Fighting the Devil by Killing the Angel

MRS. W. ARRANGED US alphabetically, so I spent my entire third-grade year sitting next to a sadist named Hank C. Every day, several times a day, whenever the teacher wasn't looking, Hank would jab his pencil into my arm. He was shorter than me, and I'd look down on his straight brown hair and he'd glance up at me with a crooked smile and then he'd do it: jab jab jab. He'd get up from his seat often to sharpen the point; I'd sit in my seat in dread, listening to the churn of the pencil sharpener in the back of the room, knowing the pencil tip would be dulled not by paper but by my skin. I'd go home with little gray circles, some with dots of red in the center, Hank's own bull's-eye, all up and down my left arm. I remember it was my left arm because I can see myself sitting next to him, wearing one of the outfits, not just a dress, but an outfit -- matching socks, hair ribbon, even underwear -- that my mother would put me in each morning. I look at him and hope maybe not this time, please no more, and he glances at me (or doesn't -- he got so good at it that after a while he could find my arm without looking) and: jab jab jab. Each time I hope he won't and each time he does. Mostly I'd just endure. This is what is happening; there's nothing I can do about it. One day after school I decided that I couldn't take it anymore. I decided that I would tell the teacher the very next time he did it. Of course I'd have to wait for him to do it again first. I felt relief.

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I look at him and hope maybe not this time, please no more, and he glances at me (or doesn't -- he got so good at it that after a while he could find my arm without looking) and: jab jab jab. Each time I hope he won't and each time he does. Mostly I'd just endure. This is what is happening; there's nothing I can do about it. One day after school I decided that I couldn't take it anymore. I decided that I would tell the teacher the very next time he did it. Of course I'd have to wait for him to do it again first. I felt relief. When I went to school the next day, we had a substitute teacher instead of Mrs. W. I lost some of my resolve, but not all of it. Hank seemed in better spirits than usual. He started in soon after the bell rang while we were doing workbooks. Jab jab jab. I stood and walked to the front of the room, my lime green dress brushing against the gray metal of the teacher's desk. "Hank always pokes me with the pencil," I told the stranger. My voice was much smaller than I'd hoped. I'd said it like a whisper; I'd meant to sound mad. "You go back to your seat and tell me if he does it again," she said. And that was it. I never could work up the nerve again to walk the 15 feet to the big desk and blurt out the nature of the boy's crime: Always, he pokes me. I continued going home each day with pencil wounds. The problem, I think, was that I simply wasn't mad at him. When I went to tell the teacher, my voice wasn't loud in a burst of righteous anger; it was demure. I didn't want to bother her. Maybe I didn't want to see Hank punished. Maybe I didn't think I deserved not to be hurt. Maybe it just didn't seem that big an aberration. Even though no one else was being poked at every day, maybe this was just my lot in life. I'm 25 years old. I'm alone in my apartment. I hear a knock. I open the door and see a face I don't know. The man scares me, I don't know why. My first impulse is to shut the door. But I stop myself: You can't do something like that. It's rude. I don't invite him in, but suddenly he is pushing the door and stepping inside. I don't want him to come in; he hasn't waited to be invited. I push the door to close it, but I don't push very hard; I keep remembering that it's not polite to slam a door in someone's face. He is inside. He slams the door shut himself and pushes me against the wall. My judgment: He is very rude. I make this conscious decision: Since he is being rude, it is okay for me to be rude back. I reach for the doorknob; I want to open the door and shove him outside and then slam the door in his face, rude or not, I don't care now. But frankly, I don't push him aside with much determination. I've made the mental choice to be rude, but I haven't been able to muster the physical bluntness the act requires. Or maybe I realize the game is lost already. He is stronger than I am, I assume, as men have always been stronger. I have no real chance of pushing him aside. No real chance of it unless I am very angry. And I'm not very angry. I'm a little bit angry. But, despite the fact that I didn't shove with much force, he is angry with me. I know why: It's because I've been