

Her demonic Angel

‘Get off! You’re really hurting me!’ bellows the young mother from next door. High-pitched, defiant banshee wails stream endlessly from her rebellious daughter. My heart sinks as my rising anger pumps my worn out, sluggish blood ever quicker around my decrepit body. I turn up my television in an attempt to drown out the din, but it cannot be ignored. I had hoped that my noisy protest would cut short the conflict, but sadly to no avail.

These dysfunctional neighbours are at it again! Claudette is shouting threats in her strong Devonian accent at Angel, her eight-year-old, fair-haired only child. Demonic Angel is defiantly screaming foul abuse back at her mother, confident that there is nothing she can do about her insults. The ghastly child is deliberately banging their living room door over and over and over again. My anger and irritation increases alarmingly at each bang until my blood reaches boiling point. My marquetry picture of a maiden kneeling beside a stream that hangs on the adjoining wall tilts alarmingly, threatening to tumble onto the floor.

‘I’m sick of straightening that picture after every row, so it can just stay crooked,’ I say to myself, knowing full well that I will be straightening the picture at some point this evening, despite it being a pointless exercise.

‘Shut up! Shut up! Shut up for Christ’s sake,’ my mind chants. My nerves are jangling as though a thousand fingernails are being repeatedly scraped down the school blackboards of my youth too many decades ago to mention. Over the past three years, I have too often endured hearing these unsettling and intensely disruptive barrages of negative energy from this pair of battling females. When I first moved my old carcass into my new home on this idyllic Devonian seafront, I wondered if it was the sound of endless screaming matches coming from next door that had prompted the vendor to have been so eager to sell it to me. The selling price had seemed too good to be true to me at the time and I soon discovered the reason why it was so reasonable. After the stressful years of nursing my dear husband until his death five years ago, I had been yearning for a peaceful, trouble-free retirement now that I am a widow. Dear Angel has put paid to that dream.

On this particular evening, the shouts of verbal abuse, the endless banging of furniture and persistent slamming of doors speaks of imminent physical violence. I fear for both of their young lives and also for my sanity. It is clear how much power that vile child exercises over her cornered, desperate mother. Angel seems all too aware that today’s society frowns upon parents who physically chastise their badly behaved children. I have lost count of the times that I have been distressed to hear the pitiful sobs of the despairing mother after such stomach-churning confrontations with her daughter.

‘You can’t make me! You can’t make me!’ I hear Angel shout smugly. The girl clearly has the upper hand in this evening’s struggle for supremacy.

‘I’d bloody well make you, you little vixen,’ I mumble.

I wonder whether to knock on Claudette’s front door to offer to assist her in restoring order.

‘Any attempts by me to restrain the child won’t do a blind bit of good,’ I remind myself.

I have just remembered a conversation with downtrodden Claudette that I had one morning over the dilapidated garden fence that divides our two properties. I had tactfully brought up the tricky subject of her daughter’s appalling behaviour after having endured listening to another of their appalling rows the previous night.

‘Would you like me to have a little word with Angel? Would it help you in any way?’ I had asked gently, fearing that I might be told to keep my nose out of the situation.

‘I only wish that you having a word with her would help, but nothing anybody says to her has any effect. She just screams at me that she doesn’t care what I think or do to punish

her,' Claudette replied, her greasy, thin hair flopping into her pained, downcast eyes.

'I know. I've heard her shouting out just those words at you and a lot more besides,' I had said, shaking my head and sighing dolefully at the memory of the girl's disgusting language. 'Angel still sees your ex-husband, doesn't she? How does she behave when she stays at his house?'

'She's apparently as good as gold with Steve and his new woman, which just makes me feel even worse. I feel so inadequate, as though I am bringing her up badly. I'm at my wit's end. I don't have a clue what to do to make Angel behave when she's alone with me,' she said. Yet again, Claudette had looked on the verge of tears. Her face always looked puffy from crying.

'How does Angel act when she is at school?' I had asked.

'She's always very well behaved at school and in public, but as soon as we're alone together she acts worse than a wild animal,' Claudette had replied. 'I wish we'd never christened her Angel. The name sounds ridiculously ironic. It was Steve's idea to have her christened Angel, not mine.'

'It must be so hard for you, bringing such a strong-willed child up mostly on your own,' I had sympathised, remembering how Steve, Angel's father had stormed out of the house never to return a few months after my relocation to my new home. There had not been time to become properly acquainted with him, but he was not really my cup of tea. From what I had seen, he appeared to be vain and arrogant. How such a plain woman as Claudette ended up married to such a good-looking, but shallow peacock is a mystery to me.

'Steve wasn't of much use to me anyhow. I'm better off without the cheating bastard,' Claudette had said, her eyes flashing with anger at remembering how her husband had so cruelly wounded her by his treachery with another woman.

