

Krampusnacht

Little Timmy could smell the Krampus, long before he saw it. The Krampus smelled of musk and alcohol and and rusty iron, just like Daddy used to after a day in the junkyard. But it wasn't Daddy. Daddy hadn't been back home for months. And Mommy smelled like booze all the time now, but it wasn't her, either. Timmy just knew it was the Krampus. So Timmy had to run.

It was suddenly good that the heat was always out; Timmy wore his clothes and jacket to bed now. All he needed was his sneakers, his bookbag, and the knife he got from Daddy. It was a good knife, the kind that folds up when you're not using it and has a hole in the handle for a string to put around your neck. Timmy thought that he'd need it, and pretty soon. He waited by the window, looking out into the dried-out winter lawns and wood, all sickly and cold-looking in the night. It was going to be even colder out there.

From below there came a sound, like a doorknob being broken. Timmy knew it was the Krampus. And that it was time to go.

Getting out onto the roof was easy, because Timmy didn't care about the screen. The bushes at the end of the porch scratched him a little when he jumped into them, but that didn't matter. He was already running to the street, looking for Mr. Jenkin's car. There! All nice and shiny, just the way Mr. Jenkins liked it. Timmy stooped, picked up a rock, and threw it right at the windshield; it cracked, the alarm went off -- and Timmy went running the other way.

Timmy knew he was supposed to feel bad about breaking things, but he wasn't. Mr. Jenkins was mean to everybody, anyway. Served him right if his car got broken up by Krampus.

The boy ran in fits and starts away from the alarm (which, after half a minute or so, suddenly ended in an almost-painful sounding electronic wail). He knew, somehow and instinctively, that running into the woods to escape would just seal his fate. Krampus lived in the woods. That's where it'd be strongest. No, little Timmy had to stick to the backyards, keep moving, look for somewhere safe.

But where was safe? The police? Timmy remembered what his father said about the police; how you couldn't trust them, they were always out to get you. And they

wouldn't believe in Krampus anyway. School? School was closed, and even if it was open school was where the bullies and teachers were. They'd just call him names, and wouldn't believe in Krampus, either. A church? Maybe a church. But which one would believe a runaway boy that Krampus was after him?

Whatever Timmy decided to do, he knew that he had to decide it quick. He could start to smell Krampus again. Only a little, on the breeze; but Krampus was looking for him. For real. And it wasn't a game.

Night-time in December is cold, dark, and lonely. When the wind picks up it gets into every hole in the jacket or pants, and every leaf skittering away on the sidewalk is really something sneaking up from behind. It's really bad when there is something out there, sneaking up from behind. It's really, really bad; and when there's nobody to run to, well, kids run then because there's nothing else they can do. What made it worse for Timmy was that nobody was turning on their lights, nobody was coming to the door, nobody checking out all the racket. Maybe there was a spell that Krampus cast. Maybe nobody cared about Timmy. Well, maybe Timmy knew that last one already.

But Timmy wasn't going to give up. He was going to run, and if Krampus wanted him, well; Krampus was going to have to run, too. Maybe Krampus didn't like to run.

An adult would have been caught up in something within five minutes. A regular kid? Half an hour. But Timmy was small, and skinny, and he knew how to get through gaps and climb fences. When you're ten years old and poor -- the smells-mildewed kind of poor -- and your dad's gone and your mom's pretty gone too, you learn how to run away. And Timmy wasn't running to anything, either. He just ran, and didn't think about it.

Timmy got to the edge of town before he realized how bad things really were. The town was in a valley, and the hills were too woody to be safe. But the road out of town, it linked out to a busy highway. There should have been cars and trucks on it. Shoot, there was a 7-11 on one corner that should have been open. And the police had been around a lot every since all those things that happened last year. There should have been a police car around.

But it was all empty and quiet. The streetlights were all on, but the 7-11 was locked up, the traffic lights were just blinking red and yellow, and there wasn't a person or parked car to be seen. No animals, either. Not even a

raccoon rooting through the trash bin behind the store. Timmy was on his own.

Maybe he could climb? Timmy looked at the trash bin. He could clamber on top of that, sure, but from there it was too high to reach the roof of the 7-11. And what was he supposed to do then? Krampus wasn't a zombie. It could climb. It probably didn't care about garlic or crosses, either. This was so unfair. Adults never explained the important things about monsters like Krampus, like how to kill them; all they cared about was scaring kids.

