

The Giving of Things Cold and Cursed
By Terry M. West

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The black room was empty.

Baker Johnson could see it clearly from his position at the doorstep of the apartment. He entered the dwelling and moved quickly. He swerved around his many trunks and boxes which sat roughly piled among the antiquated furnishings of his dead uncle's home. Baker's things had arrived a week before him and with no guidance to go by, the callous delivery men had congested the formal greeting room with his belongings.

Dread crept into him when he came closer to the black room and saw the unpainted outline of a bolt on its opened door. The room had always been guarded with a lock. Antiques and other expensive items sat undisturbed in the formal room. The value of the items outside of the black room far exceeded the rather pedestrian keepsakes that the bastard space usually housed. Everywhere else seemed full and accounted for; purposefully occupied.

But the black room was cleaned out. Pale outlines gave the position of absent display shelves on the filthy, brown walls. The cold room glowered with a low yellow light, though the space was situated in the center of the building with no windows or exterior walls neighboring it.

Baker Johnson looked back to Sherman Drummond, the building super who stood with a master key set in his hand. The man twirled the metal key loop absently and whistled cheerfully in the hallway.

"Mr. Drummond," Baker called. "Could you join me for a moment?"

Sherman Drummond gave as friendly a grimace as he could, and then he crossed the threshold. Baker could tell that the building supervisor did not like being called on to do more than he felt was required of him.

Baker appraised Sherman as the man came closer. Baker's expensive education had been in the study of psychology, and he had a keen interest in the behavior of others. He didn't engage with people often. Not living ones, anyway. Baker was a people watcher. He studied them, as he himself felt coldly removed from the race. He was smarter, much smarter than most. But this gave him more patience than arrogance.

Sherman Drummond was still fairly young; mid-thirties, Baker wagered. The building supervisor was also single, as the man's ring finger declared, though Sherman's uncombed hair and short but scruffy beard screamed this fact. No wife would have let her husband venture out looking such a muddle; and in a mismatched colorful broadcloth shirt and dull, wrinkled trousers, no less. It was obvious to Baker that Sherman's passion for life lied elsewhere or was non-existent. The caretaker of the brick structure had the mannerisms and stride of a much older man.

Baker, on the other hand, wore a gray double-breasted suit and he was immaculately groomed. His desire for order and cleanliness was strong. He realized it should have been kicking up now, as the old place hadn't been cleaned in weeks. But he was too preoccupied with the black room to fret over the state of the apartment.

"Yes, Mr. Johnson?" Sherman said, presenting himself reluctantly.

The short venture had made him sweaty. Both men were quite hot. It was early September, but summer was still awake and active. Baker removed his jacket and unbuttoned his vest as he spoke to the man.

"My uncle kept things in this room. Things he would have never parted with," Baker explained. "Who removed them?"

"Well, when your uncle fell ill and went to the institution, he sent strict and specific instructions on this room, through a message," Sherman explained, digging a note from his back pocket. "I figured you might want to see it, so I brought it along."

Baker took the brief note and looked it over. It was definitely in his uncle's writing. The penmanship was stressed, but accurate. He handed it back to Sherman.

"So again I ask, because this is rather important, Mr. Drummond; where are the items?"

"Hello?" a soft voice interrupted the men.

Baker looked toward the entrance of the apartment. A heavysset and mature woman lingered at the threshold. She wore dark service work clothes and she clutched a purse to her chest.

"Are you the nephew of Richard Johnson?" she inquired.

Baker nodded. "Yes, I am."

The woman entered and joined the men. She smiled sadly at Baker. "I can see him on your face."

Baker curiously acknowledged the woman. He was working on her; forming a quick evaluation. It was a ritual that he couldn't help.

Her appearance told Baker that life had been mostly kind to her, as it had a tendency to be with those bright and pretty. Her beauty was still there, like a faded stamp, and she appealed to Baker in a way he couldn't quite decide. He didn't know if he was attracted to what she had been or what she currently was. The affection for a mother and the lust for a lover had a thin boundary between them at best. Baker had read this numerous times in text books that were too dry to be salacious.

“This is Deidre Ahearn,” Sherman introduced the woman. “She worked for your uncle.”

“I work for many a tenant in this old place. But yes, your uncle was among them. And he was a colorful one. He spoke of you, occasionally.”

