The Enemy Is Everyone: Praise For Rosemary's Baby

By Chuck Palahniuk

Before Ira Levin, horror always happened somewhere else. Regular ordinary people were forced to pack their luggage and kennel their dogs and had to leave their homes and schlep seemingly forever to Transylvania, to Manderlay, to the House of Usher, or Hill House, or the Bates Motel. Always, the journey was justified by a new job, say, as governess at a Henry James country estate, or as participant in a Shirley Jackson field study of parapsychology (oh, the wedding of science and superstition), or it was some wrong-headed Daphne Du Maurier errand to deliver a mated pair of lovebirds. Whatever the reason for the trip, it always ended badly.

Such a long commute just to be terrorized and, most times, slaughtered.

Still, it was a comfort to know that real, life-threatening horror never occurred at home. You had to be baited far, far away. For the century leading up to 1967 the real horrors had been elsewhere in the world, always outside the borders of England and the United States. If you stayed home then you'd be safe, but if you ventured out, looking for trouble—to, say, Northern Ireland or Vietnam—well, you deserved whatever you got. Home constituted this safe little island where women could raise children in domestic bliss.

Yes, everyday life was all well and fine until Ira Levin brought the requisite haunted castle into the Upper West Side of Manhattan. Such a

stroke of genius: to haul all of the creaking, clanking monster movie cliches into the midst of sophisticated smart-alecky New Yorkers. Monsters in the glaring light of day look hilarious—Minnie Castevet, for example—but they remain monsters. And reading the first two-thirds of this book, *Rosemary's Baby*, you don't know whether to laugh or to worry. To admit fear would be to lose face and risk being branded as a superstitious rube. Rosemary Woodhouse is from Omaha, Nebraska; most of the people who read this book will be from places like Omaha or Great Falls or Tacoma or Shreveport, and none of them want to look like idiots, especially not in front of blasé city slickers. So, no matter how dire and obvious the danger becomes, no one will acknowledge the true malevolence until it's too late.

It's reported that *Rosemary's Baby* is based on Anton LaVey and his Church of Satan, but in 1967 the entire world was quickly fracturing into covens of one sort or another: the Weather Underground, the Symbionese Liberation Front, the National Republican Army bombers, the Black Panthers, the Manson Family, and Playboy Key Clubs, and it seemed that secret cabals had become the norm. Thanks to Levin, the House of Usher now stood on Central Park West, and everyone wanted to live there so badly that they were able to overlook its unresolved history of cannibalism, Satanic worship, suicides, and infanticide. No, people were living in the modern era, freed from the silly cautions of the past. Religion didn't count. Religion was a joke, a relic, an embarrassment. Science had trumped God; witness the magazine cover with its glaring headline "Is God Dead?" in the obstetrician's waiting room. Instead of trusting their priests, modern New Yorkers blindly followed the advice of their doctors, especially Park Avenue doctors who appeared on television and treated wealthy socialites, even when that advice caused unendurable pain and seemed at odds with every other medical authority. Even when those doctors smelled terrible.

But, no, it was 1967 and the entire world had gone insane. The madness had landed itself smack-dab in the middle of our lives, and with this book

Ira Levin marked that shift. Before, if you left society, you were in danger. Now, if you remained in the consensus of this deranged, corrupt civilization you were in greater peril. In ironic contrast to established gothic precedent, the safest interlude is when Rosemary abandons her city life and escapes to an isolated cabin in the wilderness, eating canned chili and fuming over her husband's erratic behavior. That isolated, lonely place where in past narratives she'd meet her vampire or axe murderer, in Levin's new urban gothic tale it's become a sanctuary.

Before *Rosemary's Baby* nature was the enemy, in the form of ghosts and death and decay. Granted, there had been a couple of early horror novels set in polite society. *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* and *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, but at most the enemy was a single deranged person. Now with Levin's urban horror classic, the enemy was everyone. Levin takes all the tropes of gothic horror—the castle, the maiden, the digs at Catholicism and captivity and torture, the monsters—and he makes them all fresh and plausible, so believable that decades later communities are still whipped into a frenzy over rumors of secret covens and Satanic ritual abuse, and, despite the fact that no hard evidence is found, dozens of people are regularly tried and sentenced to prison.

And, please, let's not forget politics. In 1967 everything was politics, and that aspect of the novel marked it as groundbreaking and modern. Everything done to Rosemary is a political act, a revolutionary plot meant to overthrow God. This is not the mindless attack of a madman upon a single victim. Predator on prey. This is a plan to bring a powerful leader out of exile and spur a vast shift in world politics.

There are books which document the culture and books that create it, and *Rosemary's Baby* is both. Levin gave readers horror, politics, religion, and comedy, all of it set where we live, but he was a tough act to follow. By 1973, Robert Marasco's *Burnt Offerings* once more placed the haunted castle in the deep woods, without neighbors. In 1977, Stephen King's *The*

Shining punted the castle even farther, perched in the snowbound Rocky Mountains. Since 1967, no book has touched the classic you now hold in your hands.

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Part One

Chapter One

Rosemary and Guy Woodhouse had signed a lease on a five-room apartment in a geometric white house on First Avenue when they received word, from a woman named Mrs. Cortez, that a four-room apartment in the Bramford had become available. The Bramford, old, black, and elephantine, is a warren of high-ceilinged apartments prized for their fireplaces and Victorian detail. Rosemary and Guy had been on its waiting list since their marriage but had finally given up.

Guy relayed the news to Rosemary, stopping the phone against his chest. Rosemary groaned "Oh *no!*" and looked as if she would weep.