Well, Timmy was scared right now. He was scared a lot. He was as scared as an adult would want. So how about a little help now? -- Not that Timmy was asking for any. He couldn't. As usual, there wasn't an adult around to help him. He wasn't going to ask for help from God, either. God had already made it really clear just how much He cared about Timmy, and Timmy was ready to care just as much about God. Maybe the Devil? No, Krampus must work for the Devil. Or it **was** the Devil. More things adults never explained to kids.

Timmy suddenly sat down on the sidewalk, because it was all too much. Timmy had gotten as far as he did because he was afraid, but fear burns up energy, too. He was worn

out. That's probably what the Krampus wanted. Let the kids run themselves half to death, then come in and pick them up. That would be smart, because Timmy was done...

“Child! Come with me if you want to live!”

Timmy's head snapped up. There was somebody else there! A man in a long coat, frantically waving at him by a car with the lights on and the engine running. Krampus probably didn't drive a car. But even if he did, it'd be warmer than the street. Timmy picked himself up, and started to move slowly to the man.

“You must move faster!” the man hissed. “You don't want Krampus to find you!” He opened the back door. “Get in here, and I'll take you where you'll be safe.”

Timmy clambered into the back seat, which smelled old and not very nice; but it didn't smell like Krampus, either. The man didn't wait, either. He popped right back into the driver's seat and took off like Krampus itself was visibly chasing them. The car shuddered a little as the driver took it all the way up to ninety, but didn't protest much.

Timmy looked around, and realized that the lights were out. Even the headlights. The only light visible was one blinking icon on the dashboard, which the man ignored. “Mister? Don’t you need to see?” he asked.

The man looked at Timmy through the windshield mirror. “You need to get your seatbelt on.” He waited until Timmy (starting to cough, halfway through) had pulled the strap over and looked back up before responding, “If the lights are off, Krampus can’t track us. Soon we’ll be somewhere that’s safe for both of us.”

“How do you know that, Mister?” asked Timmy. “And how do you know about me?”

The man smiled. “Because I’m an angel, Timmy. I’ve been fighting Krampus for a long time. And I know about you because I’ve been protecting you since before you were born.”

Timmy blinked. “Wow. Like a guardian angel?”

“Exactly! And this is the most important night of my job. I don’t know what I’d do if you were lost, Timmy. So we need to get you to a safe place right now. One that Krampus can’t get to.”

Around them, the dark countryside rushed by, still inexplicably absent of lights and cars and people and living things. This worried Timmy, because he knew that it meant Krampus was still after them. And the man -- the angel? -- was still driving down the road like a maniac. Timmy was a kid, sure, but the angel was kind of a bad driver.

But he did save Timmy, so that was OK, right? Timmy cleared his throat. "This is a nice car."

The angel laughed. "I've had it a long time, thanks! It's been used on many an adventure, saving little kids from Krampus. It fills me with joy to think of all the scrapes that me and my car have gotten ourselves in and out of."

Timmy looked around at the musty interior, slightly dirty window, and slightly cracked upholstery. "Neat! Where are we going, anyway?"

"Somewhere safe, Timmy. It won't be too much longer. Then we can figure out what to do next."

Actually, it took about fifteen minutes of furious driving -- with no lights, and no traffic -- before the car slowed, then

turned onto a dark, tree-lined dirt road. Timmy had been spending the time trying not to fall asleep, but the turn and new road definitely woke him up. “Hey! Mister Angel! These are the woods! Krampus lives out here!”

The angel looked at him again via the mirror. “Don’t be silly, Timmy. Krampus doesn’t live in the woods. I wouldn’t take you here to die.” His eyes narrowed. “Are you scared, Timmy?”

Timmy nodded. The angel chuckled. “Don’t be. Here, let me make you safer.” He spoke two words that almost made Timmy’s nose bleed; both the seat belt buckle and the locks on the doors glowed red, with eye-twisting sigils. “There; now Krampus can’t get in, and you’re protected. See? I’m not some crazy, evil person after all.

“Now, let’s get to the place where you’ll be safe.”

When the car stopped, it was at what was probably a scenic overlook during the summertime. Now it was just deserted, cold, lonely, and missing even the moon. The man in front was silent for a good five minutes after stopping, and it was getting cold with the engine off.

So Timmy called out, “Mister Angel?”

