

# DOWN IN THE DARKNESS

Dean R. Koontz, 1986

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DARKNESS DWELLS WITHIN EVEN THE BEST OF US. IN THE WORST OF us, darkness not only dwells but reigns.

Although occasionally providing darkness with a habitat, I have never provided it with a kingdom. That's what I prefer to believe. I think of myself as a basically good man: a hard worker, a loving and faithful husband, a stern but doting father.

If I use the cellar again, however, I will no longer be able to pretend that I can suppress my own potential for evil. If I use the cellar again, I will exist in eternal moral eclipse and will never thereafter walk in the light.

But the temptation is great.

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I first discovered the cellar door two hours after we signed the final papers, delivered a cashier's check to the escrow company to pay for the house, and received the keys. It was in the kitchen, in the corner beyond the refrigerator: a raised-panel door, stained dark like all the others in the house, with a burnished-brass lever-action handle instead of a conventional knob. I stared in disbelief, for I was certain that the door had not been there before.

Initially, I thought I had found a pantry. When I opened it, I was startled to see steps leading down through deepening shadows into pitch blackness. A windowless basement.

In Southern California, nearly all houses - virtually everything from the cheaper tract crackerboxes to those in the multimillion-dollar range - are built on concrete slabs. They have no basements. For decades this has been considered prudent design. The land is frequently sandy, with little bedrock near the surface. In country subject to earthquakes and mudslides, a basement with concrete-block walls can be a point of structural weakness into which all rooms above might collapse if the giants in the earth wake and stretch.

Our new home was neither crackerbox nor mansion, but it had a cellar. The real-estate agent never mentioned it. Until now, we had never noticed it.

Peering down the steps, I was at first curious - then uneasy. A wall switch was set just inside the doorway. I clicked it up, down, up again. No light came on below.

Leaving the door open, I went looking for Carmen. She was in the master bathroom, hugging herself, grinning, admiring the handmade emerald-green ceramic tiles and the Sherle Wagner sinks with their gold-plated fixtures.

"Oh, Jess, isn't it beautiful? Isn't it grand? When I was a little girl, I never dreamed I'd live in a house like this. My best hope was for one of those cute bungalows from the forties. But this is a palace, and I'm not sure I know how to act like a queen."

"It's no palace," I said, putting an arm around her. "You've got to be a Rockefeller to afford a palace in Orange County. Anyway, so what if it was a palace - you've always had the style and bearing of a queen."

She stopped hugging herself and hugged me. "We've come a long way, haven't we?"

"And we're going even further, kid."

"I'm a little scared, you know?"

"Don't be silly."

"Jess, honey, I'm just a cook, a dishwasher, a pot scrubber, only one generation removed from a shack on the outskirts of Mexico City. We worked hard for this, sure, and a lot of years ... but now that we're here, it seems to have happened overnight."

"Trust me, kid - you could hold your own in any gathering of society ladies from Newport Beach. You have natural-born class."

I thought: God, I love her. Seventeen years of marriage, and she is still a girl to me, still fresh and surprising and sweet.

"Hey," I said, "almost forgot. You know we have a cellar?"

She blinked at me.

"It's true," I said.

Smiling, waiting for the punch line, she said, "Yeah? And what's down there? The royal vaults with all the jewels? Maybe a dungeon?"

"Come see."

She followed me into the kitchen.

The door was gone.

Staring at the blank wall, I was for a moment icebound.

"Well?" she said. "What's the joke?"

I thawed enough to say, "No joke. There was ... a door."

She pointed to the image of a kitchen window that was etched on the blank wall by the sun streaming through the glass. "You probably saw that. The square of sunlight coming through the window, falling on the wall. It's more or less in the shape of a door."

"No. No ... there was ..." Shaking my head, I put one hand on the sun-warmed plaster and lightly traced its contours, as if the seams of the door would be more apparent to the touch than to the eye.

Carmen frowned. "Jess, what's wrong?"

I looked at her and realized what she was thinking. This lovely house seemed too good to be true, and she was superstitious enough to wonder if such a great blessing could be enjoyed for long without fate throwing us a heavy weight of tragedy to balance the scales. An overworked husband, suffering from stress - or perhaps afflicted by a small brain tumor - beginning to see things that were not there, talking excitedly of nonexistent cellars ... That was just the sort of nasty turn of events with which fate too frequently evened things out.

"You're right," I said. I forced a laugh but made it sound natural. "I saw the rectangle of light on the wall and thought it was a door. Didn't even look close. Just came running for you. Now, has this new-house business got me about as crazy as a monkey or what?"

She looked at me somberly, then matched my smile. "Crazy as a monkey. But then ... you always were."

"Is that so?"

"My monkey," she said.

I said, "Ook, ook," and scratched under one arm.

I was glad I had not told her that I'd opened the door. Or that I had seen the steps beyond.

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The house in Laguna Beach had five large bedrooms, four baths, and a family room with a massive stone fireplace. It also had what they call an "entertainer's kitchen," which didn't mean that either Siegfried and Roy or Barbra Streisand performed there between Vegas engagements, but referred instead to the high quality and number of appliances: double ovens, two microwaves, a warming oven for muffins and rolls, a Jenn Air cooking center, two dishwashers, and a pair of Sub Zero refrigerators of sufficient size to serve a restaurant. Lots of immense windows let in the warm California sun and framed views of the lush landscaping - bougainvillea in shades of yellow and coral, red azaleas, impatiens, palms, two imposing Indian laurels - and the rolling hills beyond. In the distance, the sun-dappled water of the Pacific

glimmered enticingly, like a great treasure of silver coins.

