

Absolution

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If I could just get away from them, then I would be okay. And it isn't as if I haven't tried. I've sent them to my friends, people I don't like, and to anybody who I felt deserved them. I even tried selling them—at garage sales and pawn shops—but no one would take them. One guy at *The Divine Head* seemed interested, but when I came back to make the deal, no one knew where I could find him. So, I'm stuck with them and they are stuck with me. But I haven't given up. In fact, last night with the help of my friend Stella, I sent them away to the other side of the universe—to Marduk, she said—but I don't think it worked.

They're very feisty, the demons. There are nine in all. Four are pretty quiet, I don't have much of a problem with them. Three are always asking me if I'm okay, did I have a good day at the office, how am I feeling and all that. But it's the last two that cause me the most trouble. They're always hanging around me, it doesn't matter if I'm awake or asleep. They flush the toilet when I'm in the shower, they make the lights flicker when I have guests over, and they cause my car to stall if I happen to go out with my girl. I find them irritating, the worst thing that could ever happen to a person. Once, at the office, the most annoying one, Azag, changed the radio station on my boss' desk. When he came in, he glared at me, I felt his stare on the back of my neck, and I was surprised he didn't ask me why I had changed it. But seeing I was practically hiding under my desk, asking me must've seemed stupid. Besides, if he had asked me, I don't know what I would have told him. But whatever it would've been, it wouldn't have been the truth.

I wish I could be away from them, I wish I could wish them away. Then things would be okay, I know it. But Stella promised they're on Marduk, the 10th planet on the far side of Pluto, she said. So, I'm hoping she's right. She should be, she's done readings for my brother-in-law and he says she's right on the mark, so I know she's good at what she does. The only thing I have to remember to do is to keep wishing them all away and make sure the nine statuettes—effigies—stay tucked away in a birdcage hanging in the attic. And I can do that, that's easy.

Every night when I get home from work, I pull down the ladder from the ceiling in the hall, climb up, and check on them. And every night they remain in their cage. And lately, for the past two or three nights, I've been able to get a good night's sleep and go to work fresh. My boss told me yesterday he's noticed an improvement in my performance on the job. He also told me that profits are finally going up seeing that they've been going down since I started working there. And I'm happy, I'm proud of myself that I've finally got this thing beat, that those demons are finally gone.

Patricia came by last night. She's my girl. We met one Sunday, in church. I asked her out to breakfast after mass and we've been going out ever since. She's real nice to me. Anyway, we watched TV and ate popcorn. She even said that she noticed I was in a good mood. I remember smiling a lot and that's something I never used to do since I always was thinking about the demons. I put my arm around her and kissed her many times. I felt good about us, that's why I kissed her, because before I thought we were going to break up after only three months. But that's all changed now.

I asked Stella if I could tell the story of how I got the demons. She said it shouldn't cause too much trouble talking a little about them. She knows I feel better when I write these things down. I want to tell Patricia, but not yet. I need to figure it out for myself first.

I was thirteen when I first remember them being around. I went to a summer bible camp with our church; actually, I think it was with my friend's church and he was a 7th Day Adventist. One afternoon, about two days into the stay, Jason and I sat in the chapel praying and the priest told us we need to make a lifelong commitment to Jesus. I remember feeling uneasy since in my church Jesus, God, and the Holy Spirit were already in me. I didn't know if I should take the oath. But Jason pressured me. Soon, all the kids on the pew were urging me to save my soul. The priest talked us into a frenzy and after kneeling, we stood with our arms in the air. I felt warm all over and felt perfectly at ease speaking the oath softly to myself. I felt as if my soul were wrapped in a warm blanket. Jason said that it was the love of Christ, that he was happy that I had accepted him into my life and was reborn in him.

I slept well that night, much better than at home. I don't remember if I dreamed or not, but I must have and must've dreamed so hard, I rolled in my sleep because the next morning, my left eye was swollen shut. There was no bruise, my eye just felt lazy. As I looked in the mirror and tugged at my eyelid, I faintly saw small, dark, chiseled figures dancing behind me. I thought I still might be asleep since it was early morning (faint bluish light lit the bunks where the other kids slept) and since everybody else was asleep, it seemed I could have been right. But that morning, later that day (my eye opened in the afternoon, no one said anything about it), and ever since, when I stretch open my left eye, I see the demons dancing.

