, "Thank you, Damien."

Karras picked up Merrin's cassock from the sofa, and only now, and very suddenly, did he feel the impact of the man; of the moment; of a stillness in the house, crushing down on him, choking off breath. He came back to awareness with the feeling of the cassock being tugged from his hands. Merrin was slipping it on. "You're familiar with the rules concerning exorcism, Damien?"

"Yes, I am," answered Karras.

Merrin began buttoning up the cassock. "Especially important is the warning to avoid conversations with the demon."

"The demon." He'd said it so matter-of-factly, thought Karras. It jarred him.

"We may ask what is relevant," said Merrin as he buttoned the collar of the cassock. "But anything beyond that is dangerous. Extremely. Especially, do not listen to anything he says. He will lie to confuse us but he will also mix lies with the truth to attack us. The attack is powerful. Do not listen. Remember that. Do not listen." As Karras handed him the stole, the exorcist added, "Is there anything at all you would like to ask now, Damien?"

Karras shook his head. "No. But I think it might be helpful if I gave you some background on the different personalities that Regan has manifested. So far, there seem to be three."

"There is only one," said Merrin softly, slipping the stole around his shoulders. For a moment he gripped it and stood unmoving as a haunted expression came into his eyes. Then he reached for the copies of the *Roman Ritual* and gave one to Karras. He nodded serenely toward the door. "If you will lead, please, Damien."

Upstairs, Sharon and Chris stood tense and waiting. Karras frowned at Chris. "Please don't come in," he urged her. "Don't. Sharon can stay, but you'd be making a great mistake."

Chris turned questioningly to Merrin.

"Father Karras knows best," said the exorcist quietly.

Karras opened the door and almost reeled back from the blast of stench and icy cold. He looked at the demon in the bed. Its gleaming eyes were fixed on Merrin.

Karras moved forward to the foot of the bed while Merrin walked slowly, tall and erect, to the side. There he stopped and looked down into hate. Regan licked a blackened tongue across her cracked and swollen lips. "Well, proud scum!" croaked the demon. "At last you've come!"

The old priest lifted his hand and traced the sign of the cross above the bed, then repeated the gesture toward all in the room. Turning back, he plucked the cap from a vial of holy water.

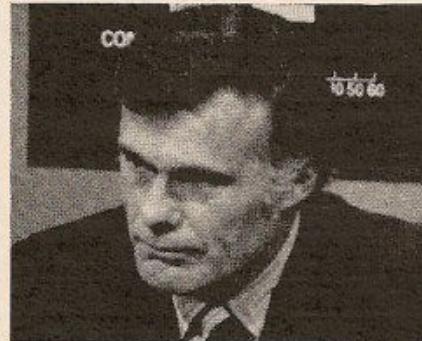
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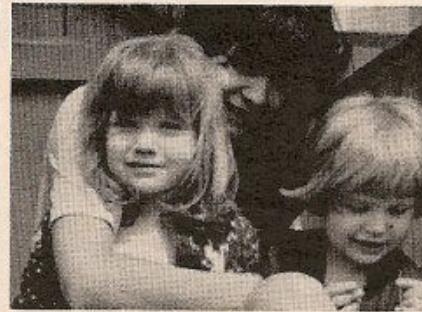
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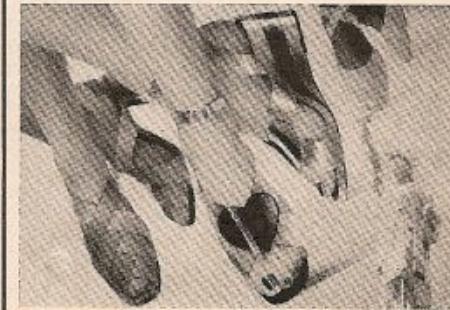
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The face of the demon grew livid. "Ah, will you, bastard?"

Merrin started sprinkling, and the demon jerked its head up, the mouth and neck muscles trembling with rage. "Yes, sprinkle, sprinkle, Merrin! Drench us! Drown us in your sweat! Bend and show the holy rump that we may worship and adore it! Kiss it!"

"Be silent!"

The words flung forth like bolts. Karras jerked his head around in wonder at Merrin, who stared commandingly at Regan. And the demon was silent. The eyes were now hesitant. Wary.

Merrin capped the holy water vial routinely and returned it to Karras. Then he knelt beside the bed and closed his eyes in murmured prayer: "Our Father . . ." he began.