Though not a mansion, it was unquestionably a house that said, The Gonzalez family has done well, has made a fine place for itself. My folks would have been very proud.

Maria and Ramon, my parents, were Mexican immigrants who had scratched out a new life in El Norte, the promised land. They had given me, my brothers, and my sister everything that hard work and sacrifice could provide, and we four had all earned university scholarships. Now, one of my brothers was an attorney, the other a doctor, and my sister was chairperson of the Department of English at UCLA.

I had chosen a career in business. Carmen and I owned a restaurant, for which I provided the business expertise, for which she provided the exquisite and authentic Mexican recipes, and where we both worked twelve hours a day, seven days a week. As our three children reached adolescence, they took jobs with us as waiters. It was a family affair, and every year we became more prosperous, but it was never easy. America does not promise easy wealth, only opportunity. We seized the machine of opportunity and lubricated it with oceans of perspiration, and by the time we bought the house in Laguna Beach, we were able to pay cash. Jokingly, we gave the house a name: Casa Sudor - House of Sweat.

It was a huge home. And beautiful.

It had every amenity. Even a basement with a disappearing door.

The previous owner was one Mr. Nguyen Quang Phu. Our Realtor - a sturdy, garrulous, middle-aged woman named Nancy Keefer - said Phu was a Vietnamese refugee, one of the courageous boat people who had fled months after the fall of Saigon. He was one of the fortunate who had survived the storms, the gunboats, and the pirates.

"He arrived in the U.S. with only three thousand dollars in gold coins and the will to make something of himself," Nancy Keefer told us when we first toured the house. "A charming man and a fabulous success. Really fabulous. He's pyramided that small bankroll into so many business interests, you wouldn't believe it, all in fourteen years! Fabulous story. He's built a new house, fourteen thousand square feet on two acres in North Tustin, it's just fabulous, really, it is, you should see it, you really should."

Carmen and I made an offer for Phu's old house, which was less than half the size of the one he had recently built, but which was a dream home to us. We dickered a bit but finally agreed on terms, and the closing was achieved in just ten days because we were paying cash, taking no mortgage.

The transfer of ownership was arranged without Nguyen Quang Phu and me coming face to face. This is not an unusual situation. Unlike some states, California does not require a formal closing ceremony with seller, buyer, and their attorneys gathered in one room.

Nevertheless, it was Nancy Keefer's policy to arrange a meeting between the buyer and seller at the house, within a day or two of the close of escrow.

Although our new home was beautiful and in splendid repair, even the finest houses have quirks. Nancy believed it was always a good idea for the seller to walk the buyer through the place to point out which closet doors tended to slide off their tracks and which windows wept in a rainstorm. She arranged for Phu to meet me at the house on Wednesday, May fourteenth.

Monday, May twelfth, was the day we closed the deal. And that was the afternoon when, strolling through the empty house, I first saw the cellar door.

Tuesday morning, I returned to the house alone. I didn't tell Carmen where I was really going. She thought that I was at Horace Dalcoe's office, politely wrangling with that extortionist over his latest greedy demands.

Dalcoe owned the small open-air shopping center in which our restaurant was located, and he was surely the very man for whom the word "sleazeball" had been coined. Our lease, signed when Carmen and I were poorer and naive, gave him the right to approve even every minor change we made inside the premises.

Therefore, six years after we opened, when we wanted to remodel the restaurant at a cost of two hundred thousand dollars - which would have been an improvement to his property - we were required to give Dalcoe ten thousand in tax-free cash, under the table, for his okay. When I bought out the lease of the stationery store next door to expand into their quarters, Dalcoe insisted upon a steep cash payment for his approval. He was interested not only in large lumps of sugar but in tiny grains of it as well; when I put a new and more attractive set of front doors on the place, Dalcoe wanted a lousy two hundred bucks under the table to sign off on that small job.

Now, we wished to replace our old sign with a new and better one, and I was negotiating a bribe with Dalcoe. He was unaware that I had discovered that he didn't own the land on which his own little shopping center stood; he had taken a ninety-nine-year lease on the parcel twenty years ago, and he felt secure. At the same time that I was working out a new bribe with him, I was secretly negotiating a purchase of the land, after which Dalcoe would discover that, while he might have a stranglehold on me by virtue of my lease, I would have a stranglehold on him because of his lease. He still thought of me as an ignorant Mex, maybe second generation but Mex just the same; he thought I'd had a little luck in the restaurant business, luck and nothing more, and he gave me no credit for intelligence or savvy. It was not going to be exactly a case of the little fish swallowing the big one, but I expected to arrange a satisfactory stalemate that would leave him furious and impotent.

These complex machinations, which had been continuing for some time, gave me a believable excuse for my absence from the restaurant Tuesday morning. I'd be bargaining with Dalcoe at his office, I told Carmen. In fact, I went directly to the new house, feeling guilty about having lied to her.

When I stepped into the kitchen, the door was where I had seen it the previous day. No rectangle of sunlight. No mere illusion. A real door.

I worked the lever-action handle.