rude to him. He is insulted. I am a bit ashamed. We fall into our roles quite easily, two people who have never met each other, two people raised in the same culture, a man and a woman. As it turns out, a rapist and his victim. I asked my students, college freshmen, these two questions once: What did your parents teach you that you will teach your own kids? What did they teach you that you won't teach your kids? One young woman said, "My parents always told me to be kind to everyone. I won't teach my children that. It's not always good to be kind to everyone." She was so young, but she knew this. Why did it take me so long to learn? Working on this stuff makes me a little crazy. Sitting at my computer typing for hours about being raped and how it made me feel and makes me feel makes me distracted, jittery -- both because I drink too much strong coffee and because writing goes beyond imagining into reliving. I decided I needed to reread Virginia Woolf. I'd been making notes to myself for a while -- "angel" or just "Woolf" scribbled on scraps of paper on my desk and in the front pocket of my backpack, to go buy the book, the book with the angel in it. (I could feel her hovering as I typed; I know the exact color and texture of her flowing gown.) What could be easier than to write articles and to buy Persian cats with the profits? But wait a moment. Articles have to be about something. Mine, I seem to remember, was about a novel by a famous man. And while I was writing this review, I discovered that if I were going to review books I should need to do battle with a certain phantom. And the phantom was a woman, and when I came to know her better I called her after the heroine of a famous poem, "The Angel in the House." It was she who used to come between me and my paper when I was writing reviews. It was she who bothered me and

wasted my time and so tormented me that at last I killed her.
-- "Professions for Women"
Virginia Woolf (1931) There was TV. Reruns of reruns of I Love Lucy and The Flintstones. I Dream of Jeannie. Bewitched. I can't even think of a show from my youth that had a single female character who was smart, self-confident, and respected by others. My sister and I would lie on our stomachs, heads propped on fuzzy cotton pillows with leopard-skin covers, watching, indiscriminate, mildly entertained, for hours. Samantha was smarter than Darrin, it was obvious, but she hid her intelligence just as she hid her magical powers, powers Darrin didn't have, powers that made him angry. Samantha's mother, Endora, used her powers with confidence and even flair, but she cackled and wore flowing bright green dresses and too much makeup; she was a mother-in-law. I was supposed to learn how to be like Samantha, not like Endora, and I did. None of this is news, of course; we can all see those sexist stereotypes quite easily now. But just because I can see, understand, and believe that something is false, that it's not right, now, doesn't mean it won't continue to be a part of me, always. (Barbara Eden calling Larry Hagman "Master." How many times did I hear that?)
"It's big," I say. I turn my head up. I smile. Why do I say this? I ask myself, even then. ..... And I want to flatter him, so he won't hurt me any more than he already plans to. I, yes, I am trying to flirt with him. I've learned about flirting and how it works and what it can do. (It can get people to like you, to do things for you, to treat you well.) It's a skill I have honed. And I'm using it now. To save my life. (And, hey, it worked! Unless of course he hadn't planned to kill me in the first place.) He smiles down at me. ..... You who come of a younger and happier generation may not have heard of her -- you may not know what I mean by the Angel in the House. I will describe her as shortly as I can. She was intensely sympathetic. She was immensely charming. She was utterly unselfish. She excelled in the difficult arts of family life. She sacrificed herself daily. If there was chicken, she took the leg; if there was a draught she sat in it -- in short she was so constituted that she never had a mind or a wish of her own, but preferred to sympathize always with the minds and wishes of others. ..... "Stop fighting!" he growled at me. Ooh, that pissed me off! "I'm not fighting!" I sassed back at him. And I wasn't. How dare he! Accuse me, I mean. Of fighting. Above all -- I need not say it -- she was pure. Her purity was supposed to be her chief beauty -- her blushes, her great grace. In those days -- the last of Queen Victoria -- every house had its Angel. And when I came to write I encountered her with the very first words. The shadow of her wings fell on my page; I heard the rustling of