

What Used to be Audrey

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Nina Kiriki Hoffinan's first short story appeared in the earlier volume of Tales by Moonlight. Since then she's become a regular in Charles Grant's Shadows series, won the Writers of the Future Contest promoted by Scientology's late guru (but we can't hold that against her), and contributed to pulp magazines such as Asimov's and Amazing. She's spiced the content of many a small magazine also, including Bill Munster's Footsteps, Michael Ambrose's Argonaut, my own Fantasy & Terror, and an upcoming issue of Alain Everts's Etchings & Odysseys. "What Used to Be Audrey" was uncovered in Arcane, which seems to have had but one issue, and then sunk without trace, which is one of the less exciting aspects of the little magazines. Nina lives presently in Eugene, Oregon, noted for its high-density backward hippies (ask any punk bored out of town), science fiction authors, and unemployed lumberjacks.

"Go away!" Mom yelled at what used to be Audrey. She had a knife in one hand, and she waved it under what used to be Audrey's nose. I would have run the other way, but what used to be Audrey didn't even blink.

"Squatter's rights," said W.U.T.B.A. It wanted us to call it Ana -- Ana -- well, something like Anabaptist. Mom called it an abomination. I called it an abbreviation: Wutba.

"Give me back my daughter," said Mom. Her careful gold curls had gone frizzy, and the starch had melted out of her blouse. She had been yelling at Wutba almost since it arrived -- since she had noticed it was there, anyway. I knew about Wutba three days before Mom did, when Audrey and I got up one day and she didn't kick me on the way to grab the bathroom first. When Wutba offered to help me with my eighth grade homework and told me all about devil worship among the French aristocrats before the Revolution, I was sure it wasn't Audrey. Audrey never helped me. It wore her face differently, too. Audrey never smiled at me when she could scowl.

Wutba stared at the knife Mom held. The knife turned a dull, pulsing red and Mom dropped it with a shriek. She ran to the kitchen sink and turned on the cold water, and then stuck her hand in the stream. The knife hissed on the floor, burning the linoleum and raising a stink. "Take warning, woman," said Wutba in three voices at once. "Threaten me at your peril." Its eyes had turned from Audrey-green to gold. Audrey's long, oil-black hair began to lift in the air around Wutba's head.

Mom rushed at me and grabbed my upper arm, and then tried to drag me out of my chair. I stood up. She pulled me into the living room of our doublewide house trailer, leaving Wutba sitting at the table in the dining nook. "Did you see what it did to me, Sherry?" she asked, stroking my hair, which is long and straight and pumpkin-colored. "How can we live with this?"

"If you're really upset, I guess you tie it to the bedposts and go get a priest," I said. Audrey-had made me watch The Exorcist on the Movie Channel three times, even though she knew it gave me nightmares. "I don't know, Mom. I think I like Wutba better than I like Audrey."

Mom stepped away from me, snatching her hand away from my head. She stared at me, eyes wide, and then turned and ran down the corridor to the master bedroom. I went back to the kitchen.

"Whatever did happen to Audrey?" I asked Wutba. I put some water in the teakettle for cocoa and got down two mugs and chocolate powder.

"She's somewhere inside me," said Wutba. It leaned over and picked up the knife Mom dropped on the floor. Then it held out a lock of Audrey's hair and chopped at it. "No edge left," it said, when the knife didn't even nick Audrey's hair. "The blade is distempered."

"How come -- how come you came?"

"A way opened," said Wutba. Its face sobered; its eyes were still gold. "I waited on the other side of shadow until the way opened." It reached up and touched Audrey's cheeks. It smiled, and then put its hand over the smile and felt the shape of its lips. "Your sister made an opening inside her, and I came to fill it."

"Are you evil?" I said. The water boiled and I poured it on the instant cocoa in the mugs.

"I don't know. I only know I am addicted to life, little Sherry." It smiled. It made Audrey's face look beautiful.

I took the cocoa mugs to the table and gave one to Wutba. I sat down.

Mom came back into the room, holding a large plastic crucifix with a glow-in-the-dark Jesus. She waved it at Wutba. Wutba smiled and sipped its cocoa. Mom pressed the cross to Wutba's forehead, but nothing happened -- no sizzle, no stench of burned flesh, hot even a cringe from Wutba. Mom dropped the cross on the table and sat down. She put her elbows on the table and rested her face on her open hands.

