Acting Edition

THESE DEMONS

by Rachel Bellman

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SAMUEL FRENCH

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CHARACTERS

LEAH – seventeen
DANIELLE – twenty-two
MIRAH – late forties or early fifties

SETTING

The events of the play take place in a cottage, two hours outside London.

Scenes can bleed into one another, and reality distorts as the play goes on.

TIME

Now.

NOTES ON TEXT

/ Slashes indicate overlapping dialogue.

– Dashes indicate an interruption.

, A comma on its own line indicates a short beat, or a shift in tone or thought.

ACT I

Scene One

(A small English cottage. Rustic and cluttered.)

(Beside the cottage, an overgrown garden.)

(Surrounding the garden, woods. Leaves cover the ground.)

(It's late afternoon.)

(Inside, books are piled on every surface.)

(On a shelf is an old-fashioned radio. Behind it, a tarnished Channukia.)

(One of the walls is covered in scribbled Post-it notes and pieces of paper.)

(In full view is a window; glass cracked, lines emanating from a central point as if something has flown into it. A rock? A bird?)

*(***LEAH** *has been adding to the Post-it wall, flicking through books, searching for something. Finally, she finds the page she wants and reads out loud.)*

LEAH. "If the eye had the power to see them, no creature could endure the *mazzikim*. They are more numerous than we are and they surround us like a ridge around a field."

(Pausing, trying to work something out, then reading again.)

LEAH. "If the eye had the power to see them, no creature could endure the *mazzikim*. They are more numerous than we are and they surround us like a ridge around a field. Every one among us has a thousand on his left hand and ten thousand on his right hand…"

(A sudden, loud noise from inside the cottage. Something falling to the floor. **LEAH** *is startled and goes to investigate. We are alone.)*

(The broken window shudders.)

*(***LEAH** *returns and sees the window. It is still.)*

(Another noise, this time from outside. A car parking. **LEAH** *can't see out the back, so she picks up a large kitchen knife and waits facing the door.)*

(Unseen by **LEAH**, **DANIELLE** *approaches the front door from outside. She takes an anxious breath, then enters.)*

DANIELLE. Jesus hell almighty Christ on a bike!

LEAH. Danielle?

DANIELLE. What have you got that / for?

LEAH. How did / you find me?

DANIELLE. You gave me a literal heart attack.

LEAH. Speak for yourself.

DANIELLE. No but I mean seriously, seriously will you please put that down?

(They both stare at the knife in **LEAH***'s hand. She lowers it onto the table.)*

LEAH. What are you doing here?

DANIELLE. What are *you* doing here? Is this where you've been the whole time?

LEAH. You weren't meant to follow me.

DANIELLE. Leah! We've been looking for you.

,

You went missing?

LEAH. *(Shrugging.)* Obvs not.

DANIELLE. You didn't come home last night. You weren't in school. If I hadn't found you here we would've… Dad agreed we'd call the police.

LEAH. That's a bit dramatic.

DANIELLE. Is it though? I mean, did you think we wouldn't notice?

LEAH. Dad's at his conference in Birmingham.

DANIELLE. Exactly. It was just me. I'm responsible.

LEAH. Well I didn't think you'd…

DANIELLE. What?

LEAH. Nothing. Okay. Care.

DANIELLE. Leah!

LEAH. Well do you?

(A beat. **DANIELLE** *looks away.)*

DANIELLE. I missed work to look for you.

LEAH. You did?

DANIELLE. I told them I was feeling sick. I missed half the afternoon.

LEAH. Oh no half the afternoon.

DANIELLE. I've not taken a sick day since Year Nine.

LEAH. Well. It's only an internship.

DANIELLE. Grad scheme.

LEAH. Bet the corporate machine had a breakdown.

DANIELLE. It's not a corporate machine. It's John Lewis.

*(**LEAH** makes a face.)*

Can we go? Put your shoes on. This place smells like cat food.

*(**LEAH** does nothing.)*

If we leave now, and if I drive as fast as I can without breaking the speed limit, I think we'll make it home for *Bake Off*.

(At the door.)

Vamos.

LEAH. I'm not going.

DANIELLE. Yes you are.

LEAH. Nope.

DANIELLE. Excuse me, what?

LEAH. I'm not leaving because you tell me to.

DANIELLE. Excuse me what?

LEAH. You just said that twice.

DANIELLE. But…

LEAH. I'm staying.

*(**DANIELLE** takes a deep breath in, then out.)*

DANIELLE. Why? What are you actually doing here?

,

I mean really. I mean, is that your handwriting?

(She moves towards the notes on the wall.)

Are those yours?

*(**LEAH** rushes to block her view.)*

LEAH. Doesn't matter.

