

Gandy Dancer Archives

Volume 11 | Issue 2

Article 3

5-1-2023

Nesting

Kiely Caulfield
University at Buffalo

Follow this and additional works at: <https://knightscholar.geneseo.edu/gandy-dancer>



Part of the [Fiction Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Caulfield, Kiely (2023) "Nesting," *Gandy Dancer Archives*: Vol. 11: Iss. 2, Article 3.

Available at: <https://knightscholar.geneseo.edu/gandy-dancer/vol11/iss2/3>

This Fiction is brought to you for free and open access by KnightScholar. It has been accepted for inclusion in Gandy Dancer Archives by an authorized editor of KnightScholar. For more information, please contact KnightScholar@geneseo.edu.

Nesting

When my sister and I were young, we were convinced our town was full of vampires. I don't quite remember when we discovered it. Part of me feels like we just woke up one day and knew, just as sure as you know when the sun rises it's daytime, and when it sets it's night. It wasn't a slow realization, or a fast one. Just one of those things that up and happened, one day.

We were in Mom's car, I think, on the way to school. All four of us crammed into her off-white Toyota Matrix, because Dad's pickup was in the shop—apparently with ancient, corroded brake discs and in such desperate need of an oil change the dipstick came out looking bloody—and it wouldn't be ready for another day or so. October hung thick in the air, as it tended to in most rural towns upstate, and that morning we swooped through the dewy mist like we were ghosts in our own right. Dad's lead foot was helping that along, though.

We breezed right through the stop sign and through the usual empty intersection off River Road—as Dad liked to say, much to our mother's chagrin, “No cop, no stop”—and took the teetering bend onto Park Avenue perilously fast. Autumn's chill couldn't find us there. We moved too quickly to feel her touch, other than the occasional seeping, frigid caress through the chilled glass of the windows. Outside, the fog swirled like fluttering, gauzy curtains.

“Jesus *Christ*, Sean,” Mom bit out from the passenger seat, her grip on the grab handle so tight all the blood bleached out of her fingers. From my view behind the driver's seat, it looked almost too white. Frighteningly skeletal, save for her rings.

“Relax,” he said, a navy ball cap tilted to spare a cursory glance at his mirrors before pointing back at the road. “Nobody saw.”

“That's not the point.”

“You love it when I drive fast.”

“Not with the girls in the car, I don’t,” she shot back, viper-quick, venom simmering just beneath the surface.

Dad snorted, shaking his head. “Sorry.”

In the seat next to me, Veronica was humming to herself, her cheek squished against the glass. She doodled tiny stars into the condensation from her breath with her fingers. Back then her hair was still a little wispy, her youth clinging to her round cheeks and blonde locks, staticky and baby-fine. The condensation from the window plastered a good portion of it to her forehead, which she shoved out of her face, oblivious to the tangles she was making with every fumbled push.

A simmering mix of useless frustration and borderline horror rose up just beneath my skin, an irritation as fraught as a buzzing bee. I couldn’t tell if I was mad at her for not noticing the knots or if I was mad at the knots themselves. I shifted, uncomfortable with the creeping pressure the sight put at the back of my head. It felt like someone had slid their fingers up into my hair—ghost-thin nails coming to razor sharp points, grazing at my scalp—and was very slowly beginning to pull.

It was Veronica who noticed it first. While I was busy thinking myself into a fit about knots and rings and things that looped and tangled and pulled, pulled, *pulled*, she was looking out at the world. She was an explorer, of sorts—Mom’s cramped Matrix turned into her own steadfast vessel. She was a brave captain, and we were her good-natured, bickering crew. Her periscope was one of frigid tempered glass, the viewport encircled with drippy, wobbly-lined stars, but it wasn’t the tool that made it special. That magic was all her own.

It was hard to hear over the sound of the defrost blasting on the windshield, but as we drove past the pallid, sagging houses on Cohocton Street—each a photocopy of the one previous, each more warped, bent, and bloated than the last—Veronica’s little voice piped up.

“A house is on fire again.”

