

 DAGGER BOOKS SINGLE

COULD BOY

cody dagger

COLD BOY

a short story

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DAGGER BOOKS

A Dagger Book Single / October 2012

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“The refrigerator is haunted.”

Carol crossed her arms in front of her chest and refused to take another step until her new husband admitted this singular fact which was to her so very obvious.

“There is no such thing as a haunted refrigerator,” Steve replied. He and Carol had been married for three months now, and they were rapidly approaching the phase when new discoveries about their spouse’s irrational beliefs were no longer exciting or cute. “I told you I’d get my friend Paul to come look at it this week.”

“He’s not going to find anything. The refrigerator is just cursed. I want a new one.”

“You know we can’t afford one right now. We plowed all our money—and the money we got from the wedding gifts—into the down payment on this place. Maybe if we cut back a bit we can save up and get one this spring if it’s that important. I mean, you don’t even cook.”

“There you go again. You try working all day...”

“I do work all day.”

“...and then come home and have to clean the house, pick up your underwear off the floor, *and* make your supper. I’m not a robot, Steve!”

The refrigerator emitted a sharp rattling noise, and something within made a loud clunk. Steve pulled open the door. Inside, a two liter bottle of soda had fallen over onto the metal grate of a shelf. The lid had popped off, and thick, brown liquid spilled over the shelves and onto the vegetables and the yogurt and the leftover piece of store-bought chocolate cake that had marked their three-month wedding anniversary and their first month in the house. Tawny froth floated atop the pools of soda, and the rivers of carbonated syrup fizzed quietly against the hum of the refrigerator’s compressor.

“Aww,” Steve said. “It’s all ruined.”

“I *told* you the fridge was haunted.”

“It’s not haunted.”

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Inside the cold machine, the one naked light bulb dimmed and died, and then the compressor shut off and did not come back on.

“Yeah, that thing has been nothing but trouble since we moved in,” Steve told Paul when he arrived the next morning with his box of tools and a six pack of beer. “The temperature wasn’t keeping right—too hot then too cold—and now the compressor stopped.”

Paul said very little as he rooted around in the back of the refrigerator, now pulling at tubes and now pressing on wires. He unscrewed something that appeared vaguely important, and he replaced a worn rubber ring with something shiny and undisturbed by layers of grime and dust. After he pushed the refrigerator’s guts back into place, he gave the machine a swift, if symbolic, kick, and the familiar hum of the cooling mechanism started anew.

“What was wrong with it?” Steve asked.

“Damned if I know,” Paul replied. “I replaced a couple of things for you, and it started up again. There wasn’t really anything wrong as far as I see. If you have more trouble, let me know. Then I’ll tell you it’s time to buy a new one. This thing’s, what, thirty years old?”

“It’s not that old. Maybe twenty, tops. It came with the house.”

“It’s in good shape, but you should get a new one. That old, it’s only a matter of time ’til it goes again.”

That evening it was Carol’s turn to choose what to do for their weekly date night, so she and Steve ordered Chinese and watched a romantic comedy in the living room. Just before the wedding scene at the end of the movie, Carol paused the DVD and asked Steve if he needed his drink freshened. He demurred and offered a lame joke whose double entendre was intended to hasten the evening toward the bedroom. Carol smiled and teased and went into the kitchen to refill her glass of Diet Coke. Steve tapped his fingers on the arm of the couch and waited.

Steve’s body reacted to Carol’s scream before his mind processed what it had heard. He leapt from the couch and ran to the kitchen, which in an older house like theirs was a separate room. He threw his arms around her and urgently asked what was wrong.

“In the fridge,” she said, drawing the words out slowly. “I saw... I saw...”

“What did you see?” Steve asked.

“There’s a boy in the fridge.”

Steve yanked open the door, and the little bottles of salad dressing and condiments lining the door rattled and clanked. A half-empty jar of taco sauce fell over.

“There’s nothing in the fridge,” Steve said.

“I saw it. There was this little boy, and he was sitting in the fridge. And he looked so cold.”

Steve furrowed his brow and frowned. He rubbed Carol’s shoulder. She grabbed his hand and pushed it off.

“I am *not* crazy. I saw him.”

“I believe you saw him, but there wasn’t any kid in there. How could there be? There’s three shelves. How would he fit?”

“I don’t know. I just know I saw him.”

“You’re tired. Why don’t you come to bed?” Steve smiled and winked.

“I am *not* in the mood, for that Steven.” She used his full name.

“Then come to bed and sleep. You’re just tired.”

Carol agreed to call it a night. She did not notice that she rubbed her vacant stomach. Steve did, and he worried that the strain of last year’s miscarriage was not entirely forgotten. After he saw Carol to sleep, he picked up the half-eaten containers of lo mein and put them in the refrigerator. He watched the end of a hockey game and turned in early.

