

*She said, "The last highway is only as far away as you are from yourself."*

-Over the Rhine "Jesus in New Orleans"

## 1. The First Joint

I woke up on my living room floor, lying on my back. I felt groggy, hungover. I couldn't remember falling asleep, or how long I'd been there.

My apartment was dark, with every light off. It was really quiet and my body had this weird static-y feel to it, caught in that thin twilight between asleep and awake.

All I knew was this: I needed to get somewhere else, and fast.

I got up off the floor, went out the door and down the stairs to the parking lot.

I went to my car— a 2014 Chevy Cruz, tungsten black, parked in a spot along the sidewalk. It was the only car in the parking lot. I hadn't seen it since I'd traded it in back in 2022. That was weird, but I didn't think about it just then.

It was freezing out, and snowing so hard I couldn't see past the end of the parking lot. Everything was white and cold and dead. But it hadn't been winter when I'd gone to sleep, whenever that was. I couldn't remember exactly what season it was, but it I knew it wasn't winter. I was dressed in just a white undershirt, a flannel button-up and jeans. The cold hit me like a wall.

As I got closer to my car, I realized there was someone in the back seat.

No, not just someone.

Two someones.

Two people.

Two guys.

Just sitting there.

As I got closer, the rear driver side window slid down, even though the car clearly wasn't running. Behind the window was a guy with coffee-colored skin and the whitest teeth I'd ever seen. He grinned out at me like a Persian film producer. Snowflakes caught in his gelled black hair.

"Door's open," he said.

I opened the driver door and got into the driver's seat, shivering helplessly, my jeans frozen against my legs. I craned my neck and examined my backseat intruders.

They were two Middle Eastern men who looked to be in their mid-forties, both swarthy and broad-shouldered and thick-necked, going gray in a classy manner. The one on the driver's side had styled hair and small gold earrings in both ears. He wore a denim vest over a white button-up shirt, opened at the top to reveal a gold chain on a broad, hairy chest.

The one on the passenger side was a veritable hulk, crammed into the backseat like a clown in a cartoon. He was lighter-skinned and wore small circular sunglasses, and he was dressed in a long black coat and a wide-brimmed hat like the kind Amish guys wear. A thin goatee circled his pursed lips. Beneath his massive hat, his head was shaved. He stared straight ahead, not speaking.

"Who are you?" I asked. "How'd you get in my old car?"

"We're everywhere, son," answered the first guy. He spoke in a folksy American accent, all country fences and rolling hills and soft sunsets. "You know who we are?"

"No," I said.

"I'm The Devil, and this," —he gestured at his companion— "...is Death. He don't talk much."

"You're The Devil?"

"Yessir. Got a lot of names, but you'd know me as The Devil."

I rubbed my eyes. I couldn't remember where I'd been a few minutes ago or how I'd gotten to my car. I still had that instinctual urge to just *go home*. I felt like something really bad would happen to me if I didn't get moving.

"You've heard of us," said the Devil. "Why don't you take a look in your little kiddie Bible?"

He nodded at the front passenger seat. Sitting on it was a weathered Catholic Children's Bible, bound in royal red leather with golden embroidery.

It was mine. I hadn't seen it since I was a kid.

"Take a look-see," said the guy claiming to be The Devil.

The guy called Death was staring straight ahead into his round sunglasses, his face pale and expressionless.

His lips moved.

"Gone..."

He spoke in a low rumble of a voice. He had an accent, too, the word coming out in a thick Southern drawl.

*Gaww-nnn...*

I picked up the children's Bible. Inside, stories of The Old and New Testament were told in graphic detail, accompanied by colorful photo-realistic illustrations. I'd received the Bible for my first Communion. I'd only ever looked through it a couple times. I was raised Catholic—sort of— but I've never been religious.

To my great surprise, the illustrations did indeed now include my backseat intruders. They were in the background of every picture after Genesis—The Devil grinning, Death towering. There they were with Daniel in the lion's den, with Samson as he

tore down the temple, with Moses as he parted the Red Sea, and with Jesus as he was nailed to the cross.

I looked back at them. The one who called himself The Devil was grinning at me in a really unpleasant way. It's cliché, but he was grinning like a fox, one that's cornered a rabbit. It was starting to piss me off.

"Gawnnn..." said Death again.

"Look, I have to get home," I told them, groggy as fuck. I really, really couldn't remember how I'd gotten down here. This shitty dream.

"Well, we need you to help us out, Johnny," said the Devil.

"Yeah, but I have to get home, though."

"There are only two forces in the world, son. Creation and destruction. Can you guess which of those is my business?"

I looked down at my Bible, which was open to the story of Sodom and Gomorrah. There was Lot fleeing the flaming cities, his wife turned into a pillar of salt. The expressions on Lot and his daughters' faces were probably supposed to convey some furious spiritual devotion, but to me they'd always just looked insane. The Devil and Death were visible down the hill, toward where the cities burned.

"Destruction?"

"That's right," said the Devil. "Johnny, when they see the vengeance of the Almighty on your face, they will tremble before you. All with one word— arise."

"Gone..." said Death.

A strange alarm pulsed in my head. Anxiety prickling, threatening to take me down to the abyss. I really, really, really couldn't remember where I was coming from, why I'd come down here, how I'd gotten to my car. There was some weird wall in my awareness that only extended to the last few minutes and nowhere else. I was high and dreaming and hungover all at once.

"I'm sorry, but I have to get home," I said.

The Devil stopped grinning.

"Look, son, why don't you start up the car, cause it's fuckin' freezing."

He was right. My entire body seemed to be clenching in on itself. I was hunched over, my shoulders tightened and my hands crammed between my legs.

The key was already in the ignition. I turned it.

The sound of the engine was comforting, the sound of progress. The sound of going home.

That's all I could think about— going home. Wherever that was. I wanted to get on the road. Home was down the road. I wasn't looking forward to driving through all this snow, but I knew I could do it if I had to. I'd driven through worse.

"There we go," said the Devil. "Crank that heat. It's good to be warm. Makes you appreciate the simple things."

I did so, turning the fan knob all the way to the right. The air was instantly hot, no engine warm-up needed.

"What's going on?" I asked over the roar of the vents, that vague feeling of inner dread threatening to expand inside me.

"What happened? Why can't I remember anything?"

"Well, that's cause you've just died, Johnny," said the Devil.

This news should've floored me. Instant, eternal panic attack. But it didn't. Instead, I was just confused.

"What?"

"You heard me."

"...I died?"

"That's what I said."

"But I'm still here."

"You sure are."

"But—"

"I know how you're feeling, son. You want to get back to that nice, relaxed, baseline mental state you little monkeys enjoy. So fucking listen. Cause we got something for you to do."

"What is it?"

"Gone..." said Death.

"Here," said the Devil. "All you need to know is on this."

He pulled out an old burned CD from his vest pocket and handed it to me.

I hadn't seen or held one of these things since I was a kid. It was one of those nondescript ones— just a blank, silver disc. A flat moon, my friend Dmitri used to call them.

The word "WRATH" was written in black marker on the CD's label.

"Some souls are simply beyond saving," said the Devil. "And they don't know it till it's too late."

"I have to get home..." I said quietly, looking down at the CD.

"Have a listen. It'll fill you in. We'll meet you when the first task is completed. You can put the CD in the organizer when you're done."

The Devil gestured and I looked at my passenger visor, flipped it open. There was a black CD holder velcro'd around it. Seven empty slots.

"Yeah, but how do I get home?" I asked. The CD's plastic edges felt sharp against my cold-sensitive fingers. The vents roared hot air.

"Just listen to the goddamn CD, son," said the Devil. "We got an eternity to run here."

The cold whooshed in as the two of them opened their doors at the same time. The rear suspension groaned as they got out.

The doors slammed and they were instantly gone (*gawwnn...*). The wind howled and the snow flew sideways.

I put my hands in front of the vents, shivering. My fingers felt like carrots in a crisper. The headlights spilled onto the parking lot, the snow shifting like bedsheets.

I put the CD in the slit. Turned up the volume. I couldn't remember the last time I'd listened to a CD mix, let alone burned one. Over a decade. Everything since 2014 had been streaming—first Pandora, then Apple Music.

A voice came out of the car's speakers.

I listened to the voice until the snow tapered off and the clouds parted and the world around me was revealed.

My usual surroundings— the old folks' home and the church across the street, every oak and willow tree, Pontiac Trail to the north, the other apartment buildings— were not there. They were all gone. My apartment building was gone. Despite the merciless blizzard that had just ended, there was absolutely no snow on the ground.

Now, the parking lot was alongside a broad four-lane highway that stretched off to both horizons.

The highway was pure black asphalt with pristine gravel shoulders. No marks, no painted lines, no road signs that I could see. It cut through vast Midwestern prairie. Grassland, farmland, occasional groves of trees. Hills rose in the distance. There were no signs of humanity— no houses or barns or fences or other cars.

The clouds surfed overhead, racing each other. Every now and then a glint of pure white would break through—beautiful, piercing shafts of light, momentary pillars between heaven and earth. They shifted in and out, a ballet of mirror illusions.

I turned on the radio, instinctively. There was only one channel. No matter where I turned the dial, there were no other stations. Just static.

The one station was playing Tom Petty. I knew the song. It's called You Don't Know How It Feels. Acoustic guitar, harmonica, really basic 4/4 drum beat.

This didn't please me. I fucking hate adult contemporary, especially anything pre-2000s. It's not my music.

But this particular song made me think of something right away. The chorus talks about "rolling another joint".

When I was a kid and my dad would play this song in the car or in the garage or whatever, I didn't know what a joint was in the drug sense. But Dad would bring out that phrase when he wanted to wrap something up.

"Let's roll another joint, Johnny-child," he'd say.

So for the first decade of my life or so, I only knew the term "joint" as "a random place,"— usually a bar or a hangout spot. So "roll another joint," to Johnny-child meant, "Let's go from one place to the next. Our work here is done, so let's get in the car and roll on down to the next joint."

I listened to Tom's pinched, distinctive vocals and the plaintive harmonica for a few seconds, then shut the radio off and put the car in drive. The heat from the vents had killed the cold in my hands, turning my fingers soft and pink again. I put them on the cold steering wheel, my foot on the brake.

It was time to go home.

## **(ira cox goes ballistic)**

The paper target was shredded, the black human outline peppered with holes clustered at the chest and head, torn through, hanging askew.

Ira took out his empty clip and put in another. Smooth as mother's butter. He was proud of how efficient and fast he'd become— the thing just snapped in and BAM he was ready to go. He didn't even have to look at it now, just did it all on feel.

Despite his marksmanship, Ira still wasn't sure he could actually do this. His nerves were pissing him off again. He was always nervous and pissed off and unsure if he could do things. He had been that way his whole life.

Fortunately, that life would be coming to an end in only a few more days. One more practice would soothe him. It would go by so fast and yet last so long.

*This has to be done*, Ira thought. Every time he had other thoughts, he'd come back to that one. *This has to be done*.

He'd already planned his entrance. He'd get them as they were eating. They'd be surprised, trapped, helpless. They would belong to him. For the first time in his life, Ira Cox would get to experience true power.

They'd all know his name. They'd all ask about him. He'd get remembered. He'd be dead, but it was better to be dead and remembered than live a thousand lifetimes in an invisible nobody hell.

Ira practiced on pumpkins. He practiced on cans. He practiced on sheets of paper. It had taken a long time, but these days he was a true master of the sight. He'd achieved something, by God. It was crazy, but he'd done it. He could shoot, and shoot well. Not that it mattered.

No one listened to him. Even kids pushed him around. Everyone did. Always had. Pushed him around or ignored him. From his parents and brother growing up to his "friends" to his wife and kid to his co-workers. Everyone. Ira Cox was just their punching bag, their dishrag, their red-headed stepchild punk-ass bitch.

Even strangers thought they could do what they wanted around him. The other day Ira had been at the library using the computer lab, half-heartedly looking for a job but mostly browsing Reddit. It was supposed to be quiet, but these two dipshits kept conversing about some asinine shit on the other side of the lab. It was just the three of them— Ira and the dipshits. Ira gave the dipshits a few warning looks but they didn't see him. No one saw him.

Ira had tolerated their asinine chatter as long as he could before going over and slamming his hand on the table right in front of the two ignorant fucks. He'd startled the hell out of both of them. He'd pointed to the "Please be quiet" sign and said nothing. The first guy nodded like a scolded schoolchild. The other stared aggressively but did nothing. They stayed quiet and left the lab not long after. Good riddance. Fucking idiots. Ira was able to do his research in peace.

He'd been out of work a few months now. Most recently he'd been employed as a technician for an air and duct supplier, going around fixing air compressors for presses. It was asinine work and Ira hadn't been very good at it. Ira wasn't very good at anything, really. He'd finally quit after flipping out on his boss over some shit he couldn't even remember. Something asinine.

It was all a failed experiment, humanity. It was time to get the fuck out while the getting was still good. Leave with a bang. Ira was sure his health was failing anyway. He had a lump on his back near his spine, just under his right shoulder blade. He refused to go to the doctor. He had no insurance and the health system was designed to fuck you over anyway. And he had barely any money to get fucked out of.

He hadn't had a piece of pussy since before his divorce. Women ignored him, but that wasn't surprising. Ira was worthless, with no status and no resources. Why the fuck would they pay attention to him? Even his wife had been a total fluke—she'd taken him for something he'd never been.

His life was a litany of complaints, of assrape. It was because he was useless and he knew it but fuck, sometimes it just really got to you, got under your skull. Ira hadn't been born this way— it had happened gradually over time. He'd been a quiet kid, mousy, living under the thumb of a domineering father and the flabby tits of a doting mother.

He was divorced, unemployable, a total loser by every stretch of the imagination. Irredeemable in the eyes of the global capitalist state. Utterly unable.

But all was not lost. Soon he would be national news. Soon he'd force the world to acknowledge him. He would be somebody, just like he'd always wanted. He didn't expect to survive, but if he did, fine. Doped up and living in a cinderblock hotel with all his needs met by the state for the next 30 to 40 years, potentially? Sure.

That was better than the life he had now— divorced for several years with a 22-year-old son who never talked to him. Asshole dad long gone, mother fading out in a shitty nursing home outside Vegas. A brother who lived on the other side of the

country and only called when he wanted something. Friends? Ha. Ira Cox hadn't had friends since he was college-aged, and even those guys never really liked him. They'd all stopped calling years ago.

How the fuck could anyone expect a person to live this kind of life and not go ballistic?

Ira had been in his mid-thirties when he'd realized he would simply never be especially talented at anything. He'd tried welding, tried working on cars, worked God knew how many odd jobs, even tried working in a gun store. Nothing clicked, except the time bomb in his temple.

But then there was the barrel. The sight. The bullet. The chamber. The report.

He'd shot casually his whole life. The gunfire was a relief, the sound of the world coming apart, a tremendous release, a release of releases. He shot handguns at first, then long guns. Then automatic rifles. They were so fucking loud. The sound alone would terrify a target, especially in closed quarters. Ira loved watching other people at the range, how they'd flinch when he squeezed off a clip. It was like a lion roaring at prey, freezing it.

These carved pieces of metal, warped into shape by heat and pressure. Beautiful, beautiful items— both in their construction and their function. Art pieces. Ira wept if he thought about it too much. Power and salvation. These heavy, black hunks of meticulously carved metal. The only things worth living for.

Guns were the closest thing Ira had to a talent. He wasn't good enough to be considered exceptional or noticeable, not enough to turn a living in this fallen economy, but good enough. Deadly enough.

He'd studied all the greats— Klebold and Harris, Lanza, and Cho. Charles Whitman, the grandaddy of all mass shooters. Kehoe, the first. He wasn't worried about being older— 43 next month— even though most of the people he'd be compared to were twentysomething punk morons upset over their lack of pussy. Age didn't matter now. After all, the most accomplished body count (so far) had been achieved by a 64-year-old shooting out a window of the Mandalay Bay casino in Vegas.

Ira wouldn't have to deal with that. He'd chosen a target that was soft, enclosed, innocent. No one would see it coming. It was the end of the year potluck at the elementary school up the road. It'd be Sandy Hook all over again, but this time the little shits' parents would be there to suffer with them.

The building was a giant U shape, an ancient brick construction three stories tall. Ira passed the school every day but had no real connection to it. His kid hadn't gone there, and

he'd never even set foot in the building, but he knew they held all sorts of events in that courtyard, in the crook of the U.

It would be families—valuable targets. No one would give a shit if Ira shot up an old folks' home or a bar full of middle aged blue collar working joes. They would, maybe for a week. He wanted them to give a shit forever. He had to take down children, young families, attractive young women. The egg-bearers and the next generation. And it would have to be a lot of them. Thirty at least. The greater public only cared about body count.

Torsos were easy to hit, and heads weren't out of the question. Any sort of hit with Ira's semi-auto would be a life-changing injury. Even kids, who presented smaller and potentially faster targets, would probably get trampled or paralyzed in the initial panic stampede. From what he'd read about Sandy Hook, most of those first graders had died piled up in a corner, blindly and madly trying to crawl and claw over each other toward some imagined safety as Lanza laid round after round into them. And if the New Zealand mosque livestream had shown Ira anything, it was that most of his targets, once trapped, would just duck and cover and tremble in quivering human clumps.

Once he got the drop on them, it should be easy to finish off a record-breaking score before the fuzz came in to ruin the fun. The parents would dive on their kids and just wait, most likely. Maybe he'd get one or two heroes, maybe even someone packing themselves, but it didn't matter. They'd all be fucked.

Ira was sure he could make it happen. You never got exactly what you wanted out of life, but if you were prepared, you could get pretty damn close.

He thought of his name and his bio scrolling along the bottom of CNN under that smug elitist faggot Anderson Cooper. He thought of his ex and son glued to the news, their phones vibrating off the coffee table. He'd go national within minutes, another anti-hero for history with his own Wikipedia page. Everyone asking, "Who was Ira Cox? Why would he do such a thing?" Scholarly articles written, smug elitist Jew York writers coming to interview his ex-wife and son and anyone else he'd ever interacted with, trying to get answers because the public was interested and that meant money. With a little luck, he'd be national (maybe even global) news for at least 48 hours if not longer. They'd wring their hands and ask, "Why why why?"

They knew perfectly well why. They just didn't care. No one did. Not about anything or anyone these days, except money and indulging their earthly urges. It was all about cashing in and lying to yourself about all of it.

Yes, Ira was mad about all this. How it had all turned out. He was pissed that as a regular middle aged white guy, no one cared about how he felt. No one asked him how he was doing. Ignored and pushed around. He was pissed that if he said something about how angry he was, he'd be called entitled, everyone blaming him, everyone making excuses as to why 'he' was the asshole. Maybe he was, but he hadn't started that way. He was fucking sick of being everyone's dishrag.

There was no winning. So time to blow it all up.  
Time to go ballistic.

Ira ignored his nerves, let his rage melt his focus away from anything other than the scope. He took aim and visualized the fuzzy head of a startled kindergartner.

He pulled the trigger. It made him smile.

## 2. Wrath

I drove west, or what felt like west. I was on my way home.

The highway stretched on forever. I started to think.

I wondered exactly where I was, what this highway was supposed to represent. I couldn't remember much, other than what had happened since I'd woke up on my apartment floor.

I was dead. This was it. But I didn't feel dead. But then, what does that even mean, to feel dead? Isn't that an oxymoron? Science— and to my knowledge, some religion— says that you can't feel anything when you're dead. But here I am, still feeling and thinking.

I kept expecting for the realization to crush me, to have a never-ending panic attack, and the threat of it always seemed to be lurking in the distance, but it never came. I had thoughts, but they didn't affect me.

*If the Devil's here, I thought, this might be hell.*

But Death was here, too. And I didn't feel like I was suffering. Just kind of in a muted trance-like state that wasn't much different than driving with sleep deprivation, which I've done more times than I could count. In that way, being dead wasn't really much different from being alive. My iPhone was gone, and I couldn't remember what I'd done with it, but I didn't mind.

I just had to drive.

The pillars of light that shot from the clouds to the grassland below started to creep me out. The clouds felt like a wool blanket pulled over the sky, hovering and ominous but also peaceful and almost cozy.

I listened to the WRATH CD in its entirety. When it finished, the CD slot spit it out. I pushed it back in to play it again, but it refused to work. The slot spit it back out as though it was defective.

The voice on the CD filled me in on my task, the first of seven. There was only one track on the CD— audio of the Devil himself narrating the life of my first target, telling me what I'd be doing, how, and why.

I did a solid 60 mph down the blank asphalt. No dashes, no dividing lines. Just a frozen river of solid black. The Cruze almost seemed to drive itself. I drove right in the center of the road. I was the only soul around.

I tried the radio once. Only one station. It was playing Richard Marx, according to the display. I turned it off.

The CD had told me to look for an exit. It turned out to be easy to spot. I saw it coming from several miles away— a tiny

square over the highway. As I got closer, it got bigger— a leprechaun green rectangle with white lettering. A highway sign from the American Midwest. It was the only sign I'd seen so far. The sign just said, "Wrath" with an arrow pointing right.

The exit ramp put me onto a two-lane road. At the end of the ramp, I turned right and headed north.

Grim overcast became cheery daylight; clouds dissolved and the grass went from dark winter green to bright summer green. I watched the temperature on the center console display shoot up from an even fifty degrees to nearly a hundred. I rolled the window down. Early summer rushed in, reeking of lilacs and dust.

I came upon a small town that looked to be located in the American southwest— maybe southern California.

I knew from the CD that this place actually existed.

I also knew no one could see me or hear me.

The town was small, one of the many forgotten grubby hubs of America's industrial age. Throngs of people lined the streets looking concerned, rubberneckers and gawkers. They weren't used to anything happening here. But something was.

I parked in the street near some long, low apartment complexes. People were coming out of their apartments, all of them focusing on a commotion in the distance.

As I stepped out of the Cruze, I could hear distant police sirens mixed with another sound. A faint crackling. Bursts of it. It made me think of pepper being sprinkled, or popcorn kernels in cooking oil.

I stretched, grateful for the free space. The sun beat down on all the spectators and me. No one acknowledged my presence.

The sounds were coming from a large brick building in the near distance— several stories tall, blocky. It stood against the pale blue sky, prison-like.

I headed in the direction of the popcorn sound. Along the way, I passed a phalanx of cops at a barricade of striped sawhorses and caution tape. One was trying to make a joke to lighten the mood, asking where the action heroes were. No one responded. The police lights flashed in the dry heat.

Not one of the cops stopped me as I brushed past them. I slipped right around the barricade, a VIP.

I was starting to get nervous. All the negative psychic energy these people were giving off was getting inside me. They were radiating with fear, anger, the brim of panic. All their heads were turned towards that huge brick building. And the sounds were getting louder.

I made it all the way into the center of the commotion. The sounds got as loud as a succession of bombs going off.

The brick building was shaped like a giant, square U. My destination was the center courtyard in the negative space of the U. As my footsteps carried me, I started feeling strange. Disassociated. Dream-like. Ghost-like.

There was a row of cops against the brick wall. They held handguns and big tactical shields. They pressed their shoulders into the brick, sweat soaking their foreheads and collars.

I stepped around the corner and saw what was going on.

A man in a Kevlar vest was strolling around the courtyard, holding a semi-automatic rifle.

The only entrance or exit was the chain-link fence in front of me. I stood behind it.

The cops tried to engage the shooter. He sprayed bullets our way whenever a cop stuck his head around the corner. They weren't doing anything. Panicked, waiting for someone to give an order, tell them what to do now.

There were a bunch of tables and food strewn all over the cement courtyard. There had been some sort of picnic or gathering going on. Now a bunch of the tables were up on their sides, and the food and plates and utensils were all over the place. And so was a bunch of other stuff. Red stuff. Red and black and white stuff.

This massacre had only been going on for a couple of minutes, and the shooter was surrounded by what I at first thought were dirty, wet towels. It didn't take long for me to realize they were mangled bodies, most of them belonging to small children. I saw a little arm, a little shoe, a little lower jaw, a hand, more wet scraps of the wet towel material.

As I watched, the shooter walked over to a man and a small girl lying on the cement behind one of the upturned tables. The man had jumped on the girl, covering her, and the guy in the vest filled him with bullets. The girl screamed underneath the man. The shooter kept firing through the man until she stopped screaming. The gun was so loud it was as if the sound of the gun itself was killing them, blowing them apart, massive holes of flayed meat and splattered blood.

The shooter's name was Ira Cox. I knew that from the CD. I'd learned all about him.

Ira's sin was wrath.

He was a middle aged white guy, ex-military, had never held a career long enough to be identified by any profession. He'd shot his ex-wife and adult son in their sleep before coming here. He'd been planning this event for weeks, but he hadn't planned on killing them until this morning. He felt it gave him the necessary momentum to carry out this final attack. He'd been

doubting himself prior. The final act of killing his family gave him the strength to follow through with his final plan.

He was expressionless but focused, like a guy at work. His eyes were hidden behind sunglasses. He wore giant ear-protecting headphones.

I watched Ira from behind the chain link fence. He casually sprayed bullets towards me and the cops again. I felt them fly past, through me, felt them do nothing to my body. Just little hot millisecond spritzes of hot wind.

Ira started over across the courtyard to some other people trying to escape into the buildings. They'd broken the ground floor windows, trying to crawl inside. A couple shredded bodies hung from a few broken windows, legs dangling. Ira fired at everything, emptying clip after clip and removing another from his vest and snapping it in. His hands didn't shake at all.

I stood behind the fence with the cops, temporarily stunned by horror and by the concussive loudness of the gunfire. I could smell the nearest cops' BO.

"Devil's here," I heard him mutter aloud. "I feel it."

"No shit," snarled another cop.

I saw other cops running toward us. Ones in black uniforms with long guns of their own, black helmets and thick body armor and faces of steel. Their arms were huge, their faces iron. These were not out of shape city cops, beat cops, desk monkeys. These were killers. They charged forward in a line. They reached the blue-uniformed city cops. One grabbed a shield without asking.

Then Ira turned toward us one last time and saw me. I knew he saw me. He looked right through his sunglasses. He looked right at me.

He saw me. I saw him.

"Arise," I heard myself whisper.

Nothing told me to do it. It just happened.

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*Johnny stops feeling like Johnny.*

*Johnny becomes something else.*

*Johnny no longer feels fear or hesitation or doubt. He feels a great sunrise building within him. He rears up, seized by forces greater than anything he's ever imagined.*

*He feels himself change. Grow. Shift, both inside and outside. It's shockingly painful.*

*The transformation doesn't take long.*

*He's tall—ten, fifteen feet. Covered in shaggy fur the color of rust. Long claws erupt from his fingers, fangs replace his teeth in a wrinkled snout. There are small round ears atop his head.*

*He roars at Ira, and the roar shakes dust from the brick walls.*

*Animals don't roar at prey.*

*They roar when they're claiming territory.*

*Out, Devil.*

*Johnny sees Ira as he really is- wretched, weak, damaged, taken by demons and made one of their own.*

*Ira sees Johnny.*

*Johnny tears the metal fence from its hinges, barrels into the courtyard, roaring.*

*Out, Devil.*

*Ira sprays Johnny with bullets.*

*On the mortal plain, the arriving SWAT forces have made relatively short work of Ira Cox. He lies bleeding from a gaping, fatal head wound, the anterior portion of his skull blown away as the heroes rush in and tend to the dead and injured. He's jerking, his legs still moving like he's running in a dream. There are already news crews out front at the barricade.*

*On the next plain, Johnny and Ira do battle.*

*Ira has turned into a twisted, skinny man-sized creature that resembles a human and not a human. His flesh has turned a bright red, flushed with furious blood. His features are exaggerated anger, all bared teeth and stretched skin, a rage rictus grin. He's completely hairless, dressed in tatters, muscular but wretched, a soldier zombie. He still wears the Kevlar vest and black jeans and boots and sunglasses, but they've become fused to him, part of his flesh, the sunglasses like large fly eyes. The earmuffs he wears have fused to his skull. His hands have fused to the gun, lumps of wax, firing continuously. No need to reload now.*

*Johnny and Ira do a brief, gruesome little chase of a dance around the courtyard. Johnny advancing even as the bullets pepper his fur. He feels them now, but they do not stop him.*

*Ira doesn't even realize he's switched realms, but he understands what has come for him. His face registers fear the moment Johnny is upon him.*

*He squeals, squeezing shit from between his asscheeks as he feels Johnny's claws seize his helpless scrawny body, feels Johnny's hot breath on his face, feels his claws and his teeth and his own weakness.*

*The battle is over fast. There is no real fight. There is a crunch, a squeal.*

*Out, Devil.*

*Johnny lets the corpse fall to the ground. The cement is so sticky with blood it's like dried soda.*

*But the task is not done.*

*Johnny puts a paw on the demon's chest. He bends down.*

*He feasts.*

"I'm going to have to insist you carve a chunk from his flank," the Devil said on the CD. "Put it in your mouth. Chew it. Swallow. Now you're one with the Lord. To regenerate the soma you must destroy the sarx. To destroy is to consume. You must TAKE from it. You must TAKE the energy within, and USE it." Tear after tear of red flesh. Johnny tastes it all. He rips skin from muscle, muscle from muscle, tendon from bone, fat from sinew, marrow from bone. Each and every scrap, every piece, every chunk, devoured. Johnny rips, chews, swallows, over and over. His tongue slips between the sinner's ribs, flicks the still-spasming heart. His paws collapse the rib cage, slime and fat and gristle slathered on his nose and snout. Johnny sucks it all down. Every bit of gristle, every crunch of bone.