Regan spat and hit Merrin in the face with a yellowish glob of mucus, but Merrin continued the prayer without a pause while his hand plucked a handkerchief out of his pocket and unhurriedly wiped it away. ". . . and lead us not into temptation," he said mildly.

"But deliver us from evil," responded Karras.

Now Merrin stood up and prayed reverently: "God, Creator and defender of the human race, look down in pity on this your servant, Regan Teresa MacNeil, now trapped in the coils of man's ancient enemy, sworn foe of our race . . ."

Karras glanced up as he heard Regan hissing. Her tongue was flicking in and out rapidly, her head weaving slowly back and forth like a cobra's.

". . . 'Save your servant,'" prayed Merrin, still reading from the Ritual.

And now the front of the bed was rising off the floor. While Karras stared at it incredulously, it rose four inches. Half a foot. Then the back legs began to come up. It's not happening! Karras thought as he watched transfixed.

The bed drifted upward another foot and then hovered there, bobbing and listing gently as if it were floating.

"Father Karras?"

Karras turned. The exorcist was eyeing him serenely, and now motioned his head toward the copy of the Ritual in Karras' hands. "The response, please, Damien."

Karras looked blank and uncomprehending.

"Let the enemy have no power over her," Merrin repeated gently.

Hastily Karras glanced back at the text and with a pounding heart breathed out the response: "And the son of iniquity be powerless to harm her."

Merrin embarked upon a lengthy prayer and Karras again returned his gaze to the bed, to his hopes of faith in his God and the supernatural. An elation thrilled through his being. It's there! he thought. There it is! Right in front of me! There!

"Almighty Father, everlasting God . . ."

The hissing ceased, and from the taut-stretched 'O' of Regan's mouth came the nerve-shredding lowing of a steer.

". . . snatch from ruination and from the clutches of the noonday devil this human being made in your image. and . . ."

The lowing grew louder, tearing at

flesh and shivering through bone.

"God and Lord of all creation . . ." Merrin casually reached up to the floating bed and pressed a portion of the stole to Regan's neck while continuing to pray: ". . . by whose might Satan was made to fall from heaven like lightning, strike terror into the beast now laying waste in your vineyard . . ."

The bellowing ceased. A ringing silence. Then a thick and putrid greenish vomit began to pump from Regan's mouth and flowed in waves onto Merrin's hand. But he did not move it. "Let your mighty hand cast out this cruel demon from Regan Teresa Mac-Neil, who . . ."

Karras watched mesmerized as the bed drifted feather-like, slowly, to the floor and settled on the rug with a cushioned thud.

"Lord, hear my prayer," said the exorcist gently.

Slowly Karras turned to the bed. "And let my cry come unto Thee."

Merrin lifted off the stole, took a slight step backward, and then jolted the room with the lash of his voice as he commanded, "I cast you out, unclean spirit, along with every Satanic power of the enemy, every savage companion!"

Regan stopped vomiting. The whites of her eyes gleamed balefully at Merrin. From the foot of the bed, Karras watched her intently. He reached down to grasp Regan's wrist. And found what he'd feared. The pulse was racing at an unbelievable speed.

"It is He who commands you. He who flung you headlong from the heights of heaven . . .!"

Merrin's powerful adjuration pounded at the rim of Karras' consciousness as the pulse came faster now. And faster. The hair on his arms began to prickle, for with nightmare slowness, a fraction at a time, Regan's head was now turning, swiveling like a manikin's, creaking with the sound of some rusted mechanism until the dread and glaring whites of those ghastly eyes were fixed on his.

"And, therefore, tremble in fear, now, Satan . . .!"

The head turned slowly back toward Merrin.

". . . You corrupter of justice! You begetter of death, you betrayer of the nations! You robber of life! You . . .!"

A muffled pounding jolted the room. Then another. Then it came steadily, shuddering through the walls, through the floor, through the ceiling—splintering and throbbing at a ponderous rate, like the beating of a heart that was massive and diseased.

Sharon cried out, pressing fists against her ears as the poundings grew deafening, then accelerated and leaped to a terrifying tempo.

Regan's pulse was astonishing. It hammered at a speed too rapid to gauge. Then Karras felt the pulse rate suddenly drop, and as Merrin prayed and traced the sign of the cross on Regan's brow the nightmarish poundings abruptly ceased. The pulse kept dropping, dropping.

