

The Red Door

Short Story by Emily Cooper

Trigger warnings include: parental loss, blood, and family trauma.

One never thinks much about death until it pops up at inopportune times.

“I’m sorry to inform you about your mother’s passing. We have been trying to get ahold of you for a couple months.” Darren’s mind blanked. His vision dimmed. His heart seemed to sink into his chest.

His mother was dead.

For months. How? Why? Darren had been gone for so long. And now facing the death of the woman who gave him life, he couldn’t remember why he was angry. Why had he left in the middle of the night? Why had he left without giving her, at least his phone number? Just why?

Sitting in the lawyer’s office, Darren felt as if he had been called to the principal’s office. So small. So out of place. Even his suit jacket felt like an ill-fitting shell around his frame. With every legal word he shrunk in his seat.

Logan, his college roommate, now lawyer, had joined him in this crusade. Darren was grateful for his friend. Even if they had drifted apart since graduating, Logan still dropped everything to be there for him. “As loyal as a dog” his frat brothers used to say, “like a blood hound, he could always find beer.”

Beer, something Darren could really use.

“Darren?” Logan’s voice was gentle, just loud enough to break the fog of grief. Darren blinked, the room coming into his conscious view. He had been running on autopilot since the call. “We need you to sign this contract agreeing to accepting your mother’s estate.”

Darren swallowed as he reached for the pen.

“Are you ready to go in?” Logan’s voice permeated the fog again. They were now in a car. Logan’s? How had they gotten here? Damn it, he really needed to get a grip.

Darren shook himself. *Think*. He ran his hand through his sandy blonde hair, trying to root himself in the present. In the now. Darren shifted his gaze to side window and saw his childhood home. A lump formed in his throat, but he swallowed it down. He had to do this. He couldn’t rely on Logan for everything. This was not his job. He was taking off from his real job to be here with him, Darren should at least be mentally present.

Inhaling again, Darren nodded and pushed the car door open. The air wrapped him in a cool embrace like his mother’s ghost was giving him a final hug. Darren’s shoes sank in the wet grass as if it sought to keep him there, away from that chipped red door.

Darren remembered when his mother picked that red color. His father had been so angry. But no matter how hard he hit, his mother refused to give in on the color. She would have at least one beautiful thing in her life, even if it were a door. With that memory, Darren was grateful that his father was long dead. All he hoped was his mother was far away from his father in whatever afterlife they were sentenced to.

The knob was cold in Darren’s palm as he opened the door. It stuck for a brief moment before giving away with a whoosh of the scent of his childhood home. How could it smell the same if his mother had been gone for months? Did it really matter? Either way it filled him with warm memories that he had shoved away.

Homework at the kitchen counter while his father was at work. Christmas after his father had passed out on the couch. His first PG-13 movie on that couch.

That couch, it was faded, barely showing the red of the velvet. It was piled high with junk. And as Darren's eyes scanned through the living room, the whole house was filled with trash. How did this happen? His mother was a clean freak. Almost obsessively such.

“What happened?” Darren's voice was barely a squeak, his eyes unable to stop their frantic assessment.

“Remember? Your cousins got ahold of the place first. They held an estate sale before the lawyer could find you.” Logan placed a steadying hand on Darren's shoulder. The contact jolted him out of his stupor.

Darren surged forward, his hands sinking into the trash swiping it away from his mother's prized couch. “How could they?” He snarled through his tears. “She would have never stood for this! Even against – Against...” Darren couldn't finish his sentence.

Even against his father.

They worked in silence for a long while cleaning the mess. Only the ticking of the clock as their company. So, when a woman's voice broke through the silence, both Darren and Logan jumped with their own curses.

“The long-lost son has finally returned.” A sultry voice startled Darren enough he almost fell over a trash bag. Darren followed the voice and saw a woman standing in the doorway, her arms crossed with a seductive pout on her pale face.

“What are you doing here?” Logan bared his teeth in a feral grin, Darren stepped back a step. It didn't quite seem human on his friend's face.

“This is my home.” Her delicate fingers dance in the air demonstrating her point.

“No, the house was left to Darren.”

“Legalities. Now run along mutt, I need to have words with little Darren here.”

Mutt? Darren wondered at the odd insult. He tried to open his mouth to interject something on his behalf but Logan cut him off.

“You don’t need to speak with my client, blood sucker.”

How ironic his lawyer friend would call someone else a blood sucker.

The woman waved off Logan’s words, “No lawyers needed because our contract is already signed.”

