Bourne toWrite... creative writing workshops

Friday Night Rituals

by Juliet Robinson

She's in the corner, watching. She hasn't got eyes, but her hollow orbits have a way of latching onto me. I turn to face the wall and pull the duvet over my head. The softest creak of the floorboards tells me she has moved. I close my eyes and will sleep to come.

She sits at the end of my bed, her head cocked so her tangled blood-red hair falls to one side. No light glints in the pits where her eyes should be, only an endless dark that seems to draw the warmth in.

'Please leave.'

She leans forward, exhaling a soft hiss of breath. The sweet smell of rot fills my nostrils.

I'm working on my laptop, and out of the corner of my eye, an empty space slowly fills with shape and shadow. The screen flickers, its light dimming. The familiar chill creeps up my spine.

'I'm busy.'

On the way back to bed, having been woken by a full bladder, I pause in the threshold of my room. She's there, crouched by my bedside table, making a soft humming sound. I brace myself and step into the room. Her head snaps up, hair tossing wildly.

'Why?'

Joey has just stormed into the apartment wearing all of Chandler's clothes. The canned laughter is joined by a wet, rattling cackle. I turn; she's standing in the narrow space between my sofa and the wall. As Joey starts doing lunges, her body shakes with mirth, her wet shift clinging to her skeletal frame.

'Yeah, it's funny.'

Her attention is fixed on the TV. I watch as her laugh deepens, bubbling up her throat like air forced through stagnant water.

‘Could I be wearing any more clothes?’

I’m eating crisps and drinking a cheap bottle of white wine—it’s sweet and nasty, but it’s doing the job. From the hall, I hear the patter of wet footsteps. She appears in the doorway, the TV remote clutched in her pale hand, her talon-like nails scratching the plastic.

She steps aside and lets me past, a stuttering, excited breath escaping her stretched lips. She holds out the remote, and I take it gingerly. A cold shock rushes through me as I accidentally touch her saturated flesh. We both flinch, and the remote tumbles to the ground, its back popping off and sending the batteries scattering.

A skin-stripping shriek erupts from her. The glass in my hand vibrates, the wine spilling over its rim. She drops to the ground, her head jolting from side to side with insectoid speed. Water sprays from her as she scrambles to gather the batteries.

‘It’s OK! I can fix it.’

The Gang are playing Thanksgiving football. I’m sitting on my sofa, and at the far end, perched like an awkward bird of prey, she sits with her knees pulled tightly to her chest. Her long, pale toes curl over the cushion edge, leaving dark, damp circles in the fabric.

On screen, Monica and Ross are screaming at each other over the Geller Cup. Her head tilts in tandem with every chaotic play, the tangled mass of red hair shifting over her shoulder. I sip my wine; the hairline fracture in the glass holds firm.

The scent of rot in the air has settled into something familiar now, almost comforting, like turned soil in my mother’s garden. We have a Friday ritual: cheap wine, crisps—which she likes watching me eat—and always Friends; sometimes Sex & the City; never Father Ted—the actors dressed as priests send her into convulsing fits of violent trembling, her hollow sockets weeping dark, stagnant water until I hit the off button. She loves Buffy the Vampire Slayer and The X-Files. She creeps closer and closer to the screen, reaching trembling fingers out to brush against its static surface, causing it to flicker and distort into a snowstorm of static until she snatches her hand back with a guilty, raspy gasp.

She still watches me sleep, standing in the corner of the room or in the shadows by my wardrobe.

‘Good night.’

I no longer pull the duvet over my head.

A shattering crash pulls me from my dreams. I lie still, suspended between sleep and full alert, uncertain if the sound was a remnant of my dream. Icy droplets of water patter on my forehead.

She is on my bed, crouched over me, an agitated hiss escaping her thin lips. She pushes her hands down on my shoulders.

Then comes the sharp, crunching scrape of heavy boots on broken glass.

She jerks her head towards the door, her nails biting into my flesh as she tries to pull me from my bed. I take the lead down the hall an umbrella clutched in my hands. She presses close to my back—a cold, nervous presence.

'Grab the TV.'

'Unplug the bloody cables.'

A cold wave sweeps through me. On the other side of the door, someone starts to shriek. She isn't behind me anymore. She's already there.

I throw the door open. My demon had been tamed, but she came out roaring.

She has one of the men by the throat, pinned against the wall, while his mate scrambles for the window. Her head snaps around; she drops the first man and skitters on all fours towards the other.

He starts to scream.