

GRAHAM JOYCE

First, Catch Your Demon

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In 2001, Subterranean Press published Joyce's chapbook *Black Dust*, while his novel *Smoking Poppy* appeared from Gollancz in the UK and Pocket Books in America. His latest novel, *The Facts of Life*, is from the same publishers.

"This story is set in the scorpion-infested house I lived in on the Greek island of Lesbos in 1988," the author remembers. "Before I knew about the scorpions in the house, I was awakened one night by a bad dream and the word "scorpion" on my lips. I lit the oil lamp and saw three of the creatures on the wall - just as described in this tale."

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I MUST HAVE KNOWN THEY WERE there because some dark instinct jolted me awake. I sat upright in bed. The shutters were closed against the sirocco heat and there wasn't even the light from a single star. Fumbling for the matches I kept at the side of the bed, I lit an oil lamp. Not until then did I feel confident enough to swing my legs out of the bed without stepping on one of the disgusting things.

I lit two other oil lamps and the flame dancing behind each glass dispatched skittering shadows across the floor. Not helping at all. It was stifling. I opened the wooden shutters and the heat rolled over me. It was 4.00 a.m.

I looked under the bed. I looked behind the cupboard. I lifted the mat at the door. I knew they were there somewhere because a voice in my dreams had warned me, and I tend to take these things seriously. I didn't know whether to walk down to the water to throw myself in or to try to go back to sleep. Then I saw them.

Three of them.

My grandmother used to have three ceramic flying ducks on her living room wall. In the eighties, it was ironic-kitsch to display three Volkswagen Beetles, or three Supermen flying in strict formation. Such is our cleverness. But here in my beach house on the Greek island of Karpachos I'd managed to trump all that with three live scorpions. In ascending order: big, bigger, biggest. The largest not more than six inches away from where my dreaming head had slumbered moments earlier.

We should trust our dreams. They are trying to help us.

Well, I didn't like them, the scorpions. I'd heard they like to get into shoes and other warm, moist places. Perhaps if I'd been less of a lout I would have behaved like a proper naturalist, making sketches of these beautiful creatures, taking scholarly notes about their habitat and behaviour. But I'm not and I didn't. Plus I was thinking defensively about my own warm, moist places.

I marched outside to my patio kitchen and reached for a heavy iron skillet. Aspro, a feral white cat living on scraps from my table, looked puzzled. I weighed the frying pan in my right hand, returned to the

scorpions and hit Number One so hard that what didn't stick to the underside of the skillet left a scorpion-shaped applique on the wall. Bang went Number Two, and fuck you all the way to hell thou slimy carapace, thou whoreson zed, thou mere cipher. I was saying all this and lining up for the hat-trick when Number Three, coming to its senses, dropped from the wall and scuttled toward my bare feet, sting cocked.

I leapt on my bedside chair, tipping over the oil lamp. The glass smashed and the burning oil spilled on the stone floor, raising a small curtain of flame between me and the surviving scorpion. I have heard that a scorpion encircled by fire will sting itself to death. Nonsense. Undeterred by the conflagration in its path, the scorpion - almost casually - stepped through the fire and came to a swaggering halt at the foot of the chair. Its sting remained cocked. My six-foot height advantage notwithstanding, it raised its pincers at me like a species of dense English football hooligan, drunkenly beckoning me on.

Then Aspro the cat appeared, and, properly challenged, the scorpion retreated to a crevice at the foot of the wall and was gone. I climbed down from my ridiculous perch and extinguished the small fire with a bedside glass of water. I examined the bottom of the skillet, where the crushed scorpions comprised no more than flimsy crisps of brown carapace and mucus. I let the cat have what it wanted, and anyway it saved me from having to clean the underside of the skillet. Aspro chewed thankfully and licked his paws.

"Sometimes, Aspro, you disgust me."

The heat blanket made me sigh. Sweat ran in my eyes, down my back, trickled in my groin. There was no possibility of my going back to sleep. I decided to go and climb in the rowing boat, where at least I could sit with my feet in the water. I pulled on some shorts and Aspro followed me along the garden path to the boat.

I pulled up short. Someone was sitting in my boat. I didn't know who it could be. I had no friends and I discouraged all neighbours and strangers.

The sea was still, like oil, bearing a dermis of moonlight, but suffocating under the sirocco heat. The small, silhouetted figure hunched over the prow of the small rowing boat, gazing into the water. I stood under the fig tree at the gate to my garden, contemplating what to do. Aspro looked up at me as if to say, *what next?*

"You're in my boat," I said rather fiercely.