DANIELLE. But what –

LEAH. It's nothing.

DANIELLE. Nothing?

LEAH. If you want to go so badly, go. I don't care.

DANIELLE. Leah. I didn't drive for two hours, in rush hour traffic, to this shithole in the middle of nowhere, just to turn around and leave without you.

LEAH. It's not a shithole.

DANIELLE. Look at it. I mean, Jesus. I haven't been here since she moved in. Dad said the house was falling down, but.

(She inspects the room and recoils.)

Is Aunt Mirah just a slob, or is she, you know, losing it?

LEAH. Take that back.

DANIELLE. No. Actually, okay. If you come home with me right now.

LEAH. I told you I can't.

DANIELLE. Oh you can. You just won't.

,

You know what? Whatever this is, you can explain it to Dad.

(Getting out her phone.) That way he can tell you to do what you're told, and we can leave, and…and…

*(**DANIELLE** fumbles with her phone for a good while.)*

LEAH. There's no signal.

,

There's not even wifi half the time.

DANIELLE. But…

LEAH. Mirah has to do online lectures sometimes. Drives her nuts.

*(***DANIELLE** *moves towards the landline.)*

Landline's been broken since I got here. It used to work, but.

*(***DANIELLE** *tries it anyway.)*

I mean it. I tried ordering pizza, but, no pizza. A short tragedy.

DANIELLE. How do I tell Dad you're not floating in some ditch?

LEAH. He doesn't think that.

DANIELLE. How would you know?

LEAH. It's dumped in a ditch or floating in a river.

,

Plus the body would be weighted. Unless my killer was doing that test to see if I would float. Like if they thought I was a witch, or just. Really gassy.

DANIELLE. We'll have to drive to somewhere with signal, to tell him you're okay, otherwise he'll freak out.

LEAH. No, you'll freak out. Besides, if I get in the car with you…

DANIELLE. Yes?

LEAH. You'll kidnap me.

DANIELLE. I don't think it counts as kidnapping if I'm your sister. Like, legally, I'm not sure it counts.

LEAH. But you admit you'll make me go home?

(Pause.)

DANIELLE. Tell me what's going on.

LEAH. …

DANIELLE. I'm serious.

LEAH. I'm getting that. You're acting proper weird.

DANIELLE. Me? You're the one who's… Why are you here?

LEAH. Maybe I'm here to feed Babs.

DANIELLE. The cat?

LEAH. She's Barbara to you. Babs if you're a friend.

DANIELLE. Will you just stop. What are those notes you're making?

,

I called the school this morning. Since you never came home. They said you weren't there, but your Head of Sixth Form wasn't even surprised. Apparently bunking off is normal for you.

LEAH. I'm not here to bunk off.

DANIELLE. Dad messaged me the names of your friends. They were freaked I was even texting. Sophie said you hadn't hung out since Year Ten.

LEAH. Dad's out of date.

DANIELLE. That's when I left work. I went back home, to see if your passport was there. To see if maybe / you'd –

LEAH. It was there.

DANIELLE. Yes, but I wanted to see / if –

LEAH. I didn't jet off to Ibiza.

DANIELLE. I wanted to see if you'd gone to visit Mum.

(Unseen by both of them, a feather falls from the ceiling.)

LEAH. Obviously not.

DANIELLE. No. Obviously not.

,

Then, I tried calling Aunt Mirah.

LEAH. How'd that go?

DANIELLE. She didn't pick up.

LEAH. Do you know why she didn't pick up? It wasn't 'cause of bad wifi.

DANIELLE. Why didn't she pick –

LEAH. 'Cause she's in hospital.

DANIELLE. In hospital? Is she okay?

LEAH. She is now.

(There's a faint sound, like a scuttle.)

She fractured her kneecap. I was the one who found her yesterday.

DANIELLE. Found her?

,

Were you bunking off yesterday too?

LEAH. Did you hear what I said?

DANIELLE. Is this where you go? Does Aunt Mirah let you just –

LEAH. Did you hear what I –

DANIELLE. Yes. You said she fell.

LEAH. She didn't just fall.

DANIELLE. What do you mean?

LEAH. She's not an old lady. She didn't go to A&E in an ambulance 'cause she 'fell'.

DANIELLE. Okay. Then –

LEAH. Someone hurt her on purpose.

DANIELLE. Hang on, what?

LEAH. That's why I'm back here. Because I had to do something.

,

I know who hurt Aunt Mirah. By the time I found her yesterday, he'd already left.

DANIELLE. Wait, who?

LEAH. So I came back last night. I decided to send him a message.

DANIELLE. You what?

LEAH. A note. I stuck one up in the newsagents this morning. And the pub.

DANIELLE. You left notes, like physically?