Johnny doesn't know how long it takes him to finish. The wind whistles through the brick courtyard. The sky has gone a strange yellow. The only noises are Johnny's jaws and claws as they do their work on the rapidly-disappearing heap of flesh and bone that used to be known as Ira Cox.

Johnny heaves mighty breath as he feasts. He's bleeding, riddled with what feels like a million hot marbles. His maw is as red as the demon's skin.

*He is ravenous. And then he is finished.*

*When the demon once known as Ira Cox is reduced to a red stain on the pavement— a stain that Johnny licks with a fat, pink tongue— then it is done.*

*"Amen," thinks Johnny.*

*He feels himself change again.*

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I was alone.

I was me again.

The courtyard was empty now. Clean and empty, like nothing had happened. An oven-warm wind blew. The gawkers, the spectators, the cops, they were all gone. The victims' bodies, the men and women and children, were gone. Ira was gone. Even the stain on the pavement was gone.

I walked back to the Cruze. It was getting colder. The highway was calling me back.

I still needed to get home.

### **3. The Father**

My dad was from Tennessee, which I guess means I'm from Tennessee even though I never actually lived there. Bible Country.

Dad was a big dude— not abnormally big, but redneck farmboy big. He grew up south of Nashville and never talked about his childhood much except that his parents owned several hundred acres of backwood and he got away from them as soon as he could. He wore square glasses and looked ten years older than he actually was. He smoked. Wore a mustache that started sandy blonde and turned totally grey by the time he was 40. Said shit to people even if he knew it was rude or would hurt their feelings or piss them off. Said he only did it to people he "liked". That's what I'd tell my friends so I didn't have to feel embarrassed. Rough around the edges, salt of the earth, all that condescending shit people use when they describe uneducated working class men.

Dad worked as a truck driver most of his life, hauling all kinds of loads both locally and regionally. Despite the rigorous schedule, he was home often, especially on weekends.

"That's a hard-working man, there," I said out loud to myself one cold morning as I watched him exit our front door from my bedroom window.

Dad was also a drinker with a rage problem. I remember him screaming at my mom, my mom screaming at him, while my sister and I holed up in our rooms. That only happened when we were young. It was a terrifying thing at that age, seeing a grown-up lose control like that. The anger would sort of swell out of him. Anything could spark it— all the old clichés about the wrong thing for dinner or the door slamming or anything. Dad carried a lot of mental shit with him, and the fire was always stoked. He calmed down as we got older, but you never outgrow witnessing something like that.

We lived in this tiny little house in town when I was first born, then moved to a bigger house on the county line when I was in middle school. Dad changed for the better after that move. The new place was more than home. Dad had room to breathe there. He had a woodpile to stack and a garage to spend time in. Still, I never stopped being afraid of him, even when he was in a good mood.

Dad worked on a Firebird, which he referred to as "The Bird," for most of my childhood. It was an old one, a 69 or 70. He meant to restore it, but he never actually did. He would always be "working on the Bird" in the garage whenever he had

free time or was feeling productive, and it always stayed a drab metal shell. The one thing he ever did was put new lock knobs on it. Lock knobs. That's it. They were blue. The car didn't even have tires. Its naked axles rested on cinderblocks. (For all the driving I did during my life, you'd think I know cars. I don't. I just know driving.)

Dad didn't know cars, either. I don't know where he even got the Firebird shell. I think he drove by it one day soon after my sister was born and just impulsively bought it, intending to fix it up. Or maybe he inherited it from an old high school buddy or cousin or something. I don't know. I didn't ask him.

He went to work, came home, occasionally watched football or baseball, drank beer, worked around the house. He was boring. And he knew it.

Usually Dad just killed a six pack and listened to the old radio and sat in his lawn chair and looked at the metal shell of The Bird. I could see his lips moving as he talked to himself. Sometimes he'd get up and walk around, muttering. None of us bothered him when he was out in the garage.

I once asked him why he liked cars so much. I'll never forget his answer.

"I like their wheels," he told me. "Always gave me a good feeling, watching the wheels when I was a little kid. Watching the hubcaps spin, watching the patterns they made when they were movin'. Just gave me a good feeling."

He continued. He liked the curves of cars' fenders, the way their headlights made their front ends look like faces. He used to say it looked like cars had two faces— one on the front and another on their back. He used to say that some cars look really angry and others look surprised and others look sad. The front of our red Ford Taurus station wagon looked angry.

That was the deepest conversation we'd ever had. Thereafter, I always used to think of him whenever I saw a car's wheels in motion.

Dad said he felt like cars were living things that had lives of their own and thoughts and feelings. He liked the different colors of paint, how smooth they felt when you ran your fingers over them, the roundness of their wheels and the different hubcap designs and the different brand logos on their hoods. By that logic, whenever he went out to the garage to work on The Bird, he was enjoying staring at a corpse, a skeleton, dreaming about what it once had been and may still could be. But he couldn't make it happen. Then it might be something he didn't want. The dream would be put at risk. It was better to dream about it forever.

It's funny, since cars eventually became a major part of my own life. Random cars, all sorts of wheels and logos that I'd use for one leg of a trip or one shipment and then never see again. Like I said, I still don't know much about specific brands or engines or anything. Never interested me. Like I said, I'm not a technical guy. I just know driving.

Or knew.

I have one specific memory of Dad that I can't shake. It played over and over in my head as I traveled down that unmarked road of pure asphalt.

We were going to buy a fence for the backyard at the new house on the county line. Cyclone fence. I remember the place that sold them was this dirt field with all the fencing rolled up and stacked everywhere. There was one square little building, a dirty little reception area. It smelled weird in there. There were all these yellow, prickly burrs all over the fence yard. I got a bunch of them on my jean cuffs and my shoelaces and they hurt to pick off. They'd prick your fingers, little nasty buggers, little balls with porcupine quills on them.

"Which one should we get, Johnny-child?" Dad asked me as we observed the different options of fencing. He was in a good mood that day, no idea why. This was a non-complicated task he could finish easily. And he had me to order around.

All the rolls of fencing looked the same to me, and I told him so.

Dad snorted laughter.

"You're right, they do."

A guy came out of the building and talked to Dad. He introduced himself as Ira. Dad told him how much we'd need.

Ira was a squirrelly guy, didn't talk much. He loaded some fencing up in Dad's pick-up bed while Dad paid the cashier and bullshitted with him. Dad could be really charismatic when he was in a good mood or on the right side of a few beers. The rest of the time he was a moody, morose old fuck.

We went home and I spent the afternoon helping Dad put up the fence around our backyard. Setting up the poles and the metal bar that ran across the top, then stringing the metal mesh between them, securing it with these brackets and bolts. We did the whole yard, and it took all afternoon. Dad was in a good mood the whole time.

I hated it. I was tired and sick of being told what to do. Dad would contradict himself all the time, get pissy with me when I tried to correct him or suggest we try something another way. He always wanted to do things in a complicated manner. As long as he was in charge, it was right.

"Oh, come on," he'd snap at me as I failed to put the new post exactly where he wanted it or didn't bring him the right wrench.

The job only took an hour or two, but it felt like the entire afternoon to me.

"Good job," he said once we were done.

"Thanks," I said, happy to be finished.

I went to go inside, but Dad clamped a hand on my shoulder.

"Wait," he said. "Let's just look at it for a second."

I looked at the fence, stretching down the backyard and around again. A perfect, metal square. Before the yard had seemed open. Now it looked like a cage. I didn't know why Dad wanted to put the fence up. We didn't have pets.

"We did that, son," Dad said. "We did that together. And it'll be here for as long as we live here, even longer. Good job. Really."

It was the first time I could remember him saying that to me. I was always afraid of him. Always afraid I'd get the brunt of that temper. But that felt good. Moments like that were hard to come by.

The worst moment happened in high school.

I had a friend, a skinny black kid named Dmitri. He rode my bus, and I started giving him rides to school every day when I got my own first car, a black 95 Taurus. I bought it with money I got for working at the tubing factory that summer, sitting at a workbench, cleaning and organizing screws. Now I was free. I could come and go from the house as I pleased. I found it on the side of Milford Road. 2300 dollars. I bought it myself. The previous owner helped me with everything, and if he tried to fuck me over I still haven't found the angle.

I brought Dmitri over to the house one day. Dad watched us from his usual spot in the garage, killing a six pack. He was in a particularly snippy mood that day. I'll never know why.

Dmitri and I played Playstation in the living room. Mom brought us Diet Cokes and for some reason it really pissed me off. She was trying to be nice, trying to hide how shitty our lives were and I'd always thought she was better than that. I started thinking as we played Twisted Metal, and then I started stewing.

When we went to leave, Dad called to me and Dmitri.

"Hey."

I turned, not liking the tone.

"Yeah?"

"What you doing here?"

I didn't know how to answer that. Dmitri was quiet.

"What do you mean?"

"What are you two doing over here? What are you doing?"

"... we're hanging out."

"With your little nigger friend?"

With the benefit of hindsight, I honestly don't think he meant anything serious by it. He was trying to be smart-assed. Trying to show he "liked" Dmitri. But something went off in me. I saw an excuse and I took it.

I don't remember much after that. I remember my face being really hot and I remember my knuckles exploding with a red pain and my arms aching because I was swinging them so much and so hard and my dad's face and how rough his skin and whiskers felt on my knuckles. I cut my ring finger on his tooth. I was screaming something, I can't remember what.

It was a decisive victory, but I'll never forget the way Dmitri looked at me after it was over, when I took him home.

Mom never showed up outside. Neither did my sister, who wasn't home that day. Dmitri kind of patted me on the shoulder a few times to get me off my dad and I stalked away to the car and we both got in and drove off as if nothing had happened. I left my dad lying there on the garage floor surrounded by his empty beer bottles like some pagan temple sacrifice.

The ride was silent. My face felt so hot and cold all at once, like I was standing next to a bonfire at night in winter. My throat felt weird. I couldn't swallow.

I realized I was trying not to cry. I looked at Dmitri to see if he could tell.

He looked right back at me. The road disappeared under us.

"You gonna say anything?" I asked.

Dmitri gave an awkward little grin. His eyes were blank.

"...World Star?"

He never came over again after that.

That night I sobbed myself to sleep in a way I hadn't before and haven't since. It wasn't the fact Dad had called Dmitri the n-word. Not really. Any other day I'd of let that slide. I wouldn't have liked it, but I'd of taken it, and Dmitri would've, too. But he'd caught me in the right mood.

I knew why I was crying. I was crying because I realized, because I knew, I'd known, that I'd wanted to do that for a long time. It was because I knew, from that moment on, I finally wouldn't really ever be afraid of my father again. And I'd wasted so much time being afraid of him.

But mostly, it was dad's face after that first punch. That cracked me. He didn't look angry anymore. He just looked really, really hurt. And confused. With a, "Huh? Why would you do this? I thought we were having fun!" expression all over his face. Just surprise, then hurt and sadness. He was just sad. Sad and

scared and angry and wanting everyone else to feel the same way. And he'd succeeded in dragging me down with him.

It was the way he didn't fight back. The way he fell on the smooth garage pavement floor next to his beer bottles and his prized metal dream corpse of a sports car and just lay there with his face bloated and red and his eyes open and sad as I pummeled him. He was sad, drunk middle aged man and I'd pounded the fuck out of him. Bloodied my own father's nose. All the fists I rained down on him, I couldn't hit him hard enough. I didn't do any serious damage to his physical body, just his soul. He never went to the hospital, though he was gone when I got back from dropping off Dmitri. He didn't come back for a week. When he did come back, both of us acted like it hadn't happened.

I was no better than he was. A couple of seconds, and he'd proven that without even meaning to.

"God, God, God," I'd said over and over into my tear-soaked pillow that night, not knowing what else to say.

I didn't realize it at the time, but I was praying.

## **4. The Second Joint**

I thought about Ira and how his innards had the consistency of, like, a wet Snickers bar or something. Like pumpkin insides mixed with raw meat. How his bones had cracked, how the marrow inside them had tasted. How he'd turned into that red Skeletor thing with an AR for hands. How casually he'd been spraying all those people with gunfire, like he was power washing.

The world was empty again, everything clean and sterile and lonely. I felt like I was moving slower, that weird sleep-deprived feeling. The feeling I got right before I met the Devil and Death.

Once I made it back to the Cruze, I turned on the radio. I didn't care what was playing, I just needed another human voice. I got Talking Heads. And She Was.

Within minutes I was back on the highway, and the clouds were wheeling overhead again, making their weird shafts of light all around me. Like they were dancing with each other, dancers on a ballroom floor. The familiar landscape was almost comforting. But it wasn't home.

I drove and drove. The Talking Heads song finished. Then Billy Joel played— River of Dreams. Then Phil Collins— Every Day.

I shut the radio off. Enough for now.

When I was driving for the Prof, my legs and butt would ache. Sometimes I'd be sitting so long in the car seat, they would start to go numb. Miles and miles of cement and asphalt flying underneath me. Rhythmic little taps as the wheels went over lines in the concrete, one after the other. For hours. My pants would stick to the insides of my legs, my boxers would fuse to my ass cheeks. There would be no comfortable position to sit in after a day on the road. Just a numb and sweaty ass. Just had to keep moving. Deadline after deadline. Destination after destination.

There was none of that now. I always felt like I had just got in the car, was always just about to get out. Yet I was never comfortable.

Another exit up ahead pointed me to a rest area.

I pulled off the freeway, coasted into the parking lot.

The rest stop looked like any roadside dive on the highways I'd traveled during my career. They all look the same— they're long and low and dark-colored and state-funded. Inside, was a dining area with hanging lamps, old booths and tables and chairs, a bar with stools. Food courts. Smoking areas. Vending machines. Half-clean bathrooms. No one stays there, no one lives

there. They are the loneliest places on earth, and yet I'd always found a strange comfort to them.

This place looked abandoned. As I parked in a slanted spot, I could see through the dark windows. Sitting at one of the booths were two figures.

I went inside, door dingding. I walked to the booth area, sat down across from the Devil and Death. They were both dressed the exact same way—tasteful jewelry and denim for the Devil, Southern preacher cloth and sunglasses for Death.

There was bread and water at the table. Loaves of bread in a basket, warm and wafting steam. The water was in a glass pitcher bejeweled with condensation. A little cup sat next to it. The light above our table was the only one in the entire place. The rest looked untouched. Like we were here after closing time.

"Gone," drawled Death as I sat down. He stared straight ahead, never acknowledging me.

"Have some bread," said the Devil, motioning to the loaves.

I wasted no time. I tore into it. I ravaged that bread. Time seemed relative in this place, but I couldn't tell how long it had been since I'd last ate. Anything other than Ira, I mean. It might have been hours, might have been days, or even longer than days. I didn't feel hungry, exactly, but I ate like I was starving.

"Makes you appreciate the simple things, eh?" said the Devil, watching me tear chunks off each loaf and stuff them in my mouth.

"Yeah," I said, my mouth crammed with bread. Even without butter or anything, the bread was delicious. I'd never really appreciated just a good hunk of fresh warm bread before.

"You listen to the CD?" the Devil asked.

"Yeah," I said, pouring myself a cup of the water, pure and cool. I sucked it down, little trickles out the corners of my mouth.

"You understand our little endeavor here?"

"I guess."

"You guess?"

"Yeah."

"Explain it to us."

"I lived a life of sin."

"Right. How'd you live a life of sin?"

"I dedicated my life to the pursuit of the flesh, to earthly pleasure, both in my personal and professional endeavors. I ignored God and the way. I betrayed my eternal soul."

"Gone," said Death.

"And what did you do, Johnny?" asked the Devil. "In your professional endeavors."

"I was a high driver," I said. "A drug runner. For a college professor who was also one of the biggest illegal pill suppliers in the country."

I grabbed the water pitcher, poured some more in the cup, which was made out of smooth stone. I drank it all in one gulp. I had another. I can't even describe how perfect and refreshing that water was. It was so good, I put the pitcher to my lips and guzzled the glorious, cold water down. Then I tore another loaf of bread in half and stuffed the hot, warm, soft half-loaf of bread into my mouth. It almost hurt, my cheeks stretching, my jaw aching as I chewed.

"So you were a delivery man," said the Devil.

"I delivered drugs, yeah," I said as well as I could through the bread. "Opiates, mostly. Pills. I never asked who they were for or where they were from. Wasn't part of the job. Some cocaine and other things. But mostly pills. Lots of them. Cases of them. Tens of thousands of dollars, sometimes more. A lot of the time I didn't even know what I had exactly. I was just told to pick up a car, drive it to a place, leave it and get in another car and come back. Or go somewhere else."

"And now you'll deliver souls to me," said the Devil.

"Yeah," I said, swallowing the final lump of the half-loaf and guzzling more water out of the pitcher. "I have to retrieve seven damned souls and bring them to you."

More water ran down the sides of my cheeks and dripped onto the table.

The Devil grinned widely.

"Gone," said Death.

"How you gonna get these people, Johnny? How will you send them to me?"

"I meet them at the moment of their demise. And I go werebeast on them. I become a giant half-man, half-animal and defeat them before God."

"And?"

"I eat them."

"You *consume* them."

"Gone," said Death.

"Right."

"Why do you consume them?"

"I become the spiritual embodiment of their sin. Their sin consuming them."

The Devil nodded, grinning. All those white teeth, flashing at me. His eyes were dark. He looked like he'd just struck the deal of the century. I was too busy enjoying the bread and the

water to really care. I was down to the last loaf, the pitcher almost empty.

"Did you recognize your first assignment, Johnny?"

"I did," I said without hesitation.

"Who was he?"

"He worked at a fencing company. I went there with my dad once."

"What was his name?"

"Ira Cox. He was young then. He didn't say anything to me."

We sat there a second. I bit heels of crust off the bread, chewed, crunched, washed it down with the rest of the water. I stuck my tongue in the little stone cup, slobbering. I dumped the excess crumbs from the bowl of bread into my mouth. I licked the condensation off the pitcher. Then I licked the tabletop clean. It didn't seem weird to me. I was just that hungry, just that thirsty.

Yet, now that I was finished, I didn't feel any more satisfied than I had when I first sat down.

"How you feeling, Johnny?" the Devil asked when I was finished.

"I don't know," I said. "A little tired, I guess. Thanks for asking."

"Gone..." said Death.

"No, no, no," said the Devil. "How are you *feeling*?"

"I don't know what you mean."

"There's no panic, no begging for answers out of you. Why is that?"

I shrugged. I thought about asking for more water or bread but decided against it.

"I have a job to do," I said. "I understand it. I'll do the job now and deal with what comes after."

"So you're just doing what needs to be done."

"It's how I've always had to live," I told him. "That bread and water was fucking delicious. Can I have some more?"

"Gone," said Death.

"We got something to show you, Johnny," said the Devil, ignoring my question.

He turned around, held out a TV remote, clicked it. There was an old box style TV monitor in the corner of the restaurant, held up on a metal platform. It turned on with an old electrical zapping noise, lit up in blue. The picture zoned in. It was fuzzy, old and pixelated like around the turn of the millennium before plasma screens.

On the screen was my dad. He was in our house, the old one. He still lived there. My mom was gone. They'd divorced years ago, not long after I'd left.

Dad was on the bed, holding a picture of me. An old one— my senior picture. I always thought I looked angry in it. I don't know why, I wasn't angry when the pictures were taken. I was dressed up, smiling. But my eyes look angry.

Dad was crying. Hard. Like I had on the night I'd beaten him up.

This was especially disturbing to me. Crying was not something anyone in my family did, not me or my dad or my mom or my sister. Even when my sister and I were kids, we learned to bottle that shit up pretty quick. Crying was weakness. It was vulnerability, and that shit could get you in trouble. If the world found that out about you, nature would run its fucking course. Vulnerability felt terrible. Like torture.

Dad lay on the bed, kind of clutching this picture to his chest, and his face was like a little kid's. He was all by himself in this dark bedroom that looked like it hadn't been cleaned since he and my mom got divorced. He was crying, and all I could think about was how he'd looked when I beat him up.

I realized it was my old bedroom he was crying in, my old bed he was lying on.

"What do you think of this, Johnny?" the Devil asked.

"Gone," said Death.

"He looks upset," I said. I felt like I should care more, but mostly I was just disturbed. I didn't want to look at it.

"He just found out you died," said the Devil. "He got a phone call from Nicole. He hadn't spoken to her in years. He was happy at first, to hear from her, and then he was devastated. He's devastated because he told himself he didn't care. He wouldn't care. And then he did. He could help it. He's at the mercy of the Lord in this moment."

"Oh."

"What do you think of this, Johnny?" the Devil asked again.

"I think he looks upset."

"He is. He loved you very much. He's upset because he never really showed you how much he loved you. He couldn't show it. He was hoping someday he'd get a second chance. That second chance is gone now, Johnny. Permanently. You'll never see each other again."

"Gone," said Death.

"I guess," I said, watching the TV. In a normal setting this TV would've probably played daytime sports or talk shows or some other dining space white noise.

"What would you say to him right now, Johnny? If you could?"

"I'd say..."

I tried to come up with something but didn't have a good answer.

"...I don't know."

"Oh, come on," said the Devil. "You know exactly what you'd say."

The Devil was right. I did.

"I'd tell him not to worry about it. I'd say I made mistakes, too. I wish I'd reconnected with him and mom, both."

"And?"

"And... that's it, I guess."

"And you'll never say it to him now."

"I guess not."

"How does that make you feel, Johnny?"

"How does what make me feel?"

"What you just said. What you're seeing. How does it make you feel?"

I looked down at the table, at my drying saliva from where I'd licked up the crumbs and the water ring left by the pitcher.

"I have to get home," I said.

The Devil sighed, smiled at me and clicked the remote. The old TV switched off, static sizzling.

"Gone," said Death.

"Only two types of people in this world, son," said the Devil. "Those who *think* they control the universe and those that *know* they don't."

He handed me another burned CD.

It was labeled "GREED".

## **(lee avery owes)**

Lee Avery didn't have time for snotty little peasants from wartorn shitholes. There was money to be made, hands to be shaken, parties to be attended, and the world wasn't fair.

The world wasn't fair. Lord, did Lee Avery know that.

The stress was getting to him. He could feel it in his temples. His brain drain. That's what he called it, the headaches and numbness and occasional inability to talk properly. Like his brain was loading, little spinning wheels in his eyes. Lord knew what it all actually was. He had to rise above it. No time for anything else. He was too young for health shit, only 36 for god's sake. He'd get it checked out eventually.

If you focused on how unfair it all was, you'd never accomplish dick. Like that dipshit who shot up the school picnic in that fucking Mexican ghetto the other week.

"You realize, Lee," Weinraub had said at their meeting that afternoon, sitting in front of him in the 30<sup>th</sup> floor office with the plants in the corners. "That after this party tonight, we're going to have to take off the kid gloves here. We need your numbers up."

"I understand," Lee had responded robotically, telling the old kike everything he wanted to hear.

He did understand. He'd done everything he could. But he could only make the dipshits below him do so much. He alone couldn't force everyone to consume in a certain way, certainly not in a single quarter. Data only got you so far. You could set up conditions, but that was it. The market was the market, and nowadays everything was just computers jabbering away at each other anyway. You couldn't ask them to "make the numbers go up" any more than you could ask a retarded 6 year old to make the numbers go up. People were dumb, lazy animals and anyone who didn't figure out a way to get beyond that frankly deserved to be exploited. As far as Lee Avery was concerned, people were just carbon. None of it mattered. Figure out a way to win in the system you've been given and shut up about the rest.

Sometimes it didn't work out. Sometimes the numbers weren't up. Sometimes the numbers weren't up long enough for the higher-ups to notice and call you in for a tense meeting. So what? At Lee Avery's level, he could afford to retire if he wanted. Not now, but soon. There was always more to be made. Lee knew, on some level, that no matter what his numbers were, it would never be enough. Not for him, and not for the higher-ups, either.

Infinite growth. It was what the market wanted, and the market was God.

All the day job bullshit he could deal with. Shit rolled downhill. You got treated that way sometimes by people who'd made it higher than you. Whatever. There weren't that many people above Lee Avery anyway.

What he couldn't deal with was someone *below* him having the audacity to treat him in such a way.

The girl he'd hired for the evening was a little bitchy brunette hardbody he'd known for a couple years. Baby-faced, trashy, model-skinny— just the way Lee liked them. Born in Ukraine but naturalized in the US. He told everyone she was 19, but based on his fixer's estimates she was probably at least three years younger. How a man could find a woman attractive past her prime breeding years was beyond Lee Avery.

That was his privilege. He'd earned the goddamn thing. He was a fucking titan, no matter what Weinraub implied. And titans got to do whatever they wanted. Consequences and laws were for peasants. Underage hardbodies and penthouse apartments were for titans. It'd been that way ever since Babylon. The winners get what they want and everyone else can become one or fucking deal with it.

The hardbody had her airpods in, wasn't listening to him. She was getting paid way more than she was worth tonight, way more than Lee's patience could handle when she was being so casually disrespectful. This went beyond having a word with Sascha tomorrow morning when he came to pick her up. This had to be handled right here and now.

"What you listening to?" he asked her, trying to keep it friendly.

His temples pounded in his ears. He'd been having a lot of headaches this evening, more than usual. Stress. The meeting with Weinraub. What he'd need to be doing for the next few weeks to make sure Weinraub was happy. Tylenol only did so much. Oxy, too. He hadn't been to the doctor about any of this, but he'd get around to it.

"Chappell Roan," the hardbody said, not looking at him.

They were in the limo, her dressed in this fancy lemon-colored get-up he'd purchased for the evening. He'd purchased it for her. 2500 dollars. Loud and lovely, so everyone could see what he had.

She looked fucking bored and it was pissing him off. The city rushed by, all acidic lights and damp darkness. It had rained that day, the night descending like smoke from a fire in the hills.

Lee was already tense from his meeting with Weinraub. But he'd made it through that. This night, this party, was supposed to be a relief. A brief reprieve. And now this little teenage cumslut wasn't helping.

"Which one?" he asked.

"Which what?" she said, still refusing to look at him.

"Which song," he said calmly. "Which Chappell Roan song?"

He stared at her cleavage, making it as obvious as he could. His temples throbbed.

A strange incoherence was coming over him, an instability. His consciousness seemed to sort of... wane for a second. He shook it off.

"An old one," she said, examining her phone with her pretty, sour face lit up in digital white.

"Have I heard it?"

She nodded, scrolling, not responding or even looking at him.

That did it.

He took a second to look out the window, make her think he was dropping the subject. Letting her win.

Then he reached over and smacked the phone out of her hands. Hard.

It flew out of her grasp and landed on the carpeted floor by the minibar with a muffled *thwumpf*.

She glanced down, hands falling to her sides. It was only for a second, but it was there. Good. The soft blue LED lights that lined the minibar and the limo's interior lit upon her face, making her look like some tragic Renaissance painting.

"You're not hot enough to be acting like this," Lee said coolly.

She said nothing, did nothing, stared at her phone on the floor like it was too far to reach.

"Everyone owes, sweetie. Everyone. Especially me. I owe a lot. To a lot of people. And I need some time to stop thinking about what I owe. And you are on that time. You are here right now to help me not think about what I owe. You need to think about what you owe me. So I need you to stop acting like a little brat. You weren't like this in Dubai and that was only last fucking week."

She finally reached down and picked up her phone off the floor, the white screen illuminating her face again, thumbs sliding.

Lee reached over and snatched the fucking thing out of her hands. She let him take it, didn't look at him. He could feel the caustic vibe radiating off her. So what. Fuck her. He'd take those stupid white plastic buds in her ears next.

"Go ahead, Daddy," she grunted, still looking down. "Give me something they can all take pictures of."

Lee wanted to choke this little brat the fuck out right there, but at that moment they were accosted by bright lights, a forest of flashes outside the tinted windows.

The red carpet. They'd arrived.

"Plenty of time for that later," he said. "Now put your happy face on. Earn your fucking five grand an hour. And if you don't immediately strip down when the time comes, you're going to make me look bad. So be on cue. If you're good, you might even get this back at the end of the night."

He brandished her phone as his temples pounded. It felt like his left side was going numb. The fucking stress. The brain drain. The mind fuck.

"Give me those things in your ears, too."

She smiled at him with everything but her eyes, briskly removed her airpods and handed them over. Lee brushed his thumb against hers when she dropped them into his palm.

"Be a good girl," he said. "Do you understand?"

"I understand," she said robotically.

Lee rolled his eyes. Good enough.

He licked his lips, showed the world his porcelain veneers, and threw open the door to let the celebration in.

## 5. Greed

The next exit wasn't far. Predictably, the sign read Greed. I was already getting the hang of this. Adaptation is my specialty. Not sure if I mentioned that yet.

I pulled off the freeway, drove until luxurious skyscrapers sprouted up all around me.

It was night. The streets were wet. Everything smelled like ozone. It was very beautiful, deep in the city, everything all lit up like a birthday cake.

My destination was this grand theater with a big red carpet leading to the golden front doors. There was press outside, bunch of faceless black figures with enough flashbulb action to give you epilepsy. Some sort of premiere or party or both.

I parked down the street and got out, walked right through the scrum and through the front doors. Inside, I went downstairs past several levels of security. No one acknowledged me. I wasn't a ghost, even if I felt like one. I wasn't passing through walls. If I bumped into someone, they'd look at me and be like, "The hell you doing?"

