

The Lady in the Frame

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This is a work of fiction. Similarities to real people, places, or events are entirely coincidental.

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My father bought the portrait at a garage sale when we were passing through Iowa, on our way to our new life and his new job in upstate New York. Had we not driven there, then I suppose we never would have encountered the woman in the frame, but we did and thus she came into our lives. I can't recall now why we stopped in the first place, my father was not usually a man who liked to pick through the former belongings of others, but I believe now that she called out to him somehow. She knew from inside her gilded cell that he was coming, and that he would not be able to resist her.

There she was among the cast out bits of furniture, well-worn stuffed animals, and scratched up pots and pans; sitting in her ornate gold frame, poised but strange looking. He took her home for forty dollars, much more than I had ever imagined he'd pay for any sort of art, wrapping her up in sheets and placing her on top the luggage in the very back of the car. That was where she stayed, all the way across the United States to our new house where he hung her in his office.

She scared me from the moment she went onto the wall, and I could truly get a look at her. She was a real woman, I knew that much, not a painting or a figment of the imagination. She was beautiful but in a way that scared me, the way her gaze stared off into a distance that I could not see. One hand snaked from beneath her black cloak to clutch it shut, as though warding off an invisible wind. On her head she wore the strangest thing, tall and pointed like a hood perhaps, or a witch's hat without the brim. Some fantastical thing sat atop the point, wiry and incomprehensible to me. I thought it looked very much like a bizarre, mechanical spider, and I hated looking at it.

The first time I noticed her eyes following me, I was doing my math homework at father's desk. He let me use his office sometimes for my school work, when I was distracted by the radio or reading books that were not assigned for school. In the office things were more boring, quieter, and I could force myself to focus more clearly. I had gotten up to open a window, and when I looked back her eyes had shifted. Not just

within my imagination, but on the heavy paper upon which she was printed. I stood for a little while, staring back at her, before daring to return to the desk. Maybe it *was* my imagination, I had thought then. When I finally made to leave though, homework complete, she was gazing into the middle distance again, but as I crossed the room I felt those cold eyes on me, tracking my every move.

I know that unmistakable feeling. She was watching me as I left the room.

After that she began to visit me at night. Not physically, she was incapable of leaving the borders of the frame that held her tight, but inside my head. She haunted my dreams, kept me from sleeping. I grew tired and sluggish, slogging through my days as best I could and up all night to avoid seeing her or hearing her. She told me awful, terrible things. Tried so hard to convince me to commit atrocities that one can not even begin to imagine. My father was the man who brought her here, but she wanted me to be the one to set her free.

Weeks upon weeks began to drag on, the world a blur of nothingness as I was being slowly driven mad by the woman in the picture and the lack of proper sleep. My father was having a dinner party with friends on the night the small thread of sanity holding me together finally severed. I tore the portrait off the wall and carried her into the backyard. I threw her onto the grass, doused her with the fluid my father used for lighting our barbecue grill, and dropped a match to her. The flames were lapping at the paper, curling the edges, when father caught me and put out the fire. His friends had gathered around to watch, staring as tendrils of smoke climbed towards the sky.

A friend of his, a very self-important man named Clarence, declared that he worked wonders with restoration, and offered to take the now damaged portrait off his hands. He carried away the woman in the frame, out of my sight and, I prayed, out of my life. The dreams stopped then, and I began to sleep again. Last I spoke to Clarence's two children at a Christmas party, they were having strange dreams and compulsions, but

didn't quite know what to make of them. I said nothing, afraid that their father would return the painting to our home instead. I knew that she could never come back to our home, or that would be the end of me.

That horrible woman with her long, lingering gaze and strange, spideresque headwear could stay on their wall, I thought. And she did, until I read in the paper that the oldest of Clarence's children had set the house ablaze with family still inside. I wonder now where she is, and if she is still contained within her four tarnished, golden walls. Was she finally engulfed in flame and destroyed as I had tried to do? Or would she live on, so that she might hang upon another wall and bring more slowly insanity and inevitable devastation?

I hope I never know.