Baker smiled warmly at her. “It is a sincere pleasure. I hope my uncle’s opinion of me wasn’t too harsh.”

Deidre snickered. “Well, Mr. Johnson, your uncle was not what you would call personable by any means. If he was indifferent to you, it was as close to fondness as he could get. He made you out to be quite similar to him. But I find you a friendlier version, if you don’t mind me being blunt, sir.”

Baker shook his head. “No. I am sure you knew him better than I. I haven’t spoken to the man in twenty-five years.”

Deidre nodded and then noticed that the door to the black room was opened. Her eyes trailed to it and lingered, trapped there by a quiet trepidation. “This room,” she said softly. “This little dingy, forgotten room always made my skin crawl. I wasn’t allowed to enter and give it a proper cleaning. Not that I minded.”

“I was speaking to Mr. Drummond about the contents of this room,” Baker told her.

“Given away, weren’t they?” Deidre said. “And right after he was put in the hospital bed. I went and saw him a few times. The doctors said he had dementia. And it pulled down his health quickly. I was the one who found him, you know; the one who contacted the authorities. It was a horrible sight, Mr. Johnson. Your uncle was wearing his own waste like war paint. It was sad and horrifying.”

Deidre caught herself and looked apologetically to Baker. “I’m sorry, sir. You surely don’t deserve that image.”

“It’s all right... *Miss?*” Baker guessed.

“It was *missus* for some years. But Mr. Ahearn died early into our marriage. So, yes, *miss* is appropriate, Mr. Johnson. And you are married, I believe. Married with a daughter, if I recall correctly, though it may be a decade or more since your uncle mentioned this to me.”

Deidre looked the apartment over. “Is your family here, Mr. Johnson? Or will they be joining you soon?”

“My daughter was taken by a fever five years ago,” Baker revealed. He bore it stoically.

“My wife followed my daughter shortly after. Her grief drove her hand to it.”

Deidre gasped and covered her heart. “That is the saddest thing I have ever heard, you poor, poor man.”

“My condolences as well, sir,” Sherman added, a little more civility showing.

“I endure. That’s all I can do,” Baker explained. He returned the conversation to the black room. “My uncle instructed you to give these possessions away?”

“When he felt the end dawning on him, he wrote that I put up signs on the front of the building,” Sherman said. “Your uncle paid me quite well to see to it. We opened the apartment up on a Saturday and the room was empty within an hour.”

“And who took the belongings?” Baker queried. “Was it residents? Outsiders?”

“Well, it was a bit chaotic, Mr. Johnson, with the giving away of free things and all. People were very pushy that day and I had to keep an eye on what sat outside this room, as your uncle wanted no other possessions taken from the apartment. I recognized a few residents. Most that attended were strangers. I couldn’t account for who took what.”

Baker nodded slowly and then motioned to the black room. “Do you have any idea what this room represents?” he asked them both. “What it held?”

“I always assumed it a junk room,” Sherman said, sneering at the space.

“More likely it was an odd museum of some sort,” Deidre said. “But a rather boring one, I always felt. It seemed a rather mundane collection of items assembled inside. But your uncle was always a little on the eccentric side of the fence.”

“And my uncle’s vocation?” Baker questioned them further. “Was it known to either of you?”

“No, but I assumed him retired for many years,” Sherman said first. “We didn’t talk much, sir. As Miss Ahearn has attested, your uncle had little need for most people. And when he did it was generally about the tending of something.”

“He never spoke of his work to me, but I guessed, by the books in his study, that he had been a doctor of some kind,” Deidre said on her turn. “He was intelligent enough to have been anything, sir. And quite successful at what he did, I am sure.”

“Are you familiar with psychical research?” Baker asked them both.

Deidre frowned curiously. “Can’t say that I am but I don’t like the sound of it.”

“I’ve heard a little about it,” Sherman replied, but he elaborated no further.

“My uncle and I were both involved with psychical research,” Baker explained. “We investigated claims of supernaturalism.”

“I always took him for a little morbid, but I had no idea he engaged in such black pursuits,” Deidre said, with a superstitious distaste. “The things I’ve heard; mediums and séances. Spiritualists bleeding slime from their mouths. We aren’t meant to call upon the dead. The good lord put a fence between us and the deceased for a good reason, I am sure.”

