

ROSE

MIKE BRYANT

SAMPLE

It rained again that night. Katya cocooned herself in blankets on the sofa with the window open just enough to smell the rain. The TV was on but she wasn't really watching it when her mother called to check up on her.

"How was the first day back?"

"Ugh," Katya said.

"That good, was it?"

"It was fine," said Katya. "But Tammy is still Tammy."

"Which one is Tammy?"

"The one who tries to drag everybody else down at every turn but disguises it as concern and support."

"The backhanded complimenter?"

"More like the backstabbing implier. She knows exactly what to say so that other people understand what she's getting at but you'd have no leg to stand on in an HR sense. It all sounds like she's just being nice and if you have a problem with it then the problem must be you."

"A Sith Lord with a clip board."

“Oh, she’s nowhere near clever enough to be a Sith Lord.”

“A Slytherin not deliverin’?”

“Something like that,” said Katya, grinning. “Wait.”

“What is it?”

Katya sat up and said, “I just heard a noise.”

“What sort of noise?” Aileen asked.

“I think someone’s on my porch,” Katya said, moving the phone away from her ear so she could listen for more noises from outside.

“Did you order Indian while Vijay was away?”

“No,” said Katya. “Well, yes, but I ate it already.” She listened for a moment but heard only the rain. “Hmm. Maybe it was just a raccoon or something.”

“Perhaps a late flyer delivery?”

“I didn’t hear the mailbox,” said Katya. “Hang on... I think someone’s in the alley.”

Katya crawled out from her blanket oasis and walked to the side window. She pushed it farther open and put her face against the screen. It was too dark out to see anything but as she looked towards the front of the house, a brief flash of lightning revealed movement. Or did it? She wasn’t sure.

“Hang on a second, Mom,” she said to the phone. She went to the front door and tried to turn on the porch light but it didn’t come on. She rose up on tiptoe and peered out the little window at the top of the door. Once again, she thought she caught a glimpse of movement on the porch, this time to her right, by the large front window on the side where the alley was. She went to that side of the window and pulled the drapes to the side just enough to peek out. She saw nothing. Or maybe a shadow? It was too difficult to tell. Until another flash of lighting lit up a ghastly pair of eyes peering back at her from a ghostly, pale, skull-like face. She stifled a scream, pulled back the drapes, and crouched.

The sound of sharp, deliberate footsteps thudded across the porch and stopped in front of the door. Three loud, cracking knocks sounded out. Katya froze.

Her mother's voice sounded from the phone, thin and tinny, barely audible over the rain. "Honey? Are you there?"

Katya stared at the door, eyes wide with terror as her mother continued to call her. "Katya? Katya! What's going on?"

She looked at the phone in her hand and began to raise it slowly to her face. The three knocks sounded again. She inhaled sharply and stared at the door. She brought the phone to her ear and whispered, "Mom? I've got to go."

"Is someone there?"

"Yeah."

"Who is it? Are you okay?"

"You know that Sith Lord?"

"Yes?"

"It's the Emperor."

Three hard knocks sounded once more. Katya disconnected, stood up, and went to the door.

"Hello, Pamela," she said as she opened it.

"It's Mrs. Harrington," said Pamela. "I use your honorific, Miss Carter. I expect the same respect in return."

"Fine. Mrs. Harrington," said Katya. "How can I help you?"

"I have excellent news for you," said Pamela. "The Home Owner's Association has reviewed your case and come up with an alternative solution."

"What are you talking about?"

"The association has agreed to pay your dues, backdated to its inception, making you a retroactive member with all of the perks and privileges contained therein. This comes with automatic seniority in the association dating back to the day you first joined."

“Pamela, I told you we don’t want to join.”

“Nonsense. This is better for everybody,” said Pamela. “I had to pull in quite a number of favours to do this for you, as a lot of people don’t think your seniority should be backdated. But I managed to convince them that it was for the best.”

“You really didn’t need to—”

“Now, of course, with these advantages come certain responsibilities, i.e, the color of your front door which, I note, is still in violation of the code. But the good news is that if you correct this oversight by 5pm Friday, you won’t be obligated to pay the outstanding retroactively-paid dues.”

