Living with the Dead

The halls were silent, save for the whipping sound of the wind outside against the lone great oak out front of the house. The air inside was warm enough for light clothing, yet the cooling gusts made the house groan and creak as it continually settled and resettled. The home, which was a long, two-story former boarding house-turned-mansion, enjoyed long halls and high ceilings in its plethora of rooms, each of which was unique and functional, including the attic which nearly made up a whole third floor. During the winter, they would burn blazing fires in the twin fireplaces at either end of the house: one in the kitchen and dining area, the other in the living room at the opposite end, with an adjoined flue upstairs for the rec-room’s own fireplace.

Yet this late autumn had been relatively warm, so the electric central-air controlled the temperature with only minute adjustments. Christi was happy for this as she strolled the halls in her white nightgown – a thick linen shift that reached halfway down her calves but left her arms bare – while her long black hair lay flat over her shoulders and onto her back. She was enjoying the early evening’s atmosphere, a slight humidity from without intermittently seeping into the house, which seemed to fit perfectly with the steady beating of the autumn wind against the house and its sentinel tree.

Bare feet slid effortlessly on the hardwood floor, polished to a natural sheen after years of others’ feet treading these same halls. A low rumble was heard through the walls, like the roll of distant thunder carried on the wind, and it sent a shiver down her spine.

“I hope the storm doesn’t come here,” she hoped fruitlessly, knowing how storm clouds seemed to be almost magnetically attracted to the property. It wasn’t the storms that scared her so much as what they brought with them. When the winds raged and lighting came down in the surrounding fields, it often seemed like there were more occupants of the house than just Claire and her father. Shadows danced, voices whispered around corners, and the noise of heavy feet and furniture in other rooms thundered along with the storm outside. Yet every time they went to investigate one of these phenomena, they could find nothing to substantiate it.

A second, louder rumble ground for several seconds through the air, and Christi’s stomach suddenly felt like it had a rock in it. Tonight was going to be one of those torments.

Her father was doing his usual evening routine in the living room – the *lounge* for his more high-class friends – reading the paper, listening to the radio, and otherwise eschewing the outside world. He was of little comfort for, while he had also seen and heard all of these things, he dismissed them as completely natural and explainable phenomena. When he was deep into his habits, as we was now, it was best not to disturb him anyway, especially since he had been getting more irritable of late. A peek into the room revealed him sitting silently, listening to some report about the weather.

*As if it’s not speaking for itself*, she thought, turning away and stepping silently away. Not five steps later, a loud *clang* echoed from the kitchen and she could hear her father shift in his seat. “Claire, what are you doing in that kitchen?” he yelled.

“I’m right here, dad,” she said. “It must be the storm. I’ll go fix it. Wanted to make some tea anyway.”

“Alright. Put the pot on; I might grab some in a little bit.”

“Right.” With quick steps she made her way toward the kitchen, her bare feet making soft *pat pat* noises with each footfall. She crossed through the stone-floored foyer, checking the stairs and overhanging balcony for any shades. *None yet*. She grumbled as she got closer to the kitchen. “It must be the storm” had become their mutual way of not using the g-word, which after the third or fourth storm, her father had banned her from saying except as a reference to a book or movie. Yet as she stepped up to the swinging door for the kitchen, she hesitated, knowing that the storm was not what knocked over whatever had fallen.

She opened the door in a flourish, quiet so as not to alert her father, but fast enough to boost her courage. The kitchen walls and counter space curved in obtuse angles around a central island counter forming one of the front corners of the house. Ambient light from outside settled in through the tall windows that curved with the wall, bathing the space in a shady blue against the painted whites. On the floor right in front of the door lay a large saucepan, upside down and missing its lid. Not wanting to take her eyes off of the scene at large, Christi slid her hand along the wall to find the light switch. Her heart jumped when the light *clicked* into life, only to settle again when nothing more appeared.

