

**The Ritual**  
By Tyler Patrick

I stand at the base of my stairs and pull the key to exorcising my house out of my pocket. It's a set of instructions for a ritual, the ingredients to which clutter around my feet. A fan, a glass of water, some dirt, bacon, a candle, a photo of my house, a live cricket, and bag of salt await placement on the steps. I put each item in its place and make sure everything is in the right order.

A glance back at the list reveals the final instructions.

- All tasks must be completed to the letter.
- Once the ritual has started, do not move unless told to.
- Do not respond to anything you see or feel except the signal to proceed.
- DO NOT LOOK BACK FOR ANY REASON.
- Continue at your own risk. May God be with your soul.

It's now or never, my family's asleep and the house is mine until morning. I take a deep breath and turn off the lights. The moon shines through the windows enough for me to see the bottom step. I release my breath and proceed forward.

The fan ticks to life when I flip its switch. The air blows across the step, cooling my ankles.

"This is the air humans breathe. I give this to fill your lungs," I say into the dark.

The fan stutters at my words. The curtains flap behind me, slamming their fabric fists into the windows. I stare straight ahead.

A wave of whispers crashes through the silence. They mingle with the fan and disappear beneath the white noise the blades produce.

A tap on my shoulder tells me it's time to move. I open the jar of dirt and pour it over the step.

"This is the Earth from which we are born and to which we will return. I give you this to create your form."

The whispers grow louder. Through my periphery I see shadows begin to form on the wall beside me. Spots that grow as they dance atop the wallpaper. I keep my gaze forward.

The tap returns to my shoulder, it's time to move up a step. I grab a piece of bacon from the plate and take a bite.

"The strong consume the weak. Flesh from one to sustain another."

The whispers grow into a cacophony of echoes.

*Turn around. A little peek won't hurt. It's okay to give up.*

The words sink into my brain and worm their way around. I want to look. I know something is there. It's been following me from the beginning. All I need is one look.

I shake my head and steady myself. My stare lies straight ahead.

The whispers laugh. The shadows take up the entire wall beside me, no longer little spots.

Tap. Time to move on.

The next step brings the candle. I pull out my lighter and strike the flint wheel with my thumb. The rough edges grip my flesh, the spark turns to flame. I hold the candle up and light the wick.

“The fire of desire burns within us all. Take this light as your beacon’s call.”

*You’re too weak for this, little one. Give in. It’s inevitable.*

The shadows lurch from the walls, formless masses that reach for me. They grab my pants and tug at my shirt. Cold ribbons spread across my bare feet.

The light from the candle dims, the shadows drown out the light. Wax drips onto my hand. It burns, but the pain is brief.

A shove comes from behind. I trip up to the next step and try not to drop the candle. I pick up the picture of my house and hold it to the flame. The edge blackens and curls.

“Fire to cleanse, Fire to burn. This house no longer shall you reside.”

The picture bursts into flames at my words. I put the candle down. The shadows engulf it and leave only the picture aflame. The fire scorches my fingers, but I hold my grip. I can’t let go until the picture turns to ash.

*You’re never going to make it. You’re nothing. Turn back now.*

I stare ahead with the flaming picture by my side. The ashes fall to my feet. With the final piece comes another shove.

The stair brings the cricket. I unscrew the jar and pour the creature into my mouth. I swallow it whole, the legs twitch as it slides down my throat. I fight my body's reaction to vomit. Bile shoots into my mouth, but I choke it back down. I gasp for air and say the incantation.

“A life depleted for your's completed.”

Silence takes over. The shadows stretch through the room and create a darkness I've never seen before. A suffocating embrace of nothingness. An abyss that I stare into. It stares back.

Something grabs my shoulders, weighing me down. It pulls me backwards. I grip the bannister and the wall to hold my balance. The shadows engulf my hands. Bursts of hot air flow down the back of my neck. They are rhythmic and grow closer, moving toward my ear. I realize that it is breath.

The thing behind me tightens its grip. My shoulders ache from the pressure. The presence leans in. The smell of bacon drifts through the air.

“We are one. You are none,” it says.

I stand my ground. I made it this far. I won't let it break me. It softens it's grip on me. A familiar perfume fills the air, floral and powdery.

“It's okay. You can rest, baby. Stay here with us,” says my grandmother's voice.

The scent of Old Spice and Brylcreem take over. The grip firms up on my shoulders.

“Yeah, come with us,” my grandfather's voice says.

Tears fill my eyes. My knees buckle and my grip on the bannister falters. The thing behind me lets go. No! I scream inside my head. I won't let it use them against me. They've been gone for years. I catch my balance and stand up straight. I close my eyes to not look back.

The thing behind me laughs and grabs me again. Its grip radiates pain through my body. All my warmth disappears. The shadows wrap around my legs and feet. They coil and crawl up my body.

“Don’t fight it. Let us in,” the thing growls.

Every fiber of me strains to move, but I’m frozen in place. One more step. That’s all I need.

I try to lift my right leg, the shadows pull it back. I strain and struggle against them. They’re too strong. I grip the bannister with both hands and pull with what strength I have left. My muscles burn and my body is tearing apart. The shadows lose grip of me and the thing lets me go.

I made it, the last step. I grab the salt and pour it across the step.

“Salt is purity that evil can not breach. Once past this line I’m out of your reach,” I say into the dark.

The thing behind me shoves. I trip up the stairs, my left foot grazes the salt. I fall onto the landing, roll, and bounce to my feet. I turn around to face the thing that has haunted me. Nothing is there.

The darkness has subsided, the moon shines through the windows. Everything is still. No shadows, no whispers, only the sound of the fan at the bottom of the stairs. I relax my body, my arms fall to my side and my shoulders slump forward. I did it. It’s gone.

Tap. I spin around to see my own reflection. It stares at me with blank eyes. Eyes that pierce the soul.

“You lose. Now we play,” the doppelgänger growls.

It leaps at me and all goes black.

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I live in a new home, now. Pads line the walls. There's no one left to visit me after that night. It's okay, though. I hear their screams nightly, and the shadows still whisper.