Their dances are erratic, I think that's what Stella called it. They danced without music, with themselves, and without rhythm. Stella says their dancing is playful, that they are celebrating, but what they possibly could be celebrating, I don't know. They never did include me, but now I suppose they only danced when I was happy.

Later, when I got an ‘A’ on a test, or cleaned the garage for my parents, or did well at my jobs, they would dance the same dance. For awhile, I used to like to watch them dance—it was pretty harmless and all—but when I turned 20, they started doing other things.

If I ever got upset or mad, one or two would go after the person who made me mad. Stella says that kind of thing starts when the person wishes for it to happen like that. But I don’t remember wishing like that. One day at the junior college, Jason started talking about his church. He said I should convert to his faith since I had already taken the oath. We had had this kind of talk many times, but always I told him I would do no such thing, but that day something was bothering me. I don’t know what it was. Anyway, I said no and he got mad, which was strange for him. I’d seen Jason get mad, but not really at me. He said I was slapping his face for not completely converting. And when I told him I didn’t want to take the oath in the first place and was forced into it, he said,

“But you took the oath. You have to live up to your word.”

I started walking away from him telling him no again and again. He followed me and grabbed my arm and that’s when I saw the demons out of the corner of my left eye coming at him. I shut my eyes not knowing what might happen. Soon, Jason was shaking me, telling me not to be so stupid and when I opened my eyes, they were gone and Jason’s hand still held my arm. Nothing had happened, except that I felt funny. That warm blanket around my soul felt like it had fingers in it. They pressed into me so hard I felt as if I couldn’t breathe. I pulled myself away from Jason and ran to my car and drove home.

A couple of days later, I heard that Jason had broken his arm. What was odd about it was that I vaguely remembered just before I closed my eyes, them jumping and biting into the arm

that was later broken. I went to Jason's house and told him what I saw that day. Even with his arm slung in front of him, he tried to punch me.

“The devil has gotten you! If only you had followed through with your oath! God has punished you, God has forsaken you! You're at the mercy of the devil!”

That happened almost fifteen years ago. We haven't spoken since.

I didn't believe that stuff Jason told me. Not a word of it. The demons were not the devil's work. Maybe they were annoying and hurtful and caused me a lot of trouble, but they were definitely *not* evil! Even on this, Stella agrees with me! Maybe they came out of me when I was at camp that summer, when I was forced into believing something I didn't want to. They were only protecting me. Sometimes I think that they were created by God himself as my guardian angels. People in my church say they've seen guardian angels, but I don't think they have. They talk like the angels are white and fluffy, with feathery wings and long, flowing gowns—like pajamas. But if I were an evil spirit out to get someone and I saw those angels, I would laugh at them and mock their singing and praying. Now my demons, they are very scary. They drive away evil spirits before they have the chance to get near me. Now my demons, I would be afraid of and I would stay as far away from them as possible. Especially when Azag growls his deep growl and bears his teeth. Sometimes you can see him drooling as he's waiting to pounce on the spirit. Nothing ever happened to me as long as Azag was around. Bullies would try to pick on me, my bosses would try to intimidate me, but they would soon stop because Azag was ready to tear them up. All I had to do was let go of the leash and tell him to “sick ‘em”. Nothing would ever happen to me. Not nothing. Ever.