Her fingers grasped the handle of the saucepan firmly, almost readying to swing it at anything that might try to scare her. As she walked around the room, she found the lid lying haphazardly against the breadbox, six feet from the open cupboard that housed the other similar cookware. With practiced, if not hastened rapidity, she replaced the saucepan, grabbed and filled the kettle with water, and set it onto the stove to start heating the water. There was hesitance in her hand as she turned the burner on, still recalling the last time they had run the gas line during a storm.

The house had nearly burnt down from the ceiling combusting from the stove’s heat. Thankfully there was an extinguisher under the sink, but it was still a freak event that puzzled even the fire department. Aside from a vent hood, there was nothing to conduct that much heat so high up, even with the burners set to maximum.

*Maybe a bath will calm my nerves*, she thought, leaving the kitchen and heading up the stairs. She caught a peek into the distant living room, and for a moment thought she heard her father talking to someone. *Must’ve turned up the radio*, she thought as she continued up the steps, thinking of how to go about her plan. If she went and started the bath, she could come back, make the tea, and then go soak comfortably with her drink. Walking the long length of the second floor hall, she repeatedly heard noises that sounded like other people in the adjoining rooms, but ignored it, attributing it to the storm, if only for her own sake.

Once at the far end, she entered the bathroom’s tiled entry area. Thanks to its former status as a boarding house, the old building had a massive shower room and toilet area that, after other tenants took over, became a large toilet and bidet area separated from an equally large shower and bath. The half of the long area near the door became an entry area that, with its oak-slat seating along the wall, could double as a sauna if the shower was running hot water.

Christi had only just turned the handle on the bath when there was a tremendous *crash* outside, nearly making her slip and fall on the smooth floor before catching herself on the towel rack. After taking some time to regain her footing, she walked out to the hall to see her father at the other end, glaring her way.

“What in the hell did you do?!”

“N-nothing,” she called back. “I was just running a bath when I heard a loud noise.”

With a gruff sigh, her father walked into the long library room to her left and she followed suit through the alternate door at her end of the hall. Within the walls stood bookcases that covered the entirety of the wall space, save for a few feet of wallpaper above the crest of the cases. One of these many heavy-laden wooden monstrosities had fallen forward, half of it landing on a central table that was now largely a pile of large wooden splinters. Her father hunched over the wreckage, picking up a hefty piece of table leg.

“What did you do?” he growled, punctuating each word.

“I didn’t *do* anything! I already told you I was getting the bathtub filled when I heard the crash.” He tapped the jagged end of the table leg on the ground irritably, sending a shiver up Christi’s spine. “Dad?”

“It was just the storm,” he finally said, still staring at the heavy piece of timber in his hand. “Go take your bath.”

The girl turned and started out the door, mumbling, “It wasn’t the storm and you know it.”

Much to her chagrin, her father heard the remark. “Excuse me?!”

She faced her father, nervous but tired of the tension. “Come on dad! This room is locked up, and there’s not a single breeze! How heavy are these things anyway? Unless I missed the earthquake, there’s nothing in here that could have knocked it over.”

“Don’t say it,” her father spoke as he rose to his feet, still clutching the table leg.

“Dammit dad, why won’t you believe me?!”

Her cry was broken swiftly by her father taking the wood in his hand and, in a single swift motion, swinging it down right toward her head. Managing only a half-step backward, the girl took only a fraction of the strike to her scalp, just above the hairline on her forehead. Several *snaps* were heard as shards at the broken end of the wooden leg broke off and fell to the ground, most slick and coated in red.

Christi reeled, her hands quickly reacting to the pain and moving to cover her head, while her feet moved drunkenly as she tried to regain her sense of balance. When she finally opened her eyes, she saw her father staring wild-eyed at the table leg, unsure of what he had done. Bringing her hand down from her hair revealed her palm entirely covered in blood, with more dripping down in rivulets over her forehead.

When her father looked up, she instantly recoiled further away. “N-no honey. I’m sorry, I-I don’t know what came over me.”

“Stay away,” she stammered, inching her way toward the door behind her.

