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THE GROSSES

WE BEAR

A HORROR SHORT STORY

The Crosses We Bear

by

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Dedication

My thanks go to insanity, because without it, this would never have been written. The Giveaway Games was one of those ideas that didn't even seem like a sensible one at the time :). However, it resulted in some great fiction.

Author's Note

The Crosses We Bear was published 24th July 2012.

This short is another of my visits to the horror genre. I really enjoyed writing this fic because sometimes it's fun to have a jerk of a main character get their comeuppance. It is a dark piece of fiction, something I am not usually known for, but I hope it will entertain.

Thank you for reading.

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The Crosses We Bear

It was a shitty hotel in the middle of nowhere for a shitty team bonding weekend and Lyle cursed his need to suck up to his boss. He could have been on a yacht in the south of France with Miss 'Legs that go on for miles', but instead he was in Scotland where it was cold and wet. To make things worse there was no phone signal and no wifi either.

He was in hell.

They'd arrived late, having travelled up from London by coach, so at least there weren't any hideous team bonding exercises yet. Everyone had been assigned a room and left to their own devices. Lyle dumped his things and headed straight for the bar.

"Good evening, Sir," the barman said with a pleasant smile, "what can I get you?"

"Scotch, a large one."

He didn't bother being nice; the local hick didn't have anything he wanted.

"Well, well, on the booze already?" a familiar voice asked as he took a long swig of the drink he was presented.

"Yes, Susan," he said, "what else am I supposed to do in this hell hole?"

He turned to the woman who had once been his wife and grimaced a smile. Their marriage had lasted precisely six months before they had figured out they were both too selfish to keep someone else in their lives. The divorce had been mutual and they occasionally still slept with each other when they needed a good fuck. Lyle had never had any complaints about their activities in the bedroom, it had just been the rest of the relationship that failed.

These days they were the sharpest partnership in the New Sights ad agency. The company had just been bought by a much larger multinational and they had a new boss. The man was from California and thought team bonding was important, so now they had to make nice with copy editors and dogs bodies.

"Red wine," Susan ordered and sat down next to him. "This place gives me the creeps."

Lyle looked around and then lifted an eyebrow at her.

"It's all the damn crosses," Susan said and shuddered; "reminds me of my grandmother's house. Now there was a woman with a Catholic guilt complex."

"Your family's Catholic?" Lyle asked, because that was one thing that had never come up, which probably said a whole lot about their marriage.

"Not most of us, we went CofE, but my grandmother is Catholic enough for all of us."

"Now I'm glad you never took me home to meet the in-laws," he commented and went back to his scotch.

Susan's red wine was delivered and she downed half of it in one large gulp. The other thing they had shared in common other than sex was a love of alcohol.

"I've counted twenty four crosses so far," she said, all but glaring around the room, "and there are another two over there. This place could restock the Vatican."

Lyle glanced around and had to admit she was right. There were at least two crosses on each wall in the room and the couple Susan was talking about were all but hidden behind a book shelf. It was a little weird.

"Hey, barman," he said, "what's with all the crosses."

The man smiled at him.

"Oh, just tradition, sir," the man replied, but the smile didn't seem to reach his eyes.

Lyle decided that maybe Susan was right about the place being creepy. Of course it could just have been the fact he'd pissed the guy off with his usual, sparkling personality.

"Want to have sex?" he asked Susan two whiskeys later.

Susan was well into her second glass of wine and clearly drunk enough to at least consider it.

"Nothing else to do," she said and stood up, picking up her glass.

It took them a couple of minutes to find his room, because the hotel was all twisty turny hallways, so by the time they crashed through the door he already had her half out of her blouse. There was no point in hanging about and he knew he had a packet of condoms in his case for just such an occasion, so they were covered.

It was only when they made it to the bed, both well over half naked that Susan moaned. It wasn't a good moan.

"What?" he asked, a little annoyed.

If she changed her mind now he was not going to be happy.

"There's another bloody cross and this one's a crucifix," she said and pointed upwards. "I cannot have sex with Jesus looking at me, especially with an expression like that."

Lyle didn't bother arguing; he knew that tone of voice very well. Susan would not be putting out until the problem went away. Swearing colourfully, Lyle climbed to his feet, stepped onto the bed and reached for the damned cross. Luckily he was tall and the ceiling wasn't too far away. His fingers just about reached the Jesus figure, which meant he could push the crucifix off its mounts.