Beyond the threshold, steps led down into deepening shadows.

"What the hell?" I said. My voice echoed back to me as if it had bounced off a wall a thousand miles away.

The switch still did not work.

I had brought a flashlight. I snapped it on.

I crossed the threshold.

The wooden landing creaked loudly, because the boards were old, unpainted, scarred. Mottled with gray and yellow stains, webbed with hairline cracks, the plaster walls looked as if they were much older

than the rest of the house. The cellar clearly did not belong in this structure, was not an integral part of it.

I moved off the landing onto the first step.

A frightening possibility occurred to me. What if a draft pushed the door shut behind me - and then the door vanished as it had done yesterday, leaving me trapped in the cellar?

I retreated in search of something with which to brace the door. The house contained no furniture, but in the garage I found a length of two-by-four that did the job.

Standing on the top step once more, I shone the flashlight down, but the beam did not reach nearly as far as it should have. I could not see the cellar floor. The tar-black murk below was unnaturally deep. This darkness was not merely an absence of light but seemed to possess substance, texture, and weight, as if the lower chamber was filled with a pool of oil. Like a sponge, the darkness absorbed the light, and only twelve steps were revealed in the pale beam before it faded into the gloom.

I descended two steps, and two more steps appeared at the far reach of the light. I eased down four additional steps, and four more came into view below.

Six steps behind, one under my feet, and twelve ahead - nineteen so far.

How many steps would I expect to find in an ordinary basement? Ten? Twelve?

Not this many, surely.

Quickly, quietly, I descended six steps. When I stopped, twelve steps were illuminated ahead of me. Dry, aged boards. Nailheads gleamed here and there.

The same mottled walls.

Unnerved, I looked back up at the door, which was thirteen steps and one landing above me. The sunlight in the kitchen looked warm, inviting - and more distant than it should have been.

My hands had begun to sweat. I switched the flashlight from one hand to the other, blotting my palms on my slacks.

The air had a vague lime odor and an even fainter underlying scent of mold and corruption.

I hurriedly and noisily descended six more steps, then eight more, then another eight, then six. Now forty-one rose at my back - and twelve were still illuminated below me.

Each of the steep steps was about ten inches high, which meant that I had gone approximately three stories underground. No ordinary basement had such a long flight of stairs.

I told myself that this might be a bomb shelter, but I knew that it was not.

As yet, I had no thought of turning back. This was our house, damn it, for which we had paid a small fortune in money and a larger fortune in time and sweat, and we could not live in it with such a mystery beneath our feet, unexplored. Besides, when I was twenty-two and twenty-three, far from home and in the hands of enemies, I had known two years of terror so constant and intense that my tolerance for fear was higher than that of most men.

One hundred steps farther, I stopped again because I figured I was ten stories below ground level, which was a milestone requiring some contemplation. Turning and peering up, I saw the light at the open kitchen door far above me, an opalescent rectangle that appeared to be one-quarter the size of a postage stamp.

Looking down, I studied the eight bare wooden steps illuminated ahead of me - eight, not the usual twelve. As I had gone deeper, the flashlight had become less effective. The batteries were not growing weak; the problem was nothing as simple or explicable as that. Where it passed through the lens, the beam was as crisp and bright as ever. But the darkness ahead was somehow thicker, hungrier, and it absorbed the light in a shorter distance than it had done farther up.

The air still smelled vaguely of lime, though the scent of decay was now nearly the equal of that more pleasant odor.

This subterranean world had been preternaturally quiet except for my own footsteps and increasingly heavier breathing. Pausing at the ten-story point, however, I thought I heard something below. I held my breath, stood motionless, and listened. I was half sure that I detected strange, furtive sounds a long way off - whispering and oily squelching noises - but I could not be certain. They were faint and short-lived. I could have been imagining them.

After descending ten more steps, I came to a landing at last, where I discovered opposing archways in the walls of the stairwell. Both openings were doorless and unornamented, and my light revealed a short stone corridor beyond each. Stepping through the arch on my left, I followed the narrow passage for perhaps fifteen feet, where it ended at the head of another staircase, which went down at a right angle to the stairs that I had just left.

Here, the odor of decay was stronger. It was reminiscent of the pungent fumes of rotting vegetable matter.

The stink was like a spade, turning up long-buried memories. I had encountered precisely this stench before, in the place where I had been imprisoned during my twenty-second and twenty-third years. There, they had sometimes served meals largely composed of rotting vegetables - mostly turnips, sweet potatoes, and other tubers. Worse, the garbage that we wouldn't eat was thrown into the sweatbox, a tin-roofed pit in the ground where recalcitrant prisoners were punished with solitary confinement. In that filthy hole, I was forced to sit in foot-deep slime reeking so strongly of decay that, in heat-induced delusion, I sometimes became convinced that I was dead already and that what I smelled was the relentlessly progressing corruption of my own lifeless flesh.

"What's going on?" I asked, expecting and receiving no answer.

Returning to the main stairs, I passed through the archway on the right. At the end of that passage, a second set of branching stairs also led down. From tenebrous depths, a different rancidity arose, and I recognized this one as well: decomposing fish heads.

Not just decomposing fish but, specifically, fish heads - like those that the guards had sometimes put in our soup. Grinning, they stood and watched us as we greedily sucked up the broth. We gagged on it but were often too hungry to pour it on the ground in protest. Sometimes, starving, we choked down the repulsive fish heads as well, which was what the guards most wanted to see. They were unfailingly amused by our disgust - and especially by our selfdisgust.