No response.

“Mister Angel?”

Still no response.

“Mister Ang--”

And at that the angel sprang into action with a horrible screaming noise as channels of fire flowed through his skin. His left hand suddenly and somehow grew a long, hooked-edged knife, and his eyes were pulsating strobes of green and black-purple light. The car seat somehow shrank without moving, allowing the angel to leap over into the back, knife aimed at Timmy’s heart.

It was about then that the angel encountered Timmy’s backpack.

When properly modified, a backpack is an under-appreciated weapon in the arsenal of self-defense. Useless in school, because it can only be used once there before the teachers notice; but when you’re coming home from school and are set upon by three kids at once, it’s helpful to have something that’s been weighed down in the

right places with rocks and scrap metal. But that had happened only once, and Timmy had made sure to hide all the extras before the teachers later looked in his bag, and after they checked a second time and still found nothing he figured that he was safe. The kids had stayed away after that, which suited Timmy just fine. He only wanted to be left alone, preferably without hurting people. He didn't like that.

But he had reloaded the backpack, just in case. Timmy had also not actually buckled in, or closed the car door all the way, because somebody on TV had once said to never get in a car with strangers. Timmy had decided that he didn't have a choice, but if this guy was really Krampus after all then he should be ready. Which was pretty smart of him, hey?

Of course, as he ran on the gravel after half-running, half-falling out of the car, Timmy was still miles from his home town and being chased by a homicidal angel. He was going to die. He was ten years old, and God had sent somebody to kill him. He should have stuck with Krampus.

"You have nowhere to run to, stupid boy!" The angel, of course, was faster than a ten year old boy; surprise had

gotten Timmy out of the car, but it hadn't gotten him more than twenty feet away before the angel had pulled itself from the back seat. Timmy got maybe ten more feet before he felt hands grab his jacket and lift him up.

"You should have made this simple!" yelled the angel as he effortlessly carried the struggling boy to the edge of the overlook. "I was being kind! But now you must learn the penalty for disobeying an angel!" Timmy's legs were now dangling over the edge; he couldn't help but see that the ground was very far below, and looked remarkably rocky. "But if you plead, talking monkey, I shall still be merciful in your death!"

Timmy was literally tossed in the angel's arms, spinning around in a perfect 180 degree arc to face it. Seen up close, it was now impossible to miss the subtle inhumanity in the angel's face. The chin was just a little too pointed, the eyes a touch too yellow, the smell a bit feral. Timmy covered his face with his hands.

The angel laughed. "That will not help you! You must beg for an easy death!" Timmy lowered his hands -- one of which now holding the knife that he had previously stuck in one sleeve of his parka. Getting it out had cut him a little,

but Timmy was never the kind of kid that worried about blood.

“No,” Timmy said almost conversationally as he shoved the knife into the angel’s face.

He was trying for a slice, but even a ten-year-old with Timmy’s unique nervelessness is still a ten-year-old; he instead managed to embed the knife into the angel’s right eye. The scream that came out of the angel’s throat was horrifying: Timmy’s nose did start bleeding then, from his proximity to the Words. As he felt the angel’s fingers start to tighten, he desperately threw down his own arms, trying to free himself from the grip.

Timmy only succeeded in encouraging the angel to throw him out over the cliff. His last sight of the angel was to see it holding the crackling edges of its face together as it screamed “Twice-accursed blade, twice-accursed blood! *Like father, like son!*” at Timmy as he fell. Timmy closed his own eyes. It was, he knew, true.

And then there was a sudden growing growl and the shock of being grabbed as Timmy found himself pressed against a mass of fur and muscle. Krampus had found him, after all. When the two hit the ground, Krampus bounced and

left back in the air, neatly flipping open his pack in the back and slipping Timmy into it. There was a whirling spin of light and sound, and suddenly Timmy was in the dark.

It was surprisingly warm. And soft. The smell wasn't really bad, either. Timmy tried to move, anyway, but he was done. And soon, he was asleep.

...

And now Timmy was sitting in a rather nice room, drinking chocolate milk and eating cookies, as an exceedingly grim-looking (yet not actually awful) man was talking at him.

“Well, young Mister Timothy! You did have a time of it, yes?” The man -- he had said to call him ‘Headmaster’ or ‘sir,’ depending; and apparently all of this was part of a ‘School’ -- beamed in a remarkably evil way as he sipped his own coffee. “Normally Krampus doesn’t have to work so hard to acquire a new child. I encourage you to keep that innate industry up, my boy. It will take you far.”

