

The Town Drunk

Presents

Habitats of Humanity

Monte Davis

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Darla Fay felt guilty for hating Tyler. After all, he was her only grandchild and an orphan who would have had no family left if not for her. She believed in her heart that she could have loved him had his worst trait been his high-decibel knuckle-popping. And perhaps she could've looked past his poor hygiene and his refusal to try her five-bean casserole. But he had worse traits, like his spit-in-your-face defiance and his cold-blooded cruelty toward all living things.

Darla Fay would have sent Tyler away, but she didn't know where to send him. Once, she'd actually considered trying to... no, don't go there. That had been a very bad day, and she wouldn't have even known what kind of poison to use. Tyler would have probably been immune, anyway. He took 20mg of doctor-prescribed Adderall every morning and 30mg of doctor-prescribed Abilify every night and no doubt whatever was prescribed by his horde of dumpster-pharmacist acquaintances. The kid was surely on his last box of brain cells by now, as if a high school dropout with no aspirations really needed a lot of those.

"Where's the phone?" he asked, strolling through the living room with the raggedy bell-bottoms of his saggy-croched pants sweeping the carpet.

"I need to use the phone before you take it," Darla Fay said.

"You're not using it. Where is it?"

"I told you, I need it, Tyler. You can use it when I'm finished. Once you get it, you'll be on it for hours."

"You can use it when I'm finished."

"I'll tell you when I'm through."

"What is it with you and phones, woman?"

"Don't call me 'woman'."

Tyler strode over to the phone base on the piano and pushed the *Page Find* button. A recurring, muffled beep emanated from the crevice between Darla Fay's thigh and the padded recliner arm. Tyler stepped toward her, holding out his open hand. She didn't move. He cracked his knuckles and reached for the phone. She clutched it and held it away from him.

"After I make a call," she said. "Then you can use it."

"Give it to me!" He always growled his words when he was mad.

"No, Tyler! Go to your room."

Tyler's face turned red. He made a fist, raised it, and punched the wall near his grandmother's head.

Darla Fay held out the phone. "Fine!" she said. "Just take it."

"Thank you, woman," he said, his dull voice heavy with sarcasm. He grabbed the phone and headed up the stairs, bell-bottoms sweep-sweep-sweeping. He stomped hard on every stair.

Darla Fay looked at the hole in the wall. There were others like it around the house. A minute later, she could feel the throbbing bass from Tyler's stereo.

Even the house trembled when the monster was in. The fist-hole riddled house, quivering in its wooden bones.

Can a house hate?

Darla Fay rose at seven and slipped her robe on over her pajamas. She shuffled to the bathroom and brushed her few remaining teeth. She swished water in her mouth, spit, inspected her face in the mirror, and plucked a gray whisker from her chin with a pair of tweezers. For a few seconds, it was a new day. Minty, tingly. Life was good.

Then she remembered Tyler. Suddenly, it wasn't a new day anymore. It was the same old day starting all over again. Tyler would wake up (eventually) and raise his voice to the day as if to cast a dark spell. He would stumble around in an invisible cloud of misery, throw a box of cereal because it was the wrong kind, and go in search of the phone which would probably have a dead battery because he hadn't put it back on its base in the wee hours of the morning. He wouldn't take his Adderall until prompted. Occasionally, he'd fake taking it and save up a week's worth to gobble down all at once for a weekend of sleepless partying.

Darla Fay brushed her dentures under the running faucet and popped them into her mouth. Time to make coffee. If all went well, she would have a two-hour respite before Tyler appeared at the bottom of the stairs smelling of BO with his hair looking... normal.

She went to the dresser and got her Bible, a hard-back King James wearing a crocheted cover with a picture of a dove. As she stepped toward the kitchen, she whispered a prayer. She hoped that God would hear it and answer it favorably, but she had her doubts. Her hatred for Tyler was a likely source of spiritual static. A shame, but that's the way it went. She had no plans to stop hating the boy until he changed, and it wasn't like he was going to change overnight.

She turned the corner and was shocked to see Tyler sitting at the round table in the breakfast nook. He was staring out the bay window and wearing only boxers. He looked astonishingly pale in the soft, indirect sunlight.