I hurriedly returned to the main stairwell. I stood on the ten-story-deep landing, shuddering uncontrollably, trying to shake off those unbidden memories.

By now, I was half convinced that I was dreaming or that I did, indeed, have a brain tumor which, by exerting pressure on surrounding cerebral tissue, was the cause of these hallucinations.

I continued downward and noticed that step by step the range of my flashlight was decreasing. Now I could see only seven steps ahead ... six ... five ... four....

Suddenly, the impenetrable darkness was only two feet in front of me, a black mass that seemed to throb in expectation of my final advance into its embrace. It seemed alive.

Yet I hadn't reached the foot of the stairs, for I heard those whisperings again, far below, and the oily, oozing sound that brought gooseflesh to my arms.

I reached forward with one trembling hand. It disappeared into the darkness, which was bitterly cold.

My heart hammered and my mouth was suddenly dry and sour. I let out a childlike cry, and I fled back to the kitchen and the light.

2

THAT EVENING AT THE RESTAURANT, I GREETED THE GUESTS AND SEATED them. Even after all these years, I spend most nights at the front door, meeting people, playing the host. Usually, I enjoy it. Many customers have been coming to us for a decade; they are honorary members of the family, old friends. But that night, my heart was not in it, and several people asked me if I was feeling well.

Tom Gatlin, my accountant, stopped by for dinner with his wife. He said, "Jess, you're gray, for God's sake. You're three years overdue for a vacation, my friend. What's the point of piling up the money if you never take time to enjoy it?"

Fortunately, the restaurant staff we have assembled is first-rate. In addition to Carmen and me and our kids - Stacy, Heather, and young Joe there are twenty-two employees, and every one of them knows his job and performs it well. Although I was not at my best, there were others to take up the slack, Stacy, Heather, and Joe. Very American names. Funny. My mother and father, being immigrants, clung to the world they left by giving all their children traditional Mexican names. Carmen's folks were the same way: Her two brothers are Juan and Jose, and her sister's name is Evalina. My name actually was Jesus Gonzalez. Jesus is a common name in Mexico, but I had it changed to Jess years ago, though by doing so I hurt my parents. (The Spanish pronunciation is "Hay-seuss," although most North Americans pronounce it as if referring to the Christian savior. There's just no way you can be regarded as either one of the guys or a serious businessman when burdened with such an exotic moniker.) It's interesting how the children of immigrants, second-generation Americans like Carmen and me, usually give their own kids the most popular current American names, as if trying to conceal how recently our ancestors got off the boat - or in this case, crossed the Rio Grande. Stacy, Heather, and Joe.



Just as there are no more fervent Christians than those recently converted to the faith, there are no more ardent Americans than those whose claim to citizenship begins with themselves or their parents. We want so desperately to be part of this great, huge, crazy country. Unlike some whose roots go back generations, we understand what a blessing it is to live beneath the stars and stripes. We also know that a price must be paid for the blessing, and that sometimes it's high. Partly, the cost is in leaving behind everything we once were. Sometimes, however, there is a more painful price inflicted, as I well know.

I served in Vietnam.

I was under fire. I killed the enemy.

And I was a prisoner of war.

That was where I ate soup with rotting fish heads.

That was part of the price I paid.

Now, thinking about the impossible cellar beneath our new house, remembering the smells of the prison camp that had wafted out of the darkness at the bottom of those stairs, I began to wonder if I was still paying the price. I had come home sixteen years ago - gaunt, half my teeth rotten. I'd been starved and tortured but not broken. There had been nightmares for years, but I hadn't needed therapy. I had come through all right, as had many of the guys in those North Vietnamese hellholes. Badly bent, scarred, splintered - but, damn it, not broken. Somewhere, I had lost my Catholicism, but that had seemed a negligible loss at the time. Year by year, I had put the experience behind me. Part of the price. Part of what we pay for being where we are.

Forget it. Over. Done. And it had seemed behind me. Until now. The cellar could not possibly be real, which meant that I must be having vivid hallucinations. Could it be that, after so long a time, the fiercely repressed emotional trauma of imprisonment and torture were working profound changes in me, that I had been ignoring the problem rather than dealing with it, and that now it was going to drive me mad?

If that was the case, I wondered what had suddenly triggered my mental collapse. Was it that we had bought a house from a Vietnamese refugee? That seemed too small a thing to have been the trigger. I couldn't see how the seller's original nationality alone could have caused wires to cross in my subconscious, shorting out the system, blowing fuses. On the other hand, if my peace with the memories of Vietnam and my sanity were only as stable as a house of cards, the barest breath might demolish me.

Damn it, I didn't feel insane. I felt stable - frightened but firmly in control. The most reasonable explanation for the cellar was hallucination. But I was largely convinced that the impossible subterranean staircases were real and that the disconnection from reality was external rather than internal.

At eight o'clock, Horace Dalcoe arrived for dinner with a party of seven, which almost took my mind off the cellar. As holder of our lease, he believes that he should never pay a cent for dinner in our establishment. If we didn't comp him and his friends, he would find ways to make us miserable, so we oblige. He never says thank you, and he usually finds something to complain about.

