

The Appointment  
By Kirk B. Young

I was five years old the first time he looked at me.

It was the middle of the night; I had chicken pox and I'd been scratching feverishly at my body all day only to be put to bed wrapped up in a wool blanket. You'd hope it was a cruel joke and not just malevolence, and truth be told it was neither. Auntie Lilith never had any children of her own, and when she looked after me during the summer months it had always seemed more of a neutrality with which she approached my presence there. Being her sister's child, she'd look after me when needed, but her general disdain for most children and other people led her to spend more time in the garden with her adopted saplings than with me. I and my largely uninterrupted play time were fine with this arrangement, even when confined to the bedroom for the day with my pox.

So yes, without giving it much thought Auntie Lilith wrapped me up in a woolen blanket, tucked me in, and then turned out the lights and went downstairs. And I began to itch. And itch. And itch.

Eventually I thought whatever the five year old version of "to hell with this" is and threw the blanket off of myself, finding enough momentary relief in the absence of any friction against my skin other than cool air from the window to fall into a slumber.

It was some time later that I woke with a start, eyes fixing on the popcorn ceiling above and wondering how many little nubs there were above me in hopes of boring myself back to sleep. But it didn't take, so I sighed and looked out the window to my right and that's when I began to feel it. Even a child can feel it: the sensation of being watched. Normally when this happens in the middle of the night you will look and find no one there staring back at you other than your own imagination, its eyes having already bored holes into your paranoid mind.

I looked slowly, thinking the sensation might fade before my eyes had crossed the room, but I didn't rotate long before setting my sights on a dark figure in my doorway, a man, very tall, with a somewhat thinner build. I could see no facial features in the dark other than his eyes, bathed by a strip of light falling just perfectly across his sockets. Was it by chance? Did he position himself purposely? I wanted to think the former while experience tells me it's the latter.

He didn't say anything. I had no idea who he was, but being five even the shadiest of figures were innocent until they indicated otherwise in my eyes, so I assumed he was in the right place, standing there in the doorway where he was supposed to, because the world was wondrous and wide and I found something new each day and surely this man must just be another part of life, another adult to buy me toys or read me a story or take me to the carnival as my father had a week before.

"What's your name?" I asked him, because above all else five year olds want to know how to address the person from whom they'll soon ask for things, and in order to do that they need a name.

But he didn't answer, so I frowned, and rolled over in bed onto my other side so as to not have to acknowledge him. I now sometimes wish I was still capable of as much indignation as I was then. Alas.

I shut my eyes and tried to sleep, but failed to do so. After awhile I opened them and stared at the wall. There was no shadow cast there by the moon shining through the window behind me, but I felt as if he was indeed standing there. It was at this point that I became scared.

The floorboard creaked behind me. I heard the rustle of fabric.

I turned over, starting to say “what are you doin mister?” but only made it to the point of uttering “what,” because as I turned the wool blanket was thrown down over my face and body, smothering me in its itchy warmth.

I screamed and began flailing wildly, and managed to roll off of the bed, the blanket coming with me, intertwined amongst my legs and arms, and once I hit the wooden floor I instantly pushed up in my wild movements, tearing myself out of the thorny fabric and breathing as heavily as a child can I bolted for the door, not even looking to see if the man was still in the room.

Auntie Lilith scolded me the next morning for getting out of bed and sleeping on the couch downstairs. She said I was spreading my germs and that she might be getting sick because of me.

But she never asked me why I went down there.

The fall came and once Mother and Dad were back I was able to return home. After getting through the chicken pox and a particularly bad spell of the summer flu at Auntie Lilith’s, I hadn’t given much more thought to the man, but one night after dinner we were watching the television and whatever was on reminded me somehow, so I asked Mother about the man who lived with Auntie Lilith. She was quite confused, telling me I was foolish and that Auntie Lilith lived alone: my uncle had died in a fire many years before I was born and apparently Auntie Lilith had chosen a life of solitude ever since. I was the more confused of the two of us, but there are times as children that we accept things that don’t make sense for no particular reason, and this was one of those times for me.

Another year passed and it was time to go to Auntie Lilith’s for the summer once again. By that time I had forgotten completely about the experience I’d had the previous year, other than the bouts with sickness. Since I was feeling stronger and bigger though, I thought for sure I wouldn’t even catch cold that year.

Sometime about halfway through the summer, I was laying under that wool blanket itching something fierce again, so I pushed it off and fell asleep to the gentle caress of the cool breeze coming through the window on my skin.

I woke in the middle of the night, and once again found that man staring at me from the doorway. I frowned at this, knowing right away he wasn’t going to say a thing. Rather than face his silence, I thought it better to cut short our dance and turn away from him as I had a year before. Once again, I was unable to sleep and felt him standing behind me, so I turned to see what it was he wanted.

I should’ve known. Once again that blanket was cast upon me, heavier than before, he was pushing it down on me – I flailed and escaped just as I had before and this time I spent the night on the couch downstairs and I was up the next day and eating

breakfast before Auntie Lilith even heard her alarm clock go off. I was perturbed, but being a child, I would prove rather resilient.

The incident reoccurred, year after year. As I got older and became more aware of time I realized it was on the same day each year. By the time I was eight I understood it was a recurring experience and began to spend that night on the couch downstairs. Adaptation is survival. I read that in a book many years later, and felt pretty proud of myself for having implemented such a strategic existence before having any idea it was strategic, much less what the word “strategic” meant.