“Well,” Darla Fay said, lamenting the loss of her two-hour respite, “good morning.” There was no warmth in her words, but nor was there venom. She always started conversations with Tyler in as neutral a way as possible. Any other approach was dangerous.

The boy turned his head until he faced her. His mouth opened, but for several seconds nothing came out. When sound finally came, it was like the groan of a rusty steel fencepost being bent over by a half-ton bull trying to reach greener grass. It morphed into English words spoken with a prominent accent unlike any Darla Fay had heard before.

“I am the demon Kilkorzadab.” Tyler's lips never moved.

Darla Fay gripped her King James and processed the information being funneled into her brain. It looked like Tyler, and it would not have been out of character for Tyler to emulate a demon to the best of his ability. However—and Darla Fay was absolutely certain of this—no naturally-controlled human throat could speak with the voice of a rusty fencepost yielding cantilever-style under the uniformly distributed load of a leaning wall of live meat.

Her mental processing complete, Darla Fay felt her extremities turn to ice. She screamed-turned-ran, cradling her Bible like a football against her ribs. She sprinted at top geriatric speed toward the front door and tried to decelerate while reaching for the doorknob. Her feet hit the welcome rug, which slid freely against the ceramic tiles beneath. She crashed into the door, feet-then-knees-then-shoulder, fumbled her King James, projectile-spit her dentures, collapsed, and thought she heard her hip break.

“Help me God!” she lisped. She twisted to see if Tyler or the demon or both were coming. “Help me Jesus! Forgive my hate.” She began to sob.

After a few minutes of lying in the entryway and wondering why the demon had not come to get her, she began to calm down. Maybe there was no demon. What had she actually heard in the kitchen, anyway? Maybe there was an explanation that had nothing to do with demons. Maybe it was Tyler's medication. Or his drugs. Or maybe he was trying to scare her and had found a way to change his voice. Maybe it was an electronic gadget.

Darla Fay scooted to where her dentures lay and grabbed them. She picked a hair off and put them back in her mouth. Slowly, she stood, rubbing her hips and buttocks. No protruding bones, no undue subcutaneous movement. She seemed fine, so she picked up her Bible and peered in

the direction of the kitchen.

Minutes passed. The house was quiet. She could see a fist hole she'd forgotten about next to the curtains on the far side of the living room. She took a deep breath, turned her Bible so that the dove was upright, and marched. When she rounded the corner into the kitchen, Tyler was still sitting in the breakfast nook looking pale and wearing boxers.

"What's wrong with you?" she asked.

Tyler's mouth opened. There was a pause, and then the yielding-metal voice said, "I'm eternally damned." The lips did not move.

Darla Fay shuddered.

"Look," said the strange voice from Tyler's gaping mouth, "I'm sorry about this, but I need a place to hang out and Tyler came open. I've been waiting a long time for a spot."

Darla Fay's mouth was too dry to form words. She stepped to the cabinet, pulled down a glass, filled it with tap water, and gulped a mouthful. "What's your... what's your name again?"

"Kilkorzadab. It's my middle name. I go by my middle name."

"Why aren't your lips moving?"

"Oh." Tyler's lips moved that time. His hand rubbed his face slowly from forehead to chin. "I totally forgot to animate the mouth. This is only my third situation and my last one was something like eight hundred years ago."

Darla Fay took another drink and set the glass on the counter, still gripping her Bible.

"You don't have to stare," said the demon, lips almost flawlessly synced with the words.

"Your voice..." Darla Fay began, "your accent..."

"Is this better?" asked the demon in Tyler's voice and deadbeat drawl. "It's more work for me, but I can use his voice if you want."

"Is this your medicine, Tyler?" Darla Fay asked. "Did you take something?"

"What do you want me to do? Mutilate myself? Eat a rat? I'm a demon." Tyler's body stood and continued to rise until it was standing in midair with its feet several inches above the floor. The toes wiggled. "That enough?"

When Darla Fay regained consciousness, she was lying on her side with her head resting on her

arm. She could see kitchen cabinets, white linoleum, her Bible, and her dentures. There was a lot of dirt and debris along the crevice where the baseboards met the tile. Apparently she hadn't been doing a very good job of sweeping.

Tyler. Demon. It all emerged at once from the mental fog.

As she stood at the kitchen sink washing her dentures, Darla Fay gazed at her demon-possessed grandson, sitting at the breakfast nook table. He seemed to like it there.