"Prideful bastard, Merrin! Scum! You will lose! She will die!" The demonic entity had returned and raged hatefully at Merrin. "Ancient heretic! I adjure you, turn and look on me! Now look on me, you scum!" The demon jerked for-

ward and spat in Merrin's face, and then croaked at him, "Thus does your master cure the blind!"

"God and Lord of all creation . . ." prayed Merrin, reaching placidly for his handkerchief, "deliver this servant . . ."

"Hypocrite! You care nothing at all for the piglet. You care nothing! You have made her a contest between us!"

"I humbly . . ."

"Liar! Lying bastard! Tell us, where is your humility, Merrin? In the desert? In the ruins? In the tombs where you fled to escape your fellow man?"

Abruptly the demon broke off and fixed its eyes on Karras. He again checked the pulse and found it strong, which meant it was safe to give Regan more Librium. Now he moved to Sharon to instruct her to prepare another injection.

"Do you want that woman?" leered the demon. "She is yours! Yes, the whore is yours! You may ride her as you wish! Why, she fantasizes nightly concerning you, Karras! Slut!"

Sharon crimsoned and kept her eyes averted as she bolted from the room.

Merrin continued the adjurations.

"Now the sow comes! The mother of the piglet!" mocked the demon.

Karras turned and saw Chris coming toward him with a swab and disposable syringe. She kept her head down as the demon hurled abuse.

"Are you pleased, sow-mother? It is you who have done it! Yes, you with your career before anything, your career before your husband, before her, before . . ."

Karras glanced around. Chris stood paralyzed. "Go ahead!" he ordered. "Don't listen! Go ahead!"

". . . your divorce! Go to priests, will you? Priests will not help! Bitch!"

Chris's hand began to shake. "I can't!"

Karras plucked the syringe from her fingers. "All right, I'll do it. Now get out!"

"Yes, we know of your kindness to mothers, dear Karras!" croaked the demon as Chris fled. The Jesuit blanched, and for a moment did not move. Then he slowly drew the needle out and looked into eyes that had rolled upward in their sockets. Out of Regan's mouth came a slow, lilting singing, almost chanting, in a sweet, clear voice like a choirboy's. "Tantum ergo sacramentum veneremur cernui . . ."

It was a hymn sung at Catholic benediction. Eerie and chilling, the singing was a vacuum into which Karras felt the horror of the evening rush with a horrible clarity.

". . . et antiquum documentum . . ."

The singing. Whose voice? wondered Karras. Haunted, he saw Sharon come back in. "I'd like to change her and get her cleaned up, Father. Could you both wait outside?"

The two priests stepped into the warmth and the dimness of the hall and leaned wearily against the wall.

Karras listened to the eerie, muffled singing from within. After some moments he spoke softly to Merrin. "You said—you said earlier that there was only—one entity."

"All the others are but forms of attack," continued Merrin. "There is one . . . only one. It is a demon."

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A silence. Karras spoke again. "What is the purpose of possession?"

"Who can know?" answered Merrin. He thought for a moment. "I think the demon's target is not the possessed; it is us—the observers, every person in this house. And I think—I think the point is to make us despair; to reject our own humanity, Damien; to see ourselves as ultimately bestial, as ultimately vile, ugly, unworthy. And there lies the heart of it, perhaps: in unworthiness. For I think belief in God is not a matter of reason at all; I think it is, finally, a matter of love; of accepting the possibility that God could love us."

Merrin paused. "He knows where to strike." He was nodding. "Long ago I despaired of ever loving my neighbor. Certain people—repelled me. I thought, How could I love them? It tormented me, Damien; it led me to despair of myself. And from that, very soon, to despair of my God. My faith was shattered."

Karras looked up at Merrin with interest. "And what happened?" he asked.

"Ah, well . . . at last I realized that God would never ask of me that which I know to be psychologically impossible. He was asking that I act with love; that I do unto others. That I should do it unto those who repelled me was, I believe, a greater act of love than any other."

He shook his head. "There it lies, I think, Damien. That is possession. The little things, Damien—the senseless, petty spites, the misunderstandings, the cruel and cutting word that leaps unbidden to the tongue."

The lilting singing could still be heard in the bedroom. Merrin looked at the door and listened for a moment. "And yet even from this, from evil, will come good." He paused. "Perhaps evil is the crucible of goodness. And perhaps even Satan—Satan, in spite of himself—somehow serves to work out the will of God."

