

Ancient Conflict

“Our father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name...”

Blonde hair fell forward as her head bowed in prayer before the portrait of Jesus and the makeshift shrine. “Amen.” She walked to the window and stared up in amazement at the stars her Lord had created. In the background, a gunshot rang out in the night, destroying its solemn quiet. The gunshot and violence in the world seemed to threaten the sanctity of her bedroom.

Janice backed away from the window and climbed into bed, pulling the covers close to her as if for protection. Her mind replayed the violence that she saw nightly on the news. The girl was sure evil ruled a portion of the world. Nightly she prayed for the violence of the world to end, yet, it seemed to grow more powerful. When the world was dark and she was alone in her room, she sometimes had doubts of her beliefs since God had let this reign of evil continue. Then she would pray, begging for forgiveness, crying because she questioned God’s will. The last of her conscious thoughts before going to sleep were, wishing all violence to end.

The girl woke to a morning that was brighter and warmer than usual for early spring. Janice sprang from the bed and sniffed the clean morning air that wafted through the open window. She was optimistic about the coming morning. She shuttered her trepidations in a hidden spot of her mind until another night when she lay scared in the bed. It was Sunday. She looked forward to attending church with her mother. In the Lord’s house, the world would be right again and she would feel safe.

As she stepped from the shower, a familiar sound came from below, and her mood crashed. Her hands trembled as she listened to the sounds that flowed up the stairs, through the hallway, to her room. Words that had not been meant for her ears said in distant violent voices, “For the last time I’m not going to waste my Sunday going to that damn silly church with you,” her father shouted. This had been followed by the usual words from her mother: “I’m only concerned about your salvation. Its time you give yourself to Jesus Christ. Do it for Janice if for no other reason.”

Janice stepped back into the shower and turned on the water full to drown out the sounds. Water droplets crashed onto her trembling body as she said a silent prayer for her parents, especially her father. The girl knew he was a kind and gentle man, even if he was not as firm a believer in God as was she and her mother.

That morning in church it seemed to be different. It could have been the sermon since it had been about Lucifer and Hell. Those types of sermons usually gave her chills and left her wondering how one could risk Hell by being an unbeliever. The girl felt confident in her belief, but that morning something had left her wishing to be anywhere but the church.

Light shining through the multicolored panes of the windows seemed brighter than usual that morning. Janice was sure that the coming day would be a good one. Something deep within told her it would be special. Her mood seemed to improve with that moment and then something happened to bring it back to where it had been. When she turned her attention back to the minister, Ralph Laski was turned around smiling at her. Janice immediately turned away to look back to the windows.

Ralph was in church only because his parents made him attend. The devout girl hated people such as him and wished they would stay away from church. Church was not a place for unbelievers she had thought. Ralph was nice looking and never caused trouble and did well in school, but for that one reason Janice would have nothing to do with him. The minister had said many times that a true Christian never associated with non-believers.

The sermon ran longer than usual and even Janice was glad to be out and on her feet. She usually walked the short distance home alone when the weather was warm as it was that day, her white with pink trim spring dress playing in the evening breeze. With such a delightful day, she wanted to take the long way home. This would take her through the park, which was usually safe enough during the day.

Near the middle of the park, she sat on a rock that lay partially in a bubbling brook. She closed her eyes to revel in the warmth when the voice of a man startled her. The frightened girl quickly turned her head to see a boy only slightly older than her standing to her right. He was tall for his age and looked older than he should have. She had thought that maybe his eyes were what made him look older. What ever it was that set him apart from others, she felt no threat from him. Calmly she had said, “Hi.”

“May I sit with you?”

Janice slid over without answering. The boy sat but avoided getting too close to her. This pleased her and she smiled. His clothes were simple jeans and a light blue shirt. This was not the usual church attire, but since she was late getting out of church, he could have gone home and changed by now. Janice wanted to question him about his beliefs but hesitated since some thought it rude to ask such personal things.

To her amazement the boy asked, "Did you just get out of church?"

"Why yes. Do you go to a church near here?" she questioned.

The boy looked thoughtful and replied, "I normally don't go to church, but I did visit yours this morning."

Images of the morning's congregation reeled through her mind, but in those images, she could not see the boy's face among them. She couldn't understand how she could have missed such a pleasant face. "I don't remember seeing you there." Janice said, puzzled.

The boy smiled and said, "My clothes don't fit the standards of your church, or most churches for that matter. I stayed back and out of sight."

Embarrassed Janice lowered her head and said meekly, "I'm sorry, I shouldn't..."

The boy interrupted, "Don't be embarrassed, I could have worn better, I just chose not to this day."