But no one stopped me. No one questioned my existence or asked for credentials. They saw me without seeing me. I was still dressed the way I'd been when I died—t-shirt, jeans, hoodie. My go-to outfit. Some people think it shows a lack of class. I say, 'It's comfortable.' I did not fit in with these high class bluebloods in their multi-thousand dollar suits. It didn't matter. Tech billionaires wear hoodies. If it was good enough for Zuckerberg, it was good enough for me.

The party was in the basement of the skyscraper, a glamorous, subterranean pit of exclusive, explosive decadence, everything lit neon yellow. I had no idea what sort of product these people were celebrating, but it was represented by this bright lemon color. It was surprising to me that they'd be in the basement. You'd assume they'd have it in the penthouse.

The place was a goddamn blinding circus. Older guys in tuxes partied with naked women, some of them teenaged girls.

Some of the dudes—almost all of them middle-aged or older—were naked, too. The girls were dressed in sashes and jewelry and nothing else. Drinks overflowed, dripped from trays and tabletops, the yellow lights searing the retinas. Glitter and sequins—also golden and yellow—covered everything.

These men were consuming. They saw the world as something to be consumed. They saw humans as something to be consumed. Resources. As far as these men were concerned, they were the only real humans. Anyone who wanted to be real had to achieve a

certain level of wealth or status or both. Anyone else was a resource to be exploited. Consumed. I'd seen a few of these types during my runs. Never really talked to any one of them, but I saw them.

"You're supposed to reach for your higher self," the Devil had said on the Greed CD. "These people are not only failing to do so, they're going backwards, intentionally— indulging in their animal selves. Indulge long enough and God'll have to do something to you. Take away your consciousness privileges. That's why He needs me. He'd never admit it, but that's why."

My target was Lee Avery, one of the partners at this particular firm. I don't know anything about banking or finance or producing, but Lee was one of the big shots in this outfit. He was actually one of the younger guys, not even forty, and he was scheduled to have a stroke later that night from all of the drinking and drugs he'd done since he'd started in this industry when he was twenty-two. It was part of the culture.

Lee would not see this stroke coming. He didn't go to the doctor, didn't know about his family history with this sort of thing. Lee, like many of these men, was convinced he was immortal. And I mean, he was and is immortal, but not in the way he thinks or that he's going to like.

As I walked down the stairs, a drunk man was all but passed out, cuddling with a raccoon-eyed blonde with rail-thin arms. As I passed, I heard him mutter to her, "The devil just got here."

"I love that," said the blonde, zonked out on something.

Lee was over across the room, waiting outside the women's toilet, arm cocked up and leaning on the wall, his eyes crazy and his hair out of place. He was pissed at one of his employees, his date for the night. She'd ensconced herself in the bathroom.

I watched.

Lee yelled some things into the bathroom, his voice echoing, savage. Not long after, another, older, madame-looking woman dragged Lee's date out of the bathroom, holding her firmly by the arm. Lee grabbed the girl and headed for the exit. She looked about eighteen but could've been younger, a frail-looking statuesque, brown-haired, doll-like thing. Model-skinny, all legs and torso and long, flowing hair that shone like it'd been waxed. Everything about her looked fragile, except her eyes. Her eyes were mean and cold and full of the things she'd been through in her short life. They were the eyes of a predator.

Apparently Lee had caught her flirting and making out with one of his rivals at the company— an older Jewish guy who resembled Palpatine just before his transition to the dark side. She did it to piss Lee off. He'd been a real cunt all evening

and she wanted to make him mad, to make him understand how much she hated him.

Apparently it worked, because Lee freaked out and scared her into the bathroom. He was coked up and drunk on a few bottles of champagne, bottles that cost more than what I used to make on a job as a high driver, which wasn't nothing.

I followed the two of them as he dragged her out of the party, shoving aside associates and other revelers, the floor littered with sparkling yellow confetti and streamers.

They passed me. I smelled her perfume and his cologne. It smelled like citrus.

I could hear Lee whisper harshly in the girl's ear, "You have a lot of making up to do. You can start in the car."

He'd partially torn the girl's yellow cocktail dress—that's what scared her into the bathroom. The girl didn't even look that upset. Just tired, with little black streaks on her face from where she wiped away the angry, mascara-loaded tears. I would've felt pity for her but she was a sinner, too, trapped with her own selfish choices that had landed her in this spot. In many ways, she really wasn't much different from Lee. But her judgement was for another day.

They headed out the back way, Lee barreling through the kitchen, dragging the girl by the arm, stumbling along and slamming the heavy loading door as they crashed through it.

He was walking funny, kind of struggling to get his left foot to coordinate properly with his right. He was slurring his words, too. His left side was going numb, but he assumed it was the coke he'd snorted. He felt truly alive.

Out in the alley, a limo was waiting for them. Lee's temples were pounding. He could barely feel his left arm.

I watched them get in, watched Lee slam the door. I stood in the loading dock, hands in my pockets.

"Arise," I whispered.

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*Lee throws the girl in the car and jumps in behind her. The driver can't see what's going on behind him and is being paid to ignore anything he might hear. Everyone at the party lets Avery go. They've all had nights like this. Shit happens.*

"You know Lee. He's a hothead. He'll get over it in the morning. Desdemona or whatever her name is, she'll be fine. They'll kiss and make up. Top me off and tell me about the Lorca deal."

*The driver floors it and heads back to Lee's house in the hills. In the back, Lee rips the rest of the girl's yellow dress off. She spreads herself, spreads her legs and arms, in her panties. She holds her legs up.*

Lee smacks her, grabs her by the hair, smacks her again. "You unbelievable little slut," he snarls, hitting. "You fucking unbelievable little whore."

She's bleeding now, blood smeared across her cheek, her eye swelling.

"You're mine," Lee says over and over. His face is drooping, but the girl doesn't see it. His right hand goes numb now, too. His left hand feels like it's asleep. He assumes it's from hitting her. "You're mine. You're mine."

He thinks he's saying "You're mine," but he's just babbling now. Incoherence. Murmuring.

He freezes. Something is wrong. The girl brushes her hair out of her swelling eyes. She doesn't look up at him. She just looks out the window and thinks about getting paid later.

Lee stops hitting her, continues babbling. He topples forward onto the girl. She lets him lie there, mumbling his drunken bullshit, thinking he's passed out from the coke and the champagne. She doesn't notice he's barely breathing.

The blood clot that has wormed its way through Lee's system has lodged in his left temple. Blood builds behind it, swelling. Johnny is already waiting.

As the limo tears away, he feels himself grow— not upward but outward, side-to-side. His body blows up, skin expanding like oiled rubber, fat and stretchy and slimy, his mouth widening to the length of his entire head, his eyes huge and round and blank and unblinking. His skin is bright yellow, the color of a neon lemon, a jungle warning. His front legs are short and stumpy, three little rubbery toes on each foot, the back ones long and powerful and cocked like firing pins on a cannon. Inside his mouth is a prehensile tongue, retracted in slime like an oyster. He follows the limo. Two shots of his powerful back legs and he can see it, speeding out of control. It's a dream chase, chaotic and dizzying. Another leap and he slams into the back of the car, sending it into a wheelie. He fires his tongue. It sticks to the back windows. He lets himself slip off the smashed trunk, digs his sticky toe-pads onto the damp road and holds on, reining the limo in like a demented stallion.

The limo idles on the wet pavement, the stars spinning and the warped city seeming to throb.

The back door opens up and Lee Avery's final form falls out of the car, mewling and writhing about on the wet pavement, confused as to what's happened. It 'HEEEEEE's' into the darkness, a high-pitched wheeze of a cry.

The demon that was once Lee Avery looks like a boiled chicken. A boiled, humanoid, starving, plucked chicken. Dead, black eyes. Pasty white skin stretched over cold meat and bones. No hands or

feet, just these fleshy, bone-sharp limbs waving and poking. A wrinkled, screeching little mouth with teeth like little white BB's. An emaciated, always-hungry, never-satisfied abortion of a creature.

The girl and limo driver are gone, left in the corporeal realm. Johnny and Lee are between the atoms now. The city looks like a cartoonish drawing come to life— no symmetry or order to the rows of windows or the rooftops. Even the car's wheels have gone trapezoidal. Everything is either pitch black or acid yellow, even the jagged moon and spiny stars. It all wavers, an acid vision from a children's picture book.

Johnny, squatting his fat ass in the road, fires his yellow prehensile tongue. He misses, the tongue slamming into the car door.

Lee shrieks again— HEEEEEE— and tries to run, standing on his little fleshy stilt-feet. He's a slippery thing. His skin is egg-white and damp like the garbage-strewn streets and his eyes are dabs of congealed crude oil blobbing around his pinched little face. His teeth are blunt and tiny, the nose a little slit. Johnny thinks he looks like a cross between Voldemort and Gollum and a newborn baby.

The battle is over quickly. The Master of All Creation doesn't suffer pathetic little wretches like this very long, not once they've been wrenched from their mortal coil.

One more fire of Johnny's massive hind legs and Johnny soars through the air, fifty feet in one jump. He fires his tongue out again, bug eyes searching for Lee as the former banker scurries about the wet streets. This time he connects— the mucus sticking to Lee, dragging him back toward Johnny's mouth.

Johnny closes his lips around Lee and swallows. He feels Lee kicking, hears his spoiled brat shrieks, feels his spoiled brat kicking, a death tantrum.

He swallows again, gullet muscles pushing down, down, down. Lee kicks and squeals all the way.

He feels Lee kicking in his stomach. He squats, resting. The hard part is over.

It takes a long time before Lee stops moving.

Johnny is patient. He sits there on the sidewalk, bloated and staring, hind legs cocked and front legs pleasantly crossed, just chilling, waiting for the deed to be finished.

Johnny waits until the last feeble movement, feels Lee settle into the corrosive juices breaking him down into nothing. Feels him give in.

"Amen."

## 6. The Mother

The radio's playing Patsy Cline, Walkin' After Midnight.

Holy God, I hate this bland white suburban shit. It's like having white rice stuffed in your ears. And country music, even classic country, is horrid Republican MAGA-rat shit. Redneck, hillbilly, dumbass, never-left-the-valley shit. So far on this stretch, the little display on the monitor has told me I've heard gems by artists such as The Tragically Hip, Dan Fogelberg, Cowboy Junkies, and Blues Traveler.

Fucking Blues Traveler.

This station doesn't play any genre except old white people music and it SUCKS. The only station I get on this never-ending road and it's fucking white sauce.

Now Patsy's warbling. She's better than Blues Traveler, at least. You can hear the real world in her voice. Like you can hear with Tupac or Eminem or Killer Mike or J. Cole or Kendrick or Denzel Curry or Big Sean. You hear the real world in the voices of those guys. You can hear their journeys. All I hear in this white shit is everything I don't want to be a part of.

I've tried to get the fucking radio to change but there's nothing else but static. And now it won't turn off. It just stays on, playing at a volume that can't be ignored. The volume knob doesn't work at all.

The heat won't turn down, either. I've got the windows open for now but it's chilly outside. I lean to the left to cool off until I'm too cold, lean to the right to warm up until I'm too hot. My left hand is freezing, my right hand just a little too warm.

Fuck me.

The highway stretches on. The Cruze's gas needle never drops from full. The wheels never hit a slippery patch. I just cruise with bland, vaguely-Midwestern scenery all around. It reminds me of a real place, but I can't remember exactly where, just like I can't remember anything specific about my life except shit that happened years ago.

I roll up the windows, figuring it's easier to be hot than cold for a while. I give into the song, let it take my mind where it wants.

I think about my mom. Patsy's music reminds me of her.

My mom was a drinker, too, but not like my dad. She was a cheap wine drinker, a glass-after-dinner kind of woman. She used to smoke a lot— both cigarettes and weed— and she'd do the laundry and cook and clean. Never had a job, stayed at home my

whole childhood and adolescence. Hard-working homemaker, all that condescending strong-woman shit.

When my sister and I were little she'd keep us occupied. That was probably when she was happiest, when it was just the three of us while dad was out on work runs that would sometimes last days. We watched a lot of videotapes, as was the style at the time. Disney sing-alongs, these Kidsongs tapes she'd gotten from our Grandpa where they'd go to the circus or Old McDonald's farm or the amusement park and sing old jukebox songs and nursery rhymes like Whole Lotta Shakin' Goin' On and Skip To My Lou. Mom would play with us in the backyard, in the sandbox and in the grass. She'd make up games and build blanket forts in the living room with us. When dad came home and was in a mood, she'd put us to bed early.

She'd walk us down to the A&P because we only had one car and dad always had it for work. That was when we lived in town. When we moved out to the bigger house she got a used Toyota hatchback and drove that around.

My mom was a small woman. Overweight. Kind of goblin-shaped. She was pretty when she was younger in a young Chrissie Hynde way, but as she got older and hopeless that all left her. Big belly and sagging boobs, bad teeth and jowls. Dad was ugly, too, but I always felt like Mom's lack of self-care was more tragic. Dad was ugly on the inside. Mom, for her faults, wasn't.

In fact, I remember she wouldn't ever get mad at anyone other than my dad. She never yelled at me or my sister. But Dad and her, dear God. Their fights were legendary. Over anything—dinner, work, us kids, the house, the bills, the yard, the TV, what was on the TV, what they were drinking. Anything could make them flare up like the 4th of July.

Mom used to listen to Patsy Cline when we were little. She'd put on a CD, Patsy's Greatest Hits, and fold laundry or do other housewife shit while Nicole and I were falling asleep. But only ever on nights when Dad worked late. She was always in better moods then. Sometimes I'd hear her humming along. Walkin After Midnight was one of her favorites.

The specific memory that Walkin After Midnight conjured involved this one time when mom gave this one kid a ride home from the grocery store.

Nicole and I and Mom were walking out of the Farmer Jack, which is what A&P became after we moved to the new house. It was soon after Mom got her Toyota. She was still enjoying driving it, kind of proud of the fact she finally had a car. Even a shitty, used one.

This kid and his skateboard friends had apparently rode into the open automatic door or something. We saw the aftermath

of it. For some reason, I was in a really pissy mood and I just wanted to go home. But Mom came across them as we were walking out with our plastic bags and offered them help.

"I have a car," she said. "I can give you a ride. Might be a little tight."

The kids seemed old at the time but they were probably only high school age. Skater punks. I remember they smelled bad, looked greasy, t-shirts and ripped jean shorts. The injured one was a scrawny skinhead.

Mom suggested the three of them take the back seat with me. I didn't protest but I didn't like this idea. I was crammed in there with the three of them.

Blood trickled from under the kid's arm. One of the other kids had taken off his shirt and given it to the kid to stave off the bleeding.

"Lee," said the kid who'd taken his shirt off to the kid who'd fallen. "You're dripping."

"Oh, shit," said Lee. "Sorry."

He tried to wipe the blood off the floor but just smeared it. It would always be there, little brown smears on the light blue carpet.

"It's fine," said my mom. "You guys sure you just want to go to your house and not the urgent care?"

"Naw," said Lee. "It's just a scrape. It's already healing off."

"You need to be more careful."

"Yeah," said Lee. "I'll tell my uncle you helped us, though. He can give you some money if you want."

"No," said Mom. "That's fine. You live there?"

"I'm just visiting. Dad's helping my uncle get some business set up."

"We're cousins," said the one who'd given Lee his shirt.

"His dad's got money," said one of the other skater kids.

"Dude, shut up," said the cousin.

"It's fine," said Mom. "Neither your uncle or your dad need to pay me."

I looked out the window the whole time. I didn't want to look at them because the kid's arm was bleeding and it grossed me out. I was probably seven.

I was so pissed about this. I don't know why. I didn't want to look at Lee or any of the other kids. They smelled sour, sweaty. And I hated how Mom was being nice to them for no fucking reason.

I didn't realize it at the time, but it was jealousy. I was jealous of them, jealous of the kindness they were receiving

from my mom. I wanted my Mom all to myself. She was being a mom to them and not me and it was pissing me off.

Nicole sat in front with mom. She would've been eleven or twelve. Her and Mom chatted the skater kids up, all friendly. I never asked her how she felt about it. If I told her how I really felt about it, she'd probably just criticize me.

We dropped them off outside this big house on the expensive side of town. I remember marveling at the size of the lawns, which seemed as big as playgrounds to me. I wondered what these kids had been doing in town at the dumpy Farmer Jack when they could've been hanging out here.

They got out Nicole's side and said thanks, Lee handing his cousin his shirt back. And that was it.

"This neighborhood is so nice," Nicole remarked, wide-eyed at the two and three-story McMansions we passed.

"Mom," I said when we were driving away. "Why did you help them? They got blood on your new car."

"It's not a new car," said Mom. "It's just new to us. And it needed to be done."

"No one else was helping them," said Nicole, agreed with Mom like she always did. "A bunch of other people all walked by before we got outside."

"They couldn't have skated back this far," said Mom. "And yes, Nicole, no one was helping them."

"It's sad," said Nicole.

"No, it isn't," I protested. "They would've been fine!"

Mom looked at me in the rear-view mirror.

"Sometimes when no one else will do it, it has to be you."

It was a tremendously kind thing Mom did there, and she appeared to have done it out of pure altruism. But that evening after dinner, I went up to her and hugged her, which was something I didn't do that often, even as a kid.

"Hey there," said Mom, surprised.

"Don't be anyone else's Mom," I told her.

She chuckled and kissed my forehead and hugged me back.

"I couldn't even if I wanted to, Johnny-child."

## 8. The Third Joint

I was two sinners down, and the highway ran on.

The heat from the vents was getting annoying. I had to crack the windows. And the fucking radio still wouldn't turn off. I tried my best to ignore it all. I'd had annoying drives like this before— rentals that had awkward seats or shoddy climate control or no USB ports. But the drives always came to an end, sooner or later.

Thank God for the next joint.

This time, I pulled off the freeway to a little gravel parking lot. It was the same kind of rest stop as before— non descript, long, low, brown, state-government-run, brick, dark windows. Not a place you'd want to stay. A place you'd only stop at.

I went inside. It was as dark and abandoned as the first one. There was no one here yet, though one light shone over the bar. Under the light was a sturdy, golden mug of beer waiting for me.

I took a seat and downed the beer. It looked like a light IPA, but it tasted like Two Hearted one second and PBR the next. It was deliciously full, with a crisp, bitter aftertaste. I don't know beer.

I swallowed gulps of beer so large they hurt my throat. The beer was gone in two and a half slugs. I didn't even think about drunk driving, but I doubted that mattered now. I didn't even know if I'd get drunk. But I knew I wanted more beer.

I watched the leftover suds slide down the mug's frosty insides, and after a moment, I jammed my tongue in and licked the suds off as best I could, tilting the glass all the way up until the lamps shone down through the glass into my eyes.

When I finished, I set the mug down and looked at my hands, at the little damp circle in the napkin, at the salt someone had sprinkled on the napkin to keep the beer from sticking.

I picked up the napkin, licked off the salt.

My toes scrunched in my shoes.

I waited, examined my surroundings, this joint.

Inside, the place looked like another late 20th century dive— dead jukebox against one wall, old dead boxy TV monitors in the corners. The shelves of liquor were perfectly arranged, the wells and sinks shining clean.

No sign of the Devil or Death. Who knew how long I'd have to wait for them?

So I did something I never thought I'd do.

I pulled out my children's Bible, opened it, and read some of it.

I'd hung onto the thing since it had appeared in my passenger seat. I'd kept it there since, its gold text winking at me when a shaft of light would move across the letters. When I got back to my car after dealing with Lee, I immediately opened it. The first story I saw was Jesus in the desert, head in his hands, ever so weary.

I've never been religious, never paid attention in the catechism classes my mom made me take when I was a kid. Church was always an agonizing slog of time in a sweet-smelling cedar prison. Stand up, sit down, mutter stuff. We didn't go often but it was torture all the same.

But for some reason, now, these stories calmed me down. I flipped through and examined Jesus and how he reacted to everything thrown his way. He had such a laid back, chill, unbothered demeanor that I'd never picked up on as a kid. I read the story of how he fed a crowd with a few loaves of bread and a couple fish. The Devil and Death were part of the crowd, towards the back.

Sitting there in that twisted city with Lee's demon form kicking in my stomach had got me thinking. I could still hear him, muffled screeching as he smothered and dissolved. I didn't know if the sinners stayed inside my digestive tract after I was human again, but I hadn't shit since before I died, so if they did stay inside me, they hadn't come out.

I was starting to worry that this wasn't purgatory. I was starting to worry, period. The permanence of it, the general feeling of foreboding, the growing annoyances in the car. Something wasn't sitting right.

I'd never been much of a visible worrier. I was a real, 'ignore it and it'll disappear' kind of guy. That works pretty frequently, actually, which is why so many people do it.

But anyway, yeah, I sat there at the bar and thought of Ira pumping hot iron into the body of that father to silence the screams of the child underneath. I thought of Lee's awkward stroke-gait as he tugged that eastern European teen through the kitchens, determined to reassert himself as the center of the universe at all times, how the kitchen workers had all side-eyed him and told themselves that they'd do something about it if they could.

Now, at the bar, I flipped through the illustrations of my old communion Bible, skimming the Judges. Ruth, Samson, Samuel.

I guess I was more jangled than I thought. I had no phone or way of telling time. The clock showed only zeroes on the Cruze's radio. Time didn't matter in purgatory, if that's what

this was. No one had told me where I was, but I'd spent a good part of my life not knowing where I was, on the road for some errand. Now my errand was to get home.

I read the Bible till I felt a hand on my shoulder. I started, looked up and there in the light of the solitary bar lamp was The Devil. He grinned down at me, his spiky hair like a crown of horns. Or thorns.

"Hey," I said.

"Sorry I'm late, bud," The Devil said, helping himself to a stool. "You enjoy your beer?"

"I did. Thank you."

"Makes you appreciate the simple things, eh? You know, beer was invented in Mesopotamia."

"Can I have more?"

"No."

"Where's Death?"

"Had an appointment in the city."

I didn't say anything. The Devil just sat there and looked at me.

"So what now?" I asked. "Who do you want me to send home this time?"

"We'll get to that. How's the highway treating you?"

I shrugged. The beer gurgled in my otherwise empty stomach. I felt a little tipsy but not anything I couldn't power through.

"Not bad," I said.

The Devil chuckled.

"How you like the radio?"

"Wish you'd tell me how to turn it off."

"You don't like music?"

"I love music, just not that kind."

"Why not?"

"Reminds me of shit I'd rather not think about."

The Devil laughed.

"But think of all the self-reflection you're doing."

"I'm also having problems with the heater. It won't respond to the dials. It's just up all the time and super hot."

"Take a look at this, son," said the Devil, ignoring my complaints.

He pulled out a remote again, clicked on a TV over the bar. The set plinked on and the sizzling static cleared.

There was Mom, with Jerry, her second husband. They were sitting on a couch. Mom was really quiet.

The Devil didn't have to tell me she'd just found out I was dead.

I'd never met Jerry, but he was holding her and seemed really concerned, though Mom didn't seem upset at all. Just really quiet. They just sat there on the couch, the two of them.

The sound was up, and I could hear them clearly.

"I'm fine," Mom said, quietly. "This was... a long time coming."

Jerry said something but his mouth made no sound.

"I did what I could," Mom said. I could tell she was devastated, just like Dad, but she wasn't showing it. She never showed much.

"What do you think about that, Johnny?" the Devil asked.

"I think her new husband seems like a nice guy."

"He's not new," said The Devil. "He's been married to her nearly a decade now. You hadn't spoken to her in years."

"Yeah."

"But what you think of that?"

I shrugged, looked at my empty beer glass. I wanted another one.

"Uh, I guess, Mom was never much of an emotional person on her own. Dad brought it out of her. She'll probably have a moment to herself later, but I think she's more pissed than anything right now. I think..."

"You think what?"

"I think she expected more out of me, when I was growing up. In fact, I don't think. I know. And then when I turned out the way I am, she sort of, I dunno... was disappointed or whatever. But I didn't care. I don't care."

"The way you are?"

"The path I chose. But like I said, I don't care."

"You don't care?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"I lived my life on my own terms. Expecting someone to live their life on someone else's terms is bullshit."

"But she thought she taught you right," said the Devil. "She was disappointed you ended up in the life you did. You were her baby boy, her only son. Her youngest child. She thought you'd come back to her someday. You never did."

I looked the Devil in the eye.

"Are you trying to get a rise out of me?"

"I'm trying to get the truth out of you," said the Devil, grinning like always. "How does it make you feel? That at the end of your life, this is all your mother can say about you?"

"Bad," I said, irritated. "It makes me feel bad."

The Devil nodded and clicked the TV off again. The picture went blank and Mom disappeared.

"Well, guess what," he said. "Time for your next assignment."

He handed me another CD. It was labeled "SLOTH."

"Can I ask you a question?" I said, turning the CD in my fingers and watching its prism-rainbow spokes revolve in the bar light.

"Sure," said the Devil.

"Is Christianity the right religion?"

The Devil rolled his eyes.

"There's no 'right' religion, son. There's the religion you're born into, or the religion of your people. Your breed. Even atheists had a religion at some point. Everyone descends from believers of some kind."

"So if I was Asian I'd be talking to Buddha right now. Or if I was from India I'd be talking to Siva."

The Devil huffed a laugh.

"Something like that."

"Does it not matter if you do good or bad, then?"

"Oh, it matters. Just not in the way you think."

"I don't get it."

"Simpletons believe in good and evil, Johnny. Only two kinds of organisms in the world, son— those that survive and those that don't."

"But why have rules if they're not enforced, if you can just—"

"Look, you can ask me the Why's and What if's until the whole thing starts over again," said the Devil, glancing furtively at the door. "It's not gonna change the fact that every human has a set of spiritual standards to meet and if they don't meet 'em they go to one place and if they do meet 'em they go to another."

He looked down at his golden watch.

"Speaking of which, it's time for our meeting to end. Get back out there and bag me another sinner."

He handed me another CD, got up, and left without another word, disappearing outside.

I sat there for a few minutes, Bible in one hand, the CD labeled "SLOTH" in the other.

## **(roger caplinger says fuck off)**

"So guys, here's what happened," said Roger. "I went to the Tesla dealership. And this guy was good, right? And I was thinking, like, Mindy and the kids would love this car..."

Roger sat in his Man Cave with his precious Collection stacked on shelves behind him, covering the walls. His Collection consisted of numerous action figures— MacFarlane limited editions, Star Wars figurines, Kaiju statues, bobbleheads, funko pops, and other assorted items. Nearly all of them were still boxed, of course. Most had been sent by fans. Roger couldn't believe the free shit people sent just because they liked you. In this capitalist treasure trove, Roger felt like Smaug in the halls of Erebor.

"It was white," said Roger. "The best color. First off. And I've always wanted a white car. You guys know that. And the guy keeps saying to me, like, 'This is the future, Roger. You might as well get it printed on the license plate. Do you want to be part of the future, Roger? The future? The future? The future?' And he just got me, man. He got me. I was like, 'Take my money'"

The Tesla had been a pretty piece, a new Model S autopilot, though in truth the salesman hadn't done much to get Roger to buy it. Roger had walked in, picked out the one he wanted and tried to haggle the price unsuccessfully, bringing up his status as a viral star and influencer. Not a fake one, either, a legitimate one. *Sell me this car for nothing and millions of people will hear about it.*

The salesman hadn't heard of him, but after checking with the higher-ups, they agreed to knock off some of the price and bring in some add-ons. So Roger had signed the papers, written a check, and drove it home. He had his assistant pick up his other car— a snazzy used Corvette he'd bought the year before.

"I need this taken care of before I go out on tour," said Roger. "Long story short, he sold it to me and it was a little more expensive than I thought. Around 90 grand. And... Mindy doesn't know yet. And I'm not telling her until I have the payment figured out. Cause if she gets pissy about it she can just, 'Fuck off'."

His view count was at five figures right now. That wasn't any good. He was used to it pushing a million. He had more subscribers than he knew what to do with— over ten million and climbing by the month. Why weren't more of them watching? It was the right hour. Fucking plebs.

Roger knew they'd pay for the Tesla. Might take a little persuading, some patience, but it'd happen. He could ask them for just about anything and they'd pay for it. All he'd ever done was be himself and tell them about his family, about his life. He had no fucking idea why these people liked him, but why question it? He could do whatever he wanted as long as he kept the content coming.

"So yeah, I'll tell Allie the Assistant about it and get it done soon," he said. "I'll get the price tag done, that is. And together, we can all make sure Mindy will stay happy."

That was more bullshit. Mindy didn't give a shit about Teslas. Mindy cared about drinking 200 dollar wine and not having a day job and keeping the kids to herself. That's what she cared about. They should've been divorced by now, but they had an image to maintain. A brand.

Roger was fine with all this. His channel was called Dad Sucks. It mostly consisted of vids where Roger annoyed his wife and kids. Mindy yelling at him about not cleaning anything, about cussing in front of the kids, about getting a job. *Fuck off*, he'd yell at her. That became his catchphrase: *FUCK OFF*. Really loud and singsong-y, like he didn't give a fuck, which he didn't.

He'd done the original vids totally out of boredom and desperation. He was being a total shit, and yet it turned out that's what people wanted to see. Fucking A. The first video was titled "I'm Getting a Fucking Divorce". It got a hundred thousand views in its first week, then some faggot blogger posted it to Buzzfeed and it really blew up.

Roger couldn't believe it. He'd just ranted about Mindy and followed her around with the phone cam while she told him to eat shit. Everyone on every site was talking about it within the week—Reddit, Twitch, TikTok, etc. It became a meme template. The publicist and the manager phone calls had come the week after. It was like a wonderful, wonderful dream.