Each year my mother would ask me if Auntie Lilith had had any more male visitors late at night and each year I would answer that I had seen the same one. Each year she’d laugh, brushing it off, chalking it up to my active imagination.

When I was eleven, it was different. Perhaps Auntie Lilith had grown tired of my presence year after year, perhaps she began expecting some form of payment as I got older, but in any case, the face that greeted me upon arrival that summer was not one of a friendly nature, nor were the parting words with my parents. Mother just looked at me in that way she would when appropriate, it was better than saying “well son, this is just the way of the world sometimes.” But I knew what it meant.

It only got worse from there. Auntie Lilith was miserable to me that summer, and though I was no perfect child, I knew from being around my classmates that I was one of the better ones. I did chores before I played, I kept to myself and wasn’t an unnecessary nuisance, I read and learned and retained and I was hungry to know what the world was truly made of and had to offer me. She was not appreciative of any of these traits.

As we came closer to the date of the incident Auntie Lilith became more and more agitated. She stopped making me meals after the first few weeks of my stay there, and when she would shuffle through the kitchen in her silent way, she’d glare at me as I prepared myself a sandwich, as if I had no right to her food while I was in her care. I learned to ignore it after only a few days, as I was a wise man of the world, and had learned from talking to my schoolmates that if she was this wound up it meant one of two things: she was either aching for the kiss of a man, or she was on something called PMS, which after much playground debate we determined stood for “Pretty Mad Son-of-a-bitch” despite my protests that a woman couldn’t be a son of an anything. My friends weren’t as quick as I thought, and I was overruled.

On the day before the incident, I was reading upstairs in the bedroom when I heard a great commotion of pots and pans downstairs. I rushed down to ensure Auntie Lilith was okay, and when I found her she was cursing so vehemently I thought for sure she’d cut or struck herself with one of the items cluttered about the floor. When I entered she gave me a glare that would scare the devil and shouted “Look what you did! All my pots and pans are all over the place because I was going to make you dinner, you little bastard! Go upstairs and think about what you’ve done!”

I must have betrayed my confusion with my facial expression because she quickly stomped her way through the mess to where I stood on the other side of the kitchen and smacked me right across the face. It was so hard and I was so unprepared that I actually

fell down at the foot of the stairs there, not even crying because I was so unsure of what was happening.

“Don’t come back downstairs until I tell you!”

With that she picked me up and smacked me on the bottom and I made my way up the stairs as quickly as I could. Had I been my younger indignant self I might have called back to her “that didn’t hurt, not like when Daddy does it!” Perhaps it’s better that I didn’t.

I finished reading my book on the bed, the wool blanket pushed to my side. Every once in awhile I heard a door slam downstairs, and at one point I was sure I’d heard the front door shut and the truck drive away for a time, returning later, but as the bedroom was on the back side of the house I wasn’t able to confirm my suspicions. Once I was done with the reading material, I sat there quite bored for the remainder of the evening. Eventually my boredom became so severe that I was able to fall asleep.

I woke at the expected time, though I’d forgotten about my appointment in all the day’s commotion, and found that this year was different than all those before. The man was standing at the door, but it was closed, and he was in the room in front of it. It would be the last time he looked at me.

The room was on fire.

The flames were high, licking the popcorn nubs of the ceiling, and lining the floorboards all around my bed. I looked to the window, but with the fire being taller than I would be, even standing on the bed, it was a lost cause and I knew it. I would jump through the flame but before I could unlock and raise the window I would most certainly be a marshmallow.

It was then that I looked at the man in panic, and realized he was standing in the midst of the flames. It was a sight beyond comprehension, reminding me at the time of a 3D film or the optical illusions where you must set your eyes on them just right in order to see the image – in this case, a man consumed by fire but totally unaffected. But because he was well lit in this setting I was able to see that his clothes looked as if they were already charred and blackened, though I could see the flames licking him hadn’t even begun to abate yet.

Then he was moving toward me, and my eyes would have gone wide with anticipation if I hadn’t been afraid they would melt out of my sockets from the nearby heat, and then we broke our cycle because this time I didn’t flip over and away from him, I looked up and at him, right into his eyes. They were blue, and beautiful, and yet they seemed hollow somehow, as if his soul had dipped down into the darkest recesses of his being. That, or it had ballooned out and manifested itself in his image.

The wool blanket was forced down on me. I only struggled minimally this time, knowing that the fire was around my bed and would soon be upon me. I couldn’t roll off. I couldn’t fight it. So I resigned to my fate inside my itchy wool capsule.

And then I was lifted.

And held.

I do not know how much time passed. It felt like ages. But after a long while, I was set onto the ground, quite gingerly in fact, which I interpreted as a sign that I could eject myself from the wool cocoon in which I had been hidden.

Emerging I found the entire room burnt to the blackest bits of crumbly dust. It was dark, but I could hear the owls and frogs outside much clearer than before, and then I realized: there were no walls.

At that point a fireman came up what remained of the stairs and carefully entered the remains of the room, and the look on his face alerted me to the fact that I shouldn't have been there.

I have slept under a wool blanket every night since then.

I never stayed at Auntie Lilith's again after that. I wasn't ever told I would have to, and I did not ask to do so. In fact, the next time I saw Auntie Lilith was at her funeral five years later. She had burned to death after her stove caught fire while cooking one evening. The fire department said it was a freak and unfortunate accident.

I believe it was a premeditated plan that finally came full circle. Her dinner that night came, and it was upance.

And he waited too long to serve it to her, if you ask me.