LEAH. Also the church.

DANIELLE. The church?

LEAH. Just on the door. He'll know it's for him.

DANIELLE. Hang on, wait. Wait, wait, wait. Who's 'him'?

(Time starts to shift.)

Scene Two

(Now – continuous / Two months ago.)

*(***LEAH** *continues speaking as if* **DANIELLE** *is still listening in the present.)*

LEAH. The boy came here once before. Two months ago. I was here for Shabbat.

*(***MIRAH** *enters and sets the scene.)*

Couple prayers. Super out of date kosher wine. Shit pasta.

*(***MIRAH** *puts a bowl of pasta in front of* **LEAH**.*)*

Aunt Mirah and I were talking about… Well, normal stuff.

MIRAH. Sixteenth February, Fifteen Seventy-One: The Great Event in Tzfat!

*(***LEAH** *turns to* **MIRAH**, *now inside the scene from two months ago.)*

LEAH. Tz-what?

MIRAH. A city in Israel.

LEAH. Oh.

MIRAH. Not like Israel now. That is not the point of this story. Listen. Eat.

*(***LEAH** *takes a bite of pasta.)*

Good. Now. Fifteen Seventy-One. The night was / dark –

LEAH. It's undercooked.

MIRAH. The night was –

LEAH. You al-totally-dente'd it.

MIRAH. Chew with your mouth closed, you harpy.

,

Fifteen Seventy-One. More than one hundred men were gathered. Torah scholars, heads of communities. They were there to witness a young woman. A girl who had been – so the accounts say – possessed. By a demon. Later writings would class it as a *Dybbuk*.

LEAH. Which one's that?

MIRAH. *Dybbuk*. A possessive demon. Translation: 'to cling'.

,

Two men approached, each terribly knowledgeable about spirit possession. And so they began the exorcism.

LEAH. Wait –

MIRAH. Don't speak with your mouth full.

LEAH. You said this was non-fiction.

MIRAH. All my books are non-fiction.

LEAH. Jews don't do exorcisms.

MIRAH. Leah. You're telling me you don't know the steps to a sixteenth-century Jewish exorcism? What the fuck did they teach you at *Cheder*? Alright, pay attention. Step One!

LEAH. Step One…

MIRAH. Question the demon.

LEAH. About what? His favourite pasta?

MIRAH. You could try to ask if it has a name, the nature of its sins, how it entered the body of the possessed.

LEAH. Mine's spaghetti hoops.

(Beat.)

MIRAH. I thought you said you wanted to hear about my new book, but if I'm boring you then –

LEAH. Sorry. Yes. Please

MIRAH. To encourage the demon to answer, you might recite incantations. And that is exactly what the men in Tzfat did:

(Reciting in Hebrew.)

יֹשֵׁב, בְּסֵתֶר עֶלְיוֹן; בְּצֵל שַׁדַּי, יִתְלוֹנָן
(yo·shev be·se·ter el·yo·n; be·tzel shadai yit·lo·nan.)

אֹמַר—לַיהוָה, מַחְסִי וּמְצוּדָתִי; אֱלֹהַי, אֶבְטַח-בּוֹ
(o·mar la·shem mach·si u·me·tzu·da·ti; e·lo·hai ev·tach-bo.)

Psalm ninety-one.

LEAH. Did it work?

MIRAH. It did not. And so, they proceeded to Step Two: Fumigation. Fire, smoke and sulphur.

LEAH. Sulphur. Isn't that –

MIRAH. Eggy. Like an omelette that wants to kill you.

LEAH. I was gonna say poisonous. We learnt that in Chemistry.

MIRAH. Oh yes, the fumes were highly toxic. But the two men held the girl down, to make the smoke enter her nostrils. The account says that she would not move away, even from the flames. But then, suddenly, all who were gathered heard a voice. Like "the voice of the Almighty". Drawn out like a rooooaaar!

LEAH. So, the girl was screaming?

MIRAH. The account describes the men having a conversation with the demon.

LEAH. While they were torturing her?

MIRAH. Smoking her. Like a Scottish salmon. And the two men begged the spirit: "Please. Please leave. Leave this young woman alone!" That is the next step: to demand that the demon go away.

(Lowering her voice.) I must warn you, this demand comes with great danger. If you're not careful, the demon will leave through an organ. Sometimes, the throat. If you're not careful, it will choke you.

LEAH. ...Is that what happened?

MIRAH. Traditionally, the way to tell if an exorcism has worked is if a candle blows out. And if it hasn't blown out, the traditional way to make the demon leave is to force it out through the toe.

LEAH. What? Cut it off?

MIRAH. The big toenail.

LEAH. Cut off the toenail? Who decided that?