Before, Mindy had treated him like pond scum—bullied him, threatened to leave him in between her night shifts at the hospitals. He'd been chained to her, legally and financially. Now he was the reason she couldn't leave. Ha fucking ha.

How many hours of footage were uploaded to YouTube every hour? Millions. And yet Roger was the one to get an audience. His sloppy, decadent ass. His shitty husband and father behavior. People thought it was fucking hilarious. Or they hated it. Who cared, as long as they watched.

Of course, any decadence had to be kept on the downlow. His image demanded it. As far as anyone knew, he was fucking Mindy and Mindy alone when in reality, they hadn't even touched each

other in months. He was a conservative, growing up in rural Arizona and moving around the country after college, doing shit for a church network. He'd pitched that shit gig once Mindy got her nursing degree. Nowadays he declared allegiance to the MAGA shit and people loved him for that, too. Even liberals admitted he was pretty fucking funny with his pranks and tomfoolery. His act was described as what would happen if Larry the Cable Guy had a threeway with Jim Gaffigan and Nick Offerman and then Zach Galifianakis came along a day later, sucked all the excess cum up, spat it into Joan Rivers' dead pussy and she gave birth nine months later.

He did his stand-up tours. The actual material wasn't great, even by Roger's admission, but people paid to see it. It was a beautiful thing. That's what he was doing now. 24 cities in two and a half months. A big beautiful tour bus through the Rust Belt and the flyover states. His audience was mostly guys like him, or like he'd been— suburban losers desperate for someone to tell them there was still a chance at a better life. A bunch of hicks who didn't know better.

Throughout it all Roger felt amazing. It was just as brilliant as he'd always pictured it, fame and fortune. The decadence and degeneracy. The way the upper class lived— if the regulars knew just how fucking unhinged elite lifestyles were, they'd riot and irradiate the whole fucking planet. Hell, there was that story last week about the bank executive in LA who'd died of a stroke in a limo with an underage prostitute— everyone acted appalled at that. That was just the fucking bare minimum. The dude probably had too much coke. Not Roger. Roger got all this for doing nothing. If the channel had never happened, he'd of been content sitting on his fat ass munching Pringles and sucking down Coke while binging streaming services and waiting to get bowel cancer or heart disease. Money? Mindy worked, and he would've figured something else out. Like unemployment.

He thought about Mindy and his three kids Valentino, Chiara, and little Florence. Val and Chi-chi refused to speak to him these days. Flo was too young to form opinions on such things, but Mindy would turn her against him as soon as possible. She already avoided him outright unless there was press to do or something she needed. They all stayed on the tour bus, doing their own thing. Roger wanted the hotel suite to himself anyway. It was better for all of them.

He'd probably eventually have to get a divorce, give half his shit to Mindy, but he could take his time with that. He was the product. He was the brand. They were just the co-leads. People watched *him* go onstage. Occasionally he'd bring them out at the end of the show and people would "aww" over his little

show of a life, but no one wanted that life for real. It was boring. That's why they came and saw him. It only took a few months into his first major check—a combination of Patreon donations and ad revenue off the first video—for him to start buying the life he'd always wanted. He'd started Ozempic a few months ago, took almost a hundred pounds off. He could tie his shoes again. Lol.

Still, though, sometimes he wondered—why couldn't Mindy be more happy for him? He was different. She was different. There was time to figure this out. He knew she wanted to get away, especially after the wine bottle prank. He hadn't pulled any pranks on the kids after that, hadn't even really included Mindy or the kids at all when it came to making videos. She knew he cheated on her, fucked around with all sorts of people, refused to do any sort of real husband or father work. But she couldn't leave. Cause where would she go, and where would the money come from?

Bah, all that didn't matter right now. He had to get his fans to pay for this Tesla.

His assistant, Allie, a sexy little former Fox intern who wouldn't fuck him but stayed around (for now) and got shit done and made him look good, would set up the GoFundMe. All he needed was 90 thousand of his little shits, as he called them, to give him a dollar. 90 thousand out of over ten million. That was like 2 percent or something. It was inevitable. So the fans would pick up the tab for him, and whatever they didn't pick up he'd get from his Patreon. Worse case scenario, he could auction off a signed piece of his Collection. Someone would replace it.

"I'll see you all at the show tonight," Roger said, closing out the livestream, his face bathed in the white light, reflected in his screens. "Nighty night, my little shits."

## **9. Sloth**

"You know, a lot of people used to say I was crazy," said Roger, a fat, mustached guy in his late thirties. "And now, even more people do."

There was a twitter of laughs.

"Well, you know what I say to them?"

He held the mic out.

"FUCK OFF," roared the captive audience.

They were in stitches. That was Roger's catchphrase—FUCK OFF. Really loud and obnoxious, kind of said with the same cadence as, "Ex-cuh-YUUUUUUUSE MEEEE!"

He was a very successful and very mediocrely-talented stand-up comedian, but mostly he was a YouTuber. His image was a blue-collar type schlub who played pranks on his beleaguered wife and children. He was married with three kids, all of whom he took along on his tour bus. All this made it look like he was just another goofy dad on a crazy wild vacation with his loving, eye-rolling, unthreatening wife and cute middle class litter along for the ride.

*I'm famous, honey, can you believe it? Neither can I! I'm such a fat slob!*

I'd watched a clip of Roger performing on the center console of the Cruze. It had played when I stuck the CD in the slit. He has a massive following but I'd never heard of him when I was alive. Social media is cancer and I never joined anything other than Google/YouTube and a LinkedIn page the Prof made me keep that said I was a corporate intern. I didn't want my family finding me.

I walked up the sidewalks to The Fox Theater venue. It was an old style movie house, couple thousand seater. Gorgeous space, red luxury seating and gold trimming and elaborate carvings of rams and royal flourishes. The CD had said to do the usual— park far away and walk to the target.

I passed some homeless people. I nodded at them. They didn't nod back. One of them was holding a grey rat with little black eyes. He was feeding it what looked like sunflower seeds.

"Devil just walked by," the guy with the rat told his companions.

I got into the venue— really nice old theater, really, classy as fuck, couldn't stop craning my neck to look at everything— and walked upstairs.

The show had ended an hour or so before. Roger was in his dressing room. It looked like a child's room or a particularly filthy dorm. Roger had only been here since this afternoon. Action figures and food and sex toys were everywhere.

With him were a girl and a guy. They were both in their late twenties. They were both naked and roly-poly. Roger was naked, too. His mustache bristled with happiness.

"Now *this* I can fuck," he said, looking at his two friends stretched out before him, voluptuous and vulnerable. His face was giddy, ravenous, eyes twinkling. His family was downstairs in the tour bus watching a Disney movie and eating chicken nuggets heated in the microwave. They weren't allowed up here.

I walked in and sat on a couch against the wall. Roger and his play-whores were having their fun on a fat king-sized blow-up mattress in the center of the room. The door was locked but I'd opened it and walked right in. No one was to bother Roger while he was having his fun. His whole crew knew that. *When the mattress comes out, don't be about.* That's what they said.

When Roger was finished he wiped his face with a paper towel and cleaned off his sex buddies and paid them. They were a kink couple from some sugar baby website.

"It's an honor," the girl said. Roger pulled her in and sucked on her tongue, his eyes on her husband.

"The pleasure was all mine, ya little shit," he said.

They dressed and left and Roger lay there on his back in the middle of the mattress, playing with his dick. He took an action figure—some female Star Wars figurine— and wrapped its tiny arms around his slimy dick. Then he opened a can of Spaghetti-O's and dumped them on his belly, smeared them around.

I watched, quietly disgusted.

There were boxes of pizzas set on the floor. Roger chowed down on a stray piece, grease in his mustache and everywhere else.

He called for his assistant, a pretty blonde named Allie, and told her— through the closed door— to draw him a bath.

"98 degrees on the fucking dot," he yelled through a mouthful of pizza crust. "On the fucking dot, or you'll get a great big spankin'."

The last five words were delivered in a shrill, comical, over-the-top voice. Roger intended it to sound funny, but to me it was the sound of a person in high distress, an insane person. It reminded me of a dolphin caught in a fishing net.

Then something happened that hadn't before with any of my targets.

Roger noticed me.

The CD had mentioned this might happen. It meant it was almost his time.

"Who the hell are you?" he asked through a mouthful of pizza crust. "How'd you get in here?"

"What's it like to be famous?" I asked him. The CD had said to just ask a question if this ever happened.

Roger was so wrapped up in his degeneracy that his first thought was literally how he wanted to fuck me, too. He was covered in orange pasta slime, excess lube and dried jizz, wallowing joyfully in his shit and filth. The little Star Wars figurine—it was Rey—was still clinging to his short little chode of a cock, nestled in light brown pubes.

"You are a biddie," he said, his eyes raking my body. "How old are you?"

"Older than I look," I told him.

"You don't look old," said Roger. "You look nice and ripe to me. Has a man ever loved you before?"

"I'm not here to be loved."

"Yeah, I figured," said Roger, his attitude changing instantly. "You're gonna have to wait outside, then."

"That's fine, but what's it like?"

"What?"

"You never answered my question. What's it like to be famous?"

"Oh, you know," said Roger, rolling his eyes. "It's, uh, you know, it's rewarding..."

He seriously had no idea what was about to happen to him. The CD said that would probably be the case, too—most of these people were so wrapped up in their indulgences that they wouldn't even realize they were about to slip the surly bonds of earth. It was one of the indications of damnation.

He absent-mindedly traced a Spaghetti-O from his nipple, stuck it in his hairy belly button.

"I actually really gotta go, man. Gotta clean up before the show, gotta go tell my wife what's what. I don't really have any advice to give... how'd you get in here anyway?"

He chowed more pizza, the grease and sauce dripping. He stopped chewing, got a funny look on his face. His heart, the arteries clogged with sugary gunk, was going into final Jeopardy.

It was time.

"Arise," I whispered.

Roger clutches his chest. He's alone again. The grungy otter-mode thirty-something on the couch is gone. Where'd he go, though?

Roger's alone and having a massive heart attack. His chest feels like something massive just fell on it.

The half-chewed pizza falls out of his open mouth onto his hairy chest. His eyes go blank.

He convulses on the mattress, everything squeaking, trembling, seizing. The door is locked and as far as anyone knows he's still having his fun in here.

Mattress is out, don't be about.

Johnny sits there on the couch, going through his own change. He grows, falls forward onto his hands and knees. His fingers melt, his fingernails fuse together. Stone-hard muscles grow in his back and legs.

Roger has morphed into his demon form. It's large and screeching and slimy, a fat goblin of a creature. Pointed ears, pointed nose, warts and blemishes all over its rotund body which is a chemical light blue that's almost gray. A little forked tongue, a tail ending in an arrow. Bristly hair around its mouth and crotch.

The demon leaps up, screeches at Johnny, infuriated it's been exposed.

That's new, thinks Johnny as the werebeast change finishes. So far, the others have run.

This one is standing there, gripping the deflating, goo-covered mattress with its talons and shrieking wordlessly up at him in a ghastly little display.

Power surges through Johnny. He's taller, covered with bristly sky-blue fur. Great, curved horns curl out of his forehead. His eyes are on the sides of his head now, his mouth a snarling snout where razor incisors click. His feet are heavy, sharp hooves. He snorts and paws the ground, preparing the charge. The demon paws the ground, bunching up the deflated mattress and all the chewed food and sex junk, balling its little fists. Its arms and legs are stick-thin, stuck on its fat, snowman-like body. It snorts and sneers at Johnny, snot dripping out of its nose.

For a second, Johnny thinks it'll charge him. But then it just lays down, tugging at its tiny dick.

It sinks through the floor, disappears. Johnny can hear it giggling.

Wtf, thinks Johnny.

*He lowers his head and smashes through the floor, layer after layer of reality. Suddenly the floors are not down anymore. They're in front of him. Gravity has been thrown off kilter. Down is forward, up is backward. North is left, east is up. The world spins around like a funhouse.*

*Johnny chases the demon through floor after floor, following its screeches. He smashes through walls, ceilings, floors, ceilings, walls, floors. Gravity's center keeps revolving. Johnny's hooves tear through dry wall, the carpet, cinderblock, light fixtures. He pulverizes anything in his way.*

*They're in the basement when Johnny finally catches up. There's nowhere for this demon to run. The fun is over. It's cornered, jerking off in a corner onto the cement, eyes rolled up in its head. It doesn't even try to run anymore. It's tired of running. Then, Johnny's caught it. He sinks his huge incisors into its fat belly and it screams. It bursts like fruit, screaming and clawing at Johnny's snout.*

*Johnny tears the demon's pimply flesh from its body, chews and chews, bite after bite. Roger won't stop squealing, even after his torso is mostly consumed. He tries to push Johnny's snout away with one hand, moaning, the other tugging his little demon dick until Johnny bites that off, too. He feasts, bones and gristle and every slimy organ, crunching on the bones like sticks. Roger's whole body suffers this fate, held in place by Johnny's heavy front hooves. The last thing Johnny eats is Roger's head. Roger screeches, wheezes, until Johnny eats his lower jaw. The demon's bug eyes look up, pleading, until Johnny sucks them out of their sockets, one by one, and swallows them. He crushes the skull and the mushy brain inside with one chomp, licks everything off the cement floor.*

*Johnny finishes the head, notices something on the floor, twitching.*

*It's the tail, with a tiny sharp arrow at the end. Johnny slurps it up like licorice. The pointed arrow slices his lips, stinging.*

*"Amen."*

## 10. The Sister

The radio was playing Counting Crows. A song called Round Here. Really pretty song, kind of sad-sounding, melodic, the opening guitar part is actually pretty smooth.

I only know this because my sister listened to the Counting Crows all the fucking time. I remember this song. She loved it.

It's the least shitty thing I've heard so far.

I'd rolled the front windows up, my face getting numb from the blast of cold highway air.

Truthfully, I was feeling pretty fucked up.

The vents blasted heat and the knobs weren't working. The radio blasted the American whitebread songs, forcing me to think about the memories they conjured. My legs ached and my face felt like I was next to a bonfire and the bass from the speakers throbbed in my temples.

Still, my job was to drive. Put road underneath the tires.

This highway didn't intimidate me. Highways were my home for twelve years. Highways were freedom.

Deliver the products. I drove everything from semis to minis. Pick them up, drive them to the destination. Five over the speed limit. Never get caught. Keep the burner updated in case something came up— storm, road blockage, hold off, cancellation, etc.

I kept the windows up, resigning myself to the heat and the radio.

I started thinking about Nicole. My big sister. Two years older.

I used to listen to this song with her (and many others) as she drove us both to high school, her junior and senior years and my freshmen and sophomore years.

Nicole wasn't like me. She got along with our parents. She liked what they liked, mostly, from music to movies. She could tell them things about her and they'd listen and congratulate and commiserate. She was social, not popular but competent. She had boyfriends, went to parties and events.

I remember the winter she started driving me to school. We'd get up in the pre-dawn darkness, everything frozen, deserted, the horizon like a furnace on low. We listened to that Counting Crows album over and over as we drove her old Taurus to the high school and she parked in spot 36 and we walked in the rear entrance together and split up without saying goodbye or have a good day.

I kept touch with Nicole over the years, longer than my parents. She was married and had a kid before I stopped talking to her. I didn't plan on it— losing touch with her. It just happened. No vindication or vilification.

I had two unmistakable memories with Nicole. They came up while this song played and the car vents blasted heat to my eyeballs. Both were from when we were teenagers, that part of life where you find out who you're going to be.

The first one was when I met Nicole in a computer lab. It was after school. We were waiting for mom to come pick us up. Nicole's car was being fixed. She was in a pissy mood, working on some assignment. Nicole cared about her assignments and her homework and her grades. She let it stress her out. I never cared. I got a text. Mom was downstairs.

"Hey, mom's here," I told her.

"So?" said Nicole in an annoyed voice. "She's gonna have to wait."

I didn't leave. I watched her type.

"You know why you take so slow?" I asked her. "Cause you type with one hand."

"I'm trying to follow along with this," Nicole said, not looking at me. "Shut up."

I walked away, went out to the curb to tell Mom what Nicole had said.

Mom rolled her eyes and told me to tell her we were leaving. I walked back in, amused at the whole situation. Nicole and Mom passively aggressively having it out was a rare occurrence.

"Are you good with us leaving?" I asked Nicole when I got back to the lab.

"What?"

"Are you good with us leaving and you stay here?"

"Go where?"

"To our house."

"I'll be like five minutes."

"Ten minutes if you keep typing like that."

Nicole huffed and slammed the mouse down, clicked out of everything, gathered her shit and stomped out to the car. I never found out what she was so pissy about. Her and Mom sniped at each other about nothing on the way home. I put my headphones on and didn't hear anything.

The second memory was when we were in high school. I was a sophomore and she was a senior.

She was in the garage, working on one of her dolls.

Nicole collected dolls, these baby-faced porcelain things, and she liked restoring them. They were dressed in these

elaborate outfits, frilly dresses and frocks and hats and bonnets with lots of fake hair spilling everywhere. Their faces were blank, rosy-cheeked with staring eyes. Nicole sewed their dresses and cleaned them with Q-tips and painted their porcelain faces and used other machines to put their hair on and put glue on their porcelain skin. I didn't care at the time, but looking back, it was impressive for a girl her age to be able to do all that and learn it on her own. Mom and Dad never helped her, but probably only because she told them not to.

"What is it?" she asked when I appeared.

She was ensconced in her corner of the garage, away from Dad's Firebird or anything else that belonged to him. She only came out here when he wasn't home.

"I'm bored," I told her. I almost never did this. I don't know what made me do it then.

"Go play with your friends," she said.

"They're all pissed at me," I said. I was lying. I didn't know what they were up to. I didn't want to be around them right now. I didn't have many friends anyway. My friends never stayed.

She was bent over, threading something through a doll's fingers. I looked and saw she was going to attach a little bouquet of flowers to the doll's hand. The flowers were white. They looked like roses.

Nicole had never been close with me. I tried to change that. She never minded having me around, but she never connected with me the way I wanted to. That wasn't to say we didn't get along. We did. But we never had the sort of bond that a sister and a brother should probably have.

"I want to do something," I said, refusing to leave.

"What?" Nicole said, attention still on the doll.

"I don't know. Go somewhere."

Nicole didn't say anything and for a second I thought she was going to tell me to leave.

But then she didn't.

"I have to get a book from someone at youth group," said Nicole. "You can come to that if you want."

"Ok."

"Ok. I don't have to leave for another hour."

I watched her work for a bit, her fingers moving on the doll's fingers.

"You wanna go to church while we're at it?" she asked after another minute. "After we get the book?"

"It's like 9 PM," I said.

"Yeah, I got a key to the chapel. We can just chill in there. We're gonna be at the church anyway. I was gonna go

anyway, but you can come with since you're suddenly chatty. Maybe you could talk to God about your troubles."

"How do you have the key to the chapel?"

"Ron gave it to me."

"Why? Who's Ron?"

"The old guy who coordinates the Lent volunteers."

I watched her thread that little bouquet of white flowers onto the doll's fingers. The doll was a brunette, dressed in like a Dutch dress or something. At least it looked Dutch to me. But I don't know anything about dresses or dolls.

We ended up going to the church first, as the guy Nicole was meeting wasn't home yet. He said he'd text her when he was ready for her to come over.

The church was this Catholic Church in town— kind of a long, brick building. Looked more like a school than a church, except for the actual church part, which was this big triangle-shape with these thin stained-glass windows that ran from ceiling to floor and the stations of the cross painted on the stylized brick walls.

Nicole drove, and we parked in the back. There was no one else there.

She let us into the chapel and I took a seat on the pew. It was so fucking quiet, even your footsteps on the carpet were loud. A golden crucifix hung over the altar. Jesus looked sad.

Nicole put her head down and I could tell she was praying. Nicole was like my mom, religious. My dad and I were the non-religious ones.

The place smelled like some weird mixture of wood and a weird spice I couldn't name. Incense, maybe, but something else. The lights were dim, the silence so thick you could wrap it around you and fall asleep in it.

I remembered sitting in church when we were younger and Mom still made us go. People singing quiet melodies. It was boring, but I look back now and realize it was supposed to be quiet for a reason. Like Buddhists meditating. It's not boring white people religion. It wasn't originally anyway. It's supposed to be quiet and reflective. Reminded yourself you're dust and all that. As if anyone could really let that sink in.

*You take away the sins of the world, have mercy on us,* the congregation would sing. Very light and mournful and low and straightforward, no soul or noise or swagger. White people music. Pretty in its own way, but all straight lines and pastel colors.

We sat in the pews and didn't say anything. Nicole sat on the other side of the chapel. We didn't talk, but I could hear

Nicole mumbling prayers. Then she got a text from the guy and we went and got the book.

She ran inside and was out again in another minute, clutching the book to her chest.

"So glad I don't have to see him again," she muttered, starting the car up and reversing. "He fucking waited until his wife left to tell me I could come get this. I know it."

"Why?"

"He's gross," she said. "He's a visiting pastor from Arizona. His name's Roger. He's in his twenties and married and hitting on me. I'm fucking seventeen."

"Is that why you took me?" I asked. "So you could say, 'I have to go, my brother's in the car'?"

Nicole looked down at me and smiled and said one of the nicest things anyone's ever said to me.

"You're smarter than everyone gives you credit for, Johnny."

On the way home we listened to more Counting Crows songs.

## 11. The Fourth Joint

The ride was getting worse. The windows wouldn't open any further than a crack. It was like they were mocking me. The heat wouldn't turn off. Neither would the radio. It felt like I was in a 70 mph oven. I sat there and sweated and had Steely Dan and James Taylor pumped into my earholes. My legs ached and my face burned and the road never ended.

I was getting pissed but I held on. Only four sinners to go.

Then what?

I realized I didn't know. I just wanted to get home. But what would happen after I'd consumed the sark of seven sinners?

I'd have to ask.

I thought about how it felt to wake up from death. How groggy I'd felt, out of place. I guess that's why they call it purgatory. Not that I was sure this was purgatory. It had to be. It wasn't heaven, that was for sure. And hell, well, I felt like I'd know hell when I saw it. Hell would be obvious.

Life is purgatory, if you think about it. Neither heaven nor hell.

Thank God for the next joint. This one was a nameless gas station just off the highway. It looked abandoned. No sign logos or brands or canopies, just old style pumps and a little white square building with windows. I'd seen places like this before—all of them were out in the middle of fucking nowhere.

I pulled into the gravel parking lot and parked next to one of the pumps. The pumps were empty, their hoses hanging and their price displays dark. When I took a pump off its cradle out of curiosity, nothing happened, no subterranean mechanical pump noises or lights blinking on. The number displays stayed blank. I realized my fuel gauge had stayed at full this entire time anyway. I put the old pump back on its cradle and walked over to the tiny store building.

Inside, the Devil and Death were behind the counter. The place was empty and cracked and old but there were no signs of decay. No signs of life, either. No spiderwebs or accumulated dust or dirt on the floor or anything. No residue of life. Just clean, sterile death.

A little bell tinged when I opened the door.

"Have a Snickers," said the Devil, pointing to the candy rack as I approached them. He sat on a stool behind the counter. A cash register sat beside him. Death was standing.

I looked down and saw the candy rack in front of the counter was full, a smorgasbord of colorful wrappers. Snickers, Milky Way, Skittles, Reese's, M&M's, Kit Kats, and so much more.

I knelt and helped myself, grabbing multiple items and ripping the wrappers off and shoving them in my mouth and chewing and letting the processed sugar flood my taste sensors. Holy shit, this candy tasted good.

"Have a few," said the Devil. "Hell, have all you want. Makes you appreciate the simple things."

I didn't need a second invitation. I said nothing. I gorged myself. Plastic wrappers fluttered to the floor one after the other, my mouth stuffed with chocolate and caramel and chemicals masquerading as fruit juice.

"Gone," said Death.

"How's the highway?" the Devil asked me, arms crossed, grinning down.

"It's long," I said, chewing hard, swallowing huge chunks of candy matter, chewing and swallowing so hard it hurt.

Next to the cash register, there was an old security monitor, a tiny television screen. The Devil turned it around so I could see it. It was already on.

There was Nicole, on a couch. She was on the phone.

"She's talking with your mother," said the Devil. "She called to tell her about you."

"How'd she hear about this?" I asked, barely legible since my mouth was so full, tearing open a Twix and shoving all four of the bars in my mouth at once, savoring that satisfying, sticky, cookie-caramel crunch.

"She saw it on the news," said the Devil, his smile wide as ever.

"My death was on the news?"

"Yeah."

I stopped chewing for a second. I was in the middle of opening a bag of Skittles.

"How did I die that it ended up on the news?"

"Eat your Skittles, Johnny-child."

I dumped the entire bag of Skittles into my mouth, closed my mouth as best I could, chewing, chewing, chewing, my jaws burning. I glanced away from my candy feast at the monitor again.

Nicole wasn't crying or anything, just sitting on her living room couch with a pillow in her lap, eyes wide, watching her TV. After a minute, she called someone's name. I couldn't

hear her—no audio. But Nicole's kid came into the room—my nephew, Bryden, who's about four—and Nicole hugged him quietly and kissed his sweaty little forehead.

"Gone," said Death.

"What do you think of this, Johnny?" asked the Devil.

"I think I wish I would've talked to her again," I said, and even I was surprised I said it. "I kept in touch with her, but not really."

"Does her pain not affect you?"

I looked at Nicole's face. I missed her.

"It does," I admitted. She wasn't showing any real emotion, just maybe shock and anxiety, but I could tell she was in the throes of some emotional turmoil. Nicole was always good at holding that stuff back, being the calm one in the storm. I loved her for that, I really did. Big sister shit.

"She's quite upset," said the Devil. "She's going to have anxiety attacks for the rest of her life. She wouldn't have wished that manner of death on you. Of course, the news report sensationalized it a little to make it sound worse than it was, but Nicole doesn't know that. She misses you. How do you feel?"

I didn't have an answer at first. I wasn't going to tell him it made me feel bad, which it did. Everything made me feel bad. I swallowed my last bit of candy. I'd eaten the entire rack, almost, only some Almond Joys and Hershey bars left. My cheeks hurt from chewing, my throat felt scorched from swallowing. The wrappers lay at my feet, crinkling.

Finally, I thought of something.

"I'm sorry she's upset," I said.

"Gone," said Death.

The Devil ferociously smacked the counter and I jumped a little. For a second, I thought of my dad.

"Johnny, my boy," said the Devil, still grinning down at me with peevishness tinging his voice. "You're gonna have to start giving me more than one sentence answers here."

I stuffed a Hershey bar in my mouth, whole, felt it start to melt and stick to my gums and tongue, mashed its thin rectangles between my teeth. I was sitting on the floor, surrounded by garbage, looking up at the monitor and absent-mindedly tearing wrappers and shoving the contents into my mouth. It felt like the morning after Halloween. My fingers and lips were sticky.

"I'm sorry," I said, unsure of what else to say. I swallowed again and chewed again, my stomach heavy and bloated. The lining of my mouth felt grainy and irritated. I was still hungry.

"Your only sister," said the Devil. "Your only sibling. When was the last time you spoke with her?"

"Not that long ago, actually," I said. "I reached out to her. It was when Bryden was a toddler."

"So at least a few years. Not that long ago, indeed. And what did you do?"

"We talked. I went over to her house. Her husband didn't want me there. So I didn't stay long. But we talked."

The Devil stared down from his perch, spoke to me through gritted teeth, through his Joker grin. His dark eyes raged at me.

"And how did you *feeeeeel?*" he asked, drawling the word out.

"Good," I said. "I felt good to see her. I'd always wanted to have a better relationship with her, and I took what I could get. But I was angry at her husband. But I didn't want him to be pissed off. I wanted him to like me. But he didn't. I missed her. I feel like we could've been something better to each other."

"Gone," said Death.

The Devil inhaled through his nose, his dark eyes losing their rage shine.

He nodded primly.

"All right," said the Devil. "We'll call that good."

He handed me another CD over the counter. This one was labeled PRIDE.

"Only two things you should never underestimate on the mortal plain, son," he said. "The love of power and the power of denial."

## **(brett patrick pigs out)**

Brett Patrick, former officer of the Solis Creek PD, could still see the look on his guy's face. And it still gave him wood. It made him salivate, could even make him tear up a little. Not from sorrow, but from the thought that he would likely never be able to experience that kind of thing again.

He was working out. He always relived the moment when he was working out. Currently he was whaling on his pecs. Freeweights. Third set. That glorious, wonderful pain and stretching sensation in the aftermath. Swole.

He remembered the civilian fuck begging for his life. The dim hallway. The barked orders. His finger twitching on the trigger at the precise moment. The roar of the gun. The flash of the message ("Isaiah 11:4") inscribed on the inside of Samson's loading chamber. The judge. Samson. Brett had named all his weapons after the Judges in the Bible. Gideon. Deborah. Elon. Would've made his pastor father proud.

It was a memory to be savored.

And the best part was, the system backed Brett up. He was still a free man. He'd taken a life, experienced the thrill of ending a life, and he was free.

He still had to be careful, of course. He was technically on suspension, but he was still collecting paychecks. Plus, his medical expenses would be reimbursed, and when all was said and done he'd be "medically retired" due to alleged PTSD. It would net him a pension of 3500 a month. Words like "administrative leave" and "within policy" and "split-second judgement"— all spewed from the fishy lips of a desk jockey union rep— floated through Brett's ears in the weeks prior to this final determination.