Why anyone would put a cross on the ceiling he had no idea, but it crashed to the floor with a satisfying crunch.

"Right," he said, climbing back down, "where were we?"

Honestly, the sex wasn't that great; he was slightly too drunk and Susan was in a mood about the cross. However, it scratched an itch and Susan decided to go back to her own room pretty quickly, so he didn't have to deal with her post coital chattering. The best thing about the whole escapade was that it made him wonderfully relaxed.

After shuffling around the tiny bathroom he fell into bed and went straight to sleep.

He wasn't sure how long he had been asleep when something woke him. Blinking into the darkness he tried to figure out what it had been and then he heard a scratching sound. There was nothing as civilised as a street light outside his window, so all he had to work with was the light of the moon coming through the curtains. He sat up and looked around, but all he could see was vague shapes in the gloom.

The scratching came again and he looked up. Now he wasn't lying down, the direction of the sound was obvious.

At first he couldn't see anything really. A ceiling in the dark wasn't any more interesting than a ceiling in the day and there was not a lot to see. It took him a while to realise that there was a very dark square above the short hallway to the door. It looked like it was a hole.

Why there would be a hole in the ceiling was beyond him until he vaguely remembered seeing a very small loft hatch as he was going to sleep. He'd only noticed it because it hadn't looked big enough for anyone except a child to get through. Deciding that the hole effect had to be a trick of the light, he lay back down and turned on his side. They had a stupidly early start in the morning and he had no intention of losing sleep before hand.

Almost as soon as he put his head down the scraping sounded again.

"If that is a bloody rat," he said, sitting up again and reaching for the lamp.

His eyes went straight to the loft hatch. It hadn't been a trick of the light; it was gone. What made this more than evident was the head poking out of the hole.

Lyle just sat there staring as his brain failed to believe what his eyes were seeing. The head had black, straggly hair, hanging down in limp strands and huge ears, which was all he could see, because it was facing away and upside down. As he sat there a feeling of dread began to form in his stomach. His brain said move, in fact his brain said run for the door, but his brain didn't seem overly connected to his body.

The dread became fear as the scrabbling sounded again and the head slowly began to turn. Something in Lyle knew he did not want the thing to see him, but he could not move. He breathed in short gasps, any further reaction stuck behind frozen muscles. Lyle had always thought evil was a human made thing, but as he sat there he could feel that it was not. Something inside him, something primal recognised the truth of what he was seeing even if his higher brain refused to believe it.

As the head turned, first to profile, then on, it was so slow it was as if it was taunting him and he still could not move. With each millimetre his heart beat faster and his breath came shorter. He wanted to scream, but his throat was closed to sound.

It should not have been terrifying. The face he could see was ugly, animalistic in a way, but it should not have caused such deep rooted fear. It blinked it's large, red eyes owlshly and Lyle thought his heart might stop.

The face was not what was so utterly horrifying; it was the expression. Just a slight smirk on those thin, wide lips and the steady, unwavering stare which spoke of more than animal cunning. Lyle panicked internally as his flight response tried to fire and completely failed.

One spindly arm came out of the hole to join the head, reaching across the ceiling with a claw-like hand. When it touched the surface, what had caused the scraping noise was completely obvious. The sharp nails skittered like rat's feet. The red eyes continued to look at him, pinning him down like prey and he remained frozen like a rabbit in car headlights.

As a second arm joined the first, more of the creature became visible. It seemed to be long and thin and bony, a perfect fit for the hatch. Slowly, as if speed might startle him and allow Lyle to escape, it pulled itself out onto the ceiling. It looked starved, skeletal and its body seemed to be covered in some kind of slime.

The small logical part of Lyle that was still functioning could not understand how it stayed hanging there as it crawled all the way out of its hole. Its progress was completely unnatural and it was finally that which pushed Lyle over the edge. Reason was gone, but terror finally freed him and he opened his mouth to scream. The creature looked at him and then it pounced.

~*~

Susan downed two aspirin as soon as she crawled out of bed, because red wine always gave her a hangover. She really had no idea why she drank the stuff, except for the fact it got her shit faced really quickly. A shower helped and then she headed down to breakfast. At least she knew Lyle wouldn't give her knowing looks; the bastard was too self-centred for that.

A full Scottish breakfast wasn't exactly her thing, but it was all that was on offer. Bernard, their new boss was so annoyingly enthusiastic about everything, including the breakfast, so she didn't think it was a good idea to say no. The amount of grease on the plate made her nauseous, but she managed to eat the egg and some toast. She was quite shocked when it actually made her feel better.