He followed hesitantly, still holding the bloody cudgel. “Honey, please… I’m sorry.”

She took another step before turning and dashing for the bathroom, screaming, “Stay away!” She could hear her father’s footsteps, slow and broken, as she ran through the bathroom entrance, slamming and bolting the heavy wooden door behind her. Whatever was going on in his head, she just had to ride it out in here since he was blocking the route to the stairway. The world seemed to sway unnaturally around her – a clear side-effect of the blow to her head, though she was unsure if it was the blow itself or the resulting blood loss that was the causative factor.

The bath was still running in the background, hot water in the pipes and in the tub causing the whole trio of rooms to steam up in a dense, hot fog. *I should turn that off soon*, she thought as she sat down against the door, the thick oak giving a feeling of security. Her ear against the wood of the door, she could hear what was going on outside. There was a great deal of silence, and it seemed as though she could hear the outside wind’s vibrations as it raked against the house. *That* is *the wind, right?* As she listened, the wind seemed to take on auditory shapes. Even as she heard her father’s feet shuffling in broken step toward the door, the ambient noise began to sound more and more like voices – loud whispers floating through the air, intensifying as her father approached, as though drawn to him.

Silence. Where but a moment before, there had been almost a cacophony of muted noise, in the blink of an eye the sound – all sound from without – ceased.

*You’re going to die heeere.*

The sudden, childlike voice practically sang the words in a wispy tone, almost as though whispered directly into her ear, causing the girl to jump in her seat against the door. If her father had been wondering where she was before, he knew now.

“Christi? Sweetie, are you there?”

“Dad, go away,” she nearly sobbed. “Go cool off downstairs. I’ll talk to you when I’m ready.”

“Christi, open the door,” he cooed.

“Dad, go away!” She felt bad about yelling at her father, but the gash on her head felt worse. The sticky air had slowed the coagulation, so the blood still flowed relatively freely down her face in a small, slow-moving stream.

“Christi… Honey, open the door.” He knocked tentatively at the wood. “Christi…” He knocked again, slightly harder. “Christi, open the door. Christi…” He knocked hard with a fist. “Christi, open the door!” He started banging with the table leg. “Christi you open up this door right now!”

Tears and sobs escaped as the door shuddered with each thrashing of wood-on-wood as her father hammered at the boards to no avail. “Go away!” she managed to yell, albeit meekly. Her father, engrossed as he was, only kept on hitting, and hitting, and hitting at the door.

Dusk fully fell by the time the banging stopped, returning the space to total silence save for the battering of the wind against the outside of the house. *Seems the storm’s picked up*, Christi thought groggily, her head swimming from the earlier blow and now a lengthy bout of crying as well. Her cheeks felt crusty from the dried salt, and when she wiped at her face, her wrist came back smeared with half-dried blood as well as tear grime. *At least dad’s let up. I’ll just stay here until the storm lets up and everything cools off.*

The tub had long since overflown, water cascading over the side of the enormous bath and emptying into the floor drain that the previous owners had retained through their renovations. Christi just listened to the sound of the water, nearly falling asleep, when she heard a scraping sound outside the door.

It came in short bursts – a heavy scrape like large wooden furniture being dragged along the floor planks. She kept listening, almost straining against the door to hear and maybe determine the origins of the sound. It seemed to turn a corner and become instantly louder, every few seconds emitting the painful screeching groan as it was pushed closer to the door.

And just as suddenly as it had started, the intermittent sound ceased.

Ear pressed tightly to the door, Christi tried to make out any sound at all now, but was met with only silence. This pause lasted for some moments and, just as she was about to return to drifting off to sleep, there came a heaving noise, as though her father were trying to tip something… *Oh no!* The girl scrambled away toward the bath, pausing to detour into the toilet partition and grab the plunger, making sure to get rid of the rubber end for good measure, before sliding on hands and knees into the steady stream of hot water flowing over the floor.