Technically, he'd been fired. But it didn't feel like it.

But for now, he needed to lay low, so he kept to his apartment unless he was out getting something or meeting someone.

Truthfully, he'd never been happier. Kendra, his wife, was taken care of for the time being, chilling at her parents' in San Diego, and he'd have her back at their place in a matter of months and the public would forget everything and move on to the next bullshit news item. Until then, it was a sort of bachelor life all over again.

Of course, there had been a media circus. Who cared? Brett Patrick was right. Brett Patrick was a patriot who had served the community. The law was always right and the law protected itself. Fuck the civs. They didn't get it. They were lucky to be protected. The cowardly, the slothful, the faithless, the detestable. They were the ones who should be fucking worried. Like that fucking idiot fat-ass YouTuber comedian whose heart gave out on him in the hotel room last week- he'd been found reportedly naked and covered in food and God knows what else. That was how the civs lived, including the lottery winners. Karma was a bitch.

Brett had become a cop at 23. Before that, he'd been the type of person to wear shirts that said, "Kill cops". A real lost kid, truly. Lost in his ways. Doing lines and shots nightly, fucking different bitches off Tinder just about every other night (always sure to wrap it up, no illegitimate kids to worry about, at least not that he was aware of), hitting the gym, getting swole, doing it all again night after night after day after week. He could intimidate anyone, make any pussy tingle.

He'd been busted for cocaine possession. Been an idiot, scratched up a car in a Best Buy parking lot. Sheriff had been nearby. Bad luck.

He'd had no official record, and the judge had let him go with probation and a silly little drug rehab program. He'd also suggested Brett get a new path in life. The judge was like the father he'd never known. Brett felt something really odd when the judge looked at him, something wholesome and uncorrupted.

"It's called divine intervention, son," the judge, whose name was Roberts, had said. "You're getting some help."

Strangely, Brett wanted to be a better person for this guy, for some fucking reason. But that hadn't been what really mattered. What had mattered was Brett's epiphany.

While in custody he'd had the epiphany- he wanted to be the one holding this power. The power to just take someone in off the street, ask them whatever, let them go, let them sit there while you decided their future. The power to wield a gun, righteously, and use it if necessary.

And wouldn't you know it, Judge Roberts was up for the idea when Brett asked his office if he knew where to get started.

He'd enrolled in the academy. A few months of training. Remarkably easy. Found a job at a small department near Sedona begging for recruits. Gone on the beat. Night shift, at first. Life was a trip.

A few years went by. He met Kendra when she was serving shots at a bar in Phoenix, proposed to her in the desert after a

year, they got married and bought a house in Chandler, she got pregnant and miscarried at four months. Nothing else that interesting happened, but Brett found wearing the uniform to be, overall, a blessing and a thrill, even on the boring days.

Then, the incident.

The call was to an apartment building. Signs of a dude with a gun. Some nosy neighbor, probably. They never did find one. A gun, that is.

The guy's name had been Ralph Michaelson. Some nobody, some boring profession. Non-essential. Data entry or something.

He'd been in the hallway when Brett arrived. Brett couldn't even remember what he'd been doing. Michaelson was definitely stoned, mumbling and trying to be all, "Hey, man, I live here, I'm just getting home..." He was clearly unarmed, but the adrenalized Brett had told himself at the time that there was no way to know that for sure. Brett had Samson with him, and he'd never had a call like this before. Enough reason to use Samson. Long rifle. Beautiful weapon. Meticulously carved metal, a piece of art.

Brett shouted orders to the guy. Got him on his knees. Hands on his head. Crawl forward. Stop. Don't reach down. He got the guy sobbing. The guy was a coward. He was not righteous. If he'd truly done nothing wrong, he would've been quiet and compliant. Brett was in the right.

He yelled until the hallway stank of the guy's piss. Toyed with him. Waited for backup. Initially, he'd assumed his sergeant would come and take over and that would be that.

He didn't remember making the decision to pull the trigger. He just looked at this weeping, pathetic mess of a man— a man not much older than himself—at the mercy of his sight and all of a sudden Samson was talking. The judge spoke three words, right into the torso of Ralph Michaelson, who jerked and went still. No gore. Just the scent of Samson's smoke.

Brett's bodycam caught the whole thing but whatever. It was released and the public went apeshit. So what. The bewildered herd knew nothing about the burdens of law enforcement. Sometimes nobodies got hurt. Sometimes they died. That didn't make them somebody.

The media circus was unlike anything Brett had seen. People calling for his death— libs and communists mostly. But there was also a lot of support. People calling him a hero and a scapegoat. Brett laughed at all of it.

Brett did nothing much but work out these days— that and stream Netflix and jerk off. He jerked off to the memory of Ralph on the floor, the absolute power he'd had. THAT was the moment he'd once wished for, when he'd been sitting in the drunk

tank at some podunk jail outside Scottsdale. It was everything Brett had dreamed. And what had he gotten for it all? 3500 dollars a month to stay quiet and be righteous. Clearly, this was what God wanted. Brett was righteous. He was a fucking Chad with a wife and a life and a righteous career and nobody could take that away from him.

At yet, at the end of it all, there was one little hitch.

And that had been the way Judge Roberts looked at Brett after the incident.

He hadn't said anything. Just looked at him. He'd shown up at one of the hearings. Attended out of nowhere. Brett had done a double take. There he was. Roberts hadn't said anything, just sat in the back and gazed at Brett. It was sad and angry at the same time.

"I was wrong about you," is what the look said. "You bottomed out. I thought you were worth it, but you're not."

Brett couldn't think about that. Being a better person was just not on the table. Brett was who he was. He knew he could be decent, but thinking too much about Ralph Michaelson in any truly remorseful way was not going to get him anywhere. He knew repenting for something like that was something you never got over. No one wanted anyone to be redeemed in this world. Not in America. Not in the modern US. It was all just take take take and nothing else. If he'd apologized, they would pounce. Judge Roberts told him he should make a public apology, but it was a farce and everyone knew it. Ralph Michaelson's wife stared at him during the trial and said nothing. Somewhere, Brett felt inside him a heavy, tremendous guilt, but he pushed it away. It didn't matter. He'd been in the right.

Even Kendra was strangely distant now. She'd been a playful little filly when they'd met at that bar, Brett sliding up next to her and asking, "Do you gamble, darlin'?" then taking her over to the Kino machine and by some miracle winning them 500 bucks which he immediately tipped her.

She had the same fucking look as Roberts.

"I was wrong."

He thought of his mother, dead six years now, victim of a diabetes that she could never get a handle on. His father, never around much and then finally gone for good when Brett was in fourth grade. His older brother, tired and beat down and working factory jobs in Carson City. They'd all could've been decent people. But they weren't. And something about that bothered Brett Patrick, even though he couldn't articulate it to himself.

Maybe it wasn't just the power. Maybe that wasn't why he'd put on the badge, the only reason. Maybe he'd, even for a second, believed he could be different. He could be good.

He remembered the one time he'd hung out with his dad. His dad was a cowboy, worked on ranches all over the southwest. Never had time. Probably had multiple families out there. But he'd taken Brett out to the painted desert once and they'd watched the sun come up.

"You got the shine in you," his dad had said. "You can be whatever you want, and you'll do it fine. You won't need me, that's for sure. No one needs no one in this world. Just how it is. But don't mean you gotta add to the pain just cause you can."

Brett thumped the weights down on the carpet, slinging sweat of his wrists. He heaved. Something was really weird about the way he was feeling. He couldn't process it. He needed a change of scenery. He needed Kendra back so he could talk to her. He needed to talk to Roberts, just thank him again. Make sure the old man didn't hate him.

*I'm sorry, he thought. Like, really.*

And he was. Maybe not to that nobody Michaelson, but to someone, that was for sure. Maybe even just himself.

He would see Kendra at the end of the week, but for now he wanted a different kind of sugar, the regular kind. Pop Tarts. Processed sugar. Chemical fruit slime and dry-ass pastry. Like flavored drywall innards.

Brett did a line before going out—coke was still easy to score with his new contacts—and he was feeling invincible. He roared down the street in the beater Taurus he'd recently replaced his old F150 with.

He went to the Ralph's and bought himself the pop tarts. Cereal aisle. He got cherry flavored. Then a box of s'more flavored, too. Why not splurge? He got a Diet Coke, too.

The cashier didn't recognize him. No one did. He walked in and out like he always had.

Back in the car, he tore open the box of cherry and the silvery packets, stacked the pop tarts, chomped down. Fuck yes.

He thought of Ralph Michaelson's red, splotchy face, his hands up and trembling. His body crumpled in the hallway under the shitty recessed lighting. Barely any blood. Just the scent of Samson's judgement hanging under the lights. The back-up had arrived not moments later.

"What'd he do?" had been the sergeant's first words.

Buzzing righteously on carbonated caffeine, processed sugar, and another dab that he snorted off his pinky nail, Brett floored it out of the parking lot, narrowly missing a curb as he opened the box of the s'more flavored pop tarts.

He cruised toward the nearest red light, tore open another silvery package with his teeth, took a bite out of the double Pop Tart stack and thanked God for karma.

## **12. Pride**

It seemed like a long time until the next exit. I did notice the clouds were seeming to thin a little as I took the turn and headed north. But that turned out to not be comforting at all.

I felt disgusting as I got back into the car and got back on the highway. Every muscle in my legs ached, threatening to cramp. The heat from the vents was unbearable, and sweat dampened every crevasse and crease in my clothes and skin. The music wouldn't stop, blasting outward and searing my eardrums, I couldn't even recognize the songs anymore. It was just noise. I relished the pride CD, the change of pace.

I thanked God for the exit.

PRIDE.

Night seemed to drape over everything as I drove north. It got hotter again, a dry heat. I cruised along in my hellish, humid oven until I found myself in yet another suburban mecca, this one in western desert. There were convenience stores and fast food drive thrus everywhere, the ubiquitous, faceless, brightly-colored everyday generators of everyday corporate commerce. Up ahead, at an intersection, a phalanx of flashing lights were arranged in a messy circle.

I pulled over, parked, got out, cherished the desert night breeze on my legs and arms and face. I stood there a second, stretching away whatever aches I could. Then I walked past the cop cars towards their shielded center.

It was a horrific wreck, a mini-SUV on its side. It had skidded and rolled, reduced to a crumpled toy just near the curb. The driver had been thrown-- tried to make a right hand turn too quickly, high on pink cocaine and caffeine and processed sugar.

The body lay in the ditch. It had already been covered with a purple tarp.

I glanced at the cops, all waiting for the morgue to arrive, their jobs all but finished, sipping their coffee, the ambulance shut up and the paramedics lounging in the front seats.

The cops were talking about the body as I passed by.

"This is that idiot that shot the guy in the apartment building last year," they said. "One of Roberts' sympathy cases. Used to work for Solis Creek."

"He getting his pension?"

"Yeah, they gave it to him. Shuffled him off."

"Course they did."

"Lucky fuck."

"Devil's around here," mutters another.

I walked down in the drainage ditch, my shoes kicking dry sand and dirt. I stood over the purple tarp. Its corners flapped in the warm desert breeze.

The tarp jerked. Something was under it. The siren lights flashed, casting frenzied insanity on everything.

"Come on, fucker," I said to the tarp. "Let's get this shit over with."

As if answering, the thing under the tarp suddenly sat up, and I heard growling that sounded an awful lot like chuckling.

"Arise," I grunted.

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*Johnny falls to all fours as the demon rips the tarp off. He feels his body lengthen, bones spiral into new shapes, turn into liquid muscle. Fur sprouts and turns royal purple, a magnificent mane spilling down his back. There are claws on his paws, fangs in his mouth.*

*He hears a roar and something slams into him and suddenly he's flying through the air, back towards the circle of cop cars.*

*He turns in the air and lands on all four of his feet, fully transformed. He roars back, the name of the Lord.*

*The demon that emerges from behind the police cars is a musclebound bruiser of a monster. To Johnny it looks like a horned, skeletal ape; hairless and grinning and hollow-eyed. Its massive arms and fists lead the way, knuckle walking.*

*Magnificent horns stick out of its forehead, curling up and around, an ostentatious display of headwear. Its eye sockets are wide and empty, and black ooze seeps down its bony cheeks to splat on the pavement as the thing confidently strides towards Johnny.*

*The cop cars have formed a circle, lights the color of American patriotism flashing and flashing.*

*A battle ring.*

*The demon makes that metallic chuckling noise in its throat. It leans back and beats its exposed ribcage of a chest. Johnny realizes it's the sound of a gun cocking.*

*Johnny is not afraid. He growls, head low.*

*They circle each other for a moment.*

They leap.

They connect.

They wrestle, they tear, they bite, they slash, claw, rip.

Johnny is surprised— this will not be an easy match, unlike the others. This is two predators in territorial battle. This is not predator and prey.

The demon throws Johnny off into a cop car. Johnny recorrects in the air, finds gravity, lands on all fours again, prepares to leap back.

Then something happens that Johnny is not expecting.

The demon speaks.

"Why have you come here?" it demands.

Johnny answers.

I am here in the name of the Lord, to consume the sinner.

"I am no sinner," the demon snorts, beating one fist against its chest. "I am a righteous man."

You are weak. You have been damned.

The demon stops, and though its skull-face is expressionless, Johnny feels concern and surprise.

"Damned?" the demon asks.

Johnny sits a moment, regal on his haunches. The demon stands, knuckles on the ground. Johnny sees its back legs are like hooves, its horns curved and twirling like the headgear of some twisted Dr. Seuss ungulate.

You are. God condemns you for your sins.

"What sins are mine?"

You have committed many, as all men do, but pride is the sin that hangs from your neck.

"Pride?" The demon's black eyes continue oozing their sap. "My father was a man of the Lord. Pride is the worst sin of all." Yes, it is.

Though Johnny's guard is still up, his claws out and his hair on end, he feels the battle fever disappearing. This is something he never expected. What now?

"How have I become unrighteous?" the demon asks. "I was once an unrighteous young man, lost and lonely, but I found a new path. A righteous path."

You may have, but on that path you once slaughtered an innocent man. Your entire life led to that moment, and you failed it.

The demon that was once Brett Patrick stares.

"Yes," it says after a moment. "Yes. I did."

And you did not repent. You did not even think you did anything wrong. Pride.

"I know it in my heart," says the demon. "The man I shot. I told myself it was necessary, but yes, I merely wanted to feel what

*it was like to take a life. To possess another, the essence of another."*

*The demon hangs its head.*

*You were a wicked man, Johnny says. You were a wicked man, and you must pay for it.*

*I harmed the innocent, the demon says.*

*Out of pride, says Johnny. Out of your infantile desire for power.*

*The demon stops, and suddenly kneels before Johnny. It lifts its neck, exposing it. The two of them face each other as in the beginning of the fight.*

*Then end me, says the demon that was once Brett Patrick. If this is what you say, then it is true and I am indeed unworthy. End me, and make the world right.*

*Johnny doesn't hesitate. He bounds forward, hungry for the throat. He goes to rip, to tear, to feast.*

*But his claws find only air, and his jaws close around nothing.*

*The demon is gone. And Johnny is alone, panting, troubled and circling what once was a circle of police cars but is now just a strange vaguely-shaped circle of white blobs with flashing blue and red at their crowns.*

*He stands there and paces, as if in cage. Soon, he knows there is nothing else to do.*

*"Amen."*

## **13. The Professor**

I got back in the Cruze and drove, and my mind wandered back to Nicole finding out I was dead. I must've died in my apartment, since that's where I woke up, so how the fuck would it've made the news? But just like when I found out I died, I wasn't freaked out. Just confused.

I hadn't been sick, that I was sure of. But as much as I tried, all I could remember was the time from way before my death. I couldn't come up with anything past the last few years. Just, blankness. Like nothing had happened. Like trying to remember before you were born.

The radio was playing Sting's If I Ever Lose My Faith In You.

It made me think about The Prof. He was a professor I had in college, and then my boss for my entire driving career. I knew his real name but I never used it. It was always just The Prof.

I had a lot of professors, but only one Prof. I never finished college. I did one year of community college, not even a four year degree. I was an all right student. But I ended up not needing the degree. I had the Prof, instead.

The only class I ever had him for was Humanities. Art history. The first day of class he played piano— Also Sprach Zarathustra, and the story of the man who goes up the mountain to ask God for the meaning of life before realizing there is no meaning and therefore he's free to make his own meaning.

The Prof was the first teacher I ever had who made me look forward to learning. We went through every art movement there was. The Venus of Willendorf to banksy. I fell in love with the images he showed us. My favorite movements were surrealism and Romanticism, though I loved it all.

The Prof would often go off topic, let us have discussions about stuff completely unrelated to art. A lot of the time, this was politics. The Prof hated capitalism, the global capitalist state. He wasn't a socialist, though. He was an anarchist. Every man for himself. He hated the capitalists because they applied that philosophy to everyone but themselves. Pure cowardice, in his opinion. I still have no idea how he got tenure in US academia. No rules. Only freedom.

"Pure nature is anarchy," he'd say to us. "Pure competition is anarchy. For everyone. Fairness. Our natural state."

A lot of students argued with him. He happily argued back. Even when they hated him, they respected him.

For some reason, the Prof liked me. At first I thought it was some weird chickenhawk thing, but as it went on I realized his vibes were of respect and friendship and not some concealed deep-seated lust. As far as I know, he never married or had children, but no students ever had an issue with him in that way. None that I knew of anyway.

I had one semester with him, then another. We struck up a rapport. He'd call on me, say hello in the hallway, how are you doing, it's good to see you, etc. Nothing too close, but I could tell he liked me, believed in me.

It felt flattering. It felt strange. It felt good. Here was this guy who clearly had had some success in his life. I'd had none. I came from nowhere. Yet he was treating me as though I was someone worth knowing.

Then, at the end of that year, when I was 19, he called me to his office.

I had a seat in front of his desk. The Prof's office was nothing special, could've been a doctor's office or a salesperson's office. It was located in the far corner of the Liberal Arts building. It was pretty small, only about the size of my bedroom. Just a regular desk and a computer and shelves and papers and books and shit. Grey painted metal and off-white paint. The only interesting thing was a William Blake painting on the wall behind him— it showed God creating the universe with a drawing compass.

When I was seated, the Prof pulled out an expensive bottle of liquor. I'd never even heard of the brand, some European words. It was whiskey of some kind.

"3500 a bottle," he told me. "I save this only for when I have to get rid of one of my employees. Let them go."

"You mean, like, your interns or something? Your assistants?"

"I don't have assistants, Johnny," said the Prof. "This is for something I do outside my teaching. My real job, you might say."

He uncorked it, pulled out two crystal glasses from a drawer. He was a thin guy in his late 50s with thick, vaguely curly, distinguished grey hair. Up close his skin was leathery. He had eyes that could be kind one moment and ice cold the next. In classroom debates, he could be ruthless— yelling and snapping at students who didn't meet his standards or who gave lazy arguments. But his lectures were mesmerizing. I would've been

intimidated if I hadn't grown up with my parents. His voice was high, creaky. I loved listening to him talk.

"Outside school?" I asked.

"I have many endeavors besides my teaching. Many people depend on me. And I only drink this bottle when I've had to get rid of one of my outside employees. Sometimes it's not entirely my decision, but... that's something you wouldn't want to hear about."

He slid one of the glasses across the desk to me.

"I'm not 21," I told him.

"I doubt that's stopped you before."

"Can't you get in trouble for this?" I asked, eyeing the liquor. I had indeed drunk to excess many times by then, with friends and by myself, but doing it here in school with a man I respected was both exciting, gratifying and off-putting all at the same time.

"I do all my business in this office," the Prof said. "I know every nook and cranny. See how organized it is? Everything is exactly the same, every time. If something is different, I know it. And I know no one can hear us right now— we're down at the end of the hall and no one is nearby. I know no one is watching— there aren't even any windows in this dull box of drywall and cinderblock. So let's raise a proper toast. Do you know why we toast, Johnny?"

"To, uh, congratulate people?"

"Indeed," said the Prof. "We congratulate the person and then clink our glasses together. A gesture of good will, to show that we trust each other. Though there's no evidence for it, it's said the concept of toasting came about because people would clink glasses and their drinks would slosh into one another. A gesture of trust. The drinks mix together. I drink and you drink the same liquid. We trust each other. No poison. No deception. Again, no real evidence for it, but I do like the story."

"Sincerity," I said, suddenly remembering something and eager to let him know I remembered it. "Like you said in that other story, about the Greek pillars. Sin cere. Without wax. They didn't put wax in the cement so the pillars stayed up stronger. They didn't cheat. They were sincere."

The Prof beamed and I felt pride in myself. I'd never had or wanted that kind of approval from my dad. I didn't care about dad's approval. I cared about the Prof's approval.

"Johnny Clee," he said, raising his glass. "That is why you're in this office with me right now. Lift."

I did, and the Prof toasted with me. The liquor was powerful. I tried not to choke, my eyes watering.

"Johnny," he said. "We don't know each other as well as we could, do we?"

I hesitated. That could be interpreted as creepy.

"I mean, uh, I've had you two semesters—"

"You're always in class," the Prof said, talking over me, and I realized he hadn't actually been expecting an answer. "You take this seriously. You're not naturally gifted or naturally intellectual, but you try. You take this very seriously. That impromptu debate on the Civil War, having to argue against abolition. You did good in that. Or arguing in favor of feudalism. Also a hard task. But you never complained, and you always try even if you fail. I find that impressive. Those are qualities that the real world will find useful. Your mind continues to surprise me."

"Thanks," I said, genuinely thrilled and also ready to bolt for the door if he tried to grab me or something.

The Prof kept drinking and so did I. It didn't take long before I was pretty tipsy, off only one glass of this stuff. Again, I was mostly past the point where I was worried the Prof was some kind of sex creep, but getting a student drunk in his office was definitely sketchy.

He noticed how loose I was, started asking me weird questions—did I have a clean driving record, what was my job history like (I didn't really have one then), things like that. Then the conversation switched to my life. The Prof asked me things no one had ever cared to ask me. I told him everything—my parents, my sister, the whole thing. Even beating on my dad that one time.

"It is not the man who gets angry for any cause that is praiseworthy," said the Prof after I finished. "But he who does so at the right person, in the right measure, at the right time, and for the right purpose. Aristotle said that."

I didn't say anything.

"Your father knew that would happen," said the Prof. "On some level. It had to happen. And then so it did happen, and now it's part of your memories."

I'd never had anyone like this in my life. Looking back on it now, I realized it was like a therapy session. The only one I ever had.

"You are not your family," said the Prof when I admitted to shame about my dad's rage and impotence and my mom and sister's distance. "You can be more than them. You said you're the first one in your family to ever go to college?"

"I mean, my dad's cousins might have gone," I said. "But yeah."

"This is a community college, you realize, not a four year university."

"I'm planning on transferring, though," I said. And I was, but I hadn't done any looking into it yet.

"How is this getting paid for?"

"Loans," I said. "I took out a loan."

"Who co-signed?"

"...my mom."

"Ah, so they ARE at least somewhat interested in your future, after all. What do you want to do?"

I shrugged.

"I don't know."

The Prof slammed his hand down on the desk, startling me.

"Then why the FUCK are you here," he yelled. "Why the FUCK would you spend your DEBT money and waste a PIVOTAL opportunity. Why do something just to DO IT? Are all you goddamn millennials so thick-headed? Can't you see you're being enslaved?"

I didn't say anything. I was stunned. I was embarrassed. I felt chided and frightened in a way I never had even with my dad. I realized it was because unlike my father, I respected the Prof.

I studied the melting ice in my glass and downed the rest of it.

"I have so many bright young minds in here," the Prof ranted. "So much pure potential, nothing but potential! And what happens? It's dulled by the system. Snuffed out. It's a goddamn fucking TRAVESTY."

He was really yelling now and it was making me really uncomfortable. I clutched my empty whiskey glass and looked at the front of his desk.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I just hadn't thought about it. I figured I'd pick a major after I transferred."

"There is nothing to be sorry about, Johnny," said the Prof, instantly placid again. "Forgive my outburst. It's just, I can't stand to see so much of the future go without any bloody guidance or encouragement. It breaks me up."

I saw with more surprise that he seemed to be near tears. I stared at him, unsure of how to respond.

The Prof gathered himself. Cleared his throat.

"That all brings me to the reason I asked you here this evening, Johnny. Thank you for having a drink with an old bloody coot like me."

"You're welcome," I said.

The Prof lowered his voice.

"I have a job for you, Johnny," he said. "That's why I've offered this meeting. I've kept an eye on you all year, and I'm confident you're the right person for this job."

"What's the job? Is it an internship?"

"No. Far from it. I've been doing this longer than I was a professor. It's relatively easy, but it carries much, much more responsibility."

"What is it?"

"It's delivering packages for me. It pays very well. Better than any job you'll get from a four-year university, especially if you don't know what it is you'll be studying. Would you be interested?"

I was immediately interested. Money was good. I could finally move out. That was the first thought I had. Get away from my parents. Freedom. Real freedom. I could hardly even picture it.

"Uh, I mean, I would, but I'd need to hear more—"

"Details will be worked out. But are you *interested*?"

I nodded.

"Yeah, definitely. Thank you."

The Prof nodded, looked up the ceiling, thinking.

"Good," he said. "Good..."

He looked back at me and smiled.

"I think you'll do very well."

"Why me, though?" I asked him.

The Prof looked back at me and frowned and for a second I thought he was going to yell again. But instead he just answered.

"I saw an intelligent, quiet young man in my class from a rough background, with a lot of ambition and nowhere to put it. I feel no shame in admitting that an associate's degree from this little podunk university isn't going to mean much in the real world. Even if you transfer somewhere, it won't mean much. Not in the long run. There are some places that just don't produce anyone of note. They're not designed for it. They're designed to churn out money batteries for the oligarchy and nothing else. So I'm giving you an outlet."

He narrowed his eyes at me and I didn't say anything.

"Take the hint, Johnny. If you don't make the decision on what to do with your life, you have it made for you. The sacrifice gets made whether you choose it or not. So I'm offering you a sacrifice. If you want to accept the sacrifice, it's here."

"What's the sacrifice?"

"Your time, of course."

I put my glass on his desk. I was interested. I was also still a little suspicious. At least I wasn't worried he was going to jump me.

"What would I be delivering?"

"Packages," said the Prof. "Different packages. All sorts, really. Like I said, details will be worked out. You'd start when the semester is over. I'll put you in touch with the right people, and you can make the arrangements on your own."

I nodded.

"Yeah," I said. "Yeah, I'm interested."

The Prof smiled.

"You, Johnny," said the Prof. "Are what some would call a 'clean skin'. And what I would call a 'high driver'."

## 14. The Fifth Joint

The ride had become unbearable. Nothing felt good anymore. I was in a constant state of too hot or too cold. The heat didn't shut off. The windows didn't roll up. The radio blasted whitebread hit after hit— John Mellencamp and Matchbox 20 and Eurythmics. Everything in my body ached. All I could think about was my distant past and everything that I'd done wrong in my life.

I was enraged but also strangely numb. I didn't feel the need to throw a fit or a tantrum like most people do when they've been stretched to the limit. There was no release, just the constant tension.

As I stewed in my shit, I glanced upward and almost swallowed my tongue.

Above the clouds, a great shadow was passing over me.

Something was walking around on top of the clouds. Something huge. Something with multiple, spider-like legs.

It blocked out the shafts of white light. I could make out the shape, vaguely reptilian and mammal and insect all at once. I once saw a huge stinger dip down between two clouds. The massive shadow— wider than a 100 jet planes stuck wing-to-wing— lumbered over me as I sped along, then wandered around in the northwest for a while before disappearing over the horizon.

Whatever was walking around up there had to have a legspan of several miles.

The fifth joint was a barn on the edge of a barren cornfield. It was big, the size of a warehouse, and dark red with white trim. The clouds surfed overhead. I scanned the horizon for the giant spider-thing. It was gone for now.

I parked my fucking Cruze on the fucking gravel and walked the fuck inside the barn. There was an enormous sliding door on the barn's side. I pulled on it until it slid open.

Inside the barn, the Devil was sitting behind a desk— a huge one, a heavy block of wood the size of a car. It had to have weighed hundreds of pounds. It squatted on the cement, straw and dirt scattered around it. Death was standing right next to the Devil. I smelled dust and farm mildew and manure.

"Gone," said Death when I walked in and up to the desk. My muscles still ached, my nose running, my eyes wind-scorched.

"How's the road, Johnny?" asked the Devil, as always.

"It's fucking long," I said. "Like I already told you."

"Have some milk," said the Devil, offering me a glass pitcher on the desk.

I hadn't even noticed it. I was so fucking thirsty I gasped.

There was a glass next to the pitcher but I chugged the milk right out of the pitcher. It tasted rich and wonderful and a bunch of other words I'm not smart enough to come up with. I'd never appreciated a simple glass of milk in my life. Milk was something you added to other stuff to make it richer, or stuff you put in cereal. You never drank it straight. But my days/weeks/time on the road made it feel like drinking a gourmet vanilla shake. It was goddamn refreshing. These little joint meals were my only redemption now— the milk chilled me out, inside and out, the only thing close to pleasure I'd experienced in God knows how long.

I chugged and chugged, the silky milk cooling my furnace-blasted lips and tongue. Little rivers of milk ran down my cheeks. My throat ached from swallowing so much. The pitcher got lighter and lighter as I tilted it. Excess milk splatted to the ground.

I finished the pitcher and gulped down air. Breathing when you're dead was an awful lot like breathing when you're alive.