I don't like visitors, invited or otherwise. I don't like people bothering me. I expected the intruder to be startled, or to spin round, or to take fright in some way. But the figure continued to gaze into the water. "Yes."

It was a woman's voice. I took a few steps closer, and I pulled up for a second time. There was a *naked* woman in my boat.

"You're in my boat," I repeated, stupidly.

This time she turned languidly to face me. She sat with her knees drawn up together under her chin. "You don't mind."

It wasn't a question. It was a statement. Actually I did mind. I

didn't want anyone around my place. Least of all a woman. Least of all a *naked* woman. I had to make an effort to avert my eyes from her breasts and the plump curve of her legs. Her lustrous black hair was cut in a fashionable bob. Her dark eyes trawled me with sensual laziness. She made no effort to cover

herself. Indeed, I couldn't see any clothes with which she might.

"Look, if it really upsets you I'll get out of your boat," she said. She stood up. Her skin was slightly wet. The weak moonlight slithered along her flanks like phosphorescence and her pubic bush glimmered with droplets of sea water.

I felt petty. "No, you don't have to get out. I was just startled to see you there."

She sat down again. "I've been swimming. To get out of the heat."

"Alone? You shouldn't swim at night alone. There are currents."

"You're concerned for me? That's nice. But I wasn't alone. I went swimming with my two sisters. But when I turned around I couldn't find them."

"Where? Where did you swim from?"

She gestured vaguely in the direction of Mesahori, where the illumined, whitewashed church squatted on a freakish outcrop of rock. I doubted she'd swum that far, but I didn't say anything. "Go get some wine from your house. Let's drink together."

I was taken aback by her commanding tone. So much so that I found myself returning to my kitchen for a bottle and two beakers. I also found her a towel. "I don't have a cooler," I said grumpily on returning to the boat. I tossed her the towel.

"Does it bother you?"

"Please just cover up."

"I meant does it bother you, living without electricity."

"Not at all. If you live without electricity you let other things into your life. Cheers."

"Cheers to you."

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Her name was Sasha. When she told me she was a writer I felt my teeth grinding. The writers I have known have all been drunks, dreamers, deceivers and frauds. That was just the successful ones. I should know. I was an editor. I was the one who had to deal with these whining, self-centred, immature psychopaths for a living. Anyway, after divulging this piece of information she looked at me in anticipation of the usual questions. Perhaps she expected me to be interested, but I let it go.

We smoked cigarettes and drank the wine. The moon's image floated unbroken on the water. After a while Sasha produced a battered-looking reefer, and asked me for a light. She took a deep toke before passing it to me.

There was something disturbing about Sasha, something sexually ambiguous. She was simultaneously attractive and repulsive. As I squinted at her through the smoke from the joint, she ran her tongue along her upper lip, chasing the diamond-like beads of sweat there. Meanwhile I inhaled the smoke deeply and held it back for a long time, trying to impress myself. The smoke itself had a peculiar taste and odour. That is, another odour beyond the obvious scent of the beneficial herb. I couldn't put my finger on it.

"If you swam here," it suddenly occurred to me to ask, "how did you keep the reefer dry?"

She took the joint and inhaled passionately, holding my gaze until she blew out a plume of smoke. Then she winked.

I was appalled. I got out of the boat and walked back up to the vine-covered patio of my house. I had a hammock slung there, and I slumped into it. When I opened my eyes she was sitting nearby in a wicker chair, with her knees drawn up under her chin. I don't know why I'd bothered to give her the towel.

I had an unpleasant thought. "You should be careful," I said. "This place is infested with scorpions."

"Excellent! Where? Show me."

I was a little taken aback by this response, though I lazily indicated that they were crawling all over the shop.

"Got a jar?" she said, springing to her feet. Without waiting for an answer she picked up a glass jam jar I used for burning candles outside. "If there's one around, I'll find it." She got down on her hands and knees, and, taking a draw on the joint, began blowing smoke into the cracks between the concrete floor and the external walls, moving methodically along the patio. I watched her do this for a few minutes and was about to speak when a medium-sized scorpion scuttled out of the crevices. She deftly trapped it under the jar. "Hand me a knife. A big one."

I swung out of the hammock and passed her a long-bladed kitchen knife. Lifting the jar half an inch, she manoeuvred the knife into place and expertly amputated the segmented abdominal tail from the creature. Satisfied, she lifted the jar, keeping her knife on the still-twitching tail. She picked up the disarmed scorpion, which was thrashing its lobster-like claws. "You can go now," she said, planting a kiss on its back. She set it down on the concrete. It would have scuttled away but Aspro the cat, having watched all these proceedings, pounced and ate it.