her skirts in the room. Directly, that is to say, I took my pen in hand to review that novel by a famous man, she slipped behind me and whispered: "My dear, you are a young woman. You are writing about a book that has been written by a man. Be sympathetic; be tender; flatter; deceive; use all the arts and wiles of our sex. Never let anybody guess that you have a mind of your own. Above all, be pure." One thing being raped did to me: It caused me to be sometimes rude to strangers. Not out of anger, though, but out of fear. I was 25 when I was raped. I'm 35 now. This happened last week. I was in a coffee shop, reading a textbook for a class I'm teaching. After a while, I took a little break and brought my now-empty cup back to the counter. There was a guy at the counter waiting for his drink. "What are you reading?" he asked. He had a big smile on his face, a friendly smile. He wasn't creepy; he was being friendly. I sensed these things. "It's a textbook," I answered. I was looking at the floor now, not at his face any longer. "Oh! What class are you studying for?" he asked. "It's a class I'm teaching," I said. Oh no. "Where do you teach? At _____ College?" "No," I said flatly and tried to smile a little. I felt nervous, pinned. I knew the conversation wasn't over, but I simply turned and went back to my little table. He stood there at the counter, probably watching me walk away and wondering why I wouldn't answer his question, why, against the unspoken code of our culture, I hadn't at least finished the exchange with a friendly word or a wave. But there was no way I would tell him (or you, notice) where I taught or what I taught or anything else about me. And there was no way I could explain this to him courteously; the whole exchange made me too nervous. I certainly wasn't angry at him, but I was a bit afraid. And right there in the coffee shop, I felt the presence of my angel, the rustling of her skirts: "Be sympathetic," I heard her reprimand me, sweetly. "Be tender. And pure." I couldn't be polite, but I did feel guilty. Though I wasn't finished with my reading, when I got back to the table, I gathered up my things and left. I turned upon her and caught her by the throat. I did my best to kill her. My excuse, if I were to be had up in a court of law, would be that I acted in self-defense. Had I not killed her she would have killed me. He bent down to gently arrange the towel ..... after it was all over with. "You were so good-looking, I just couldn't resist," he told me. And for the first time in my life, I didn't enjoy being complimented on my physical appearance. Why, I wondered at that moment, had I ever wanted to be considered pretty -- or kind, or good? Compliments mean nothing. Or worse, compliments mean this. What good does such a compliment do me? Thus, whenever I felt the shadow of her wing or the radiance of her halo upon my page, I took up the inkpot and flung it at her. She died hard. Her fictitious nature was of great assistance to her. It is far harder to kill a phantom than a reality. I haven't killed her. Yet. Maybe I need to go out and get an inkpot to fling at her. Hmm, I wonder how she'd hold up against a flying laptop. I can imagine hurling this 10-pound black plastic box at her (she's up in the corner, to my right). It easily tears through the soft blue, rough cotton of her ankle-length gown (she has a long, thin white lace apron tied around her waist). The computer crashes into the space where the walls and ceiling meet; she falls to the carpet. And then what? She's dead. And how do I feel about that? Guilty? Relieved? Well, I don't think I'd want to stuff my pockets with rocks and wade into a river. (Did Woolf ever really kill her angel? Or is it the angel that killed her?) What I want to know is this: If I'm ever physically attacked again, will I fight to save myself? And will I be fighting out of righteous anger or out of unstrung fear? What I need to know is this: Is the angel really the one who needs to die? "I guess I'll get twenty years in the penitentiary for this," he says and waves his hand across the room at me. Twenty years? Just for this? Just for doing this to me? Twenty years is a really long time. In fact, he got 35 years. On a plea bargain. The police, the lawyers, the judge -- the state, the legal system -- even he, the criminal, the rapist, thought he deserved decades in jail for what he'd done to me. Why didn't I? _____ “We thank Ms. Davis for allowing us to publish this excerpt from her essay. This essay was originally published in the Harvard Review and has been reprinted in Utne and the anthology Women’s Voices, Feminist Visions. To read more of Ms. Davis’

work, please visit www.debraannedavis.com.”