"Gone," said Death.

"You're goddamn right," I told him, slobbering my tongue all over the rim of the pitcher and running my dry fingers across my cheeks and sucking the excess milk from them. I considered getting on the floor and lapping at the stray splatters but the Devil spoke.

"Makes you appreciate the simple things, don't it?"

"For the last time," I told him, taking another big gulp of air and thinking of the sweet gulps of milk and how wonderful they'd been only seconds before. "Yes."

"Take a look at this, Johnny," said the Devil, getting up from the desk. He walked to the wall, took a dusty old cover off an old fashioned movie projector, film wheels and all.

"Going a little old school for this next vision," he said. "Death, if you would, please."

"Gone," said Death, getting up and sliding the barn door closed, shutting us all into a sudden, total void of darkness.

The darkness was short lived, though, because the Devil turned the old projector on and it threw a bright square of light on the wall, that old familiar scratchy whir of motion picture clockwork.

"I assume this is going to be the Prof learning I died," I said.

"Sort of," said the Devil, grinning even wider than usual in the white light from the projector.

In the sepia-toned moth-flutter picture-square, The Prof sat at an old desk, not unlike the one the Devil was sitting at. I didn't recognize this office. He must've moved since he last saw me. This one wasn't at the community college. It wasn't white and bland and non-descript. This looked like what I'd originally expected him to work out of. Massive paintings hung on the wall, gothic architecture in the molding, dark shelves of leatherbound books, his chair high-backed leather, the desk like a felled beast of oak.

I had only seen him a few months prior to my death. He was the only person I've thought of since dying that I stayed in touch with, him being my employer and all. We talked regularly, but I never saw him in person that often.

There was no audio other than the scratchy whir of the projector's mechanics.

On the Prof's desk, a smartphone buzzed to life. I could make out the screen. Number restricted.

The Prof picked up the phone and answered it. He listened to what the person on the other end was saying. He nodded grimly. His lips moved.

A title screen flashed up, old vaudeville serif font.

"Thank you," it read.

Back to the video, the Prof hung up the phone.

He sat there for a moment, fingers drumming on his desk, then he reached down, opened a drawer, pulled out a fifth of expensive liquor. I didn't recognize the brand. I remembered it, though. It was 3500 a bottle.

My heart dropped.

A toast.

The Prof's lips moved again, talking to himself.

"To Johnny Clee," said the title cards. "A true high driver."

The Prof swallowed liquor to my memory. I remembered him telling me the alleged history of the toast, his complimenting me on my insipid recitation of his lecture material. He'd played me like a fiddle. I'd eaten it up. I remembered the burn of the whiskey, the buoyant warmth of buzz it gave me, the Prof telling me about his "high drivers" and the deliveries they made.

The projector cut off. Dead white to darkness again.

The barn door rolled open again, Death's broad shoulders pushing it and letting in the grey light and the wind. I looked out at the highway, not a hundred yards away, at the clouds with their beams of light like tornadoes scraping the land. My Cruze,

parked, still utterly clean despite the miles and miles it had taken me so far, its gas gauge never dipping below full.

And out in the distance, across the road, across the fields, a massive shadow above the clouds. Multi-armed, multi-legged, with wings and a massive segmented stinger that dipped through the breaks in the clouds to probe and jab. It was as black as the shadow.

I looked at the Devil, who was grinning, of course.

"What is that?" I asked.

"That's Geryon," said the Devil. "A monster of fraud. He's gotta keep an eye on you now, since you let one of your sinners slip your grasp."

"I didn't let him slip at all," I said. "I tried to eat him, he disappeared."

"He cracked the code is what he did," said the Devil.

"Right under your claws. Geryon saw it coming. He always does. So he's gonna be right on the horizon for you from now on. Hope you don't mind. But you still gotta keep driving."

"Can you turn the radio down? Can you turn off the heat? Can I roll up the windows? Can I adjust the seat?"

"What do you think?"

Total despair flooded me, as total as the darkness before death had opened the barn door. My legs gave out and I fell to my knees in front of the desk.

"So the Prof..." I said. I couldn't say it. I couldn't say the Prof was the reason I was dead. It couldn't be him. My mentor. My surrogate father figure. That's how I'd seen him. But he'd clearly never seen it in me. Why would he?

"Gone," said Death.

"Need I spell this out for you?" asked the Devil.

No, he needn't.

I thought about the Prof and his beaming face, his pride in me, a pride my father never showed me. I thought about my career. I thought about what I had done in my life. All the deliveries, all the steering wheels, all the roads. All the drugs delivered, all the pills, the powders. The suitcases, the sealed boxes, the plastic bins.

I thought of everyone in my family learning of my death. Whatever the Prof had done, it had been enough to make it go public. I'd never known exactly how he "let employees go", but I knew it was Mafia shit. I'd had more than enough close encounters on the road to know the kinds of people that associated with him. It was no one you would fuck with. But as long as the Prof was on my side, I never worried.

"But why?" I asked. "Why would he do that now? Why me?"

"Well," said the Devil. "That's for you to figure out. But tell me..."

He leaned downward, eternally grinning.

"...how does it make you *feel*?"

"I don't know," I said.

"YES, YOU DO," screamed the Devil, slamming his fists onto the desk, his voice echoing in the barn's high rafters. "YES, YES, YES, YOU FUCKING DO, YOU ALWAYS FUCKING KNOW SO FUCKING TELL ME, YOU WORTHLESS LITTLE SHIT-MONKEY!"

"Gone," rumbled Death, and for the first time I detected a tone in the way he said it. It was one of irritation.

I didn't jump or fall backward. I just put the now-empty milk pitcher, still clutched in my fist, down on the desktop. I felt like I was talking to my dad.

"Furious," I told the Devil, my knees hurting on the cement, hurting like the rest of my body, a low-key, never-ending ache. "Betrayed. I feel like I could kill every single person on the planet right now."

The Devil grinned.

He handed me another CD. It was labeled LUST.

"Only two kinds of love in the world, son," he said. "The real kind and the other kind."

## **(calvin iguala gets a toy)**

The model's name was Nikki. She was young, fresh. Little doll-like white girl. Barely over 5 feet. Calvin's favorite. Calvin hadn't worked with her yet. Calvin also loved that. He'd been at this two decades. When he'd started doing this, she hadn't even been born. A milestone.

She would make a perfect toy.

Facially, Nikki was kind of a homely little thing but she had a positively bangin' body. She said she'd already had some experience, but Calvin knew she was probably bullshitting. That wasn't a problem— it made her even better. The less experienced the toy, the better.

He'd flown her down from Indiana. Eighteen years old. Calvin only shot with 18 year olds. It was part of his brand. Introductory marathon sessions. Sometimes faked, sometimes not. It had won him subscribers in the hundreds of thousands.

He met her at Famous Dave's for some cheap, corporate chain BBQ. She ordered a salad with buffalo chicken before he told her she should get something lighter.

"Gonna wanna take it easy on your tummy," he said. "Buffalo sauce..."

She got a regular salad instead. He got a brisket. They talked details. She was freshly graduated from high school, some shitsplat place outside Indianapolis, didn't want to go to college, didn't know what she wanted. Still lived with her parents, told them she was going to see friends. She had indeed sessioned for a couple people already, mostly small producers on Clips4Sale, no one Calvin had heard of. She had an OnlyFans without many follows.

"Only the top girls make any real money on there," she said. "I'm lucky to get a couple hundred a month."

This gig would pay her 500 dollars for an hour or two. Calvin paid above market rate, had to if he wanted to keep the youngest models coming by.

Calvin watched her eat, little dainty polite bites, and felt himself chub up. She would be all his in a few hours. Then afterwards he could have some milk.

Getting dinner with his toys was one of Calvin's favorite parts of his gig. He got to know them, got them comfortable, doing the icebreaking in public. He enjoyed the side-eyes he'd get from people, older women mostly. They assumed it was his granddaughter or a young daughter. No one ever said anything.

Just glared or side-eyed him. Let them be jealous. They should be.

He was in his sixties, a dirty old fuck, and he got paid to act out every sexual fantasy he'd ever had. What kind of luck was that?

Divine luck, that's what. Someone wanted this to happen. Someone had given him the holy green light.

"So you know I like to be intimate with my toys," he said. "My models, I mean. So you're going to be doing everything physical."

Nikki nodded, chewing lettuce and raspberry vinaigrette.

"I know," she said with her mouth full. "You said that like three times in the e-mail and in the release."

Calvin smiled at her. He glanced up at the TV in the corner, turned to the news. Some cop in Arizona who had become regionally famous for shooting a civilian had just died in a freak rollover accident. The autopsy showed he'd been high on cocaine.

"Just don't want you to have any surprises," he said, watching the cop cars and their flashing lights on the screens. "You've told me your limits, so I'll assume I can move forward with anything until you safe word. And sometimes even the safe word might not work, if I like how you're reacting..."

"I wouldn't have come down if it was a problem," said the little thing in a slight tone that suggested she got it and didn't want to talk about it anymore. "It's all good. Nothing I haven't done before, I'm sure."

All business. That was one thing Calvin wished was different. Part of him still wished the girls would go mad with love. But for a nasty old man like him? This would have to do. Most guys like him were fucking their wives if they were lucky, and more often than not they were fucking nothing at all.

Calvin looked down at his plate. He'd barely touched his brisket. He was never actually hungry for these dinners.

"Well, then, I guess I'll cash out and we can go play."

They left together, Calvin checking his rear view every few moments to make sure she was still behind him in the little Subaru he'd rented for her. He did everything to make them comfortable— he got them a hotel room, a car, paid for their food, had snacks and water available during the shoot. They could duck out at any second if they wished. And some, on occasion, did. But for about 2 grand a session with all things considered after travel and lodging, it was usually worth the price.

Calvin stroked himself through his jeans, one hand on the steering wheel, thinking of what Nikki looked like naked. He

never knew he'd still be this fucking horny in his 60's. He'd kept up with himself, worked out, kept his shoulders broad and his stomach flat enough and his muscles active and his mind sharp, but he hadn't had any work done and didn't even dye his hair. He wanted people to see the years on him as he played with his toys. That was part of the brand, too.

Nikki shivered a little when they got down to his basement, to his dungeon. He'd retrofitted the walls with old cobblestones. The table and the rack were out. He'd laid his items out on the floor neatly—various whips and vibrators and dildos, a wartenberg wheel, feathers, clamps, and other things. The cameras were already set up. The three panel lights he employed were set in the corners. Everything was ready to be switched on.

Nikki set her purse down and looked like someone about to go to work.

"Well," she said. "This looks like fun."

Her eyes fell on his Bacon print on the eastern wall. Vertical rectangular panels, three of them, showing strange creatures that looked both wormish and humanoid, just little greyish lumps with straining necks and screaming, snarling mouths. One had a scraggly mop of brown hair.

"What's that?" she asked.

"Francis Bacon," said Calvin. "1945, Three Figures at the Base of a Crucifixion. Isn't it beautiful?"

"Got a nightmarish quality to it. Jeez."

Calvin was done with pretenses. It was his time to be satisfied now.

He loved this part. The relief, the wholeness he felt. His void was being filled. Every fucking time.

He came up from behind her, put his hand on her shoulder. Their first bit of physical contact.

He squeezed a little. She didn't resist him. She was on the clock now and she knew it.

"Here's what I'm gonna do to you," he whispered in her ear.

## 15. Lust

The exit off the highway led into yet another night-splashed suburbia. The lights of the buildings and traffic controls seemed to laugh at me, inexplicably. I drove to the outskirts of this suburban mecca, the cancerous tumors of humanity's slow suicide. Palm trees and heavy undergrowth replaced the cement and asphalt as my wheels sang.

I had no words for the information that had been given to me by the Devil and Death. Right now, I had a job to do. I focused on that. We'd focus on the other shit once this job was done. I didn't want to think about it. I didn't want to think about anything. I told myself that over and over. I tuned out the wind, I tuned out the music, I tuned out the heat which still roared from the vents despite the outside climate going tropic.

Or at least that's what I told myself.

I told myself, as always, that all that mattered was getting home.

Luxuria.

That was the name of the website.

It was a fetish website. There were all sorts of websites like it. I used to fap to them myself, though not often. Just when I got really bored, when my imagination and fantasies and memories alone couldn't keep my dick up. Never spent any money of them, or any kind of porn. That, to me, is someone who's given the fuck up.

The proprietor lived in a sub division in Florida on the side of a highway next to a Taco Bell. Really nondescript. He'd once worked in retail management, another stressed-out cog in the capitalist mechanism, longing for an endless, true pleasure. He'd quit that job almost two decades ago.

His session room was in the back corner of the house, an unused bedroom that in another world would've belonged to a second or third child. I parked in his driveway, walked right in the unlocked front door. It was clearly an aging bachelor pad, relatively organized but not spotless. I went down a foreboding hallway that smelled of laundry and mildew. The session room was last door on the right.

There were LED show biz lights on stands in the corners and faux cobblestones on the walls. Who knew what he was going for here—medieval decadence? What looked like workout contraptions were revealed to be BDSM racks, assembled metal bars and leather

straps where a person could be locked in uncomfortable, vulnerable positions. A homemade torture slab made of wood and foam with straps at the wrists and ankles was in the center. Toys were all over the floor—whips and sharp things, mostly. Everything stank of human fluid.

The girl had taken off already, the video made and safe on the memory cards and ready to be posted on the internet forever and ever for thousands of other men (and women) to pleasure themselves to. Her body was covered with splotchy bruises and long, red marks. She moved slowly, aching deeply. It was more intense than she'd expected. She'd cry herself to sleep that night, but that wasn't unusual for her.

Calvin was lying on the carpeted floor, drenched in sweat and what looked like blood. He was naked, a full syringe in his hand, about to inject heroin into his big toe. He was drunk on touch, on power, riding a dopamine high of dopamine highs. He was exclusive. He was ageless. He was immortal and touched by God.

In another life, he would've been a total simpering dweeb. Here, he was too drunk on his own game, and he'd loaded too much of the wrong score in the needle. Fentanyl is in everything these days, and he was normally careful, but tonight it was a particularly juicy session, and the girl had started begging him to stop and safe wording and he'd giggled at her and kept going—“But this is still working, though!” he'd cooed—using her body to make himself forget everything he hated. And all he could think was how much he wanted to complete this perfect evening, to top it off with some “milk”, and he'd checked this shit earlier anyway so it was fine.

I watched him stick the needle in his gnarled toe. He put his head back, nodded off. In a few minutes, that would be it.

I took a seat in the corner of the room next to one of the torture racks, sat down and watched his chest rise and fall. Dried semen was caked on his stomach with the sweat and blood. He'd finished with the girl sucking him off, as he always did. He'd aimed onto his stomach when he finished, did his business. He didn't clean it off or dress. He untied her, paid her with his spunk dripping down his hairy abdomen, sent her on her way. Then he went back to the center of his shrine and began his post-session ritual.

He breathed in, tranquil. He didn't choke on his vomit or anything graphic. His breaths just got shallower and shallower. Every now and then he'd give these little hitches, like a fish out of water. Then, it was over.

“Arise.”

---

The demon that stands lithely from the floor is shriveled and tall and neon blue. The blacklights on the wall make everything look like an old space movie.

The guy was somewhat tall, and so is the demon, its head nearly scraping the ceiling. It skulks around like a lost alien, bald and gangly and a beautiful dark-blue, yet strangely unsymmetrical— its arms and legs are different lengths and it lopes around, one nostril bigger than the other, its tiny line of a mouth slanted, its head bulging at odd angles like something hastily made out of clay. It has no eyes. Its skin seems to sparkle, sensitive and thin as paper. Its nails are long and sharp, its chin is pointed. It hisses and wheezes breath in and out.

Johnny is waiting, coiled in the corner. His body is long and covered in scales, the same midnight-blue as the demon. Long hollow fangs lay retracted against his jaw, his eyes slitted and unblinking, tongue forked, slipping out to taste the air.

The demon tastes like sweat and semen, salty and metallic and vaguely chemical. Johnny sees that its blue skin is translucent, and he can see different organs and muscles and other things moving about just beneath its surface.

The demon casually makes for the door, rasping breath and clutching itself and moaning softly as it limps away.

Johnny wonders what would happen if he just let this one go, too. It's only for a second, but it's there. Then it's gone. Johnny strikes, an impossible blur. The toys and restraint rigs go flying, but the dimension has already shifted and the drywall that would've been gouged open now only absorbs the pieces like soft putty.

At first, the demon fights Johnny's fangs and muscles, but surrender comes quick. It allows itself to be consumed. There is a thumping, a struggle. The demon enjoys it. It laughs, giggles as Johnny fixes his jaw over its bulbous head and begins the task of swallowing.

And normally, that would be Amen.

But Johnny is thinking now, he's been telling himself that he doesn't have a problem, that he's going to be fine, like he always has. But now he's thinking.

Johnny thinks about the things this man has done, the life he's lead, a life of pleasure and invisibility at the expense of young women, and to have his habit fed by others, justified by others, how the fuck could he have lived like this for so long and never had anything to pay for it.

He must pay now.

Yes, a simple drifting off is too good for this soul.

He must suffer, Johnny thinks. He must suffer.

*I suffer, so he must.*

*Johnny takes his mouth off the demon's head, he feels the demon squirming in his coils. He squeezes, his coils tightening. The demon moans, its arms helpless and crushed against its sides. Its ribs give way like an empty cigarette package. Its legs snap like branches. Johnny squeezes and squeezes, looking down and flitting his tongue out and tasting the demon's pain. He must suffer.*

*Johnny lets up. He's enjoying this. He squeezes again, feels the demon's snapped ribs crumple. He lets up again, looses his coils, lets them fall away. The moaning demon tries to crawl out. Johnny almost lets him. Then he strikes again.*

*The demon moans and groans, but not in pleasure.*

*He must suffer.*

*Johnny does this a long time. He watches the demon's hollow cheeks bulge, hears it moans turn to wretched screams of agony. Johnny speaks to the demon but it does not speak to him.*

*"How dare you," he says. "How dare you."*

*The demon only moans. No matter how long Johnny tortures it, the moans are of lust. It is repulsive. Johnny hates the demon. He hates it and hates so much else. He squeezes and imagines the Prof in his coils, imagines his father, imagines every greedy bastard who ever lived, every person who ever disrespected him. It is along time before the demon breathes its last and Johnny decides to feast.*

*When the task is done, Johnny lays coiled on the floor in the blacklights, resting his head, feeling the bulge in his middle moving, the demon writhing in a way that can only be described as orgasmic. Even as its very atoms are broken down and scattered to nothing, it is consumed in lust. Johnny lets it writhe, lets himself feel it dissolve, bit by bit. It's similar to the greedy Lee Avery, and it does eventually end, and when the motions stop, Johnny knows it's done.*

*He does not feel any different. He has found no lasting pleasure or satisfaction or relief in making the demon suffer so long and so harshly.*

*In fact, he feels like weeping.*

*"Amen."*

## 16. The Girl

The radio was playing "Long Time Gone" by the Dixie Chicks (I'll never call them The Chicks and neither will anyone else). It made sense. There was only one person that song could've made me think about.

I'd stopped fighting my memories. I just let them come. The memories, the sin feasts and the joints were the only breaks I had from the road. Other than that, all I had were my thoughts. So I thought about my past, the good and the bad and I felt all it made me feel. I truly reflected. Or I told myself that's what I was doing.

You've probably been wondering.

Was there a girl?

Yeah, there was. There's always a girl.

Her name was Lisa.

The first time I saw her, she was wearing a Harley Quinn costume outside a church youth group. The red and black bodysuit comic version Harley Quinn, not the Margot Robbie blonde movie Harley Quinn. I was nineteen and she was eighteen. She didn't have much to say to me at first.

It was right after I got my job with the Prof, after my first year of college. I was living on my own in this shitty little apartment with some friends. It wasn't ideal, but I was away from my parents and free for the first time in my life, saving money for the first time in my life, feeling like ME for the first time in my life.

Mike, one of my roommates, had come to pick something up from the youth group. He worked as a volunteer. We went to this parking lot, outside what turned out to be the youth group's headquarters. They used this old vacant strip mall store as a meeting place.

It wasn't Halloween but they were doing some sort of costume party. Lisa looked awesome, all eighteen years of her.

All-American Rejects was playing. Dirty Little Secret. I'll never forget that. It blasted from the sound system inside the party. The door was propped open with a cinderblock. I couldn't see inside that well, it was too dark.

When Mike and I walked up, Lisa was standing outside in her Harley Quinn costume. She was smoking.

"Sup, Lisa," said Mike. "Where's Matt?"

"He's inside," said Lisa. "He knows you're coming."

"Why the jingle bells?" Mike asked.

"Costume party," said Lisa. "Pastor Gary wanted it. For that fundraiser thing."

Mike introduced me, cause Mike was a classy guy like that.

"This is my roommate, Johnny."

Lisa and I locked eyes for a brief moment, enough to exchange the adequate mental info.

You look good.

So do you.

I'd never really had a girlfriend at that point. I'd kissed a few, fingered a girl I'd met at a party the year before. No actual relationships. But women didn't scare me. I knew what had to be done— the eye contact, the banter, the dancing monkey bullshit.

Lisa had the cutest fucking face and a nice, thick little body that was on perfect display in the tight Harley Quinn leotard thing. Her vibe was naughty suburban girl, like the plain chick in high school who came back super-hot between sophomore and junior year and let it all go to her head. I couldn't tell anything else about her— not even what color her hair was since it was under the red and black jester cap thing.

Mike's friend Matt came out of the door, dressed as the Joker.

"There you are," he said. "What you doing out here?"

"It's fucking hot in there," said Lisa.

They were clearly together, but that didn't bother me. Still, I didn't say much to Lisa at first, just stood next to Mike. I shook hands with Matt and let them make their small talk while Matt handed over the flash drive Mike had come to retrieve.

"Is this the 10g?" Mike asked, looking at it.

"No, that's the 4g."

"I need the 10g."

"Shit, man, I don't know where that is. Luna had it last."

"It's in the office, I'll just get it myself."

"Nah, it isn't, I was just there. Come on, let's fucking find it."

They both disappeared into the noisy darkness beyond the door. It was just Lisa and me. The All American Rejects blasted out the door. Inside I could see people dancing and chatting.

"What's your name again?" I asked her.

"Lisa," she said. "And you're Johnny. What's your last name?"

"Clee," I said.

"Clee?"

"Yeah.

"Johnny Cah-lee," said Lisa, smiling. You're hot.

"You with the Joker?" I asked her, maintaining eye contact.

"Sort of," said Lisa. "But you know what?"

"What?"

"You are the only one that needs to knooooow." She lip synced at me in unison with the Rejects, pointing both fingers in a mocking, theatrical flourish.

Then she darted into the building, jingle bells flopping.

"You and Lisa were totally eye-fucking each other," said Mike once we were back in the car. "She's dating Matt, you know."

"She's cute," I said, thinking of her jingle bells bouncing.

"I heard she gives bomb-ass head," said Mike.

Two weeks later, I suggested I try Jesus out again for myself. Mike was all about it. And then we were in the car on our way to our first service. If Mike knew about my intentions with Lisa, he didn't say anything. I got a warm little thrill about knowing that I was going back to church on my own and my parents had no fucking clue. All for potential pussy.

The church was a megachurch, recently founded. They were building a headquarters for themselves somewhere but for now they were using the auditorium of a high school in an affluent suburb, and the old mini-mall as an office/youth group space.

The pastor was married to a woman whose father had been in the oil business. Crazy money. It was how they'd started the church. The pastor looked kind of like Christopher Walken— he had grey hair swept back on his head into wing-shapes and a dry voice and he walked slowly on the broad stage of the school's auditorium, talking with his hands about marriage and sacrifice and acceptance. The house band played alternative rock worship songs and everyone put their hands in the air and sang along. They had tables and tables of donuts outside in the mezzanine for everyone to eat while they asked each other about their relationship with God.

During the sermon, the pastor talked about Hurricane Katrina, which had just happened. Apparently the name Katrina means "to purify" and the fact it wiped out one of the most sinful cities in the world was not a coincidence. I sat in the upper rows with Mike and tried not to fall asleep. I kept looking for Lisa but since I didn't know what color her hair was (this was right before social media was huge, and it wasn't that easy to find people on Myspace), I couldn't find the back of her head.

I do remember eating a donut. It was powdered, filled with chocolate frosting. I had like three of them. People kept coming up to me and shaking my hand and asking if I was new. A few asked me about my relationship with God.

"It's good," I said.

"Have you ever been here before?"

I told them about my upbringing, my nights at catechism, my confirmation, etc. They nodded and listened respectfully, but I could tell every single one of them was judging me. Whatever.

Then, there she was.

Over by the bathrooms. Her hair was shoulder-length, straight, light brown highlighted blonde, fluffy. For some reason I thought it was the hottest fucking head of hair I'd ever seen in my life.

I walked right over, totally ignoring the people who'd been talking to me.

"I didn't know Harley Quinn went to church," I said to her.

She grinned up at me.

"Johnny Cah-lee," she said. "What are you doing here?"

"I'm here to ask you about your relationship with Jesus."

Her eyes sparkled.

And that's how it started.

We were together on and off for most of our twenties. I thought about buying a ring many times, but then I'd be gone on a trip that would last two weeks and I'd come back and something would've happened that would stop me. I told Lisa I was in finance, always moving shit around. She didn't care anyway, never asked me much about my actual work. She was great to have at home, but the strippers and sugar babies I acquired on the road were too good to give up. And I knew getting married would only complicate things in a way I wasn't sure I wanted.

I didn't realize it at the time, but now, in the car, on the road, with Geryon stalking the upper atmosphere on the fringes of the horizon, I knew why.

I was afraid I'd become my dad.

Still, we stayed together. On and off, never less than a few times a year, from that first day at church where she gave me head (bomb-ass, indeed) in one of the empty classrooms. She came over to the apartment and we fucked that night. I knew afterwards when we held each other that I'd never be able to let her go, one way or the other.

My unmistakable memory of Lisa involves getting drunk with her.

We were out one night, at Caesar's Windsor casino. I'd just gotten back from a three day trip that had apparently gone very well because the Prof got me a free room at the casino. I'd taken Lisa along. We'd been somewhat-together at that point like five years.

I was looking forward to fucking her and getting some of that bomb-ass head, but that night she was pissed at me. I don't remember why. But she knew how to show it—she got fucking

wasted right away and kept flashing everyone in the bar, showing them her bouncy little tits. A couple random guys at the clubs tweaked her nipples. I let it happen. It was all to spite me. I wasn't going to get my ass kicked on her account.

But I fucking hated it. She knew that, and she liked it.

When we got back to the hotel room, I tried to kiss her. She pushed me away.

"You stink," she said, wrinkling her nose.

She sat at the desk, put music on her iPhone. The iPhone I'd bought her. She put on the Dixie Chicks. She was all about pop country music— Martina McBride, Carrie Underwood, Miranda Lambert, shit like that. Rich, blonde Republican women LARPing as trailer trash. Looking back, we had so little in common except our general backgrounds. I don't know how we lasted so long.

The first three songs went through. Long Time Gone, Landslide, Travelin' Soldier. In her drunken indulgence, Lisa sat there at the hotel desk and cried during Travelin' Soldier. I laid on the bed and pretended to watch TV, but all I could see was her.

"Don't you think this is sad?" Lisa said.

"I think what's sad is your inability to grow the fuck up."

"Oh, yeah, oh yeah," snapped Lisa, her switch flipped, happy and drunk and belligerent. "Oh, yeah, I need to grow up. Yeah, me. The one with a real job and the one who cares about people. Yeah, I'm the one who needs to grow up."

"You're a fucking waitress. That's not a real job."

"You're just pissed because I let those guys touch me at Pepper's."

"Oh, forgive me for not liking it when my girlfriend flashes some random dude and he goes for a feel."

"You could've done something about it. And we are not boyfriend and girlfriend anyway. I'm sleeping with like four people right now."

This was something I'd already suspected, but for some reason it set me off.

I was up off the bed and grabbing her by the throat and tipping her back in the chair. I was my dad.

"You fat little bitch," I snarled. "Is there anyone in our friend group you haven't fucked?"

Lisa didn't even struggle, stared right back at me and held up her hand, ticking guys off.

"I'm fucking Chris, I'm fucking Kurt, I'm fucking Ed, I sucked off Jerry last fucking night," she said, rolling her eyes in exaggerated recollection.

Each name made me want to kill her. I wanted her all to myself and I hated it. The fact that I was sleeping with any multitude of random women while I was on the road- so many that I couldn't even remember names- didn't even matter to me at all. She was here now and I wanted her now.

"AND guess what?" she said, my hand still around her throat, looking up at me with her gorgeous, cruel eyes.

"What?"

"And I'm going to start working for this website. I just talked to the guy today. He emailed me back. It's 500 a session, plus expenses paid. Like 2 grand in all. If the video's successful he'll have me back, then I'll really be successful."

"Wait, what?"

"I'm going to be a fucking actress," she said. "A fetish actress."

"You're going to do amateur porn?"

"YES. He usually only takes 18 and 19 year olds but he said I look young enough in my photos to pass. And I'll get 2 grand right off the top of it, plus whatever else comes in. I'm really cute so I'm sure I'll get a lot. Probably than you'll ever make at your 'finance' job, anyway."

Instead of sending me into a screaming fit, this had the opposite effect. I calmed down. I'd had an epiphany right then.

A hard lesson was learned. I'd given her half a decade of my young life at that point. I thought of all the pussy I had waiting for me the second the Prof texted my work phone. I thought of the zeroes in my bank account.