“I’m sorry, what?”

Pamela pulled a pile of papers out of her satchel and handed them to Katya. “I’ve had the agreement written up and notarized. This is your copy. You’ll also find copies of the receipts of payment for your membership dues as well as the loan agreement that we drafted in order to allow you to have your dues paid for the past five years.”

“This is ridiculous,” Katya said, her hand moving to her chest.

“I disagree,” said Pamela. “As does the Association’s board. We’ve given you a very generous interest rate. Although after five years, it’s built up to quite a sum. We are willing to waive the principal if you bring your house up to code. We are not, however, able to waive the interest. I’m sure you’ll understand. The board isn’t made of money, after all. I’m sure you can get a loan, considering your job. You seem the type to take advantage of your connections.”

“This isn’t legal,” said Katya, quietly.

“I can assure you it is. My husband is a lawyer and he’s put quite a number of billable hours into this. We have, of course, added those to the principal, as I’m sure you’ll see. Assuming you bother to actually read

the agreement,” said Pamela. “Which I can’t force you to do.”

“But...”

“The Association appreciates your cooperation in this matter. Good day, Miss Carter,” she said, and she turned to leave. She stopped with one foot on the stairs and turned back. “And tell your friend to get in out of the rain. She’ll catch her death of cold.”

“My friend?”

“Not that it matters to me, but it’s not Halloween. Which is, of course, the only day in which the wearing of a costume is acceptable,” said Pamela. “And then, only costumes from the approved list are allowed, which I can assure you, hers is not. She’ll frighten the children, looking like that.”

“What friend?”

“Whoever that was standing on your porch when I pulled up. She looked like she needed a bath. Honestly, the company you people keep. But that’s none of my business.”

She walked quickly to her car and drove away, leaving Katya confused and angry.

Katya stood in the doorway, holding the pile of papers in one hand and her phone in the other. She stared at the spot where Pamela’s car had been, the rain blotting out all other sounds. Lightning illuminated the area and for a moment Katya thought she saw a figure standing across the road, looking at her from behind a tree. It appeared to be a pale girl with long dark hair, black, recessed eyes, and a dirty, formerly white dress. Katya focused on the spot, trying to see through the rain and the darkness when another lighting bolt flashed across the sky. There was nobody there. Katya felt a deep sense of unease. She was startled by a sudden vibration and buzzing noise from her hand. She jumped and dropped her phone.

Her phone buzzed and lit up again, revealing a

picture of she and her mother laughing after, as Aileen would say, “a lot of a couple of Chardonnays.” She picked up the phone and answered it. “Mom?”

“Okay, what’s going on?”

“Ugh, it’s nothing,” Katya said, stepping inside and closing the door. “Just your friendly neighborhood Fuhrer trying to invade.” She didn’t feel as nonchalant as she sounded.

“I’m sorry?”

“That woman I told you about. The one who runs the HOA.”

“What’s she upset about this time?” Aileen asked. “Did she want to remove your tongue for speaking out against the stonings?”

“No, she’s upset about our red door.”

“I should think so,” said Aileen. “Only harlots and Democrats have red doors.”

“Is that so?”

“Yes, I read it in Horrid Fusspot Quarterly.”

“I must have missed that issue,” said Katya.

“I’m sure the back issues are online. Not that nice girls use computers.”

Katya made a sound not entirely unlike a chuckle.

“Are you okay, sweetheart?”

“Yeah, I’m fine,” Katya said, walking back to the sofa.

“Indeed, you sound perfectly untroubled.”

“I’m just really tired,” she said, kneeling on the sofa and pushing the blankets away from her spot. “Today took a round out of me.”

“Okay, I’ll let you go,” Aileen said. “I’m a phone call away.”

“I know. Thanks.”

She crawled back into her sofa nest and pulled the blankets around her. She put her hand to her chest scar, closed her eyes, and took a deep breath. She turned on the TV. And the signal was, once again, out.