However, as breakfast drew to a close there was one thing that was bothering her; there was no sign of Lyle.

"I see we're missing one," Bernard said in his overly cheerful manner.

"Maybe his alarm didn't go off," Susan replied, not wanting Lyle being an idiot to reflect badly on their partnership; "I'll go and find him."

"Good idea," Bernard replied, "see you out back in half an hour; we're starting with trust exercises."

It took all of Susan's self control not to groan at that revelation. Trust was the last thing anyone in their agency enjoyed; they'd stab each other in the back for an extra grand a year.

"Til then," she said and managed to dredge up a smile.

She was going to kill Lyle and chop him into tiny pieces, once they'd landed the Dickenson account that was. The meeting was on Tuesday, so she didn't have long to wait.

When she reached Lyle's room there was a cart outside it and the door was opened. She walked in and found the maid making the bed.

"Excuse me," she asked, looking around and not seeing any of Lyle's things, "have you seen the man from this room?"

The maid looked startled and just hurriedly shook her head.

"Bloody locals," Susan muttered as she stormed back out and down to reception.

There was no way Lyle could have come down without her seeing; the dining room looked out onto the hall and there was only one route to his room.

"Hello," she said to the woman on duty, "do you know where the man from number thirteen is?"

"Are you Susan Mortimer?" the woman replied.

"Yes."

"Ah, then Mr Jones asked us to let you know he had an emergency phone call in the middle of the night. He had to head back to London straight away. We had someone take him to the station in the next town over."

"What kind of emergency?" she asked.

"He didn't say, Miss Mortimer, I'm very sorry."

Susan turned away and stormed out towards the back; she needed a smoke.

The morning was pure hell. Trust exercises with advertising executives was a folly of the greatest kind. Susan had never actually seen anyone drop someone in a trust fall before, but now she had.

She had made up a story about a sick mother for Bernard, who had been incredibly sympathetic about Lyle's plight. It was hard to not want to strangle the man for his cheerfully helpful attitude. Susan added Bernard to her want-to-kill list.

"We're going caving this afternoon," Bernard said as they finished the trust exercises, "won't that be so much fun."

Everyone grimaced more than smiled.

"Let's make sure we all have a good lunch to keep us going."

Everyone tramped into the dining room and ate like it was their last meal.

Not a lot scared Susan, but one thing that did was small closed in spaces. Of course she wasn't going to show weakness in front of the rest of the team; that would have been fatal. She put on her overalls, her helmet and clipped on her battery pack and she was set.

They were split into two groups and it was a competition to get as many members through each part of the cave system as possible. Her team were trying to get Ronny, their less than svelte copy editor through a rather narrow channel when she saw something out of the corner of her eye.

She turned and saw a shadow disappearing around a corner. It had to be one of the other team and they weren't supposed to know how each other were doing. No way she was letting a spy get away with that. It was going to take her team a while to get Ronny through, so she slipped away after the eavesdropper.

As she rounded the corner she was just in time to see a tall figure step into another section of the cave. The really strange thing was it looked like Lyle. She followed quickly.

"Lyle," she called quietly as she reached the entrance.

A mumble came back. She could not think why Lyle would have faked leaving, but she knew she had to find out. Without looking back she stepped into the new part of the cave. Her helmet light illuminated the area with long shadows and it was clear this was not as well travelled as the parts of the cave they were being dragged around.

"Lyle," she called again.

This time she heard a splash from up ahead.

She knew she had to be careful not to get lost, but it wasn't as if she planned on going far. If Lyle was playing some kind of game he was going to be sorely disappointed.

"Lyle, I've had just about enough," she hissed into the darkness; "if you want to talk you had better stop walking."

She took another step, reaching out to steady herself on the cave wall.

"Eewww," she said and quickly drew her hand back covered in slime. "Lyle, you bastard, where are you?"

The cave went two ways, so she chose left. As soon as she did her light began to stutter.

"Oh fucking hell," she said, loudly this time; she did not want to have to stand there and yell for help.

The light flashed on and off three times and then went out. It was totally pitch black in the cave.

"Fucking piece of shit," she swore at the battery pack and hit it hard.

There was a momentary flash of low light and she saw a figure just in front of her.

"Lyle," she said, "turn on your fucking light."

A low moan was all that came back.

"Lyle, this isn't funny. I am not kidding; if you value your manhood, turn on the fucking light."