Why the fuck was I getting upset over this? Why had I ever tried to do anything nice for this pudgy little seven and a half?

"Okay," I said. I let her go. I got back on the bed. Laid down. Looked at the TV.

"Yep," she chirped, turning back to her phone.

"I don't believe you," I said. "You hate older guys. You tell me that all the time. You say they remind you of your dad."

"I'm going to let this one pay me 2 grand to tie me up and do whatever he wants."

"So it's BDSM shit?"

"Yeah."

"Why?"

"Cause it turns me on."

We stared at each other for a second and Lisa smiled drunkenly at me as if she was the most satisfied person in the world.

"You're a liar, and you get away with it cause you're a girl."

She looked back at me, her adorable, mean face lit up by the phone screen in eerie, stark blue.

"No, I get away with it cause I'm good at it."

I had no response for that.

"Go take a shower," she sneered, turning back to her phone. "You look like fuckin' Beetlejuice."

I threw the remote across the room where it smashed against the wall. Despite her little badass-wannabe front, I saw Lisa wince.

"We're done," I said.

"Fine," Lisa said, turning the music back up.

The Dixie Chicks blared and I got up and stormed out of the hotel room and gambled two grand away on blackjack. Exactly two grand. On purpose. 2 grand meant nothing to me. Let this twisted old fuck do whatever he wanted to my girl, if he even existed.

When I got back up to the room it was almost morning. Lisa was gone. I slipped in and drifted off.

What felt like minutes later, Lisa walked in. She smelled like liquor and BO.

She slipped in next to me and I held her. She turned my way, kicked her shoes off, took off her coat and then everything else, put her arms around me.

"Tell me I'm all yours," she whispered. "Tell me there's no one else like me."

We held each other.

## 17. The Sixth Joint

The car was a rolling tomb of heat and radio. I was roasting, shifting my swamp-ass in the driver's seat, huffing hot air with Hootie and the Blowfish blasting in my ears. I'd stick my head out the window and get blasted by the freezing highway winds, the shafts of light like tornadoes on the fields. I'd pull back in again when my nose and ears went numb, and the whole thing would start over again. I started to hate every single voice, every single instrument I heard, every sensation I was capable of.

And over all of it, the terrible and immense shadow of Geryon loomed. I never saw any more of him than the stinger, and I didn't want to. He always stayed a few miles away, never getting too close, always on top of the clouds. But it was too much. The road didn't end. I kept looking for the next joint but it wouldn't come.

The stress built and built until I screamed. I screamed like a little kid, pounding the steering wheel.

But then as soon as I hit the breaking point, I got a bit of a reprieve— I had my first car trouble since joining the highway.

The first sign was the check engine light coming on. I didn't think anything of it at first, just gave it the finger. I wasn't sure how mechanics worked in this afterlife, but when the car started stalling out and the check engine started flashing I screamed some more and pulled over. It felt like a fuel injection problem, from my years of experience with driving. Bad fuel filter, maybe. I had been driving for days by now, without ever stopping for gas or oil change. The odometer hadn't changed.

Apparently, everything happens for a reason.

I was so out of my mind that I didn't see the figure up ahead on the side of the road, sticking his thumb out.

It was Death.

I coasted to a stop right where he stood, engine clicking.

Death opened the passenger door and got in. The suspension groaned.

As soon as he settled into the seat, the car shut off and so did everything but the radio and the heat. Death reached over and turned both knobs down to low. The knobs worked perfectly for him.

"Thank you," I gasped, surprised to see him and relieved beyond belief. I was shivering, drenched in sweat. My eyelids felt like paper mache.

"Gone," said Death.

"Where's the Devil?" I asked, knowing exactly what the answer would be.

He smiled at me. His teeth were really small. Like baby-teeth.

"Gone."

"Thank God I ran into you," I asked. "What do I do?"

"Gone," he said, pointing at my display with the flashing check engine light. The car wouldn't turn on. Probably a battery issue. Or the ignition. Or the fuel injection.

"Yeah, it stopped working," I said.

"Gone," said Death.

He got out of the car again. I went to open my door but it wouldn't open. Like a child lock was set.

"Gone," said Death, shaking his head.

"Why do you say 'Gone' all the time?" I asked him.

He smiled his baby-tooth smile again.

"Gone," he said gently, tapping his little sunglasses.

He took them off and handed them to me.

I was half-expecting something horrifying behind them when he took them off—black corpse holes or something. But he just had regular brown eyes. They were friendlier than I thought they'd be. There was sympathy there.

He handed the sunglasses to me, motioned for me to put them on.

I obeyed, slipped them over my eyes.

It was like putting on VR goggles. I could see into the sunglasses. Just infinite blackness at first. But then pictures started taking shape.

A room. A familiar room. An apartment. A figure. Furniture.

The vision crystallized into clarity.

I saw myself. Alive.

I was in my apartment. It was like I was up in the corner of the ceiling of the living room, looking down at myself.

I remembered this, all at once.

It was the day I died.

The only thing I could hear was the radio in the car, still playing in purgatory. Neil Young's Unknown Legend was playing, quietly. A slow song about a middle aged woman wishing she was still young and free. Typical boomer bullshit.

In my apartment, I was just getting home, probably from a job.

I walked in, threw my keys on the table, took my wallet out, set that down. Took off my shoes, my hoodie.

Watching in the car, I started to breathe faster.

Someone walked into the living room from behind me, from my bedroom.

I don't remember seeing the guy. But now, watching myself, I saw a guy in black at the door. He was tall and had a wide brimmed hat on.

It was Death.

He was pointing a handgun at me.

It happened too fast for me to register anything. My last thought was confusion, "Who the fuck is this?"

He shot me point blank, no words, and I crumpled right there. He quickly exited the apartment. Shut the door, was gone.

The guy had shot me in the face and chest as I'd turned stupidly to see who the fuck was walking into my living room. Two deadly and quick and accurate shots. I have no recollection of it.

I lay there on the floor, dumb surprise on my face and blood trickling out of my forehead. I hated the way I looked, on the floor there, dying. That was what I hated the most- the dumb expression on my face. Blank and stupid.

I ripped off Death's sunglasses and for a horrible second I thought the windshield had been blacked out, but it was just Death with the hood up, working on my engine.

He slammed the hood shut and came back over to the passenger side.

"Gone," he said, nodding and reaching in for his sunglasses.

"Thanks," I said, handing the sunglasses back. I was absolutely buzzing with anxiety now. Try watching yourself die out of nowhere.

"Gone," said Death.

"Why?"

Death shrugged, like I'd asked him about the weather.

"Gone."

He pointed to my engine, gave me a thumbs up, made a key-turning motion.

I started the car. Revved the engine. Back to normal.

"Gone," said Death, that deep Southern drawl.

He handed me another CD. It was labeled "ENVY". Then he shut my passenger door with a gloved hand and waved.

I floored it, and watched him in my rear view mirror until the horizon swallowed him up.

Gone.

## **(arthur wilson wants a hug)**

Arthur couldn't believe it.

Ariella was coming to his work place.

Ariella Pinto.

In the flesh.

He'd expected it would happen sooner or later. Ever since he'd gotten the security guard job. It was one of the reasons he'd sought it out. But he couldn't believe the event was actually in his future, tangible and real. It was happening.

He was going to meet her. No, not just meet her— he was going to be in charge of *protecting* her. He would be her protector. Arthur Wilson. Him. She would be his to protect.

Arthur got up and went to the bathroom, took a piss.

*I really need to clean this place up,* he thought, looking at the overflowing waste basket and grime on the shower and the tile and the back of the toilet and pretty much everywhere.

Ariella. Ariella Pinto. That heinous little star. That beautiful little angel. That perfect little goddess. Arthur tried to think of better ways to describe her and couldn't.

He had a good enough life, a decent job with benefits. He paid his bills. He didn't have a girlfriend. So what? He didn't have a lot of things. He didn't have any real friends. Everyone at work called him "buddy". They talked about him when he wasn't around, how weird he was. Arthur knew he was a loser. Some people were losers. That was just the way of the world. That was how God wanted it, as his grandmother would say. At least Arthur could live his own life.

And he had Ari.

The first time he'd seen her, it was when she was on the Disney channel. She'd starred with another girl on a show about teenage girls that was watched by teenage girls and guys like Arthur. Then she'd started her music career. The first video, she had looked like computer animation come to life. Innocence and beauty, all mixed up together perfectly. Yes, Arthur lacked the articulation and the poetic brain to describe the way that young woman made him feel. It was like heaven in a person. That was the best he could do. Heaven in a person. Ariella. Even her name took on a golden shine to it when spoken aloud.

It changed Arthur's life. He started thinking about her, all the time. He wanted to be with her. Could he?

There would be a lot of work to do first. He started thinking about what could be done.

He'd lost weight, gotten a new haircut, then shaved his head since there was so little to work with anyway. He worked out, five days a week, lost thirty pounds, then twenty more. He did intermittent fasting, OMAD, for six months. Did all the Red Pill stuff. Went out and asked random girls at the mall for the time. He put in the effort, put in the improvement. He deserved something more than what he had. He might be a loser, a loser-brain, but hey, he could at least be a good looking one. A healthy one. He deserved something. Someone. He could get Ariella's attention, even if it was for a second. Might as well try. Rejection was better than regret.

He got looks from girls now, including young ones. He wasn't in perfect shape, but he noticed them coyly glancing. That was new. He hadn't expected that. But all it made him think about was Ari. They weren't her.

He knew in the back of his head that even though pop culture made it out to be a statistical rarity, a lot of people just never found anyone. And that was okay. He told himself that. He didn't have a lot of things- a house, for one. Or a job he particularly enjoyed, for another. Or a family that loved him. Or a lot of friends to call and be with.

But he had his routine, his standard. And he had Ari.

He knew in the back of his head that something about him was so repulsive that there would never be anyone who would truly love him and be there for him. He didn't know what it was, but it didn't matter how he looked on the outside. The problem was inside. The problem was him. No matter how much he worked and improved, it wouldn't be enough. Coy looks from strangers notwithstanding. Even on the few occasions he'd gone over and tried talking to the girls, they'd lost interest in him within minutes. He could see it in their eyes.

*Oh, there's something wrong with you. Never mind.*

But that didn't matter. Because Ari would be his. In history and for forever. Then he could have her life. And they'd share it.

The day was set. It would be a Saturday.

He'd have power on his hip. His sidepiece. Right there. He'd be able to use it if he wanted. Just lift it out and smite her. If she treated him badly, just take it out.

He wasn't supposed to have the power, of course. He wasn't a real security guard, and anyway he knew she'd have her private security with her. But he'd bring it. Just in case. He'd done it before. Hidden it in his waistband. No one noticed. No one

noticed anything he did. Something told him it was what he should do. He wouldn't get caught.

It was what God wanted.

He opened his laptop, made his daily ritual. Twitter (23 followers, all bots), Facebook (329 friends), YouTube (no followers, but not many video blogs, either, and the only person he followed was a guy who did homemade bondage recordings in his basement and put them on Clips4Sale, and he'd stopped posting several months ago), Discord (he belonged to an Ariella server and friended most of the people there, but no one ever talked to him and whenever he tried to join in a conversation they all acted like he wasn't there, conversation flowing around his comments like a river around a rock), Snapchat (only 4 connections there— three camgirls he'd bought and paid for long ago and forgotten about, the third an old high school classmate he'd run into who'd given it to him out of pity and never posted anything). And, of course, Seeking Arrangement.

He even had a date tonight. Potential sugar baby.

She was a cute little 23 year old, looked kind of like Ari, though that might've been Arthur's imagination. She was Ari's age. Arthur had asked her to wear her hair like Ari's— in a sort of vertical ponytail that poured down on her shoulders like molten bronze. The girl didn't do it, though. Made some excuse about her hair not being long enough. It looked long enough to Arthur, but he didn't care. Whatever.

The date went fine at first. They met at Red Lobster, and she'd hugged him. "I always hug," she'd said. Then, once they were seated and cheddar biscuits were on the way, she asked him what he did for a living.

"I work at a factory during the day but then at night I'm a volunteer security guard for the arena," he said. "And I just found out this morning that Ariella Pinto's coming in the spring. Do you like her?"

"Uh, she's all right," said the sugar baby, little heart-shaped face. Actually, she looked nothing like Ari. Ari was a goddess compared to this silly thing.

"Just all right?"

"I mean, I like some of her songs," said the sugar baby, whose name Arthur couldn't remember. "She's all right."

"She's fucking amazing," said Arthur. "I've followed her since she was on YouTube. She's absolutely beautiful."

"Yeah, she's pretty."

"I'm going to protect her," Arthur said.

"Protect her?"

"Yeah," said Arthur. "When she comes for her concert. I requested being on her detail. I know she'll have her handlers

and everything, but I'll be right there. With my own protection. She'll be all mine to protect. Just like God wants."

He made the sign of a gun with his fingers. Pointed it at the sugar baby. He saw her give him the look he always got sooner or later from all women.

*Oh, I see the real you. And I'm uncomfortable now.*

"I don't have much in my life," Arthur said. "And everyone else does. Some people have everything. Like Ariella. She has everything a person could have. Sometimes it makes me angry. That's all right. I've put in the time. I've put in the work. And now I get to protect Ari. Even if it's just for a few hours. I'll have that, to hold onto, forever."

The sugar baby, whose name he wasn't going to bother learning, nodded and said nothing. Their conversation went on for awhile longer, but the girl excused herself to the restroom before their food came.

"Hey, wait," said Arthur.

She turned.

"What?"

"Can I have another hug, at least?"

She rolled her eyes and was gone.

Arthur didn't care. He nibbled on the biscuits and ate his crappy, floppy, greasy shrimp when it came out, thinking of Ari's sweet face lighting up when it saw him— her handsome volunteer security guard, there to guide her for the evening and be her guardian angel. Maybe he'd even get a hug. Maybe they'd hit it off and she'd invite him onto her tour bus.

"I just feel like no one understands me," she'd say. "But now that I've met you..."

A nice, long hug from Ariella Pinto, feeling her encircled in his arms. What did she smell like? Arthur would soon know. Just the thought of knowing her smell made Arthur hard.

*Oh, Ari. It's just not fair... you have what you do, and I'm just me.*

Arthur licked the shrimp grease off his lips, sat back in the booth and told himself it was okay to be jealous.

## 18. Envy

The Cruze never broke down again.

I had entered a sort of void headspace. I couldn't describe it. I suffered but didn't feel.

The Prof had whacked me, gotten me out of the way for some reason. I knew that now. More answers were coming my way. Like oncoming cars. They appeared, got closer, passed by. I felt more would come if I was just patient.

I had no memory of what I'd seen in Death's sunglasses. I remembered seeing it, but I didn't remember living it.

Probably for the best.

I don't remember the exit sign that said ENVY. I don't remember driving to the next godforsaken city.

All I knew now was this— I was outside an arena, a concert at night. Searchlights, excitement, lines of people down the street. The buzz of fun, of people out and about, of zero obligations for an evening, of tenuous joy.

The guy was pale. Pale but built. He worked out. He had a shaved head, big shoulders. He could've probably been attractive if it wasn't for his demeanor. The guy just had some weird vibe about him. Something off. His flawed mental processes showed on his face, his crossed wires. It was in his lips, in the light in his eyes.

He was a security guard, a volunteer. Actually, he operated a press at a plant during the day and did this night gig to make himself feel better about his lot in life. Arthur Wilson was his name.

He was obsessed with this 23-year-old pop star. She was one of the biggest acts in the world. She played stadiums and arenas, millions of social media followers, she even still got regular radio play in an era where terrestrial radio was gasping its last. She had enough money to consider herself infinitely wealthy. She was a corporation in human form.

Arthur, on the other hand, was invisible. Good looking enough to not draw the wrong kind of attention, too socially fucked to get the right kind. He let it go to his head. I couldn't blame him.

The night played out exactly as the Envy CD had said.

Arthur was "guarding" the back parking lot, as usual. He was little more than a glorified toll booth attendant. But when

Ari's black tour buses had rolled in, he'd nearly fainted. When she stepped out of the bus and made immediately for her dressing room inside the arena, his eyes teared up and he choked out a sob. There she was, and she didn't even know he was there. Nothing had changed.

Now the show was over, and a nervously-giggling throng of teenage girls was corralled in a fenced off area. There was to be a meet and greet. One last thing before Ari stepped back on her tour bus and was off to the next city. Arthur paced nervously, slowly making his way over to the fenced off area.

Ariella came out to all the usual pomp and circumstance. She was cold and mean— human attention was the cheapest thing to her— behind a thin veil of sugary and friendly. There were handshakes, signed items, starry eyes, awkward words.

Arthur the volunteer security guard stood next to Ari, wide eyes on everyone as though they were all going to grab and abduct her. She barely acknowledged him, but the circumstances made it such that he was able to talk himself out of getting too angry. She was busy, it was quick. He'd have a chance.

He was in his early thirties, and lonely as hell. He'd been obsessed about this concert date. He immediately asked to be assigned to the meet and greet. He was just a volunteer. Ari's private security was around her, and they initially thought of kicking him out.

No one knew of the gun on his hip. No one checked him. He was security, so everyone assumed that someone else had already done it.

He had the gun hidden in his waistband. They all thought of him as harmless, a harmless joke manbaby fan. They saw these guys all the time. Pathetic losers. Hangers-on. Peasants. This one didn't look dangerous. Look how his eyes were getting wet.

Arthur nearly threw up when he she came out after the show. He wanted a hug, at least.

She didn't know him. That was undeniable now in the clarity of harsh, heavy reality. It was tearing him apart. The way she'd been treating him, not knowing him, was tearing him apart. He kept telling himself it was all right, but now he knew that his original plan was the way to go.

She acted like a sweetheart. She was not. What was sad is that Arthur actually was. Or could've been. He'd just had it boiled out of him.

The night hadn't gone well, and it was ending. Arthur could feel it. Arthur had been reminded that he was the same loser he'd always been. Ariella hadn't even registered his existence.

At the end of the line, when Ari was almost done with her peasant meet and greet, Arthur realized this was his last

chance. Her private security douchebags would whirl her away in their protective cocoon of muscle and black button-up shirts, off to her tour bus, and she'd be gone forever, back to the Internet and TV where she'd stay until Arthur Wilson was cold and dead.

Arthur wouldn't let her go. He refused to. He had to do this.

He at least wanted a fucking hug.

He went in to hug her as she finished the line of fans, sort of shouldering one of her douche security guys out of the way and spreading his arms. His eyes were like a hurt puppy.

*Please, please... please.*

She saw him coming, went in for the hug. Standard operating procedure. What she always did. It was like a reflex for her. See someone awkward, just give them a hug. But her face betrayed her. For a split second, she looked at him with utter disgust and contempt. And fear. And unease. Like she was looking at a dangerous animal or mental patient. For one split second, the look was there. No one else around saw it. But Arthur did. And so did I, standing over by the fence.

Arthur saw it. He knew it. That's what everything thought of him.

He saw her. How she didn't know him and never would. Not only did she not know him, she didn't want to. Just like everyone else. What had he done? All he wanted was what everyone else wanted, and then some.

It was quick, torsos not touching, her arms sort of tapping the back of his shoulders, him leaning into her while two of her security guys put their hands on his shoulders and said, "All right, buddy, yeah, she's really happy to have you... thanks, you did a great job."

It was too much. Arthur was filled with pain. He let her go. The security guys took their hands off him.

In hindsight, it's amazing Arthur was able to pull this off.

It was a smooth move, almost like God wanted it.

Arthur reached behind him, lifted his shirt, pulled his Glock and aimed for Ari's face. It was meant to be a merciful killing, but Ari's handler saw and reached out and grabbed Arthur's arm. The trigger was pulled but the shot was deflected down into her neck.

Ari jerked as the bullet went right through her, clapped a hand to the side of her face like someone had just slapped her. At first, she felt like she'd been stung by something. Her eyes bugged out. Blood was spraying the front row. She toppled sideways.

The handler wrestled with Arthur.

"Let him go!" yelled the private security.

Their guns were already drawn.

The handler obeyed.

For a split second, Arthur managed to see what he'd done—Ari lying on the pavement, fading fast. Her blood spread across the asphalt, darkening the parking lines. She was choking, writhing. A bystander started CPR but she was already on her way out.

The private security did their job, triggers pulled and muzzles flashing, bystanders be damned, neutralizing the threat.

"Arise."

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*Johnny has shaggy green fur, four paws, a snarling fanged snout. He keeps his burly head low, emitting growls that sound like truck tires on gravel.*

*The demon is tiny, moss-covered. It makes chittering noises. It's small and pathetic. It sort of grows out of Arthur like a time-lapse tumor, a little ball of greasy moss popping off his neck and disappearing as his eyes went blank.*

*Then there's another one, and another.*

*Arthur's body grows and separates into three different sections. His head, his torso, and each of his legs. They scurry off in different directions as Johnny finishes transforming.*

*The arena parking lot is gone, replaced with a dark, stagnant swamp. Everything's covered with green slime. The first demon screeches, gnome-like, small and shriveled and insect-limbed. It disappears into the stink. The others follow, mewling, whining. Johnny follows his nose.*

*He can smell them all, they've all got a stench of sulfur and brimstone, a stark contrast to the murky swamp rot. They're easy to follow.*

*Johnny pads through squishy mud and marsh, through puss-filled cattails that tower above him, the trees twisted with agonized faces on their trunks. The faces call to him in sad, hollow voices. Johnny ignores them, nose to the ground, paws squelching.*

*The Arthur demons are silent, slipping between the trees and into the mud and through the cattails. The head has grown legs out of the sinews that extend from its neck, its face is pointed, sharp-looking nose and big green eyes with big green eyelashes, its mouth a pinched little 'o' of wretched contempt. The torso crawls along on its arms, hands flopping out and grabbing, and each of the legs haltingly slithers, toes wriggling in the muck.*

Johnny follows, not in a hurry. He's got a job to do. He doesn't know how long it's been when he spots the first demon—the head. It's quick, like a spider, with a third or so Arthur's spine, esophagus and trachea dragging behind it, catching moss and mud. Its green eyes shine in the dim swamp light as Johnny darts up on it.

It turns around and sees him, screeches and climbs a tree, slithering upward.

Johnny climbs the tree, too, claws digging into the mossy bark, his shoulder muscles lifting him up.

The Johnny demon shrieks at him, leaking brain fluids downward. Johnny snarls.

He's close now, the demon in the upper branches, unable to go anywhere. It tries to jump, but Johnny lunges out and catches it in his jaws. It screams, writhes, all six arms flailing and slapping and poking.

Johnny's jaws crunch shut. The skull collapses like a rotted log. Johnny falls softly to the soft swamp floor on all fours. He feasts, and the skull fragments are sharp, cutting his jowls and leaking black blood down his chin.

When it's finished, the others have found hiding spots. They make no noise.

Johnny follows his nose. There is no hiding.

The first leg is hiding in the giant puss cattails, knee-deep in muck. It has grown eyes near the kneecap, little black things that pop out at asymmetrical angles, blinking stupidly. Johnny tugs it out of the muck, devours it.

The torso is hiding in a hollow tree that weeps and asks for forgiveness repeatedly as Johnny lunges in and snatches the demon. The arms pummel Johnny's wrinkled muzzle as he feeds. Then they're still.

The final leg is nowhere to be found.

Johnny sniffs and searches, the faces on the trees moaning at him, the other pieces of sinner digesting in his gut.

The leg is gone. Buried in the deep algae green of the swamp, or in the rot, or in the fetid water, or burrowed into the mud like a worm. Johnny can't smell it anymore. It's gone. A piece of Arthur got away. Another sinner, partially escaped.

Johnny stands there, paws in mud, stinking. He heaves, pants, tongue logging out and drool splatting to the mud, strange motions in his hound-belly.

He's not sure what to do. Then he is.

It doesn't fucking matter if he finds it or not. It doesn't matter.

He says, or thinks, the word, and wonders what will happen.

"Amen."

I was back outside the arena again. Lights blinked. The sky was black. I could hear vents rushing air. I could hear the wind on the corners of the city buildings around me.

I was in the twilight of feast again. The aftermath. The world was empty, used, hollow. Death-empty. As empty as a fresh coffin.

It had worked.

I'd given up.

Said Amen.

And it had just ended.

Arthur's last leg was somewhere back in that suicide swamp. And it wasn't my problem.

I didn't care. I didn't care now.

Had I been able to do this the whole time?

Did it matter if I was doing this?

Why did this even matter? Why was I doing this? Why hadn't I asked the Devil why I should I do this when he'd handed me the CD.

I'd just wanted to get home.

Now this.

And I didn't care. I honestly didn't give a shit that I'd missed a piece of Arthur's demon form. I'd lost the pride demon altogether, somehow. So what? What would they do? Kill me?

I walked back to the Cruze and got back in and started it up.

I turned down a different road, different than the way I'd come.

I figured I knew what would happen, and I was right.

I ended up on the highway again. Because it didn't matter where I turned. That's where I was supposed to be.

But something was happening.

That strange, "I have to get home" hangover I'd had since I woke up from dying was lifting faster and faster.

The Cruze was the same and Geryon was still there on the horizon once I got back to the highway and he still filled me with that distant dread, but finally, I was able to access parts of my mind that I thought were gone.

Until now, remembering certain things was like recalling a face clearly but never quite being able to remember the name that went with it.

My aching, uncomfortable body and the heat and music (Bryan Adams) and my ringing ears were still there. But I started to remember my life.

Maybe it was what I'd seen in Death's sunglasses.

Whatever was causing it, I started to remember.

## **19. The Son, The Brother, The Student, The Lover**

All those years driving for the Prof, all those years on the highways with highly illegal substances packed mere feet away from me and doing all sorts of drops to eerie, sketchy places, picking up one random car and getting in another— I should've had more incidents. You would've thought I'd have run-ins with gang-bangers and mobsters and shifty go-betweens on the daily.

But I only feared for my life once. Only once, in the whole decade and change I spent running pills and whatever else for the Prof.

I got paid good. Six figures, annually. Just like the Prof had said, it was more than I ever would've made with a fucking associate's degree. Just like the Prof said. Go through the motions, get nothing. Take a risk, make a profit, get something.

I was a clean skin. I was a white kid with no criminal record, not even traffic tickets. No one noticed me. Exactly what they wanted. Low profile personified. I didn't mind. The Prof had his own term for someone like me. A high driver. I was the Prof's high driver for his little drug smuggling side gig. I never found out who his biggest clients were, I never found out who he bought or sold to. I didn't care. I wanted money and freedom and nothing else.

I picked up the cars, dropped off the packages, never had to interact with anyone for the most part. It was just me and the highways. That was fine with me. I didn't like having to interact with anyone.

It happened outside of Detroit. East side. I don't know the name of the neighborhoods. Some parking lot next to some old building.

I'd just dropped off the car and made my way across the parking lot to the other car.

A guy came out of the warehouse. I was just about to leave. "Hey, my man," he called.

I turned and waited for him. I didn't know who he was or what he wanted. I thought it might even be unrelated to the drop I'd just made.

"This isn't the right shipment, bud," the guy said, getting close. "You're gonna have to get your guy on the phone and deal with this now. 80 milligrams. Tell him that. That's what we ordered. 80. Not something else. 80 fucking milligrams."

We met under a streetlight. It was dark, warm out. The parking lot was in the middle of this industrial complex.

"I'm not supposed to talk to you," I said to him.

"Well, I gotta talk to someone," the guy said. His demeanor was bro-ish, aggressive. He had dark, spiky hair and a jean vest on. He was dark-skinned, looked Middle Eastern but talked like someone from the area. "You gave me the wrong fucking shipment."

"How do you know?" I asked. "You haven't even looked at what I brought yet."

"Do not piss me off," he said.

He took out a gun, a Glock. Just held it.

It wasn't the gun that scared me. It was what he'd said and the way he'd said it.

For a second, I was in front of my dad again.

"I'm not trying to," I whispered, deflated, trying to keep the sudden fear out of my voice.

The gun was right in my face. Casually.

The guy was not angry. He was amused, irritated at worst. This was a guy who Donald Trump would call a "killer". Someone who got what he wanted. Someone used to having people do what he said.

"Do you realize how serious this is?" he asked me.

"Yes."

"We're gonna stay right here until we get this figured out."

He pulled out his phone, kept the gun on me.

Long story short, I had brought the right shipment, he'd just thought I was working for someone else who had shafted him some time before. Apparently, The Prof has decent standing, but the guy still made me call him to make sure we were gravy.

It was a short ordeal, but a life-changing one.

I didn't panic until later.

In the moment, the adrenaline kept me normal and efficient. Or at least it seemed like it once it was over. I did what I had to do. I just pulled out my burner phone and handed it over and the Prof spoke to the guy. When the guy handed the phone back to me, I put it to my ear and the Prof said, "It's fine, Johnny, this guy has been a miserable prick about all this since day one. So sorry, you're free to go. And keep me on the line till your back on the road."

The guy never said anything else to me, just handed the burner back and walked away. The gun stayed out the whole time.

Later, I was in my hotel room. It was weird. I thought I was fine, but then I started feeling like I was sinking. Then falling. Uncontrollably.

I thought about the gun. I thought about the guy's face. I thought about his arms. What he could've done to me. I was not tough or made of stone. I was a little suburban country boy out of his element.

I checked out of the hotel and left early. I drove all night, getting as far away from the panic as possible. I considered quitting the Prof altogether, but the next run went smoothly and so did the one after that, and then months had passed and I was fine again. The money kept coming, and so did the things the money allowed me to have. Freedom.