Katya moaned lightly and considered her options. It was too early to go to bed and she didn't think she could concentrate on a book. If the TV was out, then so was the Internet. Besides, the Internet Outrage Machine was only liable to angry up the blood. She sighed, crawled out of her nest, put her shoes on, and went to the back door. A flashlight and umbrella lived on a shelf beside the door, left there by Vijay for just such an occasion. She took them and went out into the cold, wet night. The rain pattered on the umbrella and mud squished under her shoes as she crossed the back yard to the utility pole where the cable came in. Once again, the rusted-out connector had come undone. The too-small piece of duct tape that had studiously held it together for several years was a vaguely sticky lump of grey goo criss-crossed with soaking-wet threads. She raised her shoulder to hold the umbrella against her neck, squeezed the flashlight under her arm, and pulled the stray cable to the connector. They held together hesitantly for a moment before popping apart.

Katya bent down and searched the unkempt garden for a rock. She found one heavy and flat enough that it should be able to do the job. She pulled the cable behind one of the slats in the privacy fence, stretched the connector-end to the same spot, pushed them together, and set them down on a horizontal mid-fence beam. She set the rock on top. It held.

“Look at me, being an expert electrician,” she said.

She turned around to head back inside but found her way blocked by a person. Under the sound of the rain, the person had gotten nearly within touching distance of Katya without being heard. It was the girl she thought she had seen watching her earlier. Her white dress was caked in mud, ground in so hard that the rain wasn't helping. Her hair was the same, knotted and tangled, with clumps of dirt ground in, oozing slowly down her face and neck. Her skin was deathly white.

Her bare feet had sucked into the muck of the garden, her toes turned inwards, one leg turned far to one side. Her lips were black, as were her empty eye-sockets which, despite their lack of eyes, looked directly at Katya. The top two buttons on her dress were undone and she had a long tear down the front, revealing a scar that matched Katya's.

She took a shaky, lurching step forwards as she spoke. Her voice was low and gravelly as she pointed a thin, bony finger at Katya.

“You have my heart,” she said.

Katya screamed, dropped the flashlight, and swung hard at the girl with the umbrella in both hands. It connected solidly against the side of her head, and her neck bent sideways and down, causing her head to dangle in a way that no head should. She made incoherent croaking sounds as her head lolled horribly to the side. Katya hit her again, but the umbrella had bent in two from the first strike. She dropped it and ran for the back door. As she was reaching for the handle, the girl appeared suddenly in front of it, her head still dangling to the side. She reached to Katya with both hands. Guttural gurgling sounds rose up from her throat.

Katya screamed again, jumped back, turned to the right, and ran up the alley for the front door. Not that it would help, since her key was inside the house. Along with her phone. She didn't get far enough to worry about that, though, as the pale spectre appeared in front of her again.

Katya froze. The girl's neck slowly twisted back into place. Katya could hear the sickening sound of bones crunching against each other as the head repositioned itself. It opened its mouth and dry, choking sounds came out. Katya turned to run back down the alley but the thing appeared before her once again.

Katya dropped to her knees, her hand to her chest.

She moaned and began to cry.

“Why would you do that to me?” said the girl.

“I’m sorry,” Katya said, through the tears and the rain, not daring to make eye contact with the hideous holes in her attacker’s face. “I didn’t know. I didn’t know it was your heart. The doctors gave it to me.”

“But why would you hit me with your umbrella?” said the girl. “Why did you break my neck?”

“Please don’t kill me,” said Katya, still looking at the ground and crying. “I didn’t know. I didn’t know it was yours. Don’t kill me, please.”

The girl frowned and straightened up a bit. “Why would I want to kill you?”

Katya, confused, looked up at the girl. “To... to get your heart back?”

“Why would I want my heart back?” the girl asked. “I don’t need it anymore.”

Katya blinked up at the girl and squinted, rain falling into her eyes. “Then... then why are you here?”

“I...” the girl began. She choked and gagged like she was pulling something up her throat from deep inside her. She opened her mouth and a clot of mud and stones dropped out onto the alleyway ground. She coughed and drooled out more mud.

When she spoke again, her voice was considerably less aggressive sounding.

“I just wanted to meet you,” she said.