Stella says I've been thinking too much about the demons. And maybe I have. It's been almost two weeks since they've been gone—Stella had cast a good spell—and I'm wondering how they're doing on Marduk. I imagine that planet, four times the size of Jupiter, cold and blue and grey with many barren mountains and valleys and caves—my demons hiding in one from the cold, huddled together. They are shivering and wailing. Four figure I don't need them anymore, three wonder why, and the two are out for revenge—especially Azag. I see him in my dreams, he talks to me and tells me he can't wait to sink his teeth into me. Then he growls fiercely and *I* shiver. Maybe I shouldn't have sent them away. I'm starting to regret what I have done, I'm starting to feel guilty. They didn't do anything really wrong. It's my fault. I should have been more patient with them playing. They meant no harm to me. They were only trying to protect me, to make me happy. And I had Stella send them away! I should be in the cave, cold and hungry and lonely and abandoned! But Stella says there isn't much I can do so I might as well stop thinking about them. She says doing that only makes matters worse, it only complicates the spell. I asked her one day, if I wanted them back, if I could reverse the spell. She said I shouldn't even consider backing out. Who knew what the consequences would be? As the days and weeks passed, as Patricia and I grew closer and closer, as my job got more and more tedious, and seeing that people at work were really starting to pick on me, I thought of them more and more, but was afraid to take the big step—to wish them back. To want old Azag in my lap as I sat in front of the TV. I want to stroke his stiff, rough-hewn fur and feel his cold, wet nose in my ear. I want it all back. I want them back. Stella has tried to make me change my mind—she's even tried scaring me by saying my whole life would come undone—but I don't believe her, just as I don't believe Jason. Just as I don't believe in anyone or anything anymore.

I dreamt of Marduk last night. The nine demons cornered me in a shallow ravine, the crystalline rock formations blocking me at every turn. Azag lunged at me and held onto me on the back of my head. He dug his sharp claws deep into my shoulders, staining my shirt thick with blood. He stuck his nose in my ear, it was iron-hot.

“Breathe the air, taste the dust, look for the sun amidst the putrid bluish light. Live as we have, as you have forced us to, an eternity in this wasteland. Feel the wind clawing at your back, freezing your body to the quick.”

The other eight grabbed different parts of me, digging in as Azag was. I screamed.

“Yes, my friend. I will have my revenge. *I am coming back with you.*”

Azag pushed his nose further into my ear. Soon I felt him in my brain. And then in my mind.

I awoke screaming. My fingernails dug deeply into the sides of my head.

It wasn't until late afternoon when I shook off the dream. It had taken so long to do so because after calming down and going to the bathroom, I noticed in the mirror that my left eye was lazy. Immediately, I heard a soft voice,

“As you are, as I am. As you become, I already have.”

I was glad it was Saturday. I was lucky I hadn't been called into work to catch up on paperwork. I spent most of the day pacing through the house, the yard, and the garage. I must've passed the attic ladder at least thirty times. And each time, I thought to go up there and check on the effigies in the cage. I had to hope the dream was just a dream and that nothing was going to come of it. But, as Stella had warned, if even one of the effigies is out of its cage, then big problems are sure to follow. I told her I had no intention of removing them, but she

cautioned that they can jump out of the cage all by themselves—if I wish them to. And Stella seems to think I have wished and wanted too hard for the demons' return. She said I have moved from possibility to probability. There was nothing I could do to reverse the process. All I could hope for was that the probability wouldn't move from low to high.

Most of the day was quiet and later on I had forgotten about the effigies. But, after I had finished my dinner, I had the burning urge to check on them. Enough though—action. I yanked the ladder down and scrambled up. I fumbled for the light and snapped it on. Moving as quick as I could toward the cage, I stumbled, nearly putting my foot between beams through the sheet rock which was my ceiling downstairs. Regaining myself, I lunged for the cage. Grabbing it with both hands and desperately peering into it, I counted: One, two, four, five, seven, eight. . .eight. Eight? I counted again pointing at each as I rattled its number off. Eight. How did one get out? The cage door was still securely fastened. I searched the area under it, finding it nestled in a heap of fiberglass insulation. It was Azag. I knew it. It was just a feeling, but the closer I looked at the figure, the more strange it appeared. Each figurine looked exactly the same as the others, stamped out of a mold—Azag felt heavy. And warm like he had been lying in the sun. I brought it to the light and noticed a detail that sent an electric chill down my back. The left eye was lazy.