"Want cocoa, Mom?" I asked, pushing back my chair.

"Coffee, please," she said. Her hands formed fists, scrubbed her eyes, smearing her green eyeshadow. She took a deep breath and looked at Wutba. "What do you want?"

Wutba laid its left arm on the table, and then stroked its right hand up and down its arm, very slowly. It closed its eyes. I could almost hear it purr. "Sensations," it whispered. Mom leaned forward. "Find an orphan to possess. I want my daughter. Give me Audrey, abomination."

"Your desire is strong, but so is Sherry's," said Wutba, opening its eyes.

Mom turned to look at me. I tucked the coffee measuring spoon under the rubber band around the jar. "Are you responsible for this?" she asked me.

"I don't know," I said. Had something heard my prayers? I used to pray a car would hit Audrey or fall over a cliff or get run down by a buffalo stampede. When she was particularly nasty to

me, I imagined horrible things happening to her: aliens dissecting her, the kids she baby-sat for tying her up; sometimes I just dreamed she was smaller and weaker than I was. But I had never imagined this.

"Why would you -- Sherry -- why?" Mom said.

"Oh, Mom, you don't know what Audrey's like. You don't see what she does to me. You just see the perfect manners and the good grades and the way she helps around the house, the smiles she saves for you. You don't have to live in the same room with her. She never turns those smiles on me. Living with her is like -- like living with cancer."

"Oh, Sherry," said Mom. She put her hands on her cheeks. "How can you talk that way about your own sister? Audrey never -- no." She shook her head. Her eyes looked like wet green stones. "Audrey was my good girl." She looked at Wutba, who set down its mug and looked back.

Suddenly she was Audrey again. "Mama!" she wailed. "I'm in a dark place with things biting! It's soooo coooold...."

Mom jumped up, her chair crashing to the floor behind her, and went to Audrey. She put her arms around her. "Oh, baby. Oh, baby," she said, and Audrey made sobbing noises, but I saw her green eyes over Mom's shoulder. She was staring at me. She looked meaner than she had the day she burned the back of my hand with a cigarette.

I crossed my fingers and closed my eyes and wished Wutba would come back, wished it so hard I started to see purple stars on the inside of my eyelids. My hands felt funny, as if something was pooling in my fingertips. The teakettle screamed. My eyes jerked open. I looked at Audrey and saw her eyes had gone golden. She was hugging Mom and grinning. I started breathing again. I turned and took the kettle off the burner, and then poured water for Mom's coffee, the warm brown smell from the instant relaxing me like a promise that things would return to Wutba-normal.

"I'm so glad you're back, Audrey," said Mom. Then she looked at Audrey's face and saw Wutba's eyes. She screamed.

"Don't be like that," said Wutba. "I won't hurt you."

"You're torturing my daughter!"

"Nonsense. The girl is made of lies," said Wutba. "She's perfectly comfortable where she is."

"I don't believe you! She was in pain. I heard her."

Wutba smiled. It made an almost-Audrey sneer. "You begin to understand me," it said.

"Is Audrey really in pain?" I asked.

"Perhaps," said Wutba.

I-thought about that. I thought about all the times I had wished Audrey would hurt, and hurt bad. For a little while I reveled in her predicament.

"Sherry?" said Mom. "Sheryl Elizabeth MacKenzie, if you know anything you can do to get your sister back, you do it, right now!"

I looked at Mom, with her curls frizzed out, her eyeshadow smeared, her cheeks tracked by tears, and her blouse wilted.

She had clenched her hands into tight hard fists. Her green eyes looked mad. I thought that she had always loved Audrey more. It wasn't fair that with Audrey gone she still loved me less. She would hate me if Wutba stayed.

I looked at Wutba. It ran its fingers through Audrey's hair, and then scratched her nose. It gave me the sort of smile Audrey only gave to Mom, a warm smile full of friendship. I thought if it could make a knife hot it could probably do a lot of things.

"Sherry!"

What if I said there was nothing I could do? Would Mom still blame me?

"Sherry."

She would never believe me. I licked my lips, squinched my eyes shut, and crossed my fingers. Then I wished with all my might Wutba would go away. I heard Mom whispering, "Our Father, who art in Heaven..." When I opened my eyes, Wutba was gone. But Audrey never really came back. She knew what I could do to her. There's someone inside her body, but I don't think it's Audrey. It doesn't kick me any more.