



THE MYTHIC CIRCLE

Volume 2019 | Issue 41

Article 9

7-15-2019

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Christopher Tuthill

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Recommended Citation

Tuthill, Christopher (2019) "*The Touch*," *The Mythic Circle*: Vol. 2019 : Iss. 41 , Article 9.
Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/mcircle/vol2019/iss41/9>

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Mythcon 51: The Mythic, the Fantastic, and the Alien
Albuquerque, New Mexico • Postponed to: July 30 – August 2, 2021



The Touch

by

Christopher Tuthill

The last time we moved it was into this cute little house across the street from this young family who had two little kids outside in the yard all the time. Their mom and dad pushed them on a little swing set every day, and I was kind of jealous of that, but they seemed like a nice family. Their mom and dad waved to us and said hi all the time and even came over to introduce themselves. They were friendly with everyone on the street, and even gave dad a ride to the U-Haul place to drop it off when we moved in.

But mom and dad said we were not to go over there or speak to them, so I didn't. The kids yelled to us from the yard all the time as they ran around but we couldn't go and play with them. Mom said they were too little anyway, and maybe they were a lot younger than us, but it would've been fun to play with them.

Mom also didn't want me or Nancy going to school, because she said she had to fill out the right paperwork and didn't have time. I don't know why she didn't have time, since she didn't do anything except get up at noon and sit around all day and say how she hated the neighborhood. But I couldn't go. So I played with the phone she gave me, but it was old and only had a couple of games and kept crashing anyways.

Then one day Killer got loose.

That's the dog—Killer. Dad thought it'd be funny to name him that. He's a mutt and he's not friendly and I never understood why dad thought it was funny, because no one likes a dog named Killer.

That day Killer was angry, because he'd been in the basement since we moved in. Mom just didn't want to walk him and wouldn't let me or Nancy do it, because she thought we'd let him run off.

It was sunny that day, so I guess that's why Killer wanted to get out. He ran right over across the street to the swing set, and bit the little girl when she came down the slide.

The little girl was so sweet. She had yellow hair and little pigtails and a nice cute smile and a sweet laugh that echoed across the street every day. But now, she was screaming in this terrible squeal like an animal, and I ran over and grabbed Killer by the collar and shamed him and he sulked away. My kid sister Nancy ran over and grabbed him by the leash and smacked her over and over as she walked her back home.

The girl's mom came out, and as she rushed over to us, I put my hands over the little girl's bite. I hummed and told her "It'll be ok, sweet thing," and the warmth pulsed through me, like it does when I get worked up, and I concentrated so hard on making

the kid happy.

My hands warmed up, and I could feel the girl's pain and a sting and a burning sensation in my hands, and then her mom grabbed the girl into her arms. Finally, the little girl stopped screaming.

"What happened?" her mom asked. Her voice was shaking.

I said, "My dog scared her, ma'am, I'm sorry."

"He bit me," the girl said. She pointed at her leg, but there was no more open wound, no blood, no bite mark. Just pretty, smooth pink skin.

"Oh, honey, it's ok." Her mom said. "He just scared you is all. Why don't you and your friend come inside and have something to drink?"

I was so happy, making friends like that. Finally, I had managed to help someone.

"Christine!"

It was my mom, screaming at me from across the street. "You get yourself right back in here this second, girl! I didn't tell you to be over in the neighbor's yard! What you think you doin' over there anyway?"

"It's ok," our neighbor said. "She was just helping Sadie. The dog put a scare in her."

My mom walked to the middle of the street and put her hands on her hips. She had her sleeves rolled up so you could see the dumb Tasmanian devil tattoo on her shoulder. Her eyes were red and bloodshot and her hair was all tangled. She'd probably been smoking again.

"Who the hell asked you?" she yelled.

The neighbor lady stood there with her mouth open for a second, then she went over to her son, who was sitting on one of the swings, and grabbed him and brought him and his sister back inside.

And I knew that was the last time we'd speak to those people.

That night, I took Nancy to the basement to hang out. It wasn't finished off or anything like that, it was just a regular concrete basement with dark corners and cobwebs and spiders lurking around. But it was better than being upstairs, cause mom and dad were getting into their drinking and they had some friends over.