'I'm sure that you're right. Nobody needs a cheat in their life,' I said, hoping to avert her tears.

'Steve has always spoiled our daughter rotten and I reckon that is partly to blame for the problems that I have with her now. Angel was and always will be a daddy's girl. She doesn't like the fact that I don't spoil her the way he does and she is punishing me for it. Angel only started bullying me soon after her father left us, although she and I have never been as close as he is with her. I certainly can't afford to spoil her now that Steve has run off with that vile tart from the Post Office in town. I miss his wage more than I miss Steve, ha!'

A loud crash from next door cuts short my thoughts of my previous conversation with Claudette. As the current terrible row rages on over the sound of my Coronation Street programme, I think back to my own childhood. Angel's appalling behaviour would never have been tolerated back in the fifties when I was Angel's age. Living under a strict parental regime, if I had dared to raise my voice to either of my parents in the way that the Exorcist girl next door shrieks abuse at her mother, I would have been hospitalised.

My father used to hit and verbally chastise me on an almost daily basis from when I was about ten to when I was sixteen, even though I was not a particularly naughty child. He would banish me from the dinner table for very little reason on countless occasions. The brute needed no excuse to regularly lash out at me for perhaps looking at him oddly or for not laying the table as he deemed fit. He was a six-foot-four antagonising bully who had always had it in for me throughout his life and beyond. I cannot recall ever behaving badly enough to warrant the harsh punishment that he relentlessly dished out to me. I was a perfect child compared to the pint-sized Beelzebub that I can now hear screaming insults at her floundering, ineffectual mother.

I am far from putting forward the notion that my father's ultra-strict discipline was a better way to raise a child than the 'shout but don't hit' wishy-washy method adopted by the mother next door. My father was an extreme example of brutal parental discipline that should

never be emulated. However, neither should a child gain the upper hand and be allowed to terrorise its parents as is happening right now next door and in so many other households in 2016.

In a vain attempt to block out the piercing screams and shouts from next door, my tortured mind thinks back to when I had caught sight of this nightmare combination of weak mother and toxic daughter earlier today. Like me, they had wandered down onto the sun-drenched beach to make the most of the glorious weekend weather before the promised storm was due to hit this part of the Devon coastline.

As today is a Sunday, the beach was sprinkled with tourists and a few locals like me. I like to fool myself that I am a local, despite originally hailing from Nottingham. I will probably be dead before I am finally accepted by the folk who have lived all of their lives in and around this seaside resort and they consider me to be one of their own. Everyone on the beach seems to be making the most of the scenery and perfect weather, all intent on soaking up every last ounce of sunlight as they drink in the sleep-inducing ozone. With great difficulty, I had dragged my sun lounger down onto the silky stretch of sand and was luxuriating in the blissful sound of the waves lapping on the shore, lulling me into a smug reverie.

In my distant youth, on such a perfect day I would have been bobbing about in the sea, but my bones badly ache these days and so I found it easy to resist today's call of the ocean. I had bravely ventured to the water's edge to paddle when my heart sank after spotting Claudette and Angel in the distance. Annoyingly, they seemed to be walking towards me. I was aggravated that they had burst my bliss bubble just by entering my line of sight.

'Please don't come and sit over near me. I really dislike you Angel, although you probably think that I should consider you to be cute just because you're eight and pretty. Well, you don't fool me for a split second. You're not as sweet and innocent as you would have us all believe. I know what you are. To me and your mother, you're not in the least bit cute, so sod off and leave me in peace,' I had found myself thinking.

Hoping that my irritation was not plastered all over my tanned, lined face, I had briefly scolded myself for harbouring such uncharitable thoughts towards an outwardly innocent child.

At sixty-seven, my facial lines are deepening alarmingly and creases have appeared all over my sagging body. It is no longer a pleasure to look in mirrors, only a constant disappointment. However, as I am now a widow living alone and with no further use for men or they for me, I am not as bothered about my appearance as I once was. Simpering, narcissistic Angel cannot be accused of being unaware of her appealing appearance, despite being only eight years of age.

Both mother and daughter had briefly waved to me as they walked across the hot sand to the far side of the beach to buy an ice cream from the busy kiosk. I could see that Claudette's face was puce and shiny with sweat as she plodded along whilst Angel occasionally pirouetted and bounded into the air in her attempt to gain attention from everyone on the beach. Claudette had looked especially drained and weighed down by her formidable problems. Her cumbersome frame sank into the yielding sand as they progressed in my direction.

'Poor Claudette knows exactly what she's in for when they both return to their war zone of a house,' I had thought, wishing that they would hurry up and pass by so that I could resume listening to the calming sea. I had not wanted my afternoon to be interrupted by unpleasant memories of Angel's screams as Claudette did her best to prevent another unholy ruckus.