"We need to talk," Darla Fay said.

"Pull up a chair," Kilkorxadab said.

Darla Fay hesitated. "What do you want from me?"

"Room and board. And for you to keep this quiet. I just want to lay low."

Darla Fay made coffee, poured a cup, and sat across from Tyler. Or Tyler's body. "Is Tyler still... there? Alive?"

"Sure," Kilkorxadab said. "He's just out of service."

Darla Fay sipped coffee. It tasted smooth and put her at ease a little. "Why'd you pick Tyler?"

"I didn't really *pick* him. I was next in line and he came open. I jumped."

"What do you mean *came open*?"

"We've got limitations. You-know-who gives us only so much leash." As he said *you-know-who*, the demon made quote marks in the air with the first two fingers on each of Tyler's hands. They weren't invisible quote marks; they were white and puffy and hung in the air for a second before fading away.

"Are you talking about... *Satan*?" Darla Fay asked.

"No. Higher. I'd prefer not to say his name. We're allowed to possess someone only if they qualify in one of three ways: By inviting us, by saying 'orientated,' or by meeting tons of behavioral criteria. Tyler met the tons of behavioral criteria."

"So, how long do you plan to stay?"

"Don't know yet. Long as I can, probably."

Darla Fay crossed her arms. "You don't seem like a demon."

"I'm a demon. Once a demon, always a demon."

“There’s nothing you can do to, you know... redeem yourself?”

“Nope. Once you’re labeled, it’s over.”

Darla Fay and her demon-possessed grandchild stared at each other for a few seconds. She leaned back in her chair. “That’s too bad.”

“It makes sense, really. You gotta earn the label.”

“What’d you do?”

“Goes under the heading of running with the wrong crowd. Way before this world was made. I’d prefer not to talk about it.”

Darla Fay took a swig of coffee. It was weird; Tyler’s eyes were sparkling with a certain clarity they’d lacked since preadolescence.

“You don’t seem scary.” Darla Fay frowned. “You did at first, but you don’t now.”

“I’m not too blissful-good at being a demon. I don’t enjoy it. Doesn’t work for me, I guess.” After a moment, Kilkorzadab added, “Those demons you see in movies, if those were real they’d be like upper management demons. I’m a pee-on. To be honest, I hate doing tricks. I mean, I floated a while ago and did the quote marks, but I have to be in a certain mood to do more than that. Mostly, I just want to take it easy, ’cause time flies and then there’s Hell.”

Darla Fay finished her coffee. She held up her mug. “I’m getting some more. Want a cup?”

“Why not? Drop an ice cube in mine, would ya?”

It took Darla Fay almost until lunch to get used to the idea of having a demon around instead of Tyler. At a quarter to twelve, she almost whispered, “Thank you, God,” but she caught herself after “Th—”

This was all so confusing.

It turned out the demon still needed to eat, or to feed Tyler’s body. He ate two or three meals a day, snacked rarely, closed the door when he used the restroom, and pretty much sat around or slept the rest of the time. He never cracked his knuckles or asked to use the phone. At Darla Fay’s request, he maintained Tyler’s regimen of prescribed medication and took a shower every day. When Darla Fay watched TV, the demon sat in the living room and watched with her.

Darla Fay took up crocheting again and started enjoying life. She ran off all of Tyler’s old friends when they showed up and had some of her own over to play Bunko and eat sandwiches. She made the demon promise not to do tricks or reveal his identity, and he agreed in exchange

for room and board. It seemed that Darla Fay and Kilkorzadab had worked out a mutually beneficial arrangement.

Darla Fay's friends asked her what she'd done to reform the boy. He seemed almost respectful.

"Thank the good Lord for modern medicine," Darla Fay said, "and prescription drug plans." That always drew a smile from every face.

After three months, Darla Fay almost forgot how meshed she and her hatred had once been. She no longer felt its hot pressure squeezing her soul, digging in tighter and tighter with its barbed pincers. But now she felt guilty for condoning the possession of her only grandchild by an evil spirit. It wasn't right, and it wasn't normal, and she knew that her daughter would not have approved if she were still alive.

Nevertheless, the demon was a fair amount more likeable than Tyler, and she reasoned that any free rein the demon had must surely have been approved by the Lord. Otherwise, well, something like this couldn't happen. Could it?

