



TO test
THE spirits

a short story by
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To Test The Spirits

By: Ashley Keene

You are old enough to know by now that there are not monsters watching you sleep, or murderers in the bathroom while you bathe, or dark creatures behind your feet when you walk up the stairs.

You are mature and intellectual, so you know that when you're lying in bed and the power's gone out, there's nothing crouched in the closet beyond the candlelight's reach. There's nothing behind the shower curtain, even when an odd shadow catches your eye and makes you stop and wonder what cast it. There is no hollow-eyed woman watching you from the mirror across an unlit room, even though there's an unearthly tingle somewhere deep in your spine that tells you she's watching.

When you were little, though, you knew they were there. You're getting too old to remember the high-pitched fear that used to haunt you every night, and instead have kept only the now-humorous memories of jumping across shadows or using blankets as shields. But you don't remember the silent tears behind shaking palms as you tried to keep quiet, even though you knew that crying out for help was the only thing that would save you. You knew the dark creatures were there, and mustering the courage to confirm their presence was often beyond your ability. You didn't need to check the closet or beneath the bed because you knew. Even when an adult checked for you, you knew that something had been there, even if it's gone now.

It's easy to forget, since today that kind of fear is fleeting.

It's fleeting because you know there are no creatures waiting to get you. There are real things to be afraid of, now. Real fear is when you call your loved one and it goes straight to voicemail for the fourth time. You follow your unchecked thoughts through all the scenarios and the real fear grows. You follow them through identifying the mangled body at the morgue. You follow them through to the visitation and how you'll react to hollow condolences, all the way to leafing through photos years later, looking back at a life lived without someone you love.

So why do you *still* sometimes feel the thrills of paranormal fear, when there are real things to be afraid of?

Even though you're mature and rational, sometimes you can't ignore the itch of unease. Like when you're *sure* that

something is with you in the bathroom, its movements inaudible beyond the rushing of water. But unlike when you were a child you can rid yourself of the unease quickly. You scratch the paranormal itch by checking. You pull the shower curtain back, reassuring yourself that you are alone and safe. Of course there is nothing. Whenever you check, there never has been anything and there never will be anything.

So why do you check?
Because there *is* something.

Of course there is. Rational people don't get surges of fear about nothing. Something is there. Something is *always* there, and it's just as terrifying as you've always imagined. And just as you've taught yourself, it goes away when you look at it.

If there was nothing there, you would not feel the need to keep your feet from poking off the edge of the bed, safe from creatures that don't exist. You would be able to sleep without covers on top of you on hot nights because you would not need to shield yourself from the childhood demon that still haunts you.

Because that's what it is. A demon. Your very own demon, as a matter of fact. As it grows hungry it becomes more solid. When you think your eyes are playing tricks on you or your ears are just hearing things, that's how you know it's hungry. When you check to see what's there, it disappears. It goes away satisfied, taking what it came for: your fear.

It harvests fear, cultivating the energy like a farmer. It matches itself to you from childhood and follows you into adulthood, knowing you well enough to know what will make you check to see if it is really there.

Checking. Looking. That's what gives it the energy it craves. That's the reason you feel better when you check to see what's there. The demon absorbs the fear immediately, leaving you with your normal heartbeat, body temperature and brain activity. When you look straight at it, it goes invisible and takes with it your fear by-products, leaving you feeling just fine.

You already know the feeling. It's the sigh of relief when even a tiny amount of fear and energy is released. It's when you *don't* look that you have to coach your heart rate down, you have to work to slow your breathing. When you don't look, it takes time for the fear's energy to disappear, because you're not giving it away.

But when you give away your energy, the demon leaves you alone. You're safe. It's evolutionary, after all. The demon is a malicious creature, but causing fear in you is not its ultimate goal. The paranormal fear is just its fuel.

When it has fuel, it has the power to inflict real damage. That is when your demon congregates with other demons, all of them powerful with harvested energy from their humans.