The phone rang. I had to answer it, it was Stella. If anybody could get me out of this mess, she could. I got out of the attic as fast as I could. The phone was on its ninth ring when I picked it up.

“Stella?”

“You're demons are coming.”

“Only one, Azag.”

“No, they’re all coming back. Not just your nine, but all the other demons that have been cast out, tossed like flotsam when people grew tired of their antics.”

“They’re far away, on Marduk, you promised. They can’t come back.”

I felt a sharp pain in my temple.

“I don’t know how. But you did it.”

I frantically rubbed my head. Someone or something was jabbing the inside of my head with a sharp stick. “How many?”

“Thousands and thousands.”

A voice spoke for me. “That’s all I needed to know.”

With that, I felt Azag leave me. The line was dead. In the minutes that came after, I don’t know what happened. All I knew was that I had a phone in my hand and nobody was there to talk to me.

“Hello? Hello? Is there anybody there?”

I heard someone breathing. They were moaning, too. I hung up quickly, yanking my hand away from the receiver.

I knew something was wrong when I found in my pocket, one of the figurines from the cage in the attic. I knew it was supposed to be up there, Stella had put it there and I was told it had to stay in the cage or else something bad would happen. I got scared. I wanted to go up to the attic and check on the figurines and to put the one in my pocket back. How did it get out? I stood below the ladder in the hall. I couldn’t bring myself to go up and check. The statuette stayed in my pocket.

I slept pretty good and got up in time to get myself dressed and go to church. Father Frente told us about the approaching millennium and Armageddon. He said that we were all doomed unless we confessed all our sins and were truly repentant. I knew I was. I was happy with myself, my job, and with the people around me whom I loved. And I was happy with my soul.

There was a breakfast after mass and I sat across from Father Frente. He kept on looking harshly at me as if he was thinking I had done something bad and hadn't confessed it. I didn't like being looked at that way. I wished I had Azag to protect me. I reached into my pocket and held the figurine.

“Things will be okay. If I can just get away from him, then I will be okay.”

I gripped the statuette tighter. I closed my eyes. In the dark, I saw Stella at her table with her cards spread out before her. She turned over one after another. She was talking, but I couldn't hear her. I leaned closer to her.

Her eyes were hollow, vacant. I could smell the scent of burning hair. Camphor candles surrounded her; a short, fat one was behind her head which gave her a golden aura—like the Virgin Mary in the pictures on the walls around the altar at church. Her mouth moved again.

“We are all doomed,” she turned over the cards in succession. “Confess your sins. Be truly repentant. Then you must provide a sacrifice to prove your loyalty.”

She sat still—motionless. Suddenly, I was yanked back into the dark. I opened my eyes slowly. Father Frente was staring at me.

“Is there something troubling you, my son?”

“No, Father.”

“I can tell you have something on your mind. Something which is so bad, it’s hurting you to be let out. You wish to confess?”

...Confess your sins. . .Be truly repentant. . .

“Yes, Father.”

“Come with me, my son.”

He led me to the place where I usually made my confession. He led me in one door. As I knelt, he drew back the screen.

“Bless me, Father, for I have sinned. My last confession was two weeks ago.”

“Yes, my son. I missed you last week.”

“I didn’t keep my house clean and I didn’t help my parents with the yard-work like I promised. Also, I coveted another person’s things.” I reached for the statuette in my pocket. “I coveted their power.” I rubbed the figure harder, stroking the rough-hewn, pewter fur on its head. “I coveted their vision. I used them.”

Father Frente gasped. I saw him cover his mouth with his hand as if to mask his contrived astonishment. “My son, these are mortal sins. They might not have gotten so bad if you had confessed last week. But as it is. . .”

The figurine was warm in my hand. “I don’t much want to hear it right now. I don’t want to hear you spew your pseudo-religious banter. You always patronized me.”

“I can see you’re quite distraught, my son. You must be penitent before I can absolve your sins before God.”

The demon in my pocket grew in size. It was iron-hot—pulsing.

“You ever think much about Armageddon, Father? You ever truly believe its really going to happen when you preach to us? You ever think how you will be judged?”

