

THE STORYTELLER



By
RJ Smith



A Storyteller Short Story

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For

Raymond J. Gould

My very first fan!

CURSES

This story is about curses.

It's really that simple.

We all have them.

Some people are tormented by addiction, gambling; lying, drinking, work... you name it. Maybe yours isn't that serious.

The Storyteller was my very first attempt at writing fiction. Written in 1988, I was a know-nothing, rough and tumble, twenty-two year old skinny white boy.

That was then.

Now, 27-years later, I'm a virtual celebrity in my small coastal town... a published author and optioned Hollywood screenwriter. Of course, I had a long road to travel to make it here today, but here I sit, nice and comfy in my Florida home.

One day I'll write the novel to match the screenplay I wrote for Hollywood.

But here I offer you the short story.

It's based on a tale an old man told me in 1988. The story of the witch and a curse...

So, with a nod to my past, and as a treat for my fans around the world, I dug into my

literary trunk and pulled out my classic UNCHANGED short, *The Storyteller*.

This is the one which sparked a writing career all those years ago.

Who said dreams don't come true?

The Storyteller changed my life... so much so, that I named my company after this sixty-two page tale that fashioned a hooligan into a novelist.

The tale you hold hasn't changed since the day I wrote it all those years ago.

I think its best kept that way.

And so, here it is, just as I penned it 27 years ago. I hope you enjoy *this* as much as I respect it for what it did for my life.

Sometimes in a lifespan, magic happens.

Literature changed my life.

The next time your cheery old grandfather invites you over for an evening of storytelling, be sure he's not telling you the tale of the witch.

Maybe he's from the village of Rell Ridge, and he might be passing on his curse.

Though grandpa may seem harmless, some things in life are meant to look deceiving.

Beware of grandpa, he's a storyteller.

THE ARRIVAL

IT WAS a dark and stormy Halloween night, and the wind howled outside the picture window as a storm lashed the Village of Rell Ridge.

Lightning flashed sporadically, and the clap of thunder which instantly followed, shook the house to its very foundation.

Inside, a fireplace roared its throaty challenge to the cold dampness.

That fire cast flickering shadows across the wood paneled walls of this large room.

Turning from the window where I stood watching nature's fury unleashed, I saw men walking into grandfather's den.

There were four of them, and although their faces were hidden from me by the shadows, I knew who they were, for I had arrived with them on this night.

They were old cronies, these men, who came together one night each month to share dinner and swap lies until the wee hours.

They were The Liars Club.

I burned with anticipation, as this would be the first time in my young life that I'd be privileged to join them.

Turning twelve years of age the previous month, and to the surprise of both my parents and I, the mail had contained an invitation for me to join grandfather for dinner, the next time The Liars Club met.

And here I was.

Consumed with curiosity and suffused with a feeling of maturity beyond my years, I crossed the room to join the men.

Pulling chairs around the fire in a semi-circle, I took a moment to examine the storytellers. The retired banker, Herb Michaels, whose bald head was hidden beneath a hair piece matching his brown tailor made suit, sat nearest the fire and to my left. Between us, an ever present drink already in his hand, sat Pete Mackey. A greasy looking character, he had slicked back hair and a bulbous red alcoholic nose. Beside him sat Ross Thomas, a big burly farmer who everyone liked for his amiable disposition.

I sat in the middle of them all, directly in front of the raging fire, so that I would have a clear view of the group I had longed to join for as long as I could remember.

Most of my attention, however, was reserved for my grandfather, John Thomas Redman the Third, who was warming his hands at the fireplace. At ninety-six years of age and his cane propped against his knee, I considered grandfather the perfect narrator for a horror story. Shoulder length, wiry, white hair framed a thin pallid face, and above his sharp nose, his beady, twitching eyes glowed fire red from the reflection of the fire. There had always been something about those eyes. They seemed to look right into a man's soul. Staring at him now, the mournful set of his mouth lent the impression he'd seen events that no mortal should ever be exposed to.

Joining us in comfortable silence, as the fire popped and crackled, grandpa gingerly ambled over to his straight backed wooden chair while each of us was lost in our thoughts of the night ahead.

Turning to us, the old man gasped a breath, lifted his head and stared off towards the picture window and the storm outside.

Grandfather's eyes appeared to narrow then and a bead of sweat trailed down his brow. When he sensed he had our undivided

attention, his crackling, piercing voice filled the silence with a ferocity that seemed to match the fire.