The singing stopped. Karras took a deep breath and returned alone to the bedroom. He reached down and gripped Regan's thin wrist, looking at the sweep second hand of his watch.

"Why you do this to me, Dimmy?"

His heart froze. He could not move, could not breathe, did not dare look at the source of that sorrowful voice, see those accusing eyes. His mother. His mother!

"You leave me to be priest, Dimmy."

"You're not my mother!" Karras vehemently whispered.

"Oh, for Christ's sake! It simply isn't fair to drive us out of here! Little bitch! She took my body and I think it only right that I ought to be allowed to stay in hers!"

Karras opened up his eyes and saw the Dennings personality.

"Look, she killed me. I was minding my business at the bar, you see, when I thought I heard her moaning. Upstairs. Well, now, I had to see what ailed her, after all, so up I went, and don't you know she bloody well took me by the throat, the little slut!" The voice was whiny, now; pathetic. "I tell you, she pushed me out the bloody window!"

Karras swallowed. "How was—the head turned around?" he asked hoarsely.

"That was an accident. A freak. I hit the steps, you know . . . it was freaky."

"Dimmy, please! Don't make me be alone!" His mother. "If instead of priest, you was doctor, I live in nice house, Dimmy, not wit' da cockroach; not all by myself . . ."

"Won't you face the truth, stinking scum?!" Now it was the demon. "You believe what Merrin tells you? You believe him to be holy and good? Well, he is proud and unworthy! I will prove it to you, Karras! I will prove it by killing the piglet!"

The eyes were shining with triumph and piercing spite. "Feel her pulse!" grinned the demon. "Go ahead, Karras! Feel it!"

He gripped Regan's wrist. The pulse beat was rapid and . . .

"Feeble?" croaked the demon. "I will not let her sleep!"

As Karras stared numbly, the demon put its head back in gloating laughter. Karras did not hear Merrin come back into the room. The exorcist stood by him at the side of the bed and studied his face. "What is it?" he asked.

Karras answered dully, "The demon—said he wouldn't let her sleep." He turned haunted eyes on Merrin. "Her heart's begun to work inefficiently, Father. If she doesn't get rest pretty soon, she'll die of cardiac exhaustion."

Merrin looked grave. "Can you give her drugs? Some medicine to make her sleep?"

Karras shook his head. "No, that's dangerous. She might go into a coma. If

her blood pressure drops anymore . . ."

Merrin knelt by the bed. "Our Father . . . ." he began.

Regan croaked, "You will lose! She will die! She will die!"

In Karras' heart there was a desperate torment. Go to sleep! Go to sleep! he commanded in silent frenzy.

But Regan did not sleep. Not by dawn, Not by noon. Not by nightfall. Not by Sunday, when the pulse rate was one hundred and forty and ever threadier, while the fits continued unremittingly, while Karras and Merrin kept repeating the ritual, never sleeping themselves. Karras agonized. Ah, God, don't let her die! he cried repeatedly to himself. Don't let her die! Let her sleep!

At seven o'clock that Sunday evening, Karras sat mutely next to Merrin in the bedroom, exhausted and racked by demonic attacks: his lack of faith, his incompetence, his flight from his mother. And Regan's condition. His fault. Karras worried also about Merrin. The lack of sleep. At his age.

Karras checked Regan's pulse and then began to take a blood pressure reading. As he wrapped the black sphygmomanometer cloth around the arm, he blinked repeatedly to clear the blurring of his vision.

"Today Mudder Day, Dimmy."

For a moment he could not move. Then he looked into those eyes that were no longer Regan's, but his mother's.

"Why you leave me to die all alone, Dimmy?"

Merrin clutched tightly at his arm. "Please go and rest for a little now, Damien."

With a lump rising dry to his throat, Karras left the bedroom. He walked down the stairs and stood indecisively. Coffee? He craved it. But a shower even more, a change of clothing, a shave.

He left the house and crossed the street to the Jesuit residence hall. As he entered, he saw Kinderman at the telephone switchboard counter.

"Ah, well, Father," said Kinderman, smiling expression changed to concern at the exhaustion in the Jesuit's face. "You look awful! What's the matter? You've got a minute?"

"Barely," murmured Karras. "What is it?"