This seemed to displease Sasha. Still on her knees, she hissed at the cat. Aspro, chewing heartily, jumped back into the shadows. Murmuring something about hating cats, Sasha went on to give me a lesson in scorpion anatomy. "The glands are at this end of the tail. You don't want the venom sac."

"Don't I?"

"No. It would blow you apart. You want the glands, which are in a pair, here. You cut across here - see? - and here. Though I don't know why I'm telling you as you really shouldn't try this at home, as it were."

"As it were."

"You need a tiny drop of olive oil."

"I do?"

"Just the tiniest drop to activate the neurotoxin."

"The what?"

"Have you got any? Any oil?"

She crushed the segment she'd extracted from the scorpion and mixed it with a smear of olive oil. Then she asked me for a cigarette. She pinched a little of the tobacco from the end without breaking the paper, popped in her minute mix of God-knows-what and packed that in with the spare tobacco. Then she offered it to me to smoke.

“You must be fucking jesting.”

“No.”

“You first.”

“There’s only one pop in it. The thing won’t share.”

“Then you have it.”

“If you insist. I was trying to give you a treat.”

“A treat? What a pretty idea.”

She shrugged, and made to light up the concoction for herself. She struck a match and some cast to her eye, perhaps a glance of contempt as she looked across the naked flame at me, made me ask, “What does it do?”

“Oh for God’s sake. Do you want it or not?”

I stepped up to her, snatched the cigarette from between her lips, and put it to my own mouth. I could taste her lips on the filter. I grabbed her hand to steady the flame and put it to the tip of the cigarette. Catchlight from the watery moon flared briefly in her eye. I puffed on the cigarette and wiped sweat from my brow.

“Hold it deep in your lungs.”

I took another draw but nothing happened. Again, and this time something sizzled in the ciggie’s red cone. I got a lungful, held it back; still nothing. Then my head cracked against the moon.

When I say my head cracked against the moon, I mean that literally. There was a sound like a ten-thousand-decibel mosquito and my brain inflated at unconscionable velocity, rushing outward at the speed of light. My chin banged on the concrete and my skull smacked up against the moon. (Later I was to realize I’d fallen over, but I didn’t know that at the time.) The moon punctured and a shower of milky, resinous light drenched me, forming a brilliant membrane of ectoplasmic light around me, plugging my nostrils, my ears, my mouth. I could barely see through it. I had to hole the membrane to breathe and when I managed to drag the latex shroud off me my ears started popping to the cacophony of night sounds from my garden.

I heard a million insects and other wildlife excavating the ground under the house. A wave of heat rolled over me and I knew that I was lying on my back on the ground and that Sasha was fellating me. Every time I tried to open my eyes, all I could see was gold and silver flora exploding. After a moment the flora resolved into the shape of Sasha working away at my cock.

At last she hoisted herself onto my chest, her breasts quivering and I could see that from below her navel she was all scorpion and not woman at all. Half woman, half arachnid. She had human arms in place of the scorpion’s lobster-like claws, but her body trailed eight legs. I shuddered, and gagged. She wiped her mouth with the back of her hand and smiled at me. Then her venomous sting appeared over her head, quivering slightly, waving from side to side. I made to scream, but no sound would come. The sting dipped, lightly touched my forehead, and I passed out.

When I came round it was morning and the bright sunlight lancing through the open shutters hurt my eyes. Someone clattered a pot in my patio kitchen. I swung my legs out of bed, and my vision suffered from a slight strobe effect. My dick was rather sore but apart from these things I felt quite well. I started to pull

on some jeans that were lying on the floor; then, not wanting to find a scorpion in my tackle I remembered to shake them out. Sasha was outside making coffee. She must have been back to her own place because now she was wearing a simple black dress. She looked a little too much at home amongst my things.

“Come here,” she said, beckoning me off the patio. “Want to show you something.”

I followed her down the path to the whitewashed breeze-block lavatory. She’d dislodged a stone near the base of the white wall. Two scorpions were locked in apparent combat in the small depression thus exposed. “Mating is a dangerous business when you’re a scorpion,” Sasha said. I looked closer. The creatures had engaged claws and were twitching their tails together. At last they hooked on, each having effectively neutralized the other. Then they proceeded to tug each other back and forth across the stony earth. “The rocking makes him leave his seed on the ground and she picks it up on her belly.”

“Know a lot about scorpions, don’t you?” I said, scratching the back of my neck.

“Sure do.”

We went back up to the patio. She poured coffee and offered me a cigarette. I looked at it doubtfully.

“There’s nothing in it. You don’t trust me an inch, do you?”