“It’s not a fit night outside this house for man or beast,” he rasped. “Aye, and quite appropriate weather it is for this night and for the story I am about to spin.”

Glancing to each of us, the old man smiled with a wrinkled, knowing grin.

“You may laugh at the foolishness of an old man, or even think perhaps I’m pulling your leg. But, I promise you that every word I speak this night is true. It all happened when I was just a wee lad, barely twelve years of age.”

Catching his glance, I spoke up.

“Is that why you invited me, grandpa? Because you were the same age then as I am now?”

Chuckling, he nodded. “Yes, Dwayne, that is exactly why I asked you over here this evening. Although, before the night is over, I’m afraid, you won’t be thanking me.”

I stared at grandpa with wide eyes, watching at the fire’s light in his own eyes dimmed, his shoulders slumping in what appeared to be exhaustion. The lines of age

zigzagging through his face appeared like they were carved in stone, and I noticed for the first time, how transparent his skin appeared, bathed as it was in the light of the fireplace. He looked older than his 96 years suddenly, and a shiver ran the length of my spine as I wondered whether I actually wanted to hear the story he was about to tell.

THE SET UP

GRANDPA HAD our attention.

There was something about the way he spoke to us, the fashion in which his eyes shifted from side to side.

A wink here, a nod there; there was an undertone of fright in his tone.

I felt it.

Excitement pulsed through the den.

I think everyone knew this was special.

That something strange might happen.

“Okay, John,” Pete interrupted. Pointing to each of us in attendance, he went on and pointed at me. “We all know you’re older than the hills, and out of respect for your years, we’ve allowed the boy to be present tonight.”

His voice betrayed the edge of inebriation in which he perpetually lived.

“I’ll be the first to admit, you’re probably the best storyteller I’ve ever heard, but Jesus, John, at the rate you’re going... the boy will be as old as you before you mumble the tale you have this night.”

“Now wait one second,” grandpa started.

“Gentlemen,” Herb interrupted in a dry business-like tone. “Let’s not get bogged down in arguments before we’ve even begun. That is only a waste of precious time. We all know John has to set the mood before telling his story.”

Turning to my grandfather, perched on his cane, Herb cleared the way for the telling of the tale. “You do have something special for us tonight, don’t you John?”

“Yes, old friend, I do indeed. As I indicated on the phone, this tale is one I’ve kept to myself for eighty-four years now. It’s a sliver of time I wish I could carry to the grave.” Peering out the picture window, he seemed lost in a memory.

His eyes glazed over, and for a brief moment, I thought he might die right there, keeling over his cane for a final time.

But grandpa went on.

Staring into my gaze, he winked, smiled and sighed. “I know the grave won’t hold this secret; but the demons won’t permit an old man to let bygones be just that. Thus, I must tell the tale of a time long past, after all these bone creaking years.”

Ross chuckled. “Aren’t you being a tad melodramatic, buddy? I mean, the way you’re carrying on, you must’ve seen a ghost or some such.”

Elbowing me in the ribs, Ross leaned into me then and whispered in my ear.

“Watch out, Dwayne, the boogeyman is gonna get ya!”

“I wish I had seen a ghost,” Grandpa mumbled after a long silence. “Instead of the hell spawn I witnessed.”

Shaking his bony head, we saw there was pain associated with the horrific memory thrashing through his skull.

“No, what I saw that night was a fiendish diabolical wraith pawned by the depths of hell. It was a haunted soul drawn from beyond the grave to avenge its untimely demise.”

For a moment, grandfather stopped talking, and I sensed a change in the room.

It was subtle to be sure, like the changing pressure of surrounding air, and yet.... I could feel it, like a spirit had joined our chat.

“I first met the demon when I was knee high to a grasshopper. I was a child, and the boogeyman is very real to kids that age.

However, this was the worst creature to ever strike fear into the soul of mankind.”

With that declaration, granddad’s eyes came alive again, blazing with a combination of hatred and terror. His stare resembled the lonely glares of men who’ve returned from a warzone...lonely, desperate and angry to have lost their innocence.

I was spellbound by that stare.

Easing out of his chair, a compulsion had seemingly taken hold of grandfather. He appeared lost, almost as if he’d become unaware of our presence in the room.

That’s when the story began, I guess.

It’s also when everything changed.

THE STORY

RUNNING HIS HAND along the hook of his cane, Grandfather rubbed a spot which had worn down over the years.