Baker was having more impressions regarding the lady. He imagined her deceased husband had done well, but still left her with little. And there were children involved; otherwise she would have simply found another husband. She had been educated. Perhaps too well, and there was a dearth of opportunity for women who were too smart. God-fearing was blatantly obvious. He tried to appeal to that intelligence of hers.

“My dear lady, it *is* nineteen twenty-five, after all. It is time to look with objective eyes toward things we don’t comprehend. And as I stated, Miss Ahearn, we were *scientists*,” Baker stressed. “As such, we approached this particular research as skeptics. There are several flamboyant charlatans out there giving the studies a bad name. I have worked with many spiritualists over the years, and found only two that I could not disprove as conmen who were using theatrics to bilk widows. My uncle and I both had a particular corner of the field that we specialized in, and that’s where this room comes into play.”

“What corner would that be, Mr. Johnson?” Sherman asked.

“A dark one, absent of the lord’s light, I am sure,” Deidre threw in.

Baker ignored her. “The haunting of places,” he replied to Sherman’s question.

“And how does this room fit in with that?” Sherman said. He seemed absolutely fascinated with Baker’s story.

“In many cases of a haunting we suspect a human spirit to be behind the phenomena. Sometimes it is something more malevolent than that,” Baker explained.

“Demons,” Deidre proposed gravely. “Excited and released into purpose by the fooling with things best left alone.”

Baker looked at Deidre, and he felt that exceptional patience of his waver for a moment. But then he realized that no amount of reason would undo what the church had put in this woman. She spoke from ignorance and fear, and Baker was not a fan of either. But still, it was her right and he gave it to her.

“There *are* such things as inhuman spirits and they can be called into action by sinners or saints,” Baker explained. “What makes one sensitive and prone to this type of visitation is still unknown. We have theories on the catalysts for such occurrences, but believe me

when I say that the innocent and guilty alike can be haunted. So, coming back to my point, in many cases we have found a connection between the haunting and a physical item on the haunted premises. In such instances, we removed the items from the afflicted structure and we would store them, in rooms such as this. My uncle called this his black room.”

“What, he would keep trophies stored here?” Sherman asked.

“This isn’t a trophy room, Mr. Drummond,” Baker said solemnly. “This was a prison. My uncle was its warden and I was willed this property strictly to sit upon those haunted items as the new guard. But now, I suppose I have no prison to maintain.”

“Why would your uncle give these items away?” Deidre said as a dark realization set into her. “He was giving these accursed things to people. He was sending demons home with them. Why would he do such a terrible thing?”

“He suffered from dementia,” Baker guessed. “He surely wasn’t right in the head. And I can tell you from my own experiences that my uncle perceived many enemies in his life. He could carry a grudge like a birthmark.”

Sherman nodded. “Yes, I have seen signs of that from him toward people in the building. But what would happen to someone taking these items home?”

Baker shrugged. “It would depend, I think, on the level of sensitivity one has to the supernatural. In most cases, I would think the energy would sit there, undisturbed. But it is possible to reawaken a spirit within it.”

“I took something from the black room, Mr. Johnson,” Sherman confessed, and he seemed lightened, somewhat, by this admission. “I took something and I think it has haunted me, sir.”

“Please explain,” Baker said.

“Well, as I prepared the items in the room, I noticed a very nice quill and inkwell. It looked quite old. I aspire to be an author, you see, and I thought it would complement my meager and plain work desk.”

Baker nodded, thoughtfully. He knew Sherman had a desire that burned elsewhere. “And why do you believe yourself haunted by this item?”

“I write poetry, lighthearted and lyrical, in tone. But recently, my muse has grown considerably darker. My imagination sprouted fangs, suddenly. I don’t normally think of the macabre and grotesque when I work. I am certainly not a fan of it. There is a place for it, I suppose, around campfires and on Halloween night. But I thought myself more of a Longfellow than a Poe. I am driven to write, sir. I do this every night. But what I write now scares me as I can’t understand the inspiration for it. It is not me.”

“And does the quill and inkwell still sit on your desk?” Baker asked.

“No sir. I suspected it the influence and tossed it. But still my work is marred.”

Baker looked to Deidre, and the anxious expression on her face gave Baker a strong suspicion.

“You took something, too, Miss Ahearn,” he said, positive about his assumption. The woman had listened to Sherman’s story with more familiarity than empathy.