An inch? I didn’t trust her the width of a brain synapse. Speaking of which, parts of my own brain were still tingling in aftershock. I found myself studying her surreptitiously, trying to see evidence of her nocturnal carapace. Though I will say she made decent coffee.

Sasha was content to hang around all day, sunbathing topless on the apron of grass between my house and the sea, sipping my ouzo and flicking through my magazines. She swam, later trying to wash off the salt water under the ramshackle shower, but the water drum on the roof was empty and I wasn’t going to fill it up for her. No need - she did it herself, filling the bucket from the pump and climbing the ladder to empty the bucket into the drum. After showering she went around the place with a woman’s fixing-up eye. She tidied my kitchen and rearranged my hanging system for my pots and pans. She swept out the room. I didn’t like it one bit, but all I could do was growl into the encyclopaedia I was reading and feel the unwanted erection fattening inside my shorts.

“Encyclopaedia? You read encyclopaedias?”

“No. I read *one* encyclopaedia. This one.”

She leaned over me, her nipple an inch from my mouth, like the swollen pip of a pomegranate. “You’re only on C!” I don’t know why she was surprised. It was a large encyclopaedia. “What will you do when you get to the end?”

“I’ll start again. Now leave me alone.”

“What’s the last entry? Let’s go straight to the end.”

“No.”

But Sasha wouldn’t leave it. She teased and nudged me and tried to grab the book. At last I banged the encyclopaedia shut and grabbed her by the wrist, dragging her squealing from the patio into the room. Once inside I bent her over the bed and lifted her black dress over her head. Underneath she was nude. Though she pretended to resist, as I loosened my shorts she spread her legs. Released, my cock bobbed angrily and, with the startling quickness of a ferret into a rabbit hole, buried itself deep inside her. She

gasped. And laughed.

I tend to fall asleep after the act. I understand this is supposed to make me a lousy lay. But when I came to moments later, she had massaged me to erection all over again. I couldn't seem to get enough of her, and this pattern was repeated over and over throughout the rest of the afternoon and evening. Just the smell of her inflamed me, and she in turn was determined to suck me dry.

At some point in the evening I got up to grab us something to eat. She followed me outside. We stood nude on the patio as the twilight settled on the water. She stood behind me with her arms around my waist as we watched a night fisherman glide silently by in silhouette, a lantern on the prow of his rowing boat. "Know what I like about you?" she said. "Your anger. I like it. Why are you so angry?"

I shook my head and struck a match to light the gas stove.

"It doesn't matter. You don't have to say. In fact it's better not to. I understand perfectly. Because I'm angry, too."

Stars were winking awake. Orion, huge in the sky and hanging low. We stood looking out on the darkening ocean and with the ghostly fisherman gliding through the water, and with her hand stroking my belly, for a moment I felt truly happy. After we'd eaten she gave me something to smoke. I remember stumbling into bed in a daze, and her climbing in after me.

When I awoke it was in the hour just before dawn. She was gone from my side. The shutters were open and a buttery moonlight spilled into the room. Something on the wall moved, but at the periphery of my vision.

I turned my head very slowly. It was Sasha, clinging to the wall. Her eyes were half-closed in self-communion. Hanging on the whitewashed wall, she defied gravity. I was paralysed with fright. I pissed the bed. Huge boils of sweat erupted from my skin.

Sasha was nude and as I strained, trembling, to see how she clung to the wall I saw, faintly pulsating, like a brown shadow, the scorpion abdomen superimposed over her lower body. My teeth chattered, giving me away. Sasha slowly turned her gaze on me. Then she dropped from the wall and onto my bed with the lightness of a bug. As she crept towards me, her sting appeared from behind her head, wavering before it touched me lightly just below my left temple, and I passed out again.

Examining myself in my cracked shaving mirror the following morning, I found a sizeable lesion on the side of my head. Sasha was already up, frying eggs and bacon in the large skillet. She had tied a tiny apron round her waist as a precaution against the sizzling fat.

"Shouldn't you put some clothes on? Someone might come by." As I spoke I noticed three scorpion carapaces scattered on the concrete patio. Either Aspro the cat had had a good night's hunting or Sasha had a gland-extraction factory going.

"Good morning, Ryan. And no one comes by here. Sleep well?"

"Actually I didn't."

"Kind of grouchy today, aren't you?" She looked up from the chuckling, spitting frying pan. "What's that on your head?" When I fingered the sore spot, she set the pan aside from the flame and came to look. "Mosquito bite?" She went back to the eggs.

I sat down at the table. "That stuff you gave me to smoke the other day. Do you think it could have after-effects?"

“Sure.” She served up the bacon and eggs. “You can get flashbacks for days. Come and eat.”