Sure enough, coming up on the edge of the four-way intersection, nestled right between Cohocton and Canisto, the massive, blackened body of the most recent victim emerged from the morning gloom. Our car slowed to meet the meandering line of rubbernecked drivers at the stop sign, and I took in the blackened, foreboding body. It sat unmoving, ugly and smoldering. The siding had bubbled from the heat, gray lacquer and wood glue weeping through the charred slats in dirty, black puss and staining scabs. Dark soot covered the face of the house in a thick, choking pall. The windows, blown apart from the heat, splattered glittering, broken glass on the dead lawn like tears.

It was the biggest house on the block, chopped up into three different apartments. Three families lived there, not that it mattered now. They didn’t

live there anymore. It reminded me a bit of a turtle shell—whole, just without all the meaty bits inside.

I wrinkled my nose, like Mom does when she checks her hair in the mirror. “Where are the firefighters?”

“They already left, Ker,” Mom said over her shoulder.

Veronica and I shared a frown. There was still gray smoke wisping off the open, slack jaws of the shaded porch. I crossed one finger over the other in my lap. “But it’s still on fire.”

“It’s just smokey, that’s all,” Dad reassured, catching my gaze in the rear view mirror. His crow’s feet crinkled in a patient wink. “They wouldn’t leave if it was still on fire, honey.”

“Do you think anyone was hurt?” Veronica asked, leaning sharply against the seat belt as Dad shuffled the car closer and closer to the stop sign.

“I don’t think anyone was home, Ronnie.”

“There’s no yellow stuff this time,” I offered. The last three houses to go up in flames were tied down with so much yellow rope it was like the police were worried the houses would get up and walk away. “Doesn’t that mean no one was hurt?”

“Or they got sick of doing their jobs,” Dad muttered, and Mom smacked him on the arm for it. Clearing his throat, he added on louder, “You’re right, Ker. I’m sure nobody was hurt.” I saw his fingers adjust on the steering wheel, color bleeding back into the white-knuckled grip. “Probably just ran out of tape.”

The smell hit just as we reached the stop sign. Acrid and pungent—some kind of mix between bleach and rotting fruit. It was so strong it made my nose burn, eyes welling up with tears. Clamping my fingers over my nose, I blurted out a nasally sounding, “*Yuck!*”

Veronica giggled at how my voice sounded. She plugged her nose, chirping, “Yuck! Yuck!”

“Smells gross, huh?” Mom said, twisting to smile at the two of us, her nose all scrunched up.

“*Yuck!*” we both cried in unison, and then both dissolved into fits of laughter.

“Stupid bastards,” Dad cursed heatedly under his breath. Mom smacked him on the arm again, hard.

“Fucking—what, Laurie? *What?*”

“Enough,” she hissed, good humor forgotten in a flash. “Not with the girls in the car.”

Veronica kept laughing with her nose plugged, not seeming to have heard. Seeing how serious Mom’s expression was, I stopped.

“What’ll happen to the house now?” I tried to wonder before it could turn into worry.

“They’ll rebuild it,” Mom replied patiently.

“No they won’t,” I said and missed my parents’ stifled sighs as they pulled away from each other. My fingers twisted into a tight-knuckled knot, one over the other over the other again until the skin pinched, flushed bright red. “They haven’t rebuilt any of the others. What will happen?”

“The vampires will move in,” Veronica said.

Dad laughed, too loud for the small car. Mom didn’t laugh. I didn’t either, because I realized she was right.

“Did you remember your dancing shoes, Kerrigan?” Mom shifted gears as we rolled through the intersection, and the house was swallowed by the morning mist.

“How did you know?”

Ever since she said it, the thought of vampires moving into the dead husk of a house wouldn’t leave me alone. It followed me all throughout the school day and into dance class, hanging around in the corner of my senses like that bad, burn-rot smell. Even now, as I laid in bed, I could taste it in my mouth, just under the grainy layer of mint toothpaste I had scrubbed on my teeth not ten minutes earlier. No matter what I did, the thought just wouldn’t go away.

In her twin bed, the lump of Tinkerbell-themed blankets shifted as Veronica turned to face me. “How did I know what?”

“How did you know about the vampires?” I asked, running my tongue over a molar to try and taste toothpaste rather than smoking, rotting fruit. “This morning, you said that vampires would move in. How’d you know?”