She was silent for a moment, but finally her grey face shook slightly. “Yes, I took something. I was working the day that Mr. Drummond opened the room to the public. I was working here in this building. On my way out, I noticed that some of the leftover items had been consigned to the sidewalk with a note encouraging people to give the items a home. I noticed a cookbook. A very old one, as it was wrapped in aged leather and written in hand. I took it, as I am fond of cooking.”

“And were you bothered after taking it home?” Baker asked.

“I made a lovely shepherd’s pie with one of the recipes. It tasted like perfection, but I took violently ill the following day. When I recovered, I made a few more dishes from the book, as I suspected turned meat for my poisoning. Each dish made me sicker than the last. And even when I took the book from my kitchen, nothing would settle and linger in my gut. I can only hold down bare crackers and water, now. I’ve lost ten pounds or more. I had decided to see a doctor tomorrow, before I waste to my bones.”

“And do you still have the book?” Baker asked.

“No,” Deidre said, firmly. “I had the same realization as Mr. Drummond. I don’t know why I thought the book capable of the black magic it had wrought, but I did. I fed the damned thing to the furnace in my building.”

“Is there a cure, Mr. Johnson?” Sherman asked, hopefully.

“Yes,” Deidre chimed in. “Something that doesn’t involve any murky business, of course. I won’t clasp hands in a dark circle and draw the devil in.”

“The solution to both of your problems should please you, especially, Miss Ahearn,” Baker said, with a reassuring smile. “Have someone from your church bless your homes, for although you have destroyed their vessels, the spirits still obviously linger with you. Something inhuman sounds at work here. But they are usually frightened off easily by religious symbols and people of the cloth.”

“So the cure for this science of yours is a man of the cloth?” Deidre said, sarcastically. “Imagine that.”

“The cross works, for whatever reason,” Baker admitted.

“I am not a very religious man and I wouldn’t know how to broach that subject with someone who was,” Sherman admitted.

“I have contacts,” Baker said, patting the man on the shoulder. “Give me a day to unpack and I will get you the information.”

“Could you share it with me, as well?” Deidre requested. “I don’t wish to involve my priest in this.”

“Consider it done. Just give me a day.”

Deidre sighed. “Well, I just wanted to pay my respects and see if you wanted my care of the place to continue. Considering the circumstances, I won’t be offering my services to you. I hope you aren’t offended.”

Baker smiled and shook his head. “No. And I am actually accustomed to cleaning after myself.”

“Good day to you both,” Deidre Ahearn said, turning and leaving the apartment.

Baker dug coins from his pockets and offered them to Sherman. “I moved from a rather large place to live here and I fear many of my belongings may be redundant in a fully furnished place such as this. If I sort through this mess and put some items aside, could you get rid of them for me?”

Sherman stared suspiciously at Baker. “You want to give some things away? Like your uncle?”

Baker caught the man’s meaning and laughed good-naturedly. “No, *no*, Mr. Drummond. I have no desire to haunt or curse anyone. These items can be sold, given away or burned, for all I care. They carry no energy save for mine.”

Sherman smiled back at him and took the money. “I’ll handle it for you, sir.”

“Thank you,” Baker said. “I would love to read your work, sometime.”

Sherman looked at him with surprised appreciation. “No one has ever read it. It would be nice to get an opinion of my worth as an author.”

“I am not an avid reader of poetry, but I would gladly share my impressions with you. Here, I think I have something you can use.”

Baker walked to one of the trunks in the formal room. He found the one marked OFFICE and unlatched it. He opened the container and rummaged around, finding and retrieving a small silver sculpture of a duck. He handed it to Sherman.

“It’s a paperweight,” Baker explained.

“I love it. Thank you, sir,” Sherman said. He then spotted a very ornate jewelry box in the trunk. Sherman put the paperweight aside. He picked up the jewelry box without asking. Baker forgave the intrusion. The man was strongly and strangely taken with it. Baker wondered if there was a tiny bud of sensitivity in the author.

Sherman opened the box, slowly. A tiny ballerina spun and music played. A gold band had been draped over her and vibrated at her feet as she danced. “Is this an item you wish to part with? I know a child in the building who would adore it.”

“No,” Baker said, gently taking the box from Sherman and closing it. “This has too much sentimental value. Come back late in the day tomorrow. I will have inventory for you and that contact at the church.”