Had she been standing, she would not have been able to see a thing save for the vague outlines of the room, the steam was so thick, but huddled close to the ground, she could see all the way to the door. The heaving sound of her father grew more frantic and heated, until suddenly there was the toppling sound of books. Then the door burst open in a shower of splintered shards, sending the heavy bolt lock flying, as the bookcase fell through in a heavy *crash*. She nearly screamed, but checked herself with a hand clasped firmly over her mouth.

Still in his business shoes from work, his steps had a clear *clack* *clack* ring as he stepped into the humid room, the floors and walls practically perspiring from the steam. “Christiii,” he cooed as he tried to search through the fog, fumbling along the wall as he went. Mouth still covered, she crept along on hands and knees, watching his feet shuffle aimlessly. *Slowly… don’t let him see you…* She was halfway to the door, slowly gliding over the wet tiles, when her knuckle caught on one of the grout spaces, causing the plunger handle to knock against the floor with a very audible *tap*.

Instantly her father zeroed in on her, quickly letting loose with the club in his hand. Christi narrowly avoided it and, foregoing stealth, took to her feet and ran for the door. In her haste, with hair sticky from blood, sweat, and steam flailing in her eyes, she stepped on a sharp piece of wood that used to be the door, cutting her foot and causing her to fall forward. The crunching sound when her leg slammed into the bookshelf, with all of her body weight behind it, was far more painful than the mere cut on her foot, and she made this known with a bloodcurdling scream.

Skin torn, muscles beaten, and definitely with a freshly cracked or broken bone, she gasped for air, trying to settle the pain even as she heard her father’s footsteps rapidly approaching. In her ears rang the sounds of a legion of whisperers, all speaking to her father. All saying two words. *Kill her*.

The shade of her father pierced the edge of the mist, and she just made out the swing of the broken table leg in time to raise her arm in a futile block and resulted in another sickening *crunch*. She let out another scream, rolling away from another swing aimed squarely at her head and, on adrenaline and what willpower of hers remained, quickly hobbled and crawled away down the hall. Even through her raspy and heaving breaths, thick from the steam, she could hear her father’s heavy and determined footfalls. As she dashed away, she looked over her shoulder to see the image of her father, a crazed yet somehow paternal smile breaking and contorting his normal features.

As she shuddered at the sight, she turned her head back toward the stairs ahead, only to see the image of a child immediately before her eyes. She balked and tripped at the sight, bruising her already broken body even further. Somehow she retained consciousness, even through the pain, and as she looked up could see the child – a boy – standing over her.

His eyes were pale blotches, either a figment of his form or completely rolled back into their sockets; one leg was held by an arm, like when one stretches a quadriceps, only his knee was bending the wrong way; and his smile… it nearly split his face in two, yet no red or gore could be seen to show how he was so marred. The smile in itself sent a cold chill into Christi, the apparition bending low and bringing his face closer to hers. The girls eyes widened in abject terror, her voice caught in her through as she heard the same airy breath as when she had been in the still-silent bathroom.

When the child giggled, it seemed to be a call to the Reaper himself, as at the same time she heard her father’s foot falls grow near. Like breaking a column of ice, she tore herself away from the boy and scrambled toward the stairs. The trip down was half crawl, half fall, and when she finally reached bottom, her only thought was to find the car keys and drive off, but when she reached for the bowl on the little end-table, she could not find the keys. Then she heard a *jingle*.

Up above, on the hallway balcony that overlooked the foyer, stood her father shaking the keys in his hand. “Looking for these?” His voice was grating, self-satisfied and menacing. As he began the slow, methodical descent down the stairs, his daughter looked frantically around – somewhere to go; to hide. She crawled into the kitchen on hands and knees, whimpering as the man that was her father came closer and closer.

Inside the kitchen, the lights were still out, the ambient light broken every few moments by a flash of lightning. The battering of the storm against the windows was a torrent of noise as the glass panes shook in their old wooden frames. As she crawled along, she heard the faint whistle of the tea kettle on the stove, and thought she might finally have a weapon, or at least a way to bring her father back to his senses. She moved closer and closer, inching her way along, and as her fingers curled around the handle of the kettle she heard the sound of metal sliding on metal off in another corner of the kitchen.