We played down there for a while, with the doll house we made out of a cardboard box and the old Barbies. We drew some pictures and tried to make them as lifelike as we could, with the crayons we had. There was a little card table down there, and we sat and drew and tried to pretend like everything was normal, that it was just a regular old childhood like anyone else's.

Killer lurked in a corner, sulking from the beating Nancy gave him. He licked himself once in a while, and occasionally got up to get some water from his dish. Poor dog. It wasn't his fault he got mean sometimes.

Our folks were having a party upstairs and it got loud—real loud, the later it got. There were some raised voices and shouting, and blasting music with shaking bass from the stereo, and then I heard a siren and I just knew things were about to get worse.

I went upstairs with Nancy to see what was going on. There was a haze of smoke in the kitchen that stunk like weed, and suddenly the music that had been on all night went off. I heard my dad yelling.

"This is my house!" he said. "I live here, damn it!"

"Are you the owner, sir?" The cop said. He had a crew cut and a real bad attitude. Another cop stood next to him, with his

arms crossed.

My dad didn't answer. He just took another drink of beer.

"Sir, I asked if you were the owner."

"I rent this place," dad said. "What business is that of yours?"

"Sir, it became our business because we've had some noise complaints. Do you know what time it is, sir?"

The way he said 'sir,' made it sound like an insult, and I could tell it made my dad even angrier.

"It ain't that late," dad said. "This is police harassment!"

The cop said, "Man, it's one-thirty in the morning, and if you lived next door to me I would call the cops too."

That pretty much broke up the party. Everyone went home, but some of dad's friends had to wait for a ride 'cause they were so drunk. One friend of his, Jack, had to sleep on the floor of the basement, on some pieces of cardboard, 'cause he had no ride home.

Nancy and me went to our room upstairs and lay in our beds. I could hear mom crying through the door. Daddy yelled something mean, and then they were both quiet.

"You awake Nancy?" I asked my sister. But she didn't say anything. Like me, she was exhausted, but unlike me she was able to sleep.

I was happy for her. She was always able to sleep.

I lay awake and I heard Killer howling in the basement as I stared out the window into the pitch black. I wanted to evaporate. To just float out that window, away into the sky. But there I lay. I knew tomorrow mom and dad would both be hungover and in a bad way, like they were most days.

In the morning I went outside and those kids were playing on the swings again. I waved and yelled hello. The mom was standing there with a cup of coffee, but she didn't even say anything and they just kept playing and ignored me.

Nancy came outside and we sat underneath the oak tree in our front yard, not saying anything. There were some scattered beer cans across the lawn. Someone had made a firepit from cinderblocks on the grass, and it still smelled like smoke. There were cigarette butts everywhere, and broken glass from a tossed bottle was scattered across the driveway. The trunk of dad's car was still open; he often had it that way to hear his music when everyone was hanging outside.

Nancy was singing to herself, and looking up at the sky. I could hear the kids across the street laughing and screaming at each other. I wished our family could be normal like that.

Mom came out of the house after a while, looking tired and angry.

"Sadie, get yourself inside here. Let's have some breakfast." She yelled so loud the kids across the street could hear. I think she always did that stuff on purpose, to get every one of our neighbors to dislike us, like she was proud of being so loud and angry, or something. I couldn't understand that. Not only was it mean to me and Nancy, it was bad strategy, and ensured that within a few months everyone on the street would hate us.

I sat there and ignored mom, and that just made her mad.

"Sadie, I said get inside! Now! You too Nancy!"

"What's the matter," I said. "Too hungover to make your own coffee?"

Mom slammed the door shut. Across the street, the kids had gone inside.

“Now you done it,” Nancy said. “Mom’s gonna be in a mood all day.”

I knew she was right. I went inside anyway, and mom was standing at the sink, filling a glass with water. She had a bottle of aspirin open on the counter and downed a few of them as she gulped water.

Then she turned on me. Her eyes were yellow and she suddenly looked so old. There were bags under her eyes and her hair was all tousled. She had always been big, but now she had a belly that hung over her tights. Water dribbled down her chin.

“Momma,” I said, “I just wanna say that—”

“You don’t never talk to me like that, you hear me?” she said. She was angry, trembling, but the words sounded more like a plea than a threat. I felt sorry for her.

“I just wish we could have a normal weekend for once,” I said.