“I can’t do anything for you.” He got up to leave.

“Well, it’s going to happen. You too. The destruction will fall more on your shoulders than anyone else’s because you have not received true absolution. Let me enlighten you toward things unseen and unknown and undone. It’s awe-inspiring.”

Azag jumped out of my pocket. He knelt before me, growing in size and bearing his teeth—drool flowing out of the corners of his mouth. As he tore through the confessional, I smiled proudly. The first sacrifice to prove my loyalty.

I find myself lying in bed; the sun is setting, casting long shadows against the walls. I can faintly recognize crouching demons—gargoyles; contorted, twisted, repulsive, chaise. People are terrified, I can feel it, the close of the millennia draws near. Their fevered pitch is a deafening decibel. It is the unknown, the uncertain, they fear—and it is this ancient fear that binds them tight. Wouldn’t they feel as if they’d been duped if they ever realize those terrifying beasts that now invade their minds, were actually angels? White, fluffy with white, feathery wings. And don’t forget those flowing effervescent gowns with their golden halos above their heads.

It would be the joke of the century if all this were a hoax, an irony perpetuated by one man who’s powers exceed the bounds of what’s expected in being human. I can’t be blamed for what’s happening, I only respond to my environment, draw in those powers others are only too afraid or too stupid to exploit. But is isn’t a joke. Why? Because I believe in Armageddon, in the concept of Judgment Day. It has been drilled into me from day one. Repent, repent, confess, on your knees. Pay homage to the Lord else he will strike you dead. I hear the millions; no, tens of hundreds of thousands of millions begging for their lives, paying homage to whatever God

they believe in—praying for their souls. Those who seem to be unaffected, those who will survive, whose who will rise from the ruins of the society to rule are those who worship not the Christ figure. The vicious circle is complete—closure is at hand.

I lay my hand on Patricia, she is lying next to me. She wanted the comfort of a man—me—before the end came. She held fast to her beliefs, and died for them. To each his own. For myself, another sacrifice—yet this will go unnoticed. Hardly anyone will remember the one, Patricia or Father Frente, upon the realization that millions have perished.

I see my demons dancing on the floor at the foot of the bed. They seem content with their world. Actually, I'm surprised to see them back so soon. Azag tells me my four sacrifices expedited their journey: Stella, Father Frente, Patricia, and myself—that annoying part of me that couldn't wipe its own ass, much less patch things up around here after they go to hell. . .

Azag also tells me the other demons will be here within a couple months—near to the end of October, 2000. I asked him how all of them were going to get here, I couldn't possibly make enough sacrifices to provide for their passage. He said that since they can't come back from Marduk, Marduk is coming here. I can hear Stella now, spewing her monotonous, pedantic bunk.

“You must stop the demons from accomplishing their goal. Marduk will destroy the Earth.”

Granted, this passing of Marduk will be substantially more devastating than when it last passed through the system oh, say, 3,000 or so years ago. Floods, no big deal; we're talking continental upheaval, the crust fracturing, sending waves of water into places people never imagined it would be. The fate of New Atlantis sealed.

A small part of me wants me to get hold of myself and stop it before it's too late. I take one of the steak knives from the kitchen and thrust it steadily and firmly into its heart. Silence.

That part could never understand. It never knew the call of the demons, the thirst for change, the thirst for justice—nature reclaiming herself, washing the slate clean, starting fresh.

It's all for the best, you know. It's inevitable that people must die by the droves for them to understand. Humanity must evolve. Time to kill off the old so that the better may survive—Darwin and all that crap. Besides, you haven't considered that this Armageddon exists because their God demands it? Obviously, they're doomed. We all are. Even this God is. Marduk will cleanse the planet; much of nature, of humanity and all it has constructed and fabricated and raised in worship of itself—of trophies erected to celebrate man's conquest of man and nature, will be destroyed. And of God, well, he will be destroyed too. So will any and all vestiges.

The day draws near. I have buried myself within them. There isn't a doubt that I will be okay. I'll be fine. Just peachy.