Her head turned slowly, unsure if it was her father searching for her, not wanting to give away her position. As her head turned, the sickening smell of bloody, aging meat filled her nostrils, and what her eyes saw was just as repulsive. In the far corner, where the counter served as a table-wide butcher block, stood an enormous man with a cancerous hump on one shoulder, gliding a meat cleaver along a steel kitchen-knife sharpening rod. He wore an apron coated from neck to base in gore of some kind, and he smiled widely with each flash of lightning, revealing sharpened teeth and a locked iron band around his face, leaving only room for his crazed eyes to look through. Christi dare not guess what the black, writhing mass on the block was.

As if to break the spell of this new creature, he father burst through the door, ready to make yet another swing at his daughter. Hand already on the kettle, the girl hurled it at her father, spraying the boiling water across his face and upper chest, sending him reeling. “Dad,” she said through the sharp pains in her body, “I don’t know why you’re doing this, but you’ve *got* to snap out of it!”

Not knowing if it would work, she quickly dodged wide around him toward the other door in the kitchen that led to the central hallway downstairs. The man with the cleaver was gone, yet the stench remained as she hobbled by and into the hall. To her left was a door outside, but the handle was somehow missing, though it did not take much effort to guess who had misplaced it. She turned right, heading away from the kitchen, hoping to leave out a side window. Yes, that is how she would escape.

Yet she stopped when she saw the shade at the distant end, standing like a body made only of wiry limbs but whose fingers hung elongated into scythe-like claws. She could make out no more shape before, with her ears ringing from the storm and the repeated assaults, she heard the muffled screams of her father and felt the weight of the table leg slam into the back of her knees.

A long trail of grime and blood led down the hall from where she had crawled, sobbing, trying vainly to get away, if only for a few more seconds. Her hands were torn, her head throbbing, and ever still sounded the *pat pat* of her father’s footsteps, only now the wet tone in the sound was from the trail of red she left behind.

“Oh God…” she moaned as she made another grasping pull along the ground, “please… don’t be following…” Then she heard one final, resounding step next to her, before feeling her father’s fingers clutch at a heft of her hair and yank her back onto her knees. “Oh no! No!” Her father was eerily silent as he throttled her upright, chin angled up, as she sobbed and pleaded. “P-please… sto-hop,” she stammered. “Why are you doing this?” With her scalp yanked as it was, fresh blood flowed anew over her forehead, stinging her eyes as a thin, cold weight was pressed against her neck. “Ppplease… don’t do i-…”

What remained came out in hacks and gurgles as the bloody kitchen knife came away from her throat. Eyes bulging, Christi choked for air, trying to close the gap that was now pouring the life out of her in powerful, rhythmic gushes. Soon enough, her limbs went limp, and not long after, the final twitches of resistance faded save for the nervous movements of the newly dead.

Her father, grinning from ear to ear, slowly made his way around the house, oblivious to the stove whose flame had grown to ignite the kitchen, slowly catching the wall and ceiling on fire. As it burned to the exterior, the high winds fed the flames and brought it up in a thick, curling black smoke that engulfed the entirety of the upper floors. Christi’s father, carrying a length of heavy hempen rope, stepped over his daughter’s body that he had left lying in the hall just outside the foyer, and walked out the door into the brisk night.

When the fire department arrived, the whole of the second and third floor were ablaze, and the first was slowly being eaten away as a billowing column of smoke choked the sky above. Christi’s father was found hanging from the giant oak tree that had remained undamaged by the flames. What was left of his daughter was half-charred from the flames, yet still they could see the damage done before she had expired. The authorities declared it the crazed actions of a madman; a father gone insane with the lost memory of his wife and the loneliness of the home’s location. It was an open-and-shut case.

The house would be rebuilt, they said. Let the ghosts of the past be forgotten, they said. So unawares, the next family came with cars heavy-laden, ready to move in…