“Normal like what? Like them people across the way with their fancy car and perfect lawn and little sandbox for them brat kids? Is that what you want?” There were tears in her eyes and one rolled down her cheek and in the silence I could hear it drip onto the linoleum.

“Mom, it isn’t that,” I said, even though I was jealous of those people across the way for exactly all those things.

“What then?” she said. “You just starting to think you’re better than us, don’t you? Your nose always in some book. You weren’t even respectful to our friends last night.”

“That’s cause they were drunk, mom.”

“Oh, so you don’t like people who drink then? You’re too good for that?”

“I just don’t like when things get so loud

and out of control. And I don’t like the way Jack looks at me when he gets drunk. I don’t like that man even when he’s sober.”

That at least made mom laugh. “You’re right about Jack. He ain’t no good.”

I laughed too. I went over to her and she held out her arms for a hug, and she was crying now, really sobbing like she often did after she had a bad night.

I held my arms out, and she kissed me on the head as she took me in her arms.

I held her tight for a minute. I could feel all the anger inside her, the sorrow and the frustration. It was like a white hot rage that flowed through her.

I closed my eyes and saw her as a little girl, her hair all done up in pigtails, her momma and daddy taking her to church. Then came the accident. She was so alone, so sad, so angry. And then she had to live with her uncle, a mean, terrible man and a drunk. And everything changed, and mom hated everything in the world. And then she met dad, and I could feel it get worse, all the pain she had.

I held her tight and she whispered, “I love you, my sweet baby,” and I just held her and felt that white hot heat seeping from her body, to me.

I was filled with her heat and my head throbbed and ached and I heard a thousand voices at once, screaming at me, telling me everything that was wrong was all my fault. I felt dizzy and weak and feverish.

I opened my eyes and Nancy was standing there above me.

“What the heck happened?” she asked.

She reached down and dragged me to my feet. Mom lay on the linoleum tile.

“Help me get her to the couch,” I said.

We tugged her by the arms, but she was

like a big jellyfish, and out cold. There was no way we were getting her to her feet.

“Momma!” Nancy said. “Get up and get in bed!” But momma just lay there.

Finally, each of us grabbed one of her legs. She was heavy and it took some work, but we dragged her across the room to the couch. She slid across the linoleum pretty easy, considering how big she was; her tights and t-shirt made her almost glide. But then there was the problem of getting her on the couch.

Killer came over then, and he looked at momma and licked her face.

She woke for a moment, and looked at me and Nancy and started crying again.

“Shhh, momma, it’s okay,” I said. “Only stand up and lie on the couch and sleep.”

Nancy and I each took one of her arms, and she managed to get to her knees, and then we pushed, and rolled her onto the couch.

She lay there faceup and let out a big gasp of air. In another minute her eyes were closed and she was snoring peacefully.

“She’ll sleep like that all day,” I said. My own head hurt badly now, and my muscles ached.

“Let’s get out of here before dad wakes up,” I said. I went to my room and got the little bit of money I had saved up from under my mattress, and grabbed my purse, and we slipped out as quietly as we could.

We got our bikes and we rode away from there, out of the cul de sac.

The little kids across the street waved and yelled at us, and I waved back at them. Kids don’t hold grudges, even if their parents do.

“Where we going?” Nancy called to me, as we pedaled away.

“You’ll see,” I said.

The school playground was less than a mile away, and we were there in no time.

We racked our bikes, and Nancy said, “Momma told us we weren’t supposed to go to school yet.”

“What momma don’t know won’t hurt us,” I said. “And besides, it’s Saturday, and there ain’t no school today.”

“Then what are all them kids doin’ here?”

“They come to play, just like us. Come on, sis. It’ll be fun.”

Nancy always got nervous around other kids. They liked to tease her, I think because they sensed how she felt she just didn’t belong. She hesitated, and just stood by her bike and looked at the ground.

“I don’t know, Chris. Maybe I ought to just go home. Momma might be mad when she sees that we gone.”

I took her by the hand. “You really want to be there when she and dad wake up?”

She shook her head and looked at me and I could see the tears in the corner of her eyes. It made me mad. Not that she was upset. But that she thought so little of herself.

“You got every right to be on that playground, girl,” I said. “And I ain’t about to let no one pick on you. You hear me? I’ll put my shoe in their backside before I let that happen.”