That Tuesday night, he complained about the margaritas - not enough tequila, he said. He fussed about the corn chips - not crisp enough, he said. And he groused about the albondigas soup - not nearly enough meatballs, he said.

I wanted to throttle the bastard. Instead, I brought margaritas with more tequila - enough to burn an

alarming number of brain cells per minute and new corn chips, and a bowl of meatballs to supplement the already meat-rich soup.

That night, in bed, thinking about Dalcoe, I wondered what would happen to him if I invited him to our new house, pushed him into the cellar, closed and latched the door, and left him down there for a while. I had the bizarre but unshakable feeling that something lived deep in the basement ... something that had been only a few feet from me in the impenetrable darkness that had devoured the flashlight beam. If something was down there, it would climb the stairs to get Dalcoe. Then he would be no more trouble to us.

I did not sleep well that night.

3

WEDNESDAY MORNING, MAY FOURTEENTH, I RETURNED TO THE HOUSE to walk through it with the former owner, Nguyen Quang Phu. I arrived an hour ahead of our appointment, in case the cellar door was visible again.

It was.

Suddenly I felt that I should turn my back on the door, walk away, ignore it. I sensed that I could make it go away forever if only I refused to open it. And I knew - without knowing how I knew - that not only my body but my soul was at risk if I couldn't resist the temptation to explore those lower realms.

I braced the door open with the two-by-four.

I went down into the darkness with the flashlight.

More than ten stories underground, I stopped on the landing with the flanking archways. The stink of rotting vegetables came from the branching stairwell to the left; the foul aroma of rancid fish heads arose from the right.

I pressed on and found that the peculiarly substantive darkness did not thicken as quickly as it had done yesterday. I was able to go deeper than before, as if the darkness knew me better now and welcomed me into more intimate regions of its domain.

After an additional fifty or sixty steps, I came to another landing. As at the landing above, on each side an archway offered a change of direction.

On the left, I found another short hall leading to another set of stairs that descended into pulsing, shifting, malignant blackness as impervious to light as a pool of oil. Indeed, the beam of my flash did not fade into that dense gloom but actually terminated in a circle of reflected light, as if it had fallen on a wall, and the churning blackness glistened slightly like molten tar. It was a thing of great power, enormously repulsive. Yet I knew that it was not merely oil or any other liquid, but was instead the essence of all darkness: a syrupy distillation of a million nights, a billion shadows.

Darkness is a condition, not a substance, and therefore cannot be distilled. Yet here was that impossible extract, ancient and pure: concentrate of night, the vast blackness of interstellar space decocted until it had been rendered into an oozing sludge. And it was evil.

I backed away and returned to the main stairwell. I did not inspect the branching stairs beyond the archway on the right, because I knew that I would find the same malevolent distillate waiting down there, slowly churning, churning.

In the main stairwell, I descended only a little farther before encountering the same foul presence. It rose like a wall in front of me, or like a frozen tide. I stood two steps from it, shaking uncontrollably with fear.

I reached forward.

I put a hand against the pulsing mass of blackness.

It was cold.

I reached forward a bit farther. My hand disappeared to the wrist. The darkness was so solid, so clearly defined, that my wrist looked like an amputee's stump; a sharp line marked the point at which my hand vanished into the tar-dense mass.

Panicked, I jerked back. My hand had not been amputated after all. It was still attached to my arm. I wiggled my fingers.

Looking up from my hand, straight into the gelid darkness before me, I suddenly knew that it was aware of me. I had sensed that it was evil, yet somehow I had not thought of it as conscious. Staring into its featureless countenance, I felt that it was welcoming me to the cellar that I had not yet quite reached, to the chambers below, which were still countless steps beneath me. I was being invited to embrace darkness, to step entirely across the threshold into the gloom where my hand had gone, and for a moment I was overcome with a longing to do precisely that, to move out of the light, down, down.

Then I thought of Carmen. And my daughters - Heather and Stacy. My son, Joe. All of the people I loved and who loved me. The spell was instantly broken. The mesmeric attraction of the darkness lost its hold on me, and I turned and ran up to the bright kitchen, my footsteps booming in the narrow stairwell.

Sun streamed through the big windows.

I pulled the two-by-four out of the way, slammed the cellar door. I willed it to vanish, but it remained.

"I'm nuts," I said aloud. "Stark raving crazy."

But I knew that I was sane.

It was the world that had gone mad, not I.

Twenty minutes later, Nguyen Quang Phu arrived, as scheduled, to explain all the peculiarities of the house that we had bought from him. I met him at the front door, and the moment that I saw him, I knew why the impossible cellar had appeared and what purpose it was meant to serve.

"Mr. Gonzalez?" he asked.

"Yes."

"I am Nguyen Quang Phu."

He was not merely Nguyen Quang Phu. He was also the torture master.

In Vietnam, he had ordered me strapped to a bench and had, for more than an hour, beaten the soles of my feet with a wooden baton until each blow jarred through the bones of my legs and hips, through my rib cage, up my spine, to the top of my skull, which felt as if it might explode. He had ordered me bound hand and foot and submerged me in a tank of water fouled with urine from other prisoners who had been subjected to the ordeal before me; just when I thought I could hold my breath no longer, when my lungs were burning, when my ears were ringing, when my heart was thundering, when every fiber of my being strained toward death, I was hoisted into the air and allowed a few breaths before being plunged beneath the surface again. He had ordered that wires be attached to my genitals, and he had given me countless jolts of electricity.