"A little talk. I need advice, nothing more. We'll walk." He linked his arm through the Jesuit's and guided him diagonally across Prospect Street. "Ah, now, look at that! Beautiful! Gorgeous!" He was pointing to the sun sinking low on the Potomac.

They had come to a wall. Karras rested a forearm upon it and faced Kinderman. "What's on your mind, Lieutenant?"

"Ah, well, Father," said Kinderman, sighing. "I'm afraid I've got a problem."

"Professional?"

"Ethical, you could say. Suppose I'm working on a case, Father Karras. A homicide."

"Dennings?"

"No, no, purely hypothetical. Like a ritual witchcraft murder, this looks. And let us say that in this hypothetical house, there are living five people—and that one must be the killer. All the evidence points to a child, Father Karras; a little girl maybe ten, twelve years old."



Just a baby." He fixed his eyes on the sidewalk. "Yes, I know; sounds fantastic, ridiculous. Now also there is—Satanism involved in this illness, it happens; plus strength. Incredible strength. And this—hypothetical girl, let us say, then, could—twist a man's head around, you see." He was nodding now. "But the girl is not responsible, Father. She's demented." He shrugged. "And yet the illness that she has—it could be dangerous. She could kill someone else." He squinted out across the river.

"It's a problem. What to do? Hypothetically, I mean. Forget it? Forget it and hope she gets well?" Kinderman paused. "What do you believe would be the right thing to do?"

Karras throbbed with a dull, weary anger at the piling on of weight. Then he met Kinderman's eyes and answered softly, "I would put it in the hands of a higher authority."

"I believe it is there at this moment."

"Yes. And I would leave it there."

Their gazes locked. Kinderman nodded. He glanced at the sunset. "So beautiful. A sight." He tugged back his sleeve for a look at his wristwatch. "Ah, well, I have to go. Thank you, Father. I feel better."

Chris was looking at an album of snapshots. Karras walked over and looked down. Here was Regan blowing out candles on a whipped-creamy birthday cake; Regan sitting on a dock in shorts and a T-shirt, gaily waving at the camera.

On the opposite page a ruled sheet of paper bore the script of a child:

If instead of just clay  
I could take all the prettiest things  
Like a rainbow  
Or clouds or the way a bird sings,  
Maybe then, Mother dearest,

If I put them all together,  
I could really make a sculpture of  
you."

Below the poem: "I love you! Happy Mother's Day!" The signature, in pencil, was "Rags."

Karras shut his eyes. Compassion swelled suddenly and blindly into rage at disease and at pain, at the suffering of children and the frailty of the body, at the monstrous and outrageous corruption of death.

He entered the bedroom and looked at Regan. Her head was turned away from him as the demon directed his rage to the other side of the bed. "You scum, Merrin! Come back!"

But where was Merrin? Karras went slowly around the bed and nearly stumbled over him. Merrin lay sprawled face down on the floor beside the bed. Karras knelt, felt for his pulse. And in an anguished instant realized that Merrin was dead.

"Die, will you? Die? Karras, heal him!" raged the demon. "I was winning! Bring him back and let us finish!"

"Ah, God!" Karras groaned in a whisper. "God, no!" He sagged back and took a deep breath. Then he saw the tiny pills scattered loose on the floor. He picked one up and with aching recognition saw that Merrin had known. Nitroglycerin. Heart failure. Coronary artery. His eyes red and brimming, Karras looked at Merrin's face.

"Even worms will not eat your corruption, you—homosexual!"

Karras heard the words of the demon and began to tremble with a murderous fury. He could not hear above the roaring of his blood. He looked up with a face that was a purpling snarl. "You son of a bitch," he said in a whisper that hissed into air like molten steel.

The demon eyed him malevolently.

"You were losing!" cried Karras. "You're a loser! You've always been a loser! Yes, you're very good with little girls! Well, come on! Let's see you try something bigger! Come on!" He had his hands out, was beckoning. "Come on! Come on, loser! Try me! Leave the girl and take me!"

In the study barely a minute later, Chris and Sharon heard the sounds from above. Stumblings. Sharp bumps against furniture, the walls. Then the voice of . . . the demon? The demon. Obscenities. But another voice alternating. Karras? Yes, Karras. Yet stronger. Deeper.

"No! I won't let you hurt them! You're not going to hurt them! You're coming with me!"