The demons use their power to break into the real world, creating real death and real destruction. They transform into the fear you despise. Real horror is the only thing they find

joyful in their backwards world, the only thing worth existing for.

So when you find out that a father has slit the throats of his young children and then splattered his own brains against a wall with a shotgun, you'll now know that the demons are responsible for pushing him over the edge. They are the spark of the idea in the man's head, the energy behind the impulse that pushed him into action.

And you will be part of making that unthinkable thing happen because of the energy you gave to one of those demons.

It may not be a frightening thought just now. You probably don't even believe that these demons exist. You're reading this and it might be cheerful outside and you're half-distracted by work or school or some other bit of business that needs your attention. You'll forget about your demon. For now.

But when you're alone, later, and you feel the unease as you walk across a dark room and you speed up just the tiniest bit to get to the light switch, you'll feel that tiny bit of energy leave you when the lights show you there is nothing to fear. Then you'll remember what you read about the demon taking your energy. You won't be frightened because you still won't believe in it.

Not until you turn on the news the next morning and find out that a woman died in a fire just a few streets away, will

you start to wonder about the demon and whether or not yours had something to do with that fire.

But you'll forget. Later, without thinking, you'll give your energy away again. You won't let yourself blindly reach around the doorframe to grab your keys because you have a feeling that a clammy hand is waiting to grab your wrist, so you look around the corner to make sure nothing is there, even though you know there's nothing. You give your energy away to the clammy-handed demon and the next day you find out a child was shaken to death downtown. You will remember how you looked to see if the hand was there, and remember that you gave away your fear's energy.

That's when you'll decide that the *next* time you have a moment of fear, you won't look. Not because you believe in the demons or what they do, but because you're curious. You want to see if you're rational enough to ignore the irrational fear. You just want to test yourself.

Before long, you're in your car in an empty parking lot late at night, and you feel that unearthly feeling. *Something is in the back seat of your car.* The energy in you will swell more than usual, because this time you'll know what is really back there. Your heart will beat faster and your breathing will increase and you'll have more energy to give than you've ever given before. The demon will sense how much you have to give, and it will grow hungrier and hungrier, solidifying so much that you can hear it breathing.

But you won't look. You can't. You won't give your energy away this time.

And that is when it becomes dangerous.

When you don't look into the back seat, the demon swells with anger. You feel the fear seep into your bone marrow. You know that something is behind you as sure as you know that the car's leather seat presses against your sweaty back. You grip the steering wheel just like you used to grip the sheets to your chin when you were little.

And just like when you were little, you won't look because you know it's there. You can't face the consequences of what looking might reveal.

The demon, in a fit of anger, accidentally unleashes its intentions. Flashes of the things that the demon will do, begin to run through your mind: the bubbling skin on a newborn baby burning in the fire your demon starts; a teenager's gurgling, choked screams when your demon causes her car to be thrown into the river; the crack of bones breaking inside the fingers of a foster child as a drunk foster mother snaps them backwards one by one, her unholy rage fueled by your demon's energy.

You can't look behind you because you know that giving in will cause real, unimaginable terror and pain for someone else.

So you coach your fear away, with deep breaths and rational thoughts. You won't look and the starving demon gives up. Long moments pass, and you'll know when it has left you.

You won't feel the slightest need to look behind you anymore and your heartbeat returns to normal.

You will feel silly for your fleeting belief in the demon, and a little embarrassed at yourself for letting such horrible, graphic images go through your head. You'll convince yourself that the demons don't exist, and from then on you'll face your fears and just look when something is bothering you that badly. You'll tell yourself that your actions and fears mean nothing to anyone else. You'd rather feel better than believe in the demons.

And then, when you get the sudden, electric, inexplicable urge to throw the steering wheel to the left, to crash into that approaching minivan just because you *CAN and there's NOBODY THERE TO STOP YOU...*

The minivan will rush past, unharmed. You look into your rearview mirror at the minivan's red lights turning out of sight.

You wonder where on *earth* that impossibly strong impulse came from.

And then you'll think...

...Was it them?