"It's too late," Guy said to the phone. "We signed a lease yesterday." Rosemary caught his arm. "Couldn't we get out of it?" she asked him. "Tell them something?"

"Hold on a minute, will you, Mrs. Cortez?" Guy stopped the phone again. "Tell them what?" he asked.

Rosemary floundered and raised her hands helplessly. "I don't know, the truth. That we have a chance to get into the Bramford."

"Honey," Guy said, "they're not going to care about that."

"You'll think of *something*, Guy. Let's just look, all right? Tell her we'll look. Please. Before she hangs up."

"We signed a *lease*, Ro; we're stuck."

“Please! She’ll hang up!” Whimpering with mock anguish, Rosemary pried the phone from Guy’s chest and tried to push it up to his mouth.

Guy laughed and let the phone be pushed. “Mrs. Cortez? It turns out there’s a chance we’ll be able to get out of it, because we haven’t signed the actual lease yet. They were out of the forms so we only signed a letter of agreement. Can we take a look at the apartment?”

Mrs. Cortez gave instructions: they were to go to the Bramford between eleven and eleven-thirty, find Mr. Micklas or Jerome, and tell whichever they found that they were the party she had sent to look at 7E. Then they were to call her. She gave Guy her number.

“You see how you can think of things?” Rosemary said, putting Peds and yellow shoes on her feet. “You’re a *marvelous* liar.”

Guy, at the mirror, said, “Christ, a pimple.”

“Don’t squeeze it.”

“It’s only four rooms, you know. No nursery.”

“I’d rather have four rooms in the Bramford,” Rosemary said, “than a whole floor in that—that white cellblock.”

“Yesterday you loved it.”

“I liked it. I never loved it. I’ll bet not even the architect loves it. We’ll make a dining area in the living room and have a beautiful nursery, when and if.”

“Soon,” Guy said. He ran an electric razor back and forth across his upper lip, looking into his eyes, which were brown and large. Rosemary stepped into a yellow dress and squirmed the zipper up the back of it.

They were in one room, that had been Guy’s bachelor apartment. It had posters of Paris and Verona, a large day bed and a pullman kitchen.

It was Tuesday, the third of August.

Mr. Micklas was small and dapper but had fingers missing from both hands, which made shaking hands an embarrassment, though not apparently for him. “Oh, an actor,” he said, ringing for the elevator with a middle finger. “We’re very popular with actors.” He named four who were living at the Bramford, all of them well known. “Have I seen you in anything?”

“Let’s see,” Guy said. “I did *Hamlet* a while back, didn’t I, Liz? And then we made *The Sandpiper* . . .”

“He’s joking,” Rosemary said. “He was in *Luther* and *Nobody Loves An Albatross* and a lot of television plays and television commercials.”

“That’s where the money is, isn’t it?” Mr. Micklas said; “the commercials.”

“Yes,” Rosemary said, and Guy said, “And the artistic thrill, too.”

Rosemary gave him a pleading look; he gave back one of stunned innocence and then made a leering vampire face at the top of Mr. Micklas’s head.

The elevator—oak-paneled, with a shining brass handrail all around—was run by a uniformed Negro boy with a locked-in-place smile. “Seven,” Mr. Micklas told him; to Rosemary and Guy he said, “This apartment has four rooms, two baths, and five closets. Originally the house consisted of very large apartments—the smallest was a nine—but now they’ve almost all been broken up into fours, fives, and sixes. Seven E is a four that was originally the back part of a ten. It has the original kitchen and master bath, which are enormous, as you’ll soon see. It has the original master bedroom for its living room, another bedroom for its bedroom, and two servant’s rooms thrown together for its dining room or second bedroom. Do you have children?”

“We plan to,” Rosemary said.

“It’s an ideal child’s room, with a full bathroom and a large closet. The whole set-up is made to order for a young couple like yourselves.”

The elevator stopped and the Negro boy, smiling, chivied it down, up, and down again for a closer alignment with the floor rail outside; and still smiling, pulled in the brass inner gate and the outer rolling door. Mr. Micklas stood aside and Rosemary and Guy stepped out—into a dimly lighted hallway walled and carpeted in dark green. A workman at a sculptured green door marked 7B looked at them and turned back to fitting a peepscope into its cut-out hole.

Mr. Micklas led the way to the right and then to the left, through short branches of dark green hallway. Rosemary and Guy, following, saw rubbed-away places in the wallpaper and a seam where it had lifted and was curling inward; saw a dead light bulb in a cut-glass sconce and a patched place of light green tape on the dark green carpet. Guy looked at Rosemary: *Patched carpet?* She looked away and smiled brightly: *I love it; everything's lovely!*

"The previous tenant, Mrs. Gardenia," Mr. Micklas said, not looking back at them, "passed away only a few days ago and nothing has been moved out of the apartment yet. Her son asked me to tell whoever looks at it that the rugs, the air conditioners, and some of the furniture can be had practically for the asking." He turned into another branch of hallway papered in newer-looking green and gold stripes.

"Did she die in the apartment?" Rosemary asked. "Not that it—"

"Oh, no, in a hospital," Mr. Micklas said. "She'd been in a coma for weeks. She was very old and passed away without ever waking. I'll be grateful to go that way myself when the time comes. She was chipper right to the end; cooked her own meals, shopped the departments stores . . . She was one of the first women lawyers in New York State."

They came now to a stairwell that ended the hallway. Adjacent to it, on the left, was the door of apartment 7E, a door without sculptured garlands, narrower than the doors they had passed. Mr. Micklas pressed the pearl bell button—*L. Gardenia* was mounted above it in white letters on black plastic—and turned a key in the lock. Despite lost fingers he worked the knob and