Chris flinched at a violent splintering, at the breaking of glass, and in an instant she and Sharon were racing up the stairs, bursting into Regan's bedroom. They saw the shutters of the window on the floor, ripped off their hinges, and the shards of glass.

Alarmed, they rushed toward the shattered window, and as they did, Chris saw Merrin's body. She ran to him. "Sharon! Quick, come—!"

Sharon screamed from the window, "Father Karras!"

Chris ran trembling to the window. She looked below and felt her heart drop. At the bottom of the steps, on the busy sidewalk of M Street, Karras lay crumpled amid a gathering crowd. She stared horrified.

"Mother?"

A small, wan voice calling tearfully behind her. Chris gulped. Did not dare to believe.

"What's happening, Mother? Oh, please! Please come here! Mother, please! I'm afraid!"

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Chris turned, saw the tears of confusion, the pleading, and suddenly she was racing to the bed and weeping. "Rags! Oh, my baby, my baby! You're back! Oh, Rags!"

Late June sunlight streamed through the window of Chris's bedroom. She folded a blouse atop the contents of the suitcase and closed the lid. "O.K., that's all of it," she said to Karl, and went toward Regan's bedroom. "Hey, Rags, how ya comin'?"

It was now six weeks since the deaths of the priests. And still there were no answers. Only haunting speculation and frequent awakenings from sleep in tears. The death of Merrin had been caused by coronary artery disease. But as for Karras . . . "Baffling," Kinderman had mused. Karras had ripped away the shutters and leaped through the window to deliberate death. But why?

For Kinderman, the answer began to take shape in a statement by young Father Dyer that made mention of Karras' emotional conflicts—his guilt about his mother and her death, his problem of faith. When Kinderman added to these the continuous lack of sleep for several days, the concern and the guilt over Regan's imminent death, the demonic attacks in the form of his mother and, finally, the shock of Merrin's death, he sadly concluded that Karras' mind had snapped. Moreover, the detective had learned from his readings on possession that exorcists frequently became possessed, and through just such causes as might here have been present: strong feelings of guilt and the need to be punished. Karras had been ripe.

But Dyer could not accept this theory. He could not forget that night when he had been summoned to kneel beside the dying priest on the sidewalk to give him final absolution. There had been a strange expression on Father Karras' face. An expression of peace, and of something else—something mysteriously like joy at the end of heart's longing. Dyer had returned again and again to the house during Regan's convalescence to talk to Chris. He asked repeatedly if Regan was now able to recall what had happened in the bedroom that night. But the answer was always no.

Now Chris poked her head into Regan's bedroom, saw her daughter with two stuffed animals in her clutch staring down at the packed, open suitcase on her bed.

"There's not enough room in this thing!" Regan said, frowning.

"Well, you can't take it all now, sweetheart. Come on, baby, hurry or we'll miss our plane."

They were catching an afternoon flight to Los Angeles, leaving Sharon and the Engstroms to close up the house.

"Oh, O.K." Regan pouted mildly.

"That's my baby." Chris left her and went quickly down the stairs as the door chimes rang.

"Hi, Chris." It was Father Dyer. "Just came by to say so long."

"Oh, I'm glad. I was just going to call you myself."

They went to the kitchen where they drank coffee, spoke pleasantries for a while. Then they were silent together

while Dyer stared down into his cup. Chris read his thought. "She still can't remember," she said gently.

Dyer nodded. "What do you think really happened? As a nonbeliever. Do you think she was really possessed?"

She pondered. "Well, I do." The sadness and shock of Karras' death settled down on her mood like a melancholy haze. "You said Father Karras had a problem with his faith?"

Dyer nodded.

"I can't believe that," she said. "I've never seen such faith in my life."

"Taxi here, madam."

Chris came out of her reverie. "Thanks, Karl. O.K." She and Dyer stood up. "No, you stay, Father. I'll be right down. I'm just going upstairs to get Rags."

Dyer nodded and watched her leave. He was thinking of Karras' puzzling last words to the devil, the shouts overheard from below before his death. "You're coming with me!" He thought once again of that mysterious look of joy in Karras' eyes. And something else—a deep and fiercely shining glint of triumph?

He watched as Karl helped stow luggage in the cab. Then he saw Chris and Regan come hand in hand down the stairs. Chris kissed his cheek.

Impulsively Regan reached up her arms to him. He leaned over and she kissed him.

The taxi pulled away. Dyer walked over to the curb. The cab turned a corner and was gone.

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