“Oh!” The Tinkerbell lump sprang open as Veronica sat up. The nightlight bathed her excited face in a soft yellow glow. “You mean about the nest?”

I sat up, too, frowning. “What nest?”

“The house that got burned up,” she clarified. “It’s not a house anymore.”

My frown deepened. “Why isn’t it a house anymore?”

Veronica looked at me funny. She shook her head, chiding. “Monsters don’t live in houses, Kerri.”

“Well, what about ghosts?”

“Ghosts don’t *own* the house they’re haunting. They just work there. What aren’t you getting?”

“Fine. It’s a nest,” I relented, and Veronica nodded sagely. “But how do you know?”

“Well it makes sense, doesn’t it?” she reasoned. “Nobody wants to live in a burned house. It’s too much work. And it’s just gonna sit there anyway, so it makes sense that a vampire would move in to make a nest.”

“Are you sure?” I kept sucking my teeth. The fluoride in my mouth kept me from feeling sick. “I think it’s just an empty house, Ronnie.”

“No it isn’t.” Veronica looked appalled. “Don’t you remember? We smelled it this morning!”

I froze. “That’s what that smell was?”

“Yes!” In the dark, my sister’s eyes glowed. “I bet we could find one. I bet there’s one living in there right now.”

My stomach rolled. All I could think about was that empty turtle shell. Only now, it was covered with bugs. Dozens of little legs crawling, wedging themselves into grains and grooves, wriggling and squirming and hungry. Thousands of little sharp teeth, bloody-pink and needle fine. Thousands of black little eyes, watching, waiting for their turn at the feast of rot. Black wood and timber that sloughs off like meat falls off bone. A celebration of decay. A nest. An infestation.

I shook my head. “I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

“Oh come on,” Veronica groaned. She scowled, then puffed up her chest. “Don’t be a pussy.”

I squinted at her. “You don’t even know what that word means.”

“Yes I do. Jake Carson says it on the school bus all the time.”

“Don’t listen to anything Jake Carson says,” I said, scrunching up my nose. “He doesn’t know how to read.”

“Will you help me look for one or not?”

“Okay! Wait,” I started, pointing an accusatory finger at her. “If we do go—if, Ronnie, you don’t even know what one looks like. How are you gonna know it’s a vampire if we see one?”

Ronnie’s mouth closed with an audible click, and I felt a wave of relief wash over me. Buoyed on top of that relief was a smug bit of triumph—if it got her to stop thinking about the house-turned-nest, then I would count it as a win.

Unfortunately, I had no such luck.

“Yellow eyes,” she said, a few minutes later.

I opened my eyes, thoughts cocooned in the halfway space between waking and sleep. “Huh?”

“Yellow eyes,” she repeated, looking grave in the night light. The shadows that traced the round curves of her face made her look more severe than I knew her to be. Like a statue, scorned and righteous, staring down over the top of an ancient grave. “That’s how you tell. Their eyes are yellow.”

Hot, bitter bile rose to the back of my throat. It mixed with the rotting fruit, and on some base, instinctual level, I knew it to be the taste of black, ugly fear.

“Alright,” I relented, swallowing. I resisted the urge to scrub at my arms. “We’ll go tomorrow, after school.”

There was a flutter of movement as Veronica kicked her legs and laid back down, giggles muffled by Tinkerbelle's impish, knowing smile. Eventually the room was quiet once more, save for my sister's muffled snores.

I lay awake for the rest of the night. Every time I nearly drifted off, a phantom bug crawled up a new part of my body. I kept swatting at them, over and over, until our bedroom was colored pink with the sunrise.

Bike riding was a skill I had picked up long before Veronica even knew how to walk. So it made sense that after school—when our homework was done, and all our laundry was put away because Mom was nice enough to fold it for us—I was the one in charge of transportation for this expedition. Riding my bike down Cohocton Street, Veronica had taken up residence as a koala bear on my back, heels firmly on the foot bars of my wheels with her little grip tight on my shoulders. She peered around the neighborhood above my head, and once again, I had been transformed into a tool for her adventures—this time as both the vehicle and the sidekick.