Helpless, I had watched him beat a friend of mine to death, and I'd seen him tear out another friend's eye with a stiletto merely for cursing the soldier who had served him yet another bowl of weevil-infested rice.

I had absolutely no doubt of his identity. The memory of the torture master's face was branded forever in my mind, burned into the very tissue of my brain by the worst heat of all - hatred. And he had aged much better than I had. He looked only two or three years older than when I'd last seen him. "Pleased to meet you," I said.

"Likewise," he said as I ushered him into the house.

His voice was as memorable as his face: soft, low, and somehow cold – the voice a snake might have if serpents could speak.

We shook hands.

He was five ten, tall for a Vietnamese. He had a long face with prominent cheekbones, a sharp nose, a thin mouth, and a delicate jaw. His eyes were deeply set - and as strange as they had been in Nam.

In that prison camp, I had not known his name. Perhaps it had been Nguyen Quang Phu. Or perhaps that was a false identity that he had assumed when he sought asylum in the United States.

"You have bought a wonderful house," he said.

"We like it very much," I said.

"I was happy here," he said, smiling, nodding, looking around at the empty living room. "Very happy."

Why had he left Nam? He had been on the winning side. Well, maybe he'd fallen out with some of his comrades. Or perhaps the state had assigned him to hard farm labor or to the mines or to some other task that he knew would destroy his health and kill him before his time. Perhaps he had gone to sea in a small boat when the state no longer chose to give him a position of high authority.

The reason for his emigration was of no importance to me. All that mattered was that he was here.

The moment I saw him and realized who he was, I knew that he would not leave the house alive. I would never permit his escape.

"There's not much to point out," he said. "There's one drawer in the master-bathroom cabinets that runs off the track now and then. And the pull-down attic stairs in the closet have a small problem sometimes, but that's easily remedied. I'll show you."

"I'd appreciate that."

He did not recognize me.

I suppose he'd tortured too many men to be able to recall any single victim of his sadistic urges. All prisoners who suffered and died at his hands had probably blurred into one faceless target. The torturer had cared nothing about the individual to whom he'd given an advance taste of Hell. To Nguyen Quang Phu, each man on the rack was the same as the one before, prized not for his unique qualities but for his ability to scream and bleed, for his eagerness to grovel at the feet of his tormentor.

As he led me through the house, he also gave me the names of reliable plumbers and electricians and air-conditioner repairmen in the neighborhood, plus the name of the artisan who had created the stained-glass windows in two rooms. "If one should be badly damaged, you'll want it repaired by the man who made it."

I will never know how I restrained myself from attacking him with my bare hands. More incredible still: Neither my face nor my voice revealed my inner tension. He was utterly unaware of the danger into which he had stepped.

In the kitchen, after he had shown me the unusual placement of the restart switch on the garbage disposal beneath the sink, I asked him if, during rainstorms, there was a problem with seepage in the cellar.

He blinked at me. His soft, cold voice rose slightly: "Cellar? Oh, but there is no cellar."

Pretending surprise, I said, "Well, there sure enough is. Right over there's the door."

He stared in disbelief.

He saw it too.

I interpreted his ability to see the door as a sign that destiny was being served here and that I would be doing nothing wrong if I simply assisted fate.

Retrieving the flashlight from the counter, I opened the door.

Protesting that no such door had existed while he had lived in the house, the torture master moved past me in a state of high astonishment and curiosity. He went through the door, onto the upper landing.

"Light switch doesn't work," I said, crowding in behind him, pointing the flashlight down past him. "But we'll see well enough with this."

"But ... where ... how ... ?"

"You don't really mean you never noticed the cellar?" I said, forcing a laugh. "Come now. Are you joking with me or what?"

As if weightless with amazement, he drifted downward from one step to the next.

I followed close behind.

Soon, he knew that something was terribly wrong, for the steps went on too far without any sign of the cellar floor. He stopped, began to turn, and said, "This is strange. What's going on here? What on earth are you-"

"Go on," I said harshly. "Down. Go down, you bastard."

He tried to push past me toward the open door above.

I knocked him backward down the stairs. Screaming, he tumbled all the way to the first landing and the flanking archways. When I reached him, I saw that he was dazed and suffering considerable pain. He keened in misery. His lower lip had split; blood trickled down his chin. He'd skinned the palm of his right hand. I think his arm was broken.

Weeping, cradling his arm, he looked up at me - pain racked, afraid, confused.

I hated myself for what I was doing.

But I hated him more.

"In the camp," I said, "we called you The Snake. I know you. Oh, yes, I know you. You were the torture master."

"Oh, God," he said.

He neither asked what I was talking about nor attempted to deny it. He knew who he was, what he was, and he knew what would become of him.

"Those eyes," I said, shaking with fury now. "That voice. The Snake. A repulsive, belly-crawling snake. Contemptible. But very, very dangerous."

Briefly we were silent. In my case, at least, I was temporarily speechless, because I stood in awe of the profound machinery of fate which, in its slow-working and laborious fashion, had brought us together at this time and place.

From down in the darkness, a noise arose: sibilant whispers, a wet oozing sound that made me shudder. Millennial darkness was on the move, surging upward, the embodiment of endless night, cold and deep - and hungry.