Sherman nodded and collected his paperweight. He shook hands with Baker. Sherman then left, closing the apartment door softly behind him. Baker felt that his display of kindness had brought the building supervisor to his current and future causes. He was putting on, of course. Baker had little interest in Sherman Drummond or his poetry.

Baker cracked the jewelry box open again. He stared down at it, watching the tiny dancer. His uncle had been right about one thing. He had warned Baker not to take a wife. Richard Johnson had never loved another human being and Baker was the only one who ever knew why. It was the journey he and his uncle had both taken, and the haunted items that filled up their black rooms. Loved ones were targets for the negative energy; for the inhuman spirits and the demonic.

Richard Johnson never wanted to endanger another for the selfish reason of love. Baker, though, *had* been selfish. And he knew that his own black room had been responsible for the deaths of his wife and daughter. It was too much, the energy he and his uncle had watched over. It was a hateful and vengeful thing and the force of it grew stronger with every new acquisition.

Baker had received a letter from his uncle, days before the man’s death. He suspected it was Richard’s last correspondence. In his mad scribbling, Richard Johnson had said something that had struck a chord with his nephew.

Better that many be a little haunted, than one man consumed by the dark majority, Richard had written. The keeping of these trinkets was a mistake, and I fear they shall anchor me forever to this realm. I am going to purge myself of these glowing keepsakes. They shall go, indiscriminately, to others.

Baker had understood. He had cleaned out his own black room, in a similar fashion, before moving to the city and claiming his inheritance. The items went, without malice or conscience, as Baker felt it was every living person's responsibility to the dead to be plagued. A few would feel this dark invasion into their lives and homes, and it would be quite pronounced. But most would attribute a small shine of it to fate and luck or God's will.

Baker closed and then held the jewelry box to his chest. It had belonged to his daughter. And the wedding band inside had belonged to his wife. This was his piece of the pain and torment to carry and keep warm; his share of the misery. He hoped, one day, that an icy shadow would creep from the box. But his wife and daughter seemed at peace without him and this troubled him worse than anything he had ever seen or heard in his case studies.

Baker had been good to his family. He had provided for his wife and child and he couldn't think of one sin he had committed against them, save perhaps neglect; Baker Johnson was a driven and ambitious man. But he was beginning to think his inattention toward them might have been the worst offense possible.

So he waited for a sign of them, always. He was haunted not by a specter, but the absence of such.

The door to the black room suddenly slammed shut. Baker nearly dropped the box. He sat it back carefully into the trunk and then he walked to black room. He whipped the door open quickly, and tensed himself to face whatever might be lurking there.

It was empty, of course. The black room was pouting. Energy had evidently been spilled there. One or more prisoners were striking at the bars with a tin cup. Baker made plans and they needed to be implemented right away. He was sure Sherman could recommend a good handyman.

Baker would have the room painted a bright color. And then he would hang a crucifix on its door. The space would be blessed until Baker was sure there wasn't a flicker of energy left. There would be nothing fed to the room; no potential vessels for a stowaway. All he would fill the black room with was air.

It would be a bare and still place.

There was a time when he would have been consumed with who or what was still lingering there. But he no longer cared. It was a haystack, really, and he was done with chasing ghosts.

Baker shut the door to the black room. He noticed that the night was coming. The apartment was growing dark and cold.

He wondered where Richard Johnson, the dead old whoreson, had hidden the liquor. Baker searched the apartment until he found a bottle of brandy concealed behind a hollow bookshelf panel in the study. He dusted off a glass and filled it. He lounged and grew drunk in the ornate and comfortable chair pulled next to his uncle's desk.

There was a firm knock on a door outside of the study. Baker wasn't sure which entry required his attention and he wasn't in the mood for flesh *or* spirit. So he ignored it and poured another drink.

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Terry M. West is an American horror author. His best known works: What Price Gory, Car Nex, Dreg and his Night Things series. He is also the managing editor of the Halloween/horror website, Halloween Forevermore. He was a finalist for 2 International Horror Guild Awards and he was featured on the TV Guide Sci-Fi hot list for his YA graphic novel series, Confessions of a Teenage Vampire. Terry was born in Texas, lived in New York for two decades and he currently hangs his hat in California.
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