It was right around dusk by the time we made it to the nest. The October sunset the trees ablaze in shimmering reds and yellows, the leaves scattered like cinders all around us. From above, the hazy sky bathed the neighborhood in a sepia tint.

"Mr. Carroll's outside," Veronica observed, and my head swung on a swivel to look.

Across the street from the burnt-out nest was Mr. Carroll's Wonderland. We called it that because he never took down the big strings of multicolored Christmas lights that decorated the shaded porch. It was the only color on the whole house. The rest was slathered in a cheap, chipping white—from the siding to the shutters to the rickety porch swing Mr. Carroll sat on. Even the chains on the swing were coated in the stuff.

Today, Mr. Carroll looked like a Halloween decoration, slumped on his porch swing. He reminded me of a scarecrow who'd lost his straw. He didn't move as we started down the block. Dad and Mr. Carroll weren't very good friends—he said Mr. Carroll was a sleazy mechanic but knew better than to overstep. Mom said that his wife, Mrs. Carroll, was a saint.

"Do you think he sees us?" I asked, eyeing him warily. He hadn't moved an inch, half leaning over one side of his porch swing.

"Just don't look at him," Veronica whispered.

Ducking our heads, we both carefully didn't look over at Wonderland as we rode down the street. We made it all the way to the intersection, but the stop sign was right in front of his house. I slowly brought the bike to a halt, wincing as my brakes let out an anguished *squeeeeeak*. Veronica's grip tightened on my shoulders.

Holding my breath, I chanced a glance at the porch. I couldn't see over the tall lip of the railing, but I heard the creak of the crusted chains that held up the swing. I craned my neck to get a better view and could just see the top of Mr. Carroll's askew head when Veronica let out a sharp gasp and shrieked. It was the only warning I got before she launched herself off the back of my bike.

"*Ronnie!*" I yelped, scrambling to catch myself as the bike pitched with her weight, but by then she was already thundering up the paint-chipped steps of the house. I managed to catch myself with a hand on the curb, one of the bike pedals digging into my shin. "What are you—"

"It's a kitty!" Veronica cried, and when she turned around, I realized there was a small, black kitten squirming in the cradle of her hands. "It was too close to the ledge. Oh, Kerri, it almost fell!"

"Then I'm glad you caught her," a craggy voice rasped.

Looking up with a jolt, Mr. Carroll loomed over the two of us like an odd, warped shadow. He was a tall man, rail thin, and when he moved it was like a snap bracelet—rigidly still before a startling snap of movement, gangly limbs scrabbling and curling over themselves in a rush to catch up with his own head. His arm jerked out to reach for the kitten, then pulled back just as quickly when Veronica and I flinched. He tried again, slower this time, extending long, shaking fingers. "Give her here."

The skin on his forearms was loose in places and stretched in others, corded around his bones like taffy. Carefully, Veronica levied the small bundle of black fur into his hand. The second he had a sure grip on it, he pulled it to his chest fast enough for the little thing to mewl in surprise, muffling Veronica's soft gasp of fear.

"Thank you, thank you," Mr. Carroll said. His eyes were just a little too wide, and you could see the yellowed whites the whole way around his black irises, like two little beady lights at the front of a train. "I'm glad you caught her. I didn't see. I don't know what I'd do if she got hurt."

"You're welcome." Veronica smiled back, but I could see it wavering in the corner. She was being polite, but she clearly didn't like being so close to Mr. Carroll. I didn't like her so close either. She took a careful, slow step down the stairs. "What's her name, Mr. Carroll?"

"Oh, this little one's Mina." Mr. Carroll grinned. His smile was nice, teeth talcum white, but even from here, I could tell his breath was bad. He gave the kitten a shake, and the little thing meowed again. Its eyes weren't even open, I realized. "Hattie just had some kittens yesterday. You ask your dad and Laurie if they want any, will you?"

"We will," I piped up, and Mr. Carroll's gaze snapped to me. He looked me all up and down while Veronica was able to reach the bottom of the stairs. "Sorry to bother you, Mr. Carroll."

“*What*...what are you girls doing out so late?” Two sudden thundering steps later, Mr. Carroll was practically teetering over us from the top of the stairs. In his grip, the kitten wailed. “It’s a school night, ain’t it?”