A hand gripped her arm.

"Lyle," she warned.

That was when her light chose to come back on and she found herself staring Lyle in the face.

At least what was left of it.

One of Lyle's eyes was completely missing, only dark gouges showing and his jaw was half hanging off. It moved as if he was trying to speak, but it wasn't attached enough to be remotely useful and his tongue flapped in empty space.

Susan immediately tried to step away and screamed at the top of her lungs.

Lyle's grip was like stone.

The scream died on her lips as something appeared from behind Lyle's head. First a clawed hand came over Lyle's shoulder and then a face peeked out. The face took away all sound as the thing smiled at her and blinked its huge red eyes. Sharp teeth glistened in the lamp light and Susan was frozen. Lyle's broken face was horrific, but the thing on his back was worse in so many ways.

It crawled up over Lyle's shoulder and Susan just stood there. She wanted to laugh hysterically as she could come up with no analogy except that of a sloth as if moved slowly and deliberately. An evil, skinny sloth. She knew she was losing her mind by the moment. Another part of her mind said praying mantis and she knew the moment it went to strike.

The immediate threat freed her from her paralysis and she screamed again, trying to pull away as one of its clawed hands hit her squarely in the chest. It hurt and it burned with something unnatural and it was what she needed. With strength born of desperation, she wrenched her arm free of Lyle's grip, turned and ran.

She got about a yard before she smacked into someone else and went sprawling sideways. Hitting the floor hard did nothing to help her equilibrium and she lay there stunned. Only slowly did she realise there was chanting going on.

Pulling herself up on the side wall, she turned and her stunned brain just let her stare at what was going on. The barman from the hotel was standing between her and Lyle holding out a cross and there were three others, one on each side of Lyle doing the same thing. They were chanting something that sounded like Latin and closing in and Lyle was making a low moaning noise. The creature was standing fully on Lyle's shoulders now and it was scrabbling at the roof of the cave.

The barman threw something at the creature and the liquid hissed like acid on the thing's skin as it gave a high, keening shriek.

"Bind it," the barman said and the man on the far side threw a net over the creature and Lyle.

The pair sank to the floor making the most hideous noise.

Susan could not bear it and she curled in on herself, putting her hands over her ears. The pain in her chest throbbed and she did not look up until the sound was gone. When she did the barman and the only woman of the group were standing in front of her. The other two men were gone and so were Lyle and the creature.

"What was that thing?" she all but begged.

"Demon," the woman said; "we keep it caged. No way to send it back to hell for another hundred years. You let it out when you took down the cross."

"What about Lyle?" she asked.

"Dead, but not dead," the woman replied, "like all the others it's killed. We keep them caged too."

Susan thought she might have gone mad.

"Why in the hotel?"

She just didn't understand it.

"The energy keeps it quiet usually," the woman said. "People like you from the city having sex, hating each other, all those bitter emotions. It likes those, keeps it from trying to run."

Susan wanted to cry.

"Hold this," the barman said and held out his cross.

The last thing she wanted was a cross, what she needed was to get as far away from this place as possible. She was getting in a car or on a train and she wasn't stopping until she was home.

"Get that thing out of my face," she snarled, her terror beginning to turn to anger.

"Hold it," the man insisted, not letting her up.

"Fuck you," she replied.

The barman didn't remotely react, just pushed the cross towards her face. It touched her forehead only lightly, but she screamed.

"Bind it," he said and as ropes fell on her, Susan screamed and screamed and screamed, but it did no good.

The story of an advertising executive disappearing in the cave system made headlines all across the country the next day. The police suspected foul play. The fact her ex-husband had never turned up in London after bogusly claiming to have had a family emergency were commented upon, but the investigating officers never did find him.

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Afterword

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About Tasha

Tasha was born and raised in rural Kent, England where she still lives with her husband Rob, just down the road from her twin sister and sometimes writing partner Sophie. Tasha has been writing since she was a pre-teen and chose to take it up as a full time career when her company downsized and made the whole software engineering department redundant. After setting up Wittegen Press with her sister as a brand for their books she has not looked back, publishing novels, novellas and short stories in a wide range of genres.

Before taking up writing professionally she was very active in the world of fanfiction and still believes it is a wonderful creative outlet, even though she doesn't have very much time to play anymore. She likes to maintain a lively presence online and welcomes new friends, readers and writers alike.

For more information about Tasha's books and where to find her at places like Twitter, please check out her profile at Wittegen Press, linked below.

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