

## CHILDHOOD DEMONS

Anna Cader

„The story of our life  
is the story of our fears...”

Pablo de Santis

I learned about the apartment building in which I grew up being torn down from a local newspaper. Former residents were supposed to get substitute accommodation, and tearing down was planned in two months. For a long time I hesitated whether to return once more to the apartment where I spent my childhood to face the demons which were tormenting me in my sleep until today.

A week before the demolition I stood at the gate of the building in which I grew up for the first time in twenty years.

A story about what I went through within this walls could become a plot for a brutal horror movie, and the main demon character would be my drunk father, who would certainly get an Oscar for that part.

After a moment, I went inside the shabby gate and towards the staircase. “It’s not that bad,” I thought and went to the first floor, where the apartment in which I was born was located. When I opened the door, I felt the familiar feeling of tightness and fear in my gut, forever imprinted during my childhood. Before my eyes I could see images of countless fights started by my constantly drunk father and full of violence, my mother’s tears, words I didn’t understand then, shouted by the adults, returned to me. I was breathless. I went to the room in which the worst moments of my life happened – the source of nightmares. A little girl hidden in the arms of her mother. I still hear her whisper: “Don’t worry. I won’t let him hurt you”. We sit huddled in the corner and my father trashes everything on his way. I was four years old then. A year later I met Piotruś – at least that’s how I called him... He was my friend, even though he didn’t really ever speak, just looked at me and smiled gently. He did it such a way, it took away my fears and brought back calm. His mere presence was a consolation for me in the times when in my family home every day I lived through an indescribable nightmare.

I perfectly remember the day when I met Piotruś for the first time. On that day, during yet another row, my father threw me out from the apartment, but I don’t remember why. I didn’t know where to go so I went to the attic. It was the only place adults never visited. There was old dusty furniture there and a shabby sofa. I sat on it and started to cry. I didn’t even notice

somebody sitting next to me. When I looked at the person sitting close to me – it was a young boy, perhaps eighteen years old. When he saw tears still flowing from my eyes, he gently touched my nose and smiled. And my whole fear disappeared as if by magic.

I've never told anyone about Piotruś. I returned to the attic every time I felt sad, and he was already there, waiting for me. I told him about everything – my father, mum, school, my dreams, and he just listened and smiled, nodding his head. Each time I returned there, I felt that thanks to those conversations all the dirt in the world was washed away from me.

Our meetings lasted for three years. It was getting worse at home. I begged my mum many times to escape with me, but she only promised me someday we would do it, but not now, because she's not ready for it. She was afraid of my father – I saw it in her eyes, but then I didn't understand why she wasn't keeping her promise.

One day, my father came home drunk again and started shouting already at the door. I don't even remember what was the reason that time. I defended my mother, shouted at him and threatened to call the police this time. He got even more furious, and hit me once, and then another and another. My mother tried to defend me, but she was too weak. She managed to draw his attention and I escaped to the attic. Piotruś was already waiting for me. Tears were flowing down my cheeks, my whole body ached from the blows inflicted by my father. My friend didn't say anything, just caressed my hair so gently, the pain was going away and crying stopped. On that day, after wiping the last tear, I looked at him, and for the first time I didn't see the smile I knew so well.

In that moment my father appeared on the threshold with a belt in his hand, even more drunk he screamed something incomprehensibly. He moved towards me, without even noticing Piotruś. I was afraid my father would hurt him, so I started to escape towards the stairs. He tried to catch me, but I was faster and ran downstairs as fast as I could.

When I reached the first floor, I heard a scream, and something big and heavy tumbled down next to me and hit the floor. I looked at it and it was the motionless body of my father. I looked up, and Piotruś stood there, smiling at me with his usual smile. It was the last time I saw him in my life.

A few weeks later I moved out with my mum from that house and we started a new life. The memory of that day made my heart beat faster. I left the empty apartment, I needed some fresh air. I noticed the stairs to the attic were destroyed. But there was someone in the janitor's apartment. I knocked. An elderly woman appeared at the door and I recognized our old janitor. I said my name and she recognized me without any problems and invited me in for a coffee. I sat comfortably on the sofa in her living room and asked about my friend from childhood.

“You know, after all those years I have the impression that he was slightly mentally retarded. He never said a word”.

The janitor looked at me hesitantly, so I asked if she knew who he was.

“Your father fell down the stairs, if I remember correctly? You think Konrad did it?”

“So his name was Konrad,” I thought.

“Of course not. It was an accident,” I answered. “Do you know where he lived?”

“Yes I do,” answered the janitor and told me the story of my friend from childhood.

Konrad indeed was mentally ill. He lived with his father on the second floor, and in the opposite apartment the prostitute Angelina lived. The boy visited her often, because she was the only person to treat him like a regular boy and she never hurt him.

The woman wanted to start a new life, but the thug she worked for wouldn't allow it. A week later in Angelina's apartment her body was found, and in the attic – hanging Konrad, with a piece of paper in his pocket with the information he was the one to kill his neighbour because he couldn't stand the fact she worked as a prostitute.

“He hung himself? That's rubbish!” I interrupted her story. “People like him don't do such things”.

Then I remembered the image of the young smiling boy right after my father fell from the stairs.

“I know, my child. I later learned it was some gang business. That boy couldn't even read and write” the janitor continued her story. “We thought it was the end. But within weeks, two more people from our building died – Konrad's father and the neighbour from the third floor. They both fell from the stairs. As it turned out later, they both visited Angelina and raped her brutally...” The janitor took a deep breath. “My dear, don't tell me Konrad wasn't capable of killing. Maybe not when alive, but...” she stopped. “Since then, no one ever went to the attic. Well, perhaps you”.

Something wasn't right with this story from the very beginning. When I met Piotruś, the attic has been already empty for a long time.

“When was it?” I asked.

“A few years before you were born” answered the janitor and finished her coffee.

I went outside. My heart was beating fast again after hearing that story. I looked upstairs – maybe hoping to meet my childhood friend?

“Does that mean that Piotruś was... a ghost?” I wondered and everything became clear.

A week later I was standing on the other side of the street when sappers placed explosives in the old apartment building.

People say that walls can draw energy of human emotions and that's why sometimes you can feel their presence. I hope that once they take away the rubble, Piotruś will finally get some peace and his energy will spread around the world.