Veronica looked back at me, and I could see it in her eyes that she wanted to ask. She was close enough to grab at this point. I shook my head, reaching for her wrist, but she was already turning back.

“Do you know anything about vampires, Mr. Carroll?”

Above us, Mr. Carroll paused. His head tilted, and the yellow of his gaze fell in line with the blinking Christmas lights—like his eyeballs were nothing more than bulbs on the line, the string running from one ear out the other. With a faraway look, he murmured, “Did you say vampires?”

“Yes.” Veronica pushed on, sounding braver than I ever could be. “We think the house fires that have been happening are so the vampires can make nests.”

Mr. Carroll stared.

I looked between his face and Veronica’s determined stare, breath caught in my throat. I was the one to break first. “Sorry, Mr. Carroll,” I blurted out. “She was just kidding. We’re actually on our way to...”

I trailed off as a whistling sound reached my ears. At first I didn’t realize where it was coming from until I saw Mr. Carroll’s shoulders shake. The movement reminded me of a puppet on strings, a convulsive dance without any life. Then, like a striking snake, he threw his head back and howled with laughter. Veronica jumped back at the sound, bumping into me and gripping my arm. Together, we watched him laugh until it turned into a wretched-sounding wheeze. The breath caught in his throat, and before we knew it, he was doubled over again in a coughing fit. It passed in a wet glob that Mr. Carroll spat on the porch steps.

He was still laughing when he righted himself, waving at the two of us. “*Oh-hoh*, sorry, honey. But if that ain’t the funniest thing I ever heard.” He broke off in another fit of breathless laughter. When he looked back, his smile seemed almost too big for his face. “Tell you what. You’re right on the money, sweetheart. There is a vampire in that house.”

“There is?” I asked, setting my bike down on the curb to step forward.

“Sure is.” Mr. Carroll looked all too pleased with himself. He leaned down, bug-eyed in his excitement. “And I’ll tell you a secret.”

“What is it?” Veronica asked, still clinging onto my arm. It was now the portion of the adventure where I acted as the human shield, apparently.

Mr. Carroll motioned for us to come closer. Hesitantly, I took a step up to the first stair, leaning in close to hear.

His breath was hot against my face. He whispered, “He’s got a sweet tooth.”

I blinked in surprise, “He does?”

“Oh yes,” he giggled, high and giddy. Up this close, his breath smelled like rotten eggs. “I even know his favorite treat.”

“What is it?” I pushed, but Mr. Carroll *tsked tsked tsked*, shaking his head back and forth fast enough to make me dizzy.

“Well I can’t just up and tell you that, now can I?” His gaze cut above our heads. “I s’pose you’ll have to go ask him yourself.”

Across the street, the nest was a dark, hulking shape on the otherwise picturesque corner. Looking at it made my legs feel itchy.

“Go on,” Mr. Carroll said, biting his lip to hold back his laughter. “Get to it, little ladies. Ain’t got all night!”

I lingered too long, watching him smile. Something in his lip twitched, and all of a sudden it was more of a snarl than a grin. I couldn’t tell if it was impatience or something else, but all of a sudden a swelling animosity built up in his face. I was no longer looking at the face of a neighbor, but instead the sharp toothed grin of a predator. A shark in man’s clothing.

“I said, *get to it!*” he barked, slamming his fist against the rusted, white railing of the stairs.

In a shower of paint chips, the two of us scrambled back down the stairs with a startled yelp. Mr. Carroll kept shouting, “Get to it! get to it!” and slamming his fist over and over until all the paint had fallen away to reveal the red rust of the house, falling like clumps of dried blood onto his pants.

In my fright I hopped on my bike and all but yanked Veronica onto my back. She scrambled for a grip, pulling my hair as she did so. Blood was rushing so fast in my ears that I didn’t even notice. We were up and gone before the pain registered, speeding back down Cohocton Street in a mad dash towards Park Avenue. I biked as fast as I could all the way home, but even then I swear I could still feel him watching us. He was there in every window, every shaded patch of trees. The whole ride home, I *saw* it.

Two yellow train lights flaring in the dark.