“And where is this contract?” Logan interrupted Darren’s indignation.

A giggle made of pure evil burst through the woman’s chest, “Well everywhere of course.” She made a delicate motion with her hand causing runes to appear all around them. Every wall and every item was covered in the multicolored shapes. Darren’s eye flitted from rune to rune until he looked down and saw that even his own body covered in the shimmering symbols. The entire house was in this curse, including himself. Horror and panic filled Darren as he looked up to see the stricken look across Logan’s face.

“You see, I made a deal with his mother. Servitude for a favor. It’s a pity the woman died before her time. And now as the new owner of the house,” She took two long strides closer to Darren, her slightly floral scent consuming his senses as he stared down at her pure white teeth. No. Fangs. “You are under my control.”

Darren swallowed, his head was beginning to feel light, airy. “What was the favor?” Slipped from his mouth before he could stop it, or even think about why he would ask that.

The woman smiled even as it didn't reach her eyes, they remained just as cold as ice.
"You ever wonder how your father died?"

Heart attack was at the tip of Darren's tongue as he paused. There had been no family history of heart problems, in fact, his father's family bragged about their indestructible hearts for years before his father's death. Then the creeping awareness of what this woman was... this blood sucker. Vampire. That word went through his brain like a shard of glass, breaking apart his sense of the world. Of reality. She was a vampire. And as Darren's eyes turned toward his college friend, he saw with crystal clear clarity that Logan was a werewolf. "Loyal as a dog" took on so much more meaning.

As Darren watched fur ripple under Logan's flesh and those sharp fangs of the woman beside him, he couldn't deny it. Even the runes flickered as if to mock him.

"Don't look so horrified." She cooed as she patted his cheek with an oddly chilled hand. "All I need from you right now is to unlock my book." She walked away then, her hips clad in a deep purple velvet swayed, mesmerizing him.

Darren was so caught up in the hypnotic swaying of her hips he didn't see her pick up a large tome. It seemed too big for her small frame. Too old. Out of place. Out of time itself.

She brought the ancient book closer to him, her eyes glittering with emotion. Darren didn't have the time to recognize it as his mind seemed to swirl drunkenly.

The room was spinning. The runes were quivering with excitement as she opened the book displaying empty pages. They were yellowed with age and felt soft under his touch. He couldn't help but reach out. He knew he shouldn't but something in him was being called to the stories that were hidden within the pages.

“All I need is a drop of blood.”

“What is this?” Darren breathed. His soul felt as if he recognized this book even if he had never seen it in his life. But somehow...

“My family recipe book.”

“Recipes.” Darren doubted the word. Were the voices of the stories within the pages really a way to make cookies?

“Spells.” Her hand snapped out and grasped his hand. Her grip firm as she brought it to her lips. She gave the skin of his palm a kiss before she pressed his finger to one of her sharp fangs.

A sharp pain jolted through Darren, he tried to pull away but the woman held him still as she pressed his bloodied finger to the pages. His blood leaked out and began to form words. Began to form pictures. Intricate designs that decorated the pages.

“No!” Logan’s hand dropped to Darren’s shoulder yanking him off his feet. The runes exploded around them. Crashing. Colliding. Racing toward Darren. Tripping over themselves as Darren was pulled to his feet. His brain was stuttering. Unable to figure out what was happening other than the pain in his arm.

Darren’s eyes dropped to Logan’s grip as Logan pulled him through the house away from the book. Away from the woman.

The cool breeze took Darren’s breath as Logan broke through the front door, red splinters creating an explosion of color against the dead grass.

A soft whisper made Darren turn to look back toward the runes again, he expected them to be almost touching his skin except they were stopped. Stopped by a clear form. A ghost. As the runes battered against the spirit, Darren was able to pick out a shape. Her shape.

The spirit of his mother.

She was saving him. Even after death. She was being beaten by the runes, taking each punch with a stoic stance.

As the last rune struck, his mother fell to her knees in the grass. Fear clutched Darren's heart as he tried to crawl toward her, but Logan was still trying to pull him away. He tried to fight his friend, but Logan was too strong. Logan practically picked him up and tossed him into his car, slamming the door in Darren's face.

Darren placed a hand on the fogged glass and watched as his mother's transparent face turned toward him with a relieved smile.

"I love you, my son." She seemed to whisper before her spirit dissolved into the night.

Darren knew in his heart. In his soul. That his mother was in a better place. She was safe. And so was he.