Timmy was still trying to process waking up in a simple, but comfortable bed, having a hot bath for the first time in several months, and being fed more calories in a single

meal than he'd been getting per day for quite some time. He looked at the Headmaster; the little voice inside his head noted that the man was carefully out of Timmy's range without appearing to be so. That was weirdly good, though. Somehow, it showed that this guy thought that Timmy mattered.

The Headmaster looked over his half-spectacles -- years later, Timmy would think that him and the entire room looked like they had come out of a Dickens novel -- and continued, "I assume that you have questions, young Mister Timothy?"

Timmy was silent for a moment. "Why did the angel come to kill me?" The Headmaster snorted.

"That wasn't an angel, lad. Or hadn't been, for a long, long time. You should just assume that every damn thing that came out of its mouth was a lie."

"OK. Why did the *demon*?" -- Timmy asked; the Headmaster smiled and nodded in agreement -- Why did the demon want to kill me?"

"Why, to send you to Hell, of course." The Headmaster finished his coffee, and walked over to the sideboard to

refill his cup. "More milk, young Mister Timothy? No? Well, don't be shy if you do. Strong bones, and all that. -- Yes, Hell was the objective." The Headmaster looked back at Timmy. "And you know why, of course."

Timmy nodded, his hands suddenly clammy. "My dad."

"Yes, your father. Who you killed with his own knife -- his decidedly unsanctified knife -- and then hid his body in the junkyard. When did you first know what he was doing?"

Timmy swallowed. "When I saw a, a body. Daddy was putting it into a big underground tank at the junkyard with all the others. I wasn't supposed to be there, and when I walked in he looked at me, and he looked at the knife on the table, and then he went for the knife."

"But you grabbed it first," nodded the Headmaster. He looked at the papers on the desk. "You stabbed him, shoved it and the body in the tank, and cleaned up everything. And then you went home." His voice grew musing. "Thought your mother would be relieved, hey? If Daddy just never came back."

Timmy nodded, his eyes smarting. "Yeah. But she just... stopped."

“Yes, some people can’t handle sudden gifts.” Timmy’s eyes snapped up, shocked; the Headmaster snickered. “Oh, don’t give me that look, my boy. I’m only saying what you’re yourself thinking. Your mother should have been jumping for joy, but don’t think that she didn’t know about your father’s hobby. She likely made a deal with him; keep it all away from the family, and she didn’t care what he did. But she did care, and not in a ‘good’ way, so when you shoved a knife through your father’s gut you also shoved that knife into her. You didn’t just kill your father, young Mister Timothy; you killed your mother, too. It’s just taking longer, with her.”

Timmy looked down. “So that’s why Krampus wanted me. I *am* an evil kid.”

“No,” responded the Headmaster. “You are a **wicked child**. A ‘good’ child wouldn’t have hidden the fact that he killed his father, simply because it was inconvenient to him. An evil child would have shown no remorse -- and considerably less industry in successfully covering up the murder; evil is typically, alas, abjectly stupid.

“But *wicked* children? Children who can do awful things, calmly, and then stop doing them? Oh, children like that

can do great things, if you can get to them early enough. Oh, you will have a grand time of it here, young Mister Timothy. We treasure intelligent wickedness here at the School. And we'll teach you how to have proper fun without having it slop over into innocent people's lives, either." The Headmaster raised one finger upwards. "It's all part of the arrangements we've made with, ah, certain entities."

Timmy drank the rest of his milk, then stood up. "I don't have a choice in this, do I?" The Headmaster shrugged.

"The door to the office is over there. The front door to the school is always open, as are the main gates. Go off on your own, and nobody here will come looking for you. Why don't you think about that last part for a moment, my boy?" Timmy stopped, thought, nodded -- and then went to the sideboard for more milk.

The Headmaster allowed himself another tight smile. "Exactly, young Master Timothy. So good to have another new student who can follow a thought through. If you have further questions, I'm sure that I can find you suitable answers. But for now: by all means, take the milk and some more cookies back to your room. We're not fussy, but *do* keep the crumbs out of the bed." As Timmy turned

to leave, the Headmaster added, “Oh, and one more thing...

“Merry Christmas.”

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