The torture master, reduced to the role of victim, gazed around in fear and bewilderment, through one archway and the other, then down the stairs that continued from the landing on which he sprawled. His anxiety was so great that it drove out his pain; he no longer wept or made the keening noise. "What ... what is this place?"

"It's where you belong," I said.

I turned from him and climbed the steps. I did not stop or look back. I left the flashlight with him because I wanted him to see the thing that came for him.

(Darkness dwells within us all.)

"Wait!" he called after me.

I did not pause.

"What's that sound?" he asked.

I kept climbing.

"What's going to happen to me?"

"I don't know," I told him. "But whatever it is ... it'll be what you deserve."

Anger finally stirred in him. "You're not my judge!"

"Oh yes I am."

At the top, I stepped into the kitchen and closed the door behind me. It had no lock. I leaned against it, trembling.

Apparently Phu saw something ascending from the stairwell below him, for he wailed in terror and clambered up the steps.

Hearing him approach, I leaned hard against the door.

He pounded on the other side. "Please. Please, no. Please, for God's sake, no, for God's sake, please!"

I had heard my army buddies begging with that same desperation when the merciless torture master had forced rusty needles under their fingernails. I dwelt on those images of horror, which once I had thought I'd put behind me, and they gave me the will to resist Phu's pathetic pleas.

In addition to his voice, I heard the sludge-thick darkness rising behind him, cold lava flowing uphill: wet sounds, and that sinister, whispering.

The torture master stopped pounding on the door and let out a scream that told me the darkness had seized him.

A great weight fell against the door for a moment, then was withdrawn.

The torture master's shrill cries rose and fell and rose again, and with each bloodcurdling cycle of screams, his terror was more acute. From the sound of his voice, from the hollow booming of his feet striking the steps and kicking the walls, I could tell that he was being dragged down.

I had broken into a sweat.

I could not get my breath.

Suddenly I tore open the door and plunged across the threshold; onto the landing. I think that I genuinely intended to pull him into the kitchen and save him after all. I can't say for sure. What I saw in the stairwell, only a few steps below, was so shocking that I froze - and did nothing.

The torture master hadn't been seized by the darkness itself but by two skeletally thin men who reached out of that ceaselessly churning mass of blackness. Dead men. I recognized them. They were American soldiers who had died in the camp at the hands of the torture master while I had been there.

Neither of them had been friends of mine, and in fact they had both been hard cases themselves, bad men who had enjoyed the war before they had been captured and imprisoned by the Vietcong, the rare and hateful kind who liked killing and who engaged in black-market profiteering during their off-duty hours. Their eyes were icy, opaque. When they opened their mouths to speak to me, no words came forth, only a soft hissing and a faraway whimpering that led me to believe that those noises were coming not from their bodies but from their souls - souls chained in the cellar far below. They were straining out of the oozing distillate of darkness, unable to escape it entirely, revealed only to the extent required to grasp Nguyen Quang Phu by both arms and legs.

As I watched, they drew him screaming into that thick decoction of night that had become their eternal home. When the three of them vanished into the throbbing gloom, that rippling tarry mass flowed backward, away from me. Steps came into sight like swards of a beach appearing as the tide withdraws.

I stumbled out of the stairwell, across the kitchen to the sink. I hung my head and vomited. Ran the water. Splashed my face. Rinsed my mouth. Leaned against the counter, gasping.

When at last I turned, I saw that the cellar door had vanished. The darkness had wanted the torture master. That's why the door had appeared, why a way had opened into ... into the place below. It had wanted the torture master so badly that it couldn't wait to claim him in the natural course of events, upon his predestined death, so it had opened a door into this world and had swallowed him. Now it had him, and my encounter with the supernatural was surely at an end.

That's what I thought.

I simply did not understand.

God help me, I did not understand.

4

NGUYEN QUANG PHU'S CAR - A NEW WHITE MERCEDES - WAS PARKED in the driveway, which is rather secluded. I got in without being observed and drove the car away, abandoning it in a parking lot that served a public beach. I walked the few miles back to the house, and later, when Phu's disappearance became a matter for the police, I claimed that he had never kept our appointment. I was believed. They were not suspicious of me, for I am a leading citizen, a man of some accomplishment, and in possession of a fine reputation.



During the next three weeks, the cellar door did not reappear. I didn't expect ever to be entirely comfortable in our new dream house, but gradually the worst of my dread faded and I no longer avoided entering the kitchen.

I'd had a head-on collision with the supernatural, but there was little or no chance of another encounter. A lot of people see one ghost sometime in their lives, are caught up in one paranormal event that leaves them shaken and in doubt about the true nature of reality, but they have no further occult experiences. I was sure that I would never see the cellar door again.

Then, Horace Dalcoe, holder of our restaurant's lease and loud complainer about albondigas soup, discovered that I was negotiating secretly to buy the property that he had leased for his shopping center, and he struck back. Hard.

He has political connections. I suppose he encountered little difficulty getting the health inspector to slap us with citations for nonexistent violations of the public code. We have always run an immaculate restaurant; our own standards for food handling and cleanliness have always exceeded those of the health department. Therefore, Carmen and I decided to take the matter to court rather than pay the fines - which was when we got hit with a citation for fire-code violations. And when we announced our intention of seeking a retraction of those unjust charges, someone broke in to the restaurant at three o'clock on a Thursday morning and vandalized the place, doing over fifty thousand dollars worth of damage.