"I've got bad news." Kilkorzadab plopped down on the sofa next to Darla Fay. He'd been in Tyler's body for four-and-a-half months.

"You're not leaving!" Darla Fay rested a hand on Tyler's forearm. "Please tell me you're not leaving."

"It's complicated. Apparently, Tyler's been approved as an MDD."

"MDD?"

"Multi-Demon Dwelling. It's what happens when supply and demand get out of whack. There's a shortage of qualified units right now."

"Oh my."

"I knew that an MDD app had been filed on Tyler, but I didn't expect it to go through for another year."

Darla Fay frowned. "What does this mean?"

"It means that if I stick around, I'm gonna have roommates. And I don't want roommates. The more demons you get in one body, the more rowdy they get. They're like college freshmen. It's really stupid."

"But you can stay if you want to?"

“I’m *allowed* to, but I don’t *want* to. I’m either a one-man show or a no-show. Nothin’ else.”

“Don’t let them do it,” Darla Fay said. “File a protest.”

“Remember what I said? Pee-on? There’s nothing I can do. Plus, my protest would take longer to process than it’ll take the other demons to get here. I’m sorry. I’ll go back to the dungeon and wait in line for another eight hundred years before I’ll share this unit. And I’m not talking about two or three more demons. The world record is over forty-two thousand in one guy. It’s crazy. I don’t care how bad my man Ty was before I came along; he’ll be your worst nightmare times ten once the D-gang moves in.”

Darla Fay clasped a hand over her mouth, and her eyes filled with tears. “I won’t stand for it,” she said, her words muffled. She dropped her hand. “Should I hire an exorcist? A priest?”

“The black-suit guys with little white squares on their Adam’s apples?”

“Yes.”

“Forget it. You’ve seen too many movies. I’ve known demons who faked their own exodus just to get those guys to go away. A demon doesn’t have to make his presence known.”

“How can I make them leave if they come?”

Kilkorzadab made no reply. Tyler’s body was stone still.

“Come on,” Darla Fay said. “You know something. Tell me.”

“Oh boy.” Tyler’s fingers rubbed his temples. “Me telling you this is a big no-no. This could get me in a lot of trouble.”

“You owe me,” Darla Fay said.

“And it’s not like I’m not already in a lot of trouble.”

“Just tell me what to do.”

“There’s a way. It’s no guarantee, but it’s worth a try.”

“Show me the way,” Darla Fay said. She was surprised to see Tyler’s lips curl into a smile. “What?”

“No one’s ever asked me to *show them the way*,” Kilkorzadab said. “Okay. I’ll do it. But once they arrive, I’m outta here.”

“If I can run them off, will you come back? Please?”

“It doesn’t normally work that way, Dar. Although I must admit... I like it here.”

“So come back,” Darla Fay said. “Pretty please.”

“Get me some paper and a pencil,” the demon said. “No living person’s seen this recipe since the Dark Ages. When the other demons get here, it’ll be like they’ve moved into a house that’s plagued by mold, termites, and heglixtenooks.”

“Hegli-whats?”

“Oops. Wrong world. Just think of mold and termites. This should work, and there’s a blissful-good chance it won’t kill Tyler.”

Darla Fay got a pencil and paper. Kilkorzadab wrote out a list. The first time, it was in the wrong language; he apologized and wrote it again in English. He handed the paper to Darla Fay.

“No way,” she said.

“Yes way.”

“Wal-Mart won’t have this stuff.”

“They don’t carry embryonic warthog rumps?”

“This is impossible.”

Tyler’s body inhaled, frowned, and blew air out through its nose. “Okay,” Kilkorzadab said, “forget the list. It’s your best bet, but there’s another way. A newer way.”

“Tell me.”

“Saccharin.”

“Huh?”

“You heard me. Saccharin. A mega-dose of it. Forget the little pink packets. Think more like a big white pillowcase full of it. Get the saccharin, and I’ll choke it down. Pounds of it. Demons can still possess a person who’s loaded with saccharin, but it’s not worth it. Makes for a real slippery spirit-mind interface. My bet is they won’t last five minutes.”

Darla Fay put on her scarf, grabbed her purse, and headed for Wal-Mart.