“I didn’t have many friends as a child, and I suppose that’s why I took so many chances with the ones I had. We were forever getting ourselves into mischief after darkness. It was a different time; we didn’t have movies, malls or roller rinks. Hell, there was nothing to do after sunset. So I defied my parents.”

“What happened, Grandpa?” I asked, recognizing his painful stare.

“One night, as I sat on my bed in the second story bedroom I called home, the window called to me. Sitting here now, I don’t recall what convinced me to leave the house that night. But I did, knowing full well what would’ve happened if I were to be caught by my father.”

Shaking his head, he grunted and chuckled. “I remember that night as if it occurred yesterday. I had agreed to meet my friend, Harry Ronan, around eleven that

night. Waiting until the house was quiet, and my parents sound asleep, I crawled out of that bedroom window and sprinted a mile to an old cow pasture. Seeing ghosts and goblins hiding behind every tree, I knew they were waiting for me to slow down so they could snatch my young soul.”

Everyone laughed, each man here in the den had enjoyed just such a boyhood, and I suppose things hadn't changed much.

I, too, was wary of the darkness.

“So,” Herb smiled, getting drawn into the story, “is this when you saw the boogeyman?”

Grandfather glanced to his friend, a blank expression lining his face. “No, no, Herb, but after that night, the boogeyman never bothered me again. Because just then, I didn't know I'd encounter a demon in just a few short minutes.”

The old man paused then, reached a palsied hand out and grabbed a bottle of brandy sitting on an old oak coffee table. Filling a glass, he knocked back the alcohol in one quick swallow. It seemed to be just what the doctor ordered, because as he poured another drink, his hand seemed to

steady. Placing the bottle beside the glass, he stared into its brown liquid, seemingly lost in his thought, and then he continued in a stronger voice.

“I arrived at the pasture around half past eleven, knowing that I was late, but hoping Henry had not given up on me. At first, I thought he’d already done just that and left. But as I stood there, with the sound of crickets filling my ears, a boy’s sobs became evident. Circling behind an old rotted out barn, barely holding its own weight from years of termite infestation, I came upon my friend on his knees, trembling, half hidden behind a water trough. It looked like young Henry was trying to hide from something. Then, as I moved closer, he glanced up at me and I saw the pure terror in his eyes.”

Interrupting, I shuffled over to my grandfather and sat on his lap. His frail body barely supported my weight, and I heard his knees popping.

“What was it, Grandpa?” I asked. “What is it that scared Henry?”

Groaning, and seeming to travel back to that moment in time, the old man shook his head in a brief moment of desperation.

“The first thing I noticed was that Henry knelt sobbing like a little girl. Large tears seeped from the corner of his brown eyes, tumbled down his rosy cheeks, and dripped off his chin. Thinking back now, I suppose I could have heard those droplets hit the barn floor if I had paid closer attention. Reaching down to my friend, I grabbed ahold of his arm and felt his flesh trembling in tremors of terrifying fear.”

“What did you think happened?” Ross asked, his wide shifting eyes moving over the others seated in their chairs.

“At first, I assumed Henry’s father had gotten ahold of a bottle and dumped his drunken ire on my only friend. But, as I knelt beside him, moonlight filtering through the crumpling roof allowed me to glimpse terror on his face. Bringing my face to his, I noticed the flesh around his eyes was swollen, as if he’d been sobbing for quite a long time. In his stare, I saw an unspeakable knowledge that threatened his immortal soul... that expression I witnessed that day, I suppose I’ll never forget it.”

Grandfather paused for a moment, glanced to his West Point Class Ring and twisted it counterclockwise.

“I remember sinking to my knees beside Henry, fighting a sudden overwhelming urge to run home as fast as my feet could carry me. I thought that whatever punishment my father dished out would pale in comparison to whatever turned a strapping farmboy like Henry into a sniveling mass of flesh.”

“Did you leave Henry and run home?” Herb asked, walking to the bar and pouring himself another drink.

Granddad shook his head.

“I knew I couldn’t do that, Henry was a darn good friend. Leaving him in the dead of night, scared out of his wits was not going to happen.”

“So, what did you do?” Ross cut in.

Groaning, the old man chuckled. “I stayed by his side, of course. But now, as I look back to that time, I wish I’d moved my feet as fast as they’d carry me back to the safety of my bedroom.”

“Why, Grandpa?”

Running thin bony fingers through my full head of hair, my grandpa's shoulders slumped and he bit his lower lip.

“Well, Dwayne... If I didn't stay with Harry that night, all of us here tonight might not have to die.”

Read the rest of the story....

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