Morning came, and Steve was uncharacteristically awake before Carol and down in the kitchen deciding what to have for breakfast. When Carol awoke, she wandered into the kitchen and greeted Steve groggily. He was poking at a box of Chinese food with a fork.

“Does this smell right to you?” Steve asked. He handed her a white carton of last night’s lo mein. Carol took the container and held it to her nose. The acrid scent recalled the time a mouse died in her apartment’s ceiling, its putrescence coloring the air for weeks until the little corpse dried and its odiferous juices congealed. She gagged involuntarily and thrust the carton back at Steve.

“How long has that been in there?” she asked.

“It’s last night’s,” Steve replied.

“Are you sure?”

Steve took the carton and tossed it into the trash.

“I guess I’ll just have juice.”

Carol watched Steve withdraw a carton of orange juice from the refrigerator and unscrew the cap. He lifted it to his lips and started to drink. Carol didn’t complain. She hated orange juice, and Steve could do what he wanted with it. Steve gagged and swore and spit streams of yellow liquid onto the counter and the floor.

“It’s rancid!” he shouted. “It tastes like vomit!” He swore some more and threw the carton across the kitchen. It hit the wall opposite the refrigerator and fell into the sink, spilling a shower of yellow fluid across the dirty dishes and down into the drain.

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Steve gagged and retched a little more, and when he had regained his composure, he and Carol went through the fridge and threw out everything that was inside. What little food they had stocked since Paul fixed the fridge had rotted overnight, and even the ketchup and the mayonnaise sported crusts of strange colors.

“I don’t understand,” Steve said after probing the refrigerator and checking the temperature gauge and the compressor. “It’s still cold. This shouldn’t have happened.”

“I told you,” Carol replied tonelessly. “It’s haunted.”

That afternoon, Carol stopped by her neighbor’s house, looking for information. Mrs. Feldman was old and unpleasant, but also one of the few residents to have remained in the neighborhood for any length of time. When real estate prices rose, many of the older, working class families sold their split-levels to house-hungry young professionals and took their profits across the river or down south to comfortable retirements. Now, the new owners had planted their lawns with for sale signs, but this year’s crop found few takers other than Carol and Steve.

“I was hoping you could tell me something about my house,” Carol said to Mrs. Feldman, whose scowl gradually softened when Carol complimented Mrs. Feldman’s landscaping.

“There isn’t anything to tell. It’s a house like any other. All them on this street are the same. Put up back in seventy-three or so.”

“I mean the people who used to live there.”

“The Rides. They lived there almost twenty years. Snowbirds. Here in the summers, winters in Florida. Never had a bad thing to say about them, except for the dog. Always going in my yard.”

“I know this sounds strange, Mrs. Feldman, but I was wondering if anything bad ever happened in the house.”

“Bad how? Like rats? We don’t got none of those in this neighborhood.”

“No. I know how this must sound, but I think my house may be haunted.”

Mrs. Feldman’s scowl re-formed on her wrinkled lips.

“Didn’t the agent tell you? I thought that was the law.”

“Tell me what?”

“The family that had the house back when it was built—this was before the Rides—they weren’t good people. They had a little boy, and they didn’t treat him good. Husband banged him up some. Wife acted like it didn’t happen. Everybody suspected, but nobody did nothing.”

“That’s terrible.”

“One day, wife comes crying at my door. Husband’s gone. Kid’s missing. She’s got a black eye, and who knows what else. I called the cops.

They found the boy stuffed in the refrigerator, blue as the sky and dead from the cold. They hauled the two of them—the wife and the husband, when they found him—off to jail. House got sold. I'm surprised nobody told you."

"It's not the same refrigerator," Andrea the real estate agent said coolly when Carol got her on the phone. "The one you have was put in after the...incident."

"You should have told us. Isn't it the law to disclose that sort of thing?"

"Only if it happened recently. It was so long ago, I didn't even know about it until you asked. It isn't on the disclosure forms anymore. Otherwise, just imagine. You buy an old Victorian and get ten pages on everyone who ever died in it. And back then they died at home."

"Thanks for the comforting thought. You're sure it isn't the same fridge?"

"I got the dates for the appliances when I was doing the listing. The fridge is nineteen years old, so it can't be the same one. It's a good one, too. Almost new, like the old owners never used it."

For a few days Steve thought Carol had triumphed over her irrational fear of the refrigerator. She said nothing about it and smiled pleasantly most of the time. She had taken to drinking green tea and black coffee rather than diet soda, but he put that down to the colder weather as Indian summer gave way to full-blown autumn. Then, that Sunday, Steve awoke to another scream. Steve pulled himself out of bed and stumbled down the stairs, his bare feet recoiling from the iciness of the hard, dead wood. He should have turned the heat on last night.

"What's wrong?" he demanded as he erupted into the kitchen.

Carol stood motionless against the sink, her face a parody of itself, with bulging eyes and long creases where her open mouth pulled at the skin. She pointed toward the refrigerator.