She watched the naked-but-for-boxers body of her grandson sit at the round table in the breakfast nook and ingest an unthinkable quantity of saccharin. The boy crunched tablets and ate spoonful

after spoonful of powder and guzzled milky-white warm-water suspensions. “Row up some powder on the table and get me a straw,” Kilkorzadab said. “Quickly. They’re almost here.”

Darla Fay got a straw from the pantry. “What are you doing?”

“Snorting it, baby. Putting it in the loop any way I can.”

Darla Fay watched Tyler’s body suck powder into each nostril.

“Get me a hypodermic needle if you have one,” Kilkorzadab said. “And fill a big pot with hot water and dissolve as much sac in it as you can. I’ll soak my feet in it. Should help a litTELAGEZZABALLAGOMIFGAZAMOR!”

Tyler’s back arched violently, and his stomach hit the table hard enough to knock it over. The boy gagged with the voices of a thousand gaggers and puked up a gallon of white foam.

Darla Fay shrieked.

“What are you trying to do here?” growled a myriad of angry voices from Tyler’s shiny-white-lipped mouth. “This shack’s stained up!” His nose released a terrible sneeze, expelling a white cloud. Blood ran from one nostril.

“Who... who are you?” Darla Fay asked.

“We are Mezandobas, The Population.” Thousands of voices poured from Tyler’s body. The words came from every part of him, from every pore, as if each pore were a tiny, toothless mouth, opening and closing and shouting demonic angst. An argument broke out, and the volume grew progressively louder until it sounded to Darla Fay like a riot—a riot of angry, oily, sassy pores. Tyler’s body rose belly-up into the air as if slow-falling toward the ceiling. His arms and legs flailed as the voices became louder and louder, echoing off the walls and re-echoing, vibrating windows and light fixtures. Darla Fay grabbed two potholders and covered her ears. She screamed, adding her own voice to the cacophony. Tyler’s body flew into a cabinet, then the pantry door, then did a series of ugly airborne somersaults right out through the bay window.

Darla Fay tossed down her potholders and ran out the patio door. She found Tyler crumpled on the driveway amidst a scattering of bloody glass and saccharin barf. He lay still and quiet, his face pressed against concrete. Darla Fay watched him for several minutes, unsure of what to do.

Tyler finally squirmed. He groaned and looked up at his grandmother. After a moment, he screamed. It was the scream one might expect from a petite schoolgirl, one who had just been beaten up for her lunch money by a trio of stocky, androgynous middle-school softball players. The scream turned to weeping, then sobbing.

“I can’t move,” Tyler cried. “I can’t... I think my arm’s broken.”

It turned out to be a lot more than an arm. The x-rays showed it to be both arms, as well as a leg, three ribs, a thumb, and a collar bone. The boy's stubborn spirit was broken as well, though no evidence of this showed up on the x-rays. But there were a lot of lacerations, some road rash, a chipped tooth, and a shard-punctured bladder. Tyler was messed up pretty bad, and although he didn't realize it yet, he had entered into the first stage of a rare and irreversible case of heart-softening. He had plenty of time to think about it in the hospital and then later, on the sofa in his grandmother's living room.

“So you remember being demon-possessed?” Darla Fay asked.

“Yes,” Tyler said, staring meekly at his knees. “Yes, ma’am.” He sat on the sofa, wearing blue shorts and a yellow t-shirt. Scars like slender, pink centipedes crisscrossed his face, arms, and legs. “It was like a bad dream. There was nothing I could do.”

“Did the demon communicate with you at all?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“What did he tell you?”

Tyler took a deep breath. “He said if I was good to you he wouldn't come back. He said I have to take care of you once I've gotten well. He said I have to be like your servant.”

“And you've gotten well, haven't you?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“And if you're not good, and if you're not my servant, did the demon say what he'd do?”

Tyler said nothing.

“What did he say he would do?” Darla Fay asked.

“I don't want to think about it.”

“Tell me, Tyler. What did he say?”

The boy began to cry.

“You can tell me, Tyler.”

“He said—he said he'd come back and make me do bad stuff. Worse stuff than last time. I can't tell you the rest.”

“Then do you think you can be a good boy now? Can you be good and be my servant?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Blissful-good deal.” Darla Fay smiled and patted Tyler’s head. “Now get me a cup of coffee. And drop an ice cube in it, would ya?”

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