'It's bad enough having to endure your bad behaviour every day whilst I'm at home, let alone have to be reminded of it down here on the beach,' I had said to myself, resolving to

stay as long as possible on the beach to avoid having to listen to their intrusive arguments.

Whilst I had been attempting not to look daggers at her, Angel had smiled at me as though butter would not have melted in her pretty, abusive mouth.

As I had looked at her perfectly groomed, long, fair hair and large, blue eyes, all that I could think was, 'You unspeakable little horror! I know that you know that I can hear you through the walls as you delight in giving your poor mother an impossible time. You've ignored me whenever I've been forced to knock on the wall dividing our two houses with my walking stick to shame you into quitting your interminable banging and your foul screams of abuse. Yet here you are smiling at me as though your commotion is a figment of my imagination. You know that I understand what you really are. Walk on, you damned child of Satan, walk on!'

The force of my thought waves magically seemed to work a treat. Mother and daughter had mercifully carried on walking past me. They bought a couple of dripping ice cream cornets and stayed up the far end of the sun-drenched bay, much to my relief. I heaved a huge sigh and returned to my tranquil reverie. Whilst trying to block all thoughts of my impending return to the battle zone, I had eventually drifted off to sleep, lulled by the rhythmic calls of soaring seagulls mixing with the gentle lapping of the waves.

I had been rudely awakened by the noise of my snores. Glancing around in embarrassment over who might have heard my snoring, I then realised that the beach was now deserted apart from a couple of youths kicking a football back and forth in the far distance. Still groggy and shivering in the early evening air, I had folded up my sun lounger and set off home to face the evening's challenges.

Like clockwork, the shouting had started shortly after dipping into my light supper of soft-boiled egg and soldiers.

'Now I'll get indigestion again from my guts being tied up in knots,' I thought angrily.

Twenty minutes later, Claudette is still screaming for her infernal offspring to climb down off her painful body. Judging by the sounds coming at me through the wall, I can picture the scene next door. Angel must have clambered onto her mother's flabby belly as Claudette lies on the sofa attempting to watch television. The young, clueless mother had previously told me over the fence that she suffers from a severe, chronic arthritic condition. Angel seems to enjoy mercilessly exploiting her mother's ailments in order to test the boundaries of their fractured relationship.

It sounds to me as though, on this particular evening Claudette is finding it impossible to throw her daughter off her body or to restrain her in any way. I struggle off my sofa, intent on helping Claudette by knocking on their front door to offer assistance and rescue her. After hesitating a short while, I sit back down again unsure what to do next.

'I don't want to interfere and be thought of as a nosy neighbour,' I think, although wondering whether in fact I am just being lazy in my old age.

'My arm! Get off my bloody arm!' I hear Claudette cry out in frustrated pain as her daughter shrieks in blood-curdling defiance.

Today's sunshine and smiles during my stay on the beach now seem a million miles away to me. All of my positive thoughts are being shattered into countless shards as the negative energy from next door yet again invades my tranquillity. As usually happens when I hear their vicious rows, I start to consider calling the police to put an end to the unpleasantness. So far I have always chickened out of phoning them, but today's battle is definitely worse than normal. This one is off the scale. As I reach for my mobile phone to call the police, I hear a single, piercing different sort of shriek coming from Angel. It is more like a scream of shocked terror than of attack. The blood-curdling, visceral scream falls ominously silent.

I freeze on the sofa like a wax statue, my arm held out in mid-air, but now all thoughts

of grabbing my phone are abandoned after taking in a shocking sight that my brain cannot comprehend. My mouth falls open in horror and disbelief. I want to run, but fear for my safety if I did. The transparent yet clearly defined figure of a young, blonde girl silently floats through my living room and out into the hallway. As it slowly passes my motionless, petrified body, it stares reproachfully at me with large, blue, unearthly eyes. I have seen those same blue eyes looking back at me on the beach only a few hours ago.

By the time I manage to gather up enough courage to unglue my rigid body from my settee to stagger into the narrow hall, the silent spectre has vanished. With my legs juddering so much with terror that they can barely hold me upright, I cautiously walk upstairs to check the three small rooms up there in case they are now occupied by something unspeakable. There seems to be no sign of the apparition that so clearly had been Claudette's daughter. I cannot be certain that it will not reappear at any moment. My strength drops out of my frail body. I slump onto my bed, my knuckles gleaming white in the dusk as I desperately grip the duvet cover, struggling to regain some sense of reality.

'Did I really just see what I thought I saw gliding through my living room? Did that really just happen?' I ask myself, knowing in my heart that it had.

Despite the pre-storm heat and mugginess of my bedroom, ice now rushes through my veins as a terrible realisation dawns on me. Too stunned to decide what to do next, in the half-light I hear myself whisper, 'Angel has finally pushed her mother much too far this time.'