The freezer door stood ajar, swinging slowly back and forth. Melted ice cream dripped from the open freezer, running in rivulets down the refrigerator door to small pools on the floor. That much was not frightening. From the pools of melted ice cream, however, emerged smaller puddles that toddled off across the kitchen floor before dissolving into droplets. Several of these blotches of milk and cream bore the unmistakable outline of a child's footprints.

Carol cried, and Steve told himself that they were both seeing things in the puddles, imagining shapes that could not be. He pulled paper towels off the roll and smeared the ice cream into long, cloudy streaks. After a

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few more passes, he declared the mess clean and tried to comfort Carol with empty promises that everything was better now.

On Monday Steve and Paul installed the new refrigerator Steve had bought that morning. He took out a line of store credit, with no payments due for a year, and hoped that by then he and Carol would have the money. The new refrigerator was stainless steel, energy efficient, and most importantly, completely and utterly new.

“Will you stop obsessing over that boy?” Steve barked at Carol. “I’m sick of hearing about it. I don’t care what happened here. It’s over.”

“I’m not obsessing, Steve. Don’t you want to know what happened in our house? Did you *read* those newspaper articles I emailed you?”

“No and no.”

“That poor boy. His parents used to punish him by taking the shelves out of the refrigerator and locking him in there for hours. Can you imagine it?”

“I don’t care. I’ve had enough of this. How much longer are you going to dwell on it? You’ve been talking about it all week.”

“The last time they left him in there so long that he died. How horrible it must have been, slowly getting colder until you just...”

“Enough!” Steve shouted.

“Where are you going?”

“Out.”

Steve returned late in the evening, just before he and Carol would usually go to bed. He felt guilty about blowing up at Carol that way, and he wanted to apologize before she fell asleep. All the pressures of life—the miscarriage, the marriage, buying a house—had put more strain on their relationship than Steve was willing to admit until now. This obsession of Carol’s was a cry for help, he decided, and he was willing to do what it took to help.

He unlocked the front door and stepped inside, and he was immediately aware that the house was unusually and unseasonably cold. The air stung the back of his throat, and goose bumps rose up on his arms and legs. He let the front door swing shut behind him, and he called out across the icy rooms: “Carol?”

Steve knew without waiting for a reply where to find his wife. She was in the kitchen, staring at the open refrigerator and freezer doors. Cold air flooded downward and spread across the floors and seeped into the walls. The compressor roared and throbbed wildly, straining to cool the refrigerator, the kitchen, and the whole house.

“He’s in there,” Carol said, her voice flat and expressionless.

“There is nothing in the refrigerator,” Steve said. “It’s a brand new fridge.”

“He likes the cold. He lives in the cold. I think he lives off of the refrigerator, like it powers him or something.”

“Stop this, Carol. Stop it now.”

“He doesn’t like it when we fight, Steve. That’s why he acts out.”

“Yeah? Did he tell you that?”

“He didn’t have to.”

“This has gone far enough,” Steve said, and he turned toward the fridge to close the doors. That’s when he saw it.

There was a boy in the refrigerator. Not physically, of course. But he was there nonetheless. The way the baking soda and the soda bottles and the vegetables were lined up just so, with the patterns of frost etched across the back wall and the shadows falling from the naked light bulb, there was no mistaking it. In the labels and the shapes and the colors, Steve saw the impression of a young boy of perhaps eight years old or younger, huddled and frightened and wild-eyed. Steve found himself holding his breath, and he blinked hard to break the illusion, but it would not go away. No matter how he tried, he could not remove the face of that dead, cold boy from within the patterns of frost and plastic and glass.

“You see him, don’t you?” Carol said.

“We’ll sell the house. Move away,” Steve said.

“It’ll never sell. Not now. We can’t afford to just leave.”

“What can we do?”

“He likes the cold,” Carol replied absently. Her eyes fixed on the boy’s unblinking eye floating amidst the carbonation in the diet soda.

“We’ll unplug the fridge. Crank the heat. Keep our voices down. Then he’ll go away.”

“That’s fine for now,” Carol said. “It might even work. But what about later?”

“Later?”

Carol gestured toward the window, where in the moonlight dead leaves scratched at the glass as they scurried and fluttered in the wind.

“What will we do when it’s winter?” she asked. “There’ll be so much cold.”

“We’ll figure something out,” Steve said. He put his arm around Carol and pulled her close. They stood and they stared at the cold coffin in their kitchen, full of something dead that was once alive and refused to accept its fate.

There was a boy in the refrigerator, and neither Steve nor Carol knew how to get him out.

about the author

Cody Dagger is an underemployed writer who shares his home with two rambunctious cats. He is the author of *Freshman Fear*, his first novel, and Cody hopes it will prove popular enough to keep his cats in their favorite gourmet cat food.

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