

## **Demons by Ralph Willsey, U.S. Army, Iraq**

What are demons? The word comes from the Latin *daemon*, meaning an evil spirit. Common knowledge says they are dark power, a source of evil. Religions say they are fallen angels or creations of Satan or men or powers beyond our ken or knowledge. But we know they are liars, deceivers, tricksters; violent, vile, venomous creatures of hate. They're black souls or soulless beasts that embody our fears. Our fears of the world, of our society, of our selves.

I have seen my demons. I feel them often. They try to surface, and I fight them back. They're the voices in my head, the parts of my Self that never see the sun. They are my id that revels in the night with no moon. They want to feast, to bathe in the blood and tears of mine enemies, to smell their fear at my approach, to see them drop to their knees in awe of me, to hear their cries for mercy, and to destroy them anyway. They want to turn me into a murderer, a rapist, a reaver, a force of consumption and raw power and death. I want to find those I deem wrong and eat their hearts and gain their strength. That which is beautiful in its creation – the Sistine Chapel, the frieze of the Last Supper, every runway model, the Louvre – these things my demon wants to rend with fire and sword, to sunder them before their creators and admirers, and drink deep of the anguish in their essence.

I must never do these things. I never knew I was capable of such thoughts – let alone now knowing I am capable of such actions – when I was younger. I didn't believe things like that came from “regular” people, only from monsters like Stalin, the Son of Sam, or Lee Harvey Oswald. Then I joined the Army. I first got inklings of these demons in basic. The drill instructors tried to cultivate the “warriors” in all of us, breaking down

the walls society said were necessary, but would only hinder us in our jobs. They trained us with human silhouettes, conditioning our minds to the removal of life. To the cold, hard truth that we EXISTED to kill. We were extensions of our tools, and those tools of our willingness to transform beings of thought into sacks of meat and water. Rifles, mines, grenades, machine guns, bullets, bayonets, knives, hands, everything was a tool, but we were the weapons. Weapons of something greater than ourselves: governments, God, whatever higher power we subscribed to. Every day we shot and shouted, ran and wrestled, fought and fucked up. We bellowed battle cries, showed our war faces, and made the sky resound and ring with the word kill. We tore our throats up to be loud enough. We tore our clothes to ribbons to be fast enough. We tore our bodies down to be tough enough. We tore our souls apart to be deadly enough.

A seed germinated in me. Some might tell me it was implanted, but I know it wasn't. I know it's as much a part of my being as my eyes or my questioning mind. That seed found a damp, dark corner of my anima and covered itself over. It bided its time. It didn't truly take root until I got to the line. No, it happened before that. It happened while I was on mid-tour leave from Baghdad. The day before I was to head back to the sand and sun and smells of beautiful downtown Hell, I was packing up the last of my gear and heard a news report. Third platoon, Alpha Company, had been torn up in a major firefight in Bahquabah. I knew then I shouldn't be home, be with my family, be in the snow, but there, putting rounds into targets. Stopping these motherfuckers I'd never met from killing and injuring people I knew only in passing if at all. I broke down. I cried. I fucking wept for want of a rifle and a target, or a radio or just some way to end the existence of these savages. And, just as the Grinch's heart grew, so did that evil little seed

in my soul. Its roots reached into the soil of my mind, and its vines crawled up the fibers of my being.

And it continued to grow. Every bullet that zinged by my ears, every IED we passed, every child that gave me the finger, every friend and companion and brother I lost watered that little seed. It became a choking vine on my psyche. I would try to push it away and ignore it. I would work out, run, play games, read books, bullshit with compadres. It eventually stopped growing so fast, but would continue to writhe through my mind like strangler vine. However, it was one that no weed killer, no machete, no controlled burn could eradicate. It still can't be. I can't remove it any more than I could remove my frontal lobe and still be me. But I've found I can trim it back. It's become my little bonsai of loathing and nihilism. I can pare it very carefully with shears of writing, of helping others, of working, of study and understanding.

It's a tiring fight, keeping control of this demonic mental version of Audrey II in *Little Shop of Horrors*. I feel like Seymour Krelborn trying to keep it from eating everything and taking over the Mushnik's Flower Shop that is my mind. But I'm not sure which is more exhausting, the constant trimming or giving in and relentlessly feeding it. Nor do I know which is truly the right way to live. But I know, down to the soles of my walking boots, that if I gave in to it, people would be hurt. People I care about, people who are undeserving of the ministrations of that emergent reaper, that grim bastard incarnate, the Shiva I would become. So I fight. I clip. I cut. I trim. I seek mastery of my iniquity. For now, I control my darkness. It does not control me.