MIRAH. It's the customary exorcism method.

LEAH. *(Very into the gore.)* Was there loads of blood?

MIRAH. And not just from the toe. Guess.

LEAH. Ooh, um, ooh, maybe –

MIRAH. The spirit departed through her vagina.

LEAH. ...You made that up.

MIRAH. That's what the original account says. Why the men were looking, I, uh, well...

LEAH. *(Pushing away her bowl.)* Don't want this anymore.

MIRAH. No? Remind me to read more about exorcisms next time I'm on a diet.

LEAH. Remind me to go to dinner at yours next time I'm on a diet.

*(***MIRAH** *takes Leah's bowl.)*

MIRAH. Don't want it? Don't deserve it.

LEAH. I'll tell my Dad you don't feed me.

MIRAH. No you won't, or he'll stop you coming here. Sounds quite peaceful actually.

LEAH. You make better food for Barbara.

MIRAH. Babs appreciates what she gets, unlike you.

(There's a noise outside, a kind of crash. **LEAH** *runs to the window.)*

Well that's not Babs.

LEAH. Hey. Hey!

MIRAH. Is it a fox?

LEAH. It's a boy.

*(***MIRAH** *goes to the window as* **LEAH** *shouts.)*

Hey. Get out!

MIRAH. Don't.

LEAH. But he's emptying your bins all over the garden!

,

I'm going after him.

MIRAH. You will not.

LEAH. But he's basically my age. I can take him. I did self-defence.

MIRAH. An after-school club won't cut it. Please, I'm trying to stay out of village politics.

,

MIRAH. I mean it. Let's wait for him to leave.

LEAH. But –

MIRAH. No buts.

(They wait, watching through the window…)

LEAH. He's gone.

*(**LEAH** runs into the garden. **MIRAH** follows.)*

MIRAH. If you don't mind helping.

*(**MIRAH** starts picking rubbish off the ground.)*

LEAH. I don't get it.

MIRAH. There's a group of them from the village. Teenagers. Was it just the one boy?

LEAH. Yeah, just the one.

*(**LEAH** begins to help.)*

MIRAH. They've never come out here before.

LEAH. Do you know who he was?

MIRAH. Not personally.

LEAH. Can you report him?

MIRAH. To who? I don't know who this kid's parents are, but they probably know me. And I'm not exactly… I'm not in the WhatsApp group, put it that way.

,

He didn't bring a car either.

LEAH. So he walked here? Through the woods? That's nuts.

MIRAH. You do it every month.

LEAH. I like the river. And you give me food. Kind of.

MIRAH. Maybe if you gave me more notice about when you'd show up, I'd get other food in. Or offer you a lift, or even –

*(**MIRAH** stops sharply, staring at the ground.)*

LEAH. Even what?

MIRAH. You go over there, by the gate. I'll clear the rock garden.

LEAH. But what –

MIRAH. It doesn't matter.

LEAH. Did he write something? In the dirt?

(Trying to block **LEAH***'s view,* **MIRAH** *covers up the message in the mud.)*

MIRAH. I can clear the rest of this later, actually.

,

Shall we go inside for pudding? Something else to encourage your diet?

LEAH. Are you not going to tell me what he wrote?

(Pause.)

MIRAH. Do you know, after the exorcism, the girl died.

LEAH. What?

MIRAH. The Great Event in Tzfat. Fifteen Seventy-One. Eight days after the exorcism, she choked.

LEAH. ...Oh.

MIRAH. There are two main theories. One is that the men smoked her to death. That would be the most logical explanation.

LEAH. ...What's the other?

MIRAH. In the account, some witnesses said that the candle never blew out. What that 'could' suggest, is that the demon never left.

Scene Three

(Now. **DANIELLE** *is still with* **LEAH** *in the cottage.* **LEAH***'s described what we've just seen.)*

DANIELLE. So. What did he write?

LEAH. What do you mean?

DANIELLE. The message that kid wrote in the dirt?

LEAH. He's not a kid, he looked my age.

DANIELLE. But what did it say?

,

I mean, what does it have to do with yesterday. I'm trying to understand here.

(A beat.)

LEAH. It said –

DANIELLE. Are you even sure it was the same guy?

LEAH. Mirah told me.

DANIELLE. Okay. So –

LEAH. Are you saying Aunt Mirah's a liar?

DANIELLE. No. No…

LEAH. When I went with her to hospital, she said there's a group of them in the village – teenagers – who've been making her uncomfortable. She said the same boy who messed with her bins came back and threw a rock at her window. That window.

*(***DANIELLE** *goes to the broken window.)*

DANIELLE. Uncomfortable how?

LEAH. Mirah wouldn't say.

WAIT, THERE'S MORE!

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