Nancy laughed at that. I gave her a hug and we walked hand in hand over to the playground.

The kids called this playground The Forest, because it had all these neat wooden bridges and stairs and boxes everywhere. You went in and it was like a maze. You spiraled up and up into these wooden boxes, ducking down now and then and even crawling through some spaces ‘til you

reached the top, where you had a view of the school and the big grassy field beside it.

There were kids up at the top and running across the bridges and we could hear them hollering in some of the boxes. I looked around but didn't see Marcus nowhere. I wondered if he came after all.

Marcus was an older boy, in seventh grade, though he was older than that cause he was left back a couple of times. I met him one day at McDonald's when mom left us there, and he came in and sat next to us, which surprised me. He talked to us like we were just normal kids and not just the new kids in the neighborhood, and I thought that was nice of him. We became friends after that, and I met up with him when I could sneak away on my bike.

I never told momma about him, of course. If she knew I was making new friends in the neighborhood, she'd put an end to that right away.

We started our way through the forest, and just as we reached the second level, there was Marcus, sitting underneath a bridge like some troll or something.

"Hey Chris," he said. "Hey Nancy."

"Hey," Nancy said.

"So remember I said I had something special planned for today?" he said. "I want you to show that trick to everyone here."

My heart sank. I thought we were friends. But now I knew I never should have showed him what I could do.

It had happened when I took a spill on my bike last week. He was following me, and helped me up. I had a bad skinned knee. I healed it up with my touch. I didn't mean to be a show off, but I guess I just wanted him to see how I was special. But now he wanted me to do it again, on demand, and I didn't like how that made me feel.

Marcus whistled and yelled out. Kids from all over the forest made their way over to us. I wanted to run, but I stayed where I was. I thought it would be showing weakness to run away from all these kids.

Marcus stood up from under the bridge, towering over every kid there. He pushed his sandy brown bangs out of his eyes.

"This here is my friend Christine," he said. "And she has a special power and you're all gonna see it right now," he said.

"Marcus, don't," I said. I could feel my face grow hot. "Let's get out of here, Nancy." I took my sister by the hand again.

"Wait just a second," Marcus said. He pulled a small swiss army knife from his pocket, and opened it and held it up. He brought the knife to his hand and sliced across his palm.

Blood trickled down his arm and dripped on the wood.

"Now why'd you go and do something so stupid as that?" I said.

"You're gonna heal me up," He said.

The kids had made big circle around us. There was a dozen or so of them, and I could feel every eye on me as he stood there, his palm dripping red.

I turned away with Nancy.

But then Nancy squealed out and I felt her arm tug away from me.

Marcus had her by her pigtails, and pulled her close to him.

"You let her go!" I screamed.

Nancy was crying and wailing out horribly, almost like Killer did when she got angry or hurt. Her squeals rang out in the sky, so loud I thought the whole neighborhood must be able to hear. Marcus brought the knife to her arm, and slowly cut across it, just above her elbow.

He let her go, and she fell, and I

screamed out at him. Nancy lay there, blood trickling from her arm and she cried and cried.

Through my own tears, I ran at Marcus. I didn't care if he had a knife.

I punched him as hard as I could in his gut. The knife went flying from his hand and I kicked him between the legs. He went down and I kicked him again, as he lay there with his bloody palm, cradling his gut and whining like a fool.

"Come on, Nancy, get up," I said. "I guess momma was right. This school ain't good for us."

The kids made way for us. I half carried, half dragged Nancy back to her bike.

"Ain't you gonna heal it?" she sniffed. She pointed to the cut on her arm. It wasn't deep, but blood was running down to her wrist.

"Maybe later," I said.

Nancy cried all the way home. When we

got there, we left our bikes in the driveway and went to the backyard.

"Give me your arm," I told Nancy.

She put it in mine, and I held her. She was sticky with blood, and her face was stained with tears.

I could feel inside her all the pain and rage I felt myself. "Someday, we're gonna get out of here," I told her.

Her arm was warm in my hands and I could feel it under my touch, sort of humming.

I let go and Nancy rubbed it. "It feels itchy," she said.

"But it's good as new."

I said again: "Someday, we're gonna get outta here."

Killer came over to us, and she licked my hand and we sat there in the cool grass holding hands, just me and Nancy. Clouds were rolling in, and it felt like rain.

—The End—