I never saw the guy again.

Until I died.

He was sitting in the backseat of my car, and he called himself The Devil.

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When I was really little, my parents took me and Nicole to this Pentecostal church down in Tennessee. We were visiting my dad's relatives— his father and his father's third wife. It was one of the last times we ever did.

Mom wanted to go to church that Sunday, so dad found this place. I think she just wanted to get out of here. It was a dirty house, smelled like dog shit, literally. We never went back after that one visit.

The church was small and white, with a sharp steeple stabbing at the humid morning sky. We sat in the back on wooden pews. The air smelled like sweet wood and something else. Something ancient.

The windows were stained glass, and they had these odd designs in them— criss-crossing black lines and circles and spheres interweaving in different colors. After a minute, I started to see the circles and black lines as eyes. Angry ones. Evil ones. Some of the eyes looked like they belonged to an insane person.

The priest came out and gave the service. There was no choir, no music. He had a wide-brimmed hat on, and little round sunglasses and a long black coat. He scared the fuck out of little Johnny-child.

He didn't say anything at first, just looked at us from behind these sunglasses.

When he did speak, it was the loudest voice I'd ever heard. "GONE," he yelled in a deep voice. "GONE."

That was the first thing he yelled. The whole congregation sat and just watched. Quiet as hell. His voice was booming. It was so loud I covered my little Johnny-child ears.

"Your life! Your happiness! Your salvation! Without *GOD*, they are *GONE*."

He pointed into the audience, and I could swear he was pointing at me.

"You are *GONE*!"

I hid my face in my mom's coat. I don't remember us staying for the whole service.

The next time I saw that preacher, he was in the backseat of my car, and the Devil called him Death.

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The more I remember, the more I realize I should've seen this coming.

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The last time I saw the Prof, it was about a few weeks before I died.

He'd called me into his office. I hadn't been to his office in years. I'd just gotten back from a trip to Albany.

He looked the same, older, greyer, more diminished. But still the same Prof.

"You've been a great employee, Johnny," the Prof said after we'd exchanged pleasantries. "Much better than you were as a student. I have to ask, though, Johnny. How long do you see yourself doing this?"

"I don't know," I said. "Until I don't want to anymore, I guess."

"Honesty," said the Prof. "Impressive. That's why I hired you, one of the reasons, anyway. When do you think that might be?"

"I have no idea. Did I do something wrong?"

"Oh, of course not."

The rest of the meeting was a blur. I don't remember it. We talked about our lives, how things were going. He was divorced, fucking a couple of his (female) students. Not much to report. I do remember he kept asking when I wanted to quit. That was the only thing.

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The last time I saw Nicole, I'd come over to her house with her kids and husband. Her son darted over and nearly ran into my legs. He was about three at the time. Excited about something. Obsessed with Toy Story. Babbling, I couldn't understand half the words he'd say. Her daughter was about a year, little brown-eyed cherub. She had her dad's coloring but Nicole's face shape. I saw my mom in there, too. She didn't want me to hold her,

though, her face getting all screwed up when Nicole handed her over, and she yelled and reached back for her mommy. I gave her back right then. I didn't want to see her upset.

We sat on the back patio and talked. It was good. Just me and Nicole. We hadn't talked like that in years.

She didn't ask about my job. Knew enough not to. Her husband was chilly but cordial, kept to himself and the kids, mostly.

Lord knows how Nicole had presented me over the years, especially when they first met. I thought it was odd that she decided to invite me over at all. Her husband definitely didn't want it.

I stayed a few hours. We never brought up our parents, though I could tell we both wanted to on some level. We parted ways and Nicole said to stay in touch. But we didn't.

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The last time I saw my dad was the night I stopped talking to him.

"I'm leaving," I said. Him and mom were both just sitting on the couch, watching sometime. The news. I don't know what. I wasn't paying attention to the TV. They were getting a divorce anyway. That was the year we all split apart.

"K," Dad said, not asking where or why. He was ignoring me. He'd been ignoring me for a few weeks then, ever since I dropped out of college to take the job with the Prof. I told him I already had a job, gave him an idea of how much I'd be making (it was more than he'd ever made), and we'd had a big argument about it. He said he was done with me and I didn't think he was serious— he'd said that before.

*Fine, I thought. Make this easier.*

I'd pretend to run away as a kid sometimes, when I was being a shit about something. I'd slam the door and yell, "Don't expect to ever see me again!" What an absolute little cunt. I never thought I'd actually do it, and neither did they, but that's what I thought about as the door shut behind me.

I thought about seeing him in that house, clutching my graduate picture and weeping. He was as lonely as a greeter at Walmart these days. He never remarried, though as far as I know he never tried to find someone. I don't know what he had for a job. I don't know what he had for anything. Guess I never will.

My mom I saw the next day. I stopped back at home. Dad was at work. I'd forgotten something.

"So where are you going?"

"Bunch of places," I said. "The highway, mostly."

"You're working for that professor of yours, aren't you?"

"Yeah. I am."

Mom shook her head.

"I had so much more... planned for you than this..."

"What exactly did you have planned?" I asked her.

She didn't answer.

I took off. It didn't bother me.

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We always figure we'll have another chance.

The radio was playing Losing My Religion by R.E.M. My head felt like it was full of hot water. My lips were chapped, my throat dry. My hands ached and my ass ached and my legs ached and my entire body felt like a used up humanoid wad of carbon.

I remembered this song. It was on a CD. We played it the when the family was together— Nicole, Mom and Dad and I. It was on the way home from the store. We all went to the store and Mom found the old CD in her car and we listened to it. She skipped to this song because she loved it so much.

Nicole and I were talking in English accents for some reason.

"Why do you have an English accent?" Nicole asked me in exaggerated Cockney.

"I don't, I'm from America!" I said in the same cockney twang.

Everyone laughed.

*The memories didn't end, just like the highway.*

*I can remember Mom cleaning or doing something around the house and how it smelled when she finished—like lemon and cedar.*

*I can remember the grass in our backyard in late winter, how flat and cold and perfect it was.*

*I can remember morning sunshine on the kitchen door.*

*I can remember living rooms. I remember puking and shitting myself on the bathroom floor one night as a small child and Mom holding me and Dad standing in the doorway, his eyes dark with concern.*

*I remember sunrise after sunrise. I remember playing with this Buster Bunny McDonald's Happy Meal toy— Buster drove in this little car that had a clear plastic dome on the back with a hoop and basketball inside it, and as you drove the the little basketball would pop into the hoop.*

*I remember sitting in front of the radio and listening to the velvet bass of the DJ announcing that Lady in Red song by Chris De Burgh. Total 80s shit.*

*I remember this old cheap keyboard. The musical type, not the computer type. Dadd got it at a garage sale for 20 dollars.*

*Nicole would repeatedly play the demo on it and drive my parents crazy.*

*I can remember a lot. Finally, I'm able to remember a lot.*

*I only had one sin left. I looked up at the CD sleeve, the six CDs tucked into their slots. All but the seventh one.*

*I thought about Ira blowing holes in people's heads. I thought about my dad and how I'd inherited his rage.*

*I thought about Lee and his titan mindset. I thought about Mom and how I'd wanted her all for myself.*

*I thought about Roger and his total disregard for everyone around him. I thought about Nicole and how we'd never really known each other.*

*I thought about Brett and his chad-ish pride, how nothing he did was wrong. I thought about the Prof, and his own pride.*

*I thought about Calvin, using his model's bodies to get away from what was in his head. I thought about Lisa and how we fed off each other's worst qualities.*

*I thought about Arthur. I thought about how I'd always wanted a better life and yet was afraid of losing everything I had.*

*I thought about myself and how I was stuck on my least favorite stretch of highway in a car that was too hot, listening to music I hated.*

*It was like I was being punished.*

*I was pissed— only thirty-three years of life. Same age as Jesus. I had hundreds of thousands of dollars saved up in multiple bank accounts. I could've gone anywhere. But I didn't. Why had the Prof decided to do this?*

*I thought about the highway stretching before me. Purgatory.*

*Or was it? Life was purgatory if you thought about it. The bridge between heaven and hell. The mid-point.*

*I thought about what would happen when I consumed the last sinner. What would my judgement be like? Had the Devil even mentioned that? Would anything happen at all?*

*The heat was unbearable. I stuck my head out the window to breathe, sucked in the icy freeway blast. The music blared from the door speakers, distorting and driving me insane. On the northwestern horizon, the shadow of Geryon squatting with all his legs on the cloud, a monster the size of several stadiums, straddling the northwestern sky.*

*I looked up at him.*

*And suddenly, Geryon dipped his head below the clouds.*

*He had a human face. An enormous, white, gentle, human face. His skin was milk-white. It was the face of an honest, sympathetic man.*

He stared down at me from his cloud fortress, no expression. His tranquil eyes were blue. His straight lips—probably bigger than the exit signs—were pink. The rest of his multi-legged body was still above the clouds. He looked like someone sticking his head just below the surface of a pond.

He just stared at me from up there. Watching. Judging. His eyes calm and sad.

Nothing else happened, except the panic I'd been dreading finally broke within me. My entire awareness, my soul, seemed to turn downward, plunging, downward. Eternally downward.

I tried pumping the brakes. Slamming them. I should've been thrown through the windshield, into a tire-screaming spin.

But the Cruze just kept going. Perfectly straight down the road.

I tried jerking the wheel. It was rock steady.

Straight down the road.

I did the only thing I could.

I wept like a child, helpless.

Clarity came to me in Geryon's gentle gaze. All the things the Devil had said, all the things he'd shown me about myself and about others and the people I'd known.

Sinking. Then falling. Uncontrollably.

And still, the highway ran on.

## **20. The Seventh Joint**

The next exit was familiar. It was the same one I'd taken to get on the highway the first time. I was heading back in the direction I'd come. It felt like a long time ago, but it also might've just been the day before.

I pulled off the highway onto my old road, all the same restaurants and hotels and businesses. The same stoplights, the same industrial complexes. The same railroad tracks. The same apartment complex. Just empty. And dead.

The Devil and Death were waiting on the sidewalk in front of my apartment building. I pulled up and parked in my original spot and they got in the back seat.

Full circle.

"How's the road?" the Devil asked.

"I've been thinking about something," I said to them, not bothering with the niceties.

"What's that, Johnny?"

"If God is all merciful, why would he want you to punish these people?"

"Punish who?"

"Gone," said Death.

"Everyone. All the sinners. If God's business is creation and love and forgiveness, why would he want punishment? Why would he want you to have me devour them?"

The Devil grinned and didn't answer.

"Gone," said Death.

"He wouldn't," I answered myself. "Because he's not about destruction. But you are."

The Devil kept grinning.

"This isn't purgatory. It's hell."

The Devil grinned wider than ever.

"There is no deal," I continued. "You never had any intention of allowing me to be saved. You just used me to get these people down here, too."

The Devil finally spoke.

"So how do you feel?"

"You lied to me," I said, knowing how stupid it sounded out loud.

"I'm the fucking morning star."

"Gone," said Death.

I didn't say anything. We just sat there in the apartment complex parking lot, same place we were during the blizzard

after I died. I felt for my Bible in my pocket. It wasn't there. I couldn't remember the last time I'd seen it.

The bar. Before or after Lee.

That long ago.

When I'd actually opened it up to read it.

The Devil spoke.

"See, here's the thing, Johnny-child. The fucked up shit that you little monkeys do has consequences. And God's a real pushover when it comes to consequences. Just ask for forgiveness and you're off the hook. But see, that's where he's wrong. See, you little monkeys think life is about *you*, and feeling *good* all the time. It's not. Rules need to be enforced. And some souls are beyond saving."

"You were talking about me when you said that," I said.

"Not the people I was going to consume."

"Gee, you're so smart, Johnny. Yes. That's exactly what I was saying. Are you proud that you figured that out now?"

I didn't answer.

"You've had your fun. Now you gotta pay for it."

We were quiet again for a little bit. It was pleasant. It made me appreciate the simple things.

"Gone," Death said softly.

"So what happens to me now?" I asked, knowing the answer.

"You keep riding the highway," said the Devil. "There's no real cinematic justice here. You just stay as you lived. You drive, isolated and witnessing only the worse of humanity. Consuming the worst of humanity. Just like you did in life. Over and over and over. And if you try to do anything else, or if too many of them get away... Geryon will come down from the clouds. And maybe, someday, you'll truly understand what you threw away."

His voice changed. The voice of the Prof.

"I saw an intelligent young man with a lot of ambition and nowhere to put it. I'm giving you an outlet. Take the hint."

He handed me another CD. The seventh CD. The final sin.

GLUTTONY.

"I think you'll like this one," he said, grinning again. "It's yours."

He put a hand on my shoulder. It was warm.

"Only two kinds of people in this world, son. Those that get into heaven, and those that don't."

## **(johnny clee goes high driver again)**

Johnny did the dishes in the hotel room, put his few plates and glasses in the sink and rinsed them, washed them with a paper towel and Dawn dish soap, and set them on the rack to dry. He found it relaxing. He dried his hands.

He hadn't spoken to anyone in weeks. And he liked that. No complications. No drama. No anything. Just him. Him and the road and the money in his bank account.

He thought about his last runs. Once he got back it would be another week before he would have to go anywhere. He'd be given another burner phone, destroy the one he had now. Maybe he'd text Lisa if she was around.

He kept thinking about getting a real job. But he never did.

*Johnny boiled water and ate macaroni and cheese, Annie's shells and aged cheddar. He wolfed it down. Then he ate pop tarts. Then he had a Coke.*

*Johnny thought about his parents and how much they pissed him off. He thought about his sister. He thought about fucking Lisa and how she always tasted like cigarettes and smelled like patchouli.*

*Johnny thought about the Prof and how the Prof didn't understand how much work Johnny was doing for him, out on those never-ending highways.*

*The Coke bottle empty, Johnny decided to make himself his dinner steak now. He took it out of the fridge where'd he set it earlier to defrost, soft and cold. He tore the plastic, felt the slimy meat. He salted and peppered it. Tossed it on the cast iron skillet oiled with grapeseed oil. He seared both sides, then put the steak in the oven.*

*For some reason, Johnny was always hungry. He didn't smoke, didn't really drink. Food was how he coped with the burden of existence. His intermittent fasting schedule kept him from getting too fat, but he wasn't in shape, either.*

*Johnny was a regular lump of American. A carbon sack of corn syrup.*

*Johnny ate the steak with his hands, getting greasy and dirty. Delicious. He was an animal, and that was all right with him.*

*Johnny had callouses on his heels. Thick, tough, unfeeling skin that had to be picked into with fingernails, pinched out and peeled off in thick strips. Johnny found the sensation quite satisfying and would sit doing it before bed after his shower*

when they were softened up and easier to tear. He'd have a small pile of fleshdust and skin flakes on his sheet by the time he was done. He'd brush it off with a few sweeps of the hand, lie down, and go to bed, his heels smooth and filed.

Johnny's jaw hurt, specifically the joint of his left mandible. Something was off in there, something that made his jaw feel like there were little pebbles grinding right underneath the skin every time he opened and closed his mouth. Chewing was a tedious business.

The last few runs— one to Georgia, one to Ohio, and one to Arkansas— had not been good. The actual tasks had gone off without a hitch, as they usually did. But Johnny felt sick. Johnny had to pull over and puke several times. He puked twice or maybe three times last winter, none in the spring, once during the summer, and twice in autumn so far. He was alarmed to see blood in the most recent mess but when he mentioned finding a hospital to the Prof, the Prof shut it down.

"Wait till you're back," he said. "I'll get you into the hospital."

Johnny remembered being really little and climbing up the stairs to his parents' bedroom where morning sun blasted through the giant window above. It was like going into a tunnel to heaven.

There was a bookshelf halfway up the stairs at the landing. And there were several sinister faces that stared out from them, and Johnny didn't like the way they peered out at him as he crawled up the stairs like a mountaineer. One face was a melting candle. Another stared out of the black sky, and it had sinister blue lips in a sinister blue smile. There were blonde children menaced by blue-skinned old men with canes. They peered fearfully out of little oval portraits with wide saucer-eyes.

Johnny remembered an old movie where an old man was crawling over a bunch of metal partitions in some frozen hellscape. He wore a hat and a plain suit and he had a grey mustache. The man was climbing over the sharp edges of the metal partitions, muttering, "Cold... cold..." A vampire was hiding in that maze of black partitions under freezing blue light and cold steam, and the weak, trembling old man was like a fly in a spiderweb. The vampire reared up, fangs flashing. The old man wailed.

Johnny looked back to Lisa. To the Prof. To the great tearing of the spirit. To the winter of the body during the swelter of the summer. To phantoms of the heart, to watching movies late into the night. To sleeping with your head at the other end of the bed. To the abyss in your center, the abyss behind your eyes.

*Johnny cranked his vinyl player, some Tupac. Classic and powerful. He rode the vibes, let them carry him to calmer mental seas.*

He felt his work phone buzz.

"Johnny, we have to go high driver again," said the voice on the other end. "Do you know what that means?"

"I know exactly what that means," Johnny snarled to himself. "Why do you think I've been in five states in five days?"

Johnny had an old Sony CD player with a stack of burned CDs that he listened to. He had earbuds and he listened to the CDs with them. Johnny didn't like Mp3's. Johnny liked records and CDs that you could hold in your hands. Johnny liked things that actually existed.

"Pull yourself together, boy," he said to himself. "No time for fear."

Johnny closed his work phone and thought about eating something else.

## 21. Gluttony

I got out of the car and left the Devil and Death where they were.

I went up the stairs to my apartment.

I was back. My body lay on the floor, bullet hole in the right cheek, eyes wide open.

I was already dead, and there was no demon.

I was the demon.

I watched myself turn into a small, fat, worm-like thing on the floor. I writhed, trying to cry out. I couldn't speak anymore. I had no mouth. I was terrified and furious. I looked like a cat-sized, segmented, pink maggot, fleshy and bursting and juicy.

The apartment shook. Something was coming.

Through the doorwall came an enormous orange pig. Tusks, hooves, bristly mohawk up its head, massive body the color of Donald Trump's face.

I was to watch the feast on my own fresh demon corpse. My final punishment.

I thought of all the sinners I'd consumed so far, thinking I was doing something righteous. Had they all been watching me, invisible, just off to the side? Almost certainly.

I knew whoever was inside this orange pig-beast no doubt thought I deserved this, thought they were doing it for their own salvation, saving themselves. Or maybe they already knew they were fucked forever, and just trying to keep their own Geryons up in the clouds. We're all damned, one way or another. Sent to our own personal versions of hell depending on the decisions we made and the senses we took in.

What would happen once my demon body was consumed and digested in the gullet of this enormous pig?

I'd be gone. Broken to atoms, or whatever lies beyond atoms, scattered to oblivion. Where I belonged.

I was dead and had gone to hell.

It all came to me. All those days on the road, all those nights.

I grew up in a stressful household. I struggle to use the word abusive, because I feel like calling it that negates all the good times we had. But that's probably what it was. And in an atmosphere like that, you either leave and choose loneliness or stay and choose pain and disrespect. I chose loneliness. I chose it every time.

A glutton for loneliness.

The pig began to feast after rooting on me for a second, its fat snout brushing my face. I couldn't fight or run like some of the demons I'd met. I just felt the pig's maw sink into me and tear a chunk out. Demon-me wheezed what I assumed was a scream. Worm goo splattered onto the carpet.

I just stood there and watched and remembered everything from my idiot life. It was a moment of superior clarity. I'd been such a worthless cunt. No wonder I'd ended up here.

I thought of all the apologies I could make. All the things I'd say and do that I'd always wanted.

Then, I thought of something the Devil had said not a few minutes prior. And I thought of Brett Patrick's demon, disappearing before my lion jaws could find his neck.

There was one thing I could still say.

"End me," I said, looking down at my dead body as the pig took another bite. I felt like I should be feeling some proverbial white hot pain, but I felt nothing.

"I'm sorry. It's probably too late, but I'm sorry. I deserve this."

I fell to my knees. Folded my hands. The pig feasted and the demon-worm that had once been me wheezed.

"End it," I said out loud, the pig snout brushing against what was left of my face. "Make it quick."

I started repeating it. For a while, that's all I did.

"I'm sorry," I said. "Forgive me. I'm sorry."

I apologized for everything, to everything, to everyone. I apologized to Nicole, to my parents, to Lisa, even to the Prof.

I sat there on my knees, watching the giant pig consume the demon-worm that had been me.

What a stupid, little, selfish, insignificant life I'd led.

Then—

*Johnny's worm demon body, nearly consumed, is gone. The pig werebeast is gone.*

*He stands in his old apartment, smelling the familiar smells. He can see out his doorwall to his balcony. The blinds are open now. He's always liked the view— across a small pond, across a charming little old folks' home, all the way to the western horizon. Third floor view. All the radio towers and trees on the horizon. A white factory with twin white electrical towers down the road about a quarter mile. The world spread out before him. The sky is blue and sunny. Spring sunny. When had that happened? Johnny feels a presence in the room.*

*He turns around.*

*It's Death, seated at Johnny's table in his dining nook.*

*Death smiles at him.*

*"Well done," he says. "Always nice to see someone get it right."*

"It was always that easy?" asks Johnny.

"Why wouldn't it be? God loves his children. The prodigal son is one of the most famous parables. And you're saved now."

"It seems too simple."

"You'd be surprised at how many people never figure it out." Johnny thinks of the sinners, of the CDs he listened to that explained their minds and lives, and how most of them wouldn't even think of forgiveness, not because they couldn't feel remorse, but because they didn't think they were doing anything that needed forgiving.

"Why are you helping me?" Johnny asked.

"I'm not. I'm not on anyone's side. I'm a high driver, just like you. A faithful employee who transfers things from one place to another."

"What do I do now?" Johnny asked.

"Go back down to your car. Back out to the road. And don't worry, you'll where to go next."

Johnny looks at his doorway. Then back at Death.

"Will I see you again?"

Death smiles.

"Gone."

## **22. Judgement**

The Cruze was right where I left it, out in front of my apartment, just like Death said it would be.

I got in. The heat wasn't on. The windows rolled up and down. The air conditioning worked.

The radio was playing Everyday is a Winding Road by Sheryl Crow. I fiddled with the volume knob. I was able to turn it down. But I turned it up.

I listened to the song, not begrudgingly like I had with the other ones, not trying my damnedest to tune it out. The music actually touched me. A lot of the lyrics resonated, like the ones about feeling like a stranger in your life and living on coffee and nicotine and wondering if anything was ever really happening.

For the first time in a long time, I was feeling fine. Something had been taken from me. Some weight. I wasn't sure if I deserved it, but questioning anything at this point seemed like a fucking stupid thing to do.

I drove back to the highway. I looked up at the clouds, looking for Geryon's shadow, but he was gone. I watched the light shafts still beaming down at the endless fields. They seemed brighter.

It occurred to me that the light above the clouds might not be the sun.

I hadn't gone far when the highway ended, just tapering off into a two-lane that turned into a dirt road. It wound through the hills until it ended at a square, unkept parking lot full of cracks and weeds. The parking lot was in front of a small, unassuming building made of grey bricks. A huge metal radio tower sat on top of it. I parked and got out. The air was warm, the breeze friendly.

Heaven is a radio station, apparently. At least that's what it was for Johnny Clee. Go figure. A point of transmission between worlds or dimensions.

Inside, there were vases of columbines out front in the lobby area, wafting fragrance.

I buzzed the intercom by the door.

Before I knew it, a swarthy, short, younger Middle Eastern guy came out of the nearest doorway and threw open the door. He hugged me and kissed me on each cheek. He was dressed in a red t-shirt and blue jeans. He was trim, slight, almost tiny. His hair was short and messy, his beard untrimmed and patchy. He looked like an intern.

"Johnny Clee," he said. "It's good to see you. You remember me?"

It took a second, but yes, I did remember him.

"What do I call you?" I asked.

"You can call me Josh. How you been, man?"

"Tired," I said. "I'm sorry. It didn't go all that well. I hope I didn't screw up too bad."

"Oh, you did fine," Josh said, putting a hand on my shoulder and guiding me away from the front desk. "We've got way bigger problems than anything you did."

"I missed you," I said.

"I missed you, too, man," he said. "Glad you made it."

He kept his arm around me as we walked down the hall. His eyes were crazy. Not insane-crazy but like, beautiful-crazy. I couldn't look at them too long. They had the whole universe in them, and it was overwhelming.

We talked about The Devil. I told him everything I'd been through, everything the Devil had said and done.

"Oh, he doesn't run anything," said Josh. "Pride is his weakness. It's what got him kicked out. He's not even a manager. He's just like an employee with the most seniority."

"He said I'm beyond saving."

Josh fixed me with a look.

"Who told you that?"

"The Devil."

"Yeah. Say that again, *slowly*."

I did. Then I nodded, getting it.

"So you know I didn't believe in you... you know, before..."

"I know."

"So atheists can go to heaven?"

"Well, you're born into a religious tradition whether you want to be or not. You come from some religion no matter how far back your ancestors stopped believing. So atheists are assigned the same as the believers. And it all comes down to one thing—were you mostly a good person or not? If weren't, did you reflect on your wrongdoing? And do you feel genuinely bad for it? If you had time, did you try to make it right? Pretty simple. Most people get in eventually, one way or another. That's kind of the point. It just can't happen until they're ready."

"They all have a shot? All of them?"

"Yeah, why not? You did."

"But so many religions say if you don't believe in that specific religion, you can't be saved."

"That's not true. And Dad never came up with that part, anyway. The people who run the churches did. Marketing ploy."

"But what about the First Commandment? I am the way and all that?"

"Wouldn't it make perfect sense," said Josh. "If, like, the whole challenge is to get people to believe in you despite it all... to make every effort to challenge people's belief? If you just tell people to believe and then let them have it easy, you haven't really challenged them. It all comes down to one thing..."

We stopped in the middle of the hallway, studio doors all the way down. At the end there were enormous double doors, and someone sitting next to them in a chair.

Josh spoke to me.

"In the beginning there was the word, and the word was love. God sees everyone as his children. Children are always learning. You can't punish a child for not understanding something at first, and then learning it."

I wondered where we actually were, what this place would look like for other people. If wondered if any of the sinners I'd consumed would ever get their chance.

"I'm ashamed," I said. "I don't feel like I deserve any of this."

"That means you're in the right place."

Josh held up his hands, showed me the raw, ragged holes the nails had made. I could see through his hands, through the dried blood and puckered flesh. The wounds looked cauterized.

We came to the end of the hallway, to the enormous double doors. They were pure white, smooth and gleaming.

The Devil was outside the door, waiting. He looked irritated at first, but he grinned when he saw me.

"Free will's a helluva drug, eh, Johnny-child?"

I didn't answer him.

"I'll do the talking," Josh said to me, ignoring the Devil.

He knocked on the doors. They swung open, and the three of us walked through.

## **(nicole farnsworth has a dream)**

Nicole was in the computer lab, the one she used to go to when she was in middle school and high school. The one at the public library. She sat in the hard plastic chairs and stared at the screen, focused on the intense, unreadable-yet-familiar patterns that shifted in and out, especially when she looked away. She was supposed to be reading something, but she didn't know what.

Random people kept coming up and playing, sitting down next to her and getting up again. She even recognized some of them. Her manager from the CVS job she'd had at nineteen. Her old high school classmate Becky who became a nurse. This random guy in a Diet Coke commercial she'd crushed on in her twenties.

Then Nicole's brother sat down. Johnny. He'd died earlier that year, but Nicole wouldn't think about that until after she woke up. Right then she was still too focused on the strange patterns on the computer screen. One second they'd be letters, then little squares, then what looked like a Tetris game, then what looked like computer code.

"Hey, uh, I'm off the road now," said Johnny, who didn't seem to want to use the computer in front of him. "I don't do that anymore."

"I'm trying to follow along with this," said Nicole, irritated. He was screwing up her concentration. Just like when they were little kids. "Shut up."

"Are you good with me leaving?"

Nicole turned to him. Saw him. He looked way older. But she wouldn't think about that until she woke up.

"What?"

"Are you good with me leaving and you stay here?"

"I'll be like five minutes."

"I'm sorry about everything," Johnny said. "For you and mom and dad. I'm sorry I left."

"Yeah, I'll be done in like five minutes," said Nicole.

Johnny got up and was gone.

When Nicole woke up, she told her husband all about the dream.

## 23. The Last Highway

What seemed like an eternity later, I walked out of the radio station.

The judgement went well. Thank God.

All I had to do was take one more drive.

I chose Nicole. I'd get to say whatever I needed. She wouldn't really register it, but on some level, she would. And maybe we'd see each other again someday.

But for now, it was the highway.

"Hell," I thought as I exited the radio station. "There are worse ways to spend eternity."

My Cruze was still in the parking lot. I got in, turned the key, hit the accelerator, steered, pulled out of the parking lot.

The radio was still on. It was playing Take It to the Limit by the Eagles.

I got back on the road and floored it. The roar of the engine. The blur of the windows. A certain freedom. A certain acceleration.

I headed west again. The light beyond the clouds was so bright, I couldn't even describe it.

The road led straight up into them.

Never-ending white light.

I kept accelerating, going uphill, up and up and up.

Nothing hurt anymore.

Faster, faster, faster. Reaching some unknown velocity, terrifying and brilliant and glorious all at once.

Faster still.

My wheels left the road but I barely felt it.

The white light washed into me and over me.

I didn't look back.

I was going home.

Finally.