“Not hungry.”

Whipping off her apron she straddled me, settling herself on my lap. “If you’re going to keep fucking me seven times a day, you’re going to have to keep your strength up.” Then she kissed me, but I resisted. “What’s wrong? Tired of me already?”

“I don’t feel good.”

She put a hand on my forehead, squinting at me doubtfully. “You seem a little hot. Why don’t you take a swim? You’ll feel better.”

I picked up a towel and padded through the scorched grass down to the beach. I didn’t want a swim, but I wanted to get away from her. Why couldn’t I just kick her out? Just send her packing? I waded in the water up to my calf muscles, steadying myself against the boat to avoid stepping on the sea urchins. Looking back I saw Sasha hunkered over the table, not eating but engrossed in some new activity.

I returned to the house very quietly, coming up behind her while she thought I was still swimming. Over her shoulder I could see she was rolling another long joint. The papers were pasted together and the mixture of tobacco and resin was laid out on the paper. In her right hand was a syringe. Her left hand reached behind her head, lifting her hair as her fumbling fingers located a spot behind her ear at the base of her skull. In a shocking movement she jabbed the needle of the syringe into her neck and sharply upwards towards the region of the cerebellum. She jolted. I gagged, but she didn’t seem to notice me behind her. Slowly she drained off some dark fluid into the syringe.

When she was done she made as if to squirt the fluid from the syringe onto the contents of the joint.

“What are you doing?” I gasped.

Turning to me slowly, she smiled. The brilliant Aegean sunlight fizzed in her eyes. She dropped the syringe and picked up the reefer, lasciviously rolling her tongue along the sticky paper edge as she proceeded to turn a neat, crafted joint. “I’m gonna look after you,” she chuckled.

My feverish gaze swept the table. “Where’s that needle? The syringe, where is it?”

“What?”

The syringe was gone. I looked on the floor. Nothing. There was some cutlery on the table but that was all. “I saw a syringe. In your hand.”

She picked up a stainless steel knife. “I was just hot-knifing the resin. Give it a crumble. Say, you really are burning up, aren’t you?”

I was perspiring insanely, and my temperature was rocketing, it was true. Sasha coaxed me back inside the house, her voice gentle, wheedling. “I know what you want,” she said. “I told you I’m going to take care of you.” Pushing me back onto the bed she whipped off my shorts and closed her mouth around my cock, sucking me to the point of orgasm. I lay back with my eyes closed, unable to resist. At the instant I ejaculated into her mouth she produced the syringe from somewhere and, bringing it down hard from above her head before swinging it round in a curving thrust, jammed it into my buttock.

I was still screaming when the hit came.

The first thing that happened was that I felt a scorching heat and my body crackled like cellophane in a

fire. I was flung up in the air and out of the house. The roof blew outwards in a million tiny fragments. A golden wind shrieked in my ears as I went up and up, and my skin rippled and rolled with the g-force.

I remember corrosive sunlight stinging my eyes as I was sucked high above the clouds, up, up, up. I went ripping up through the stratosphere, through night-shining clouds and then on up into a sable darkness, passing through rises and falls of temperature until finally I passed through an exit zone of the atmosphere itself and into space, and although I knew it to be freezing, the raging inner heat of my body was keeping me alive. I was flung in a vertiginous trajectory, yoked by speed and feeling my bones cracking and resetting until I was reconfigured in a sequence of gleaming stars, major novae pulsating in a pattern almost cruciform, spine and forelimbs, while minor stellar bodies glittered superbly to complete a geometric form, pincers, legs, overhanging tail loaded with brilliant venom, set among the heavens in a place outside the curve of time.

All that of course was hallucination. None of it happened.

It was some time before I came to my senses, to find myself back in my beach house. Sasha was still there, patiently awaiting my return. And I was glad she was there. My distaste for her presence had been resolved, and some of the rage inside me had been drained, or at least transformed.

We spend our days together quietly. Often we don't even feel the need to speak, enjoying the companionable silence of old couples. I feel my eyes glaze over and almost in a slumber I am prepared to let the days pass without event. We keep late hours.

Sasha is generous. Should a juicy black spider pop its head from between the cracks in the brickwork, she will let me have first strike as I hone my skills. Sometimes I glance up from my place on the wall to Sasha's place on the wall, and I have almost forgotten to marvel at how easy it is, with the extra limbs, to maintain my grip on the perpendicular. Aspro the cat had to go, of course. Sasha doesn't like cats and we had to chase Aspro away.

We wait for someone else to take over the house. It has been a long time and no one has come, though patience is a virtue that Sasha has been able to teach me.

Though for some reason I do miss the cat.