I realized that I might win one or all of these battles but still lose the war. If I had been able to adopt Horace Dalcoe's scurrilous tactics, if I had been able to resort to bribing public officials and hiring thugs, I could have fought back in a way that he would have understood, and he might have called a truce. Though I wasn't without the stain of sin on my soul, I was nonetheless unable to lower myself to Dalcoe's level. Maybe my reluctance to play rough and dirty was more a matter of pride than of genuine honesty or honor, though I would prefer to believe better of myself.

Yesterday morning (as I write this in the diary of damnation that I have begun to keep), I went to see Dalcoe at his plush office. I humbled myself before him and agreed to abandon my efforts to buy the leased property on which his small shopping center stands. I also agreed to pay him three thousand in cash, under the table, for being permitted to erect a larger, more attractive sign for the restaurant.

He was smug, condescending, infuriating. He kept me there for more than an hour, though our business could have been concluded in ten minutes, because he relished my humiliation.

Last night, I could not sleep. The bed was comfortable, and the house was silent, and the air was pleasantly cool - all conditions for easy, deep sleep - but I could not stop brooding about Horace Dalcoe. The thought of being under his thumb for the foreseeable future was more than I could bear. I repeatedly turned the situation over in my mind, searching for a handle, for a way to obtain an advantage over him before he realized what I was doing, but no brilliant ploys occurred to me.

Finally, I slipped out of bed without waking Carmen, and I went downstairs to get a glass of milk, hopeful that a calcium fix would sedate me. When I entered the kitchen, still thinking of Dalcoe, the cellar door was there again.

Staring at it, I was very afraid, for I knew what its timely reappearance meant. I needed to deal with Horace Dalcoe, and I was being provided with a final solution to the problem. Invite Dalcoe to the house on one pretext or another. Show him the cellar. And let the darkness have him.

I opened the door.

I peered down the steps at the blackness below.

Long-dead prisoners, victims of torture, had been waiting for Nguyen Quang Phu. What would be waiting down there to seize Dalcoe?

I shuddered.

Not for Dalcoe.

I shuddered for me.

Suddenly I understood that the darkness below wanted me more than it wanted Phu the torture master or Horace Dalcoe. Neither of those men was much of a prize. They were destined for Hell anyway. If I had not escorted Phu into the cellar, the darkness would have had him sooner or later, when at last death visited him. Likewise, Dalcoe would wind up in the depths of Gehenna upon his own death. But by hurrying them along to their ultimate destination, I would be surrendering to the dark impulses within me and would, thereby, by putting my own soul in jeopardy.

Staring down the cellar stairs, I heard the darkness calling my name, welcoming me, offering me eternal communion. Its whispery voice was seductive. Its promises were sweet. The fate of my soul was still undecided, and the darkness saw the possibility of a small triumph in claiming me.

I sensed that I was not yet sufficiently corrupted to belong down in the darkness. What I had done to Phu might be seen as the mere enactment of long-overdue justice, for he was a man who deserved no rewards in either this world or the next. And allowing Dalcoe to proceed to his predestined doom ahead of schedule would probably not condemn me to Perdition.

But whom might I be tempted to lure to the cellar after Horace Dalcoe? How many and how often? Each time, the option would get easier to take. Sooner or later, I would find myself using the cellar to rid myself of people who were only minor nuisances. Some of them a might be borderline cases, people deserving of Hell but with a chance of salvation, and by hurrying them along, I would be denying them the opportunity to mend their ways and remake their lives. Their damnation would be partly my responsibility. Then I too would be lost ... and the darkness would rise up the stairs and come into the house and take me when it wished.

Below, that sludge-thick distillation of a billion moonless nights whispered to me, whispered.

I stepped back and closed the door.

It did not vanish.

Dalcoe, I thought desperately, why have you been such a bastard? Why have you made me hate you?

Darkness dwells within even the best of us. In the worst of us, darkness not only dwells but reigns.

I am a good man. A hard worker. A loving and faithful husband. A stern but doting father. A good man.

Yet I have human failings - not the least of which is a taste for vengeance. Part of the price that I have paid is the death of my innocence in Vietnam. There, I learned that great evil exists in the world, not in the

abstract but in the flesh, and when evil men tortured me, I was contaminated by the contact. I developed a thirst for vengeance.

I tell myself that I dare not succumb to the easy solutions offered by the cellar. Where would it stop? Someday, after sending a score of men and women into the lightless chamber below, I would be so thoroughly corrupted that it would be easy to use the cellar for what had previously seemed unthinkable.

For instance, what if Carmen and I had an argument? Would I devolve to the point where I could ask her to explore those lower regions with me? What if my children displeased me as, God knows, children frequently do? Where would I draw the line? And would the line be constantly redrawn?

I am a good man.

Although occasionally providing darkness with a habitat, I have never provided it with a kingdom.

I am a good man.

But the temptation is great.

I have begun to prepare a list of people who have, at one time or another, made my life difficult. I don't intend to do anything about them, of course. The list is merely a game. I will make it and then tear it to pieces and flush the pieces down the toilet.

I am a good man.

This list means nothing.

The cellar door will stay closed forever.

I will not open it again.

I swear by all that's holy.

I am a good man.

The list is longer than I had expected.