Embarrassment had been replaced by resentment to find it had been wasted on the strange boy. Containing the resentment she said with forced casualness, "I'm Janice, what is your name."

The boy offered his hand and replied, "Lucifer."

Just as she touched his hand, she jerked it away after hearing his name, "Why would a couple name their son Lucifer?"

Mocking offense, the boy asked, "Something wrong with my name?"

Janice stuttered, looking for the correct words, trying not to offend any more than she already had, "Well it is the same name as Satan, you know?"

"Oh yes, so it is, I sort of like the name myself, I'm sorry if it bothers you. You can call me Stan if you like."

She smiled nervously, "Yes Stan is better, I think."

They sat talking about mundane things when there was a loud noise in the distance. Two men stood arguing when suddenly a gun appeared. The men fought as the gun waved wildly in the air, when suddenly, it fired. The sound of the bullet tearing through the air gave no indication as to its direction. The bullet no longer belonged to the turmoil of the two men that had caused its flight. Fate had taken control of the bullet and now guided it. The bullet had its own destination and no force on Earth could have stopped it as it tore into Janice's chest.

She slumped backward over the rock and screamed in pain. Blood flowed freely from the torn artery. Her life was running onto the rock and dripping into the stream behind her, turning the water a bright crimson. Janice thought of her mother and father and screamed aloud, "Oh, God, help me," and he did. Immediately the pain stopped, the blood slowed and finally stopped. Janice sat up, still in shock and looked at the blood stained tattered spot where the bullet had struck her. The memory of the impact and the searing pain played repeatedly in her mind. Janice finally dropped to her knees, clasped her hands under her chin, and began to pray.

A hand touched her shoulder and a soft voice that could have only belonged to God, said, "Stand my child, there is no need to pray to me."

The prayerful girl opened her eyes and looked toward the voice. She saw an old man with a long beard... this she knew had to be God. Tears begin to cloud her vision. When they cleared, the young boy was standing where the old man had been. The boy took her hand, helped her to her feet, and said, "Come let's walk, we must talk."

Janice looked to him and knew in her heart that the boy was the old man. A sudden calm came over her and she asked, "You are God, aren't you?"

The boy looked thoughtful and replied, "Yes and no."

The anguish of the moment the bullet hit her still hurt, she said, "You brought me back from sure death. If you're not God, who are you?"

He sighed and said impatiently, "I am Lucifer. I am not the god you are all so eager to pray to."

Janice jumped back in fear, "My God, what have I done to bring down this evil on me?"

Lucifer laughed and replied, "Evil am I? Didn't I just I save your life?"

The fearful girl screamed, "This is some devil trick, I forsake you, Lucifer. Return to Hell where you belong."

Lucifer smiled amusingly, "Why should I return to somewhere I am not from?"

Terrified, the girl began to run. Her breath was coming in sharp pants as she strained to run faster than she was capable. Not watching where she was running, she hit someone and they both tumbled to the ground. It was an elderly man whom she immediately apologized to through the waning tears. "I'm sorry sir, I was just so frightened...there is...this man..." She said while looking in the direction from whence she had come.

The elderly man spoke in a voice that did not match his looks, "Don't be afraid of me, there is nothing to fear." The tormented girl ran, propelled by terror.

Her breaths were coming in gasp as she arrived home and ran to her room, slamming the door closed and locking it. She collapsed before her homemade shrine and began to pray fearfully. The telephone rang, interrupting her prayer. Hesitantly, she answered. Before she could speak a familiar voice pleaded, "I have to speak with you. I beg for your help. Your parent's souls could depend on it."

Janice slammed the phone down on the table and trembled with fear. She wondered what she had done to deserve the wrath of the devil. The phone rang again, but she ignored it. Not wanting to hear it ring any more, she jerked the cord from the wall. The phone continued to ring. Giving in to a power she knew was greater than her own, she answered and Lucifer said, "Meet me at the old abandoned bridge. Janice gasped at the mention of the bridge. This was the place she went when troubled. No one on the planet knew she went to that spot. Her mind tried to write it off as a coincidence, but knew it wasn't.

The blood stained dress lay crumpled in the trash. She had nearly ripped the dress off as if shedding the dress might carry with it the terror of the moment the bullet ripped into her. She pulled out the jeans she rarely wore. The Bible taught that a lady does not wear pants. She walked past the mirror and stopped to look at the spot of dried blood that still clung to her chest. She felt the spot where the bullet had entered her, and saw no sign of a scar. The religious girl wondered why Lucifer would save her life. Would a man of evil truly save her? It had to be some trick her mind contrived. She left the spot of dried blood on her chest as a reminder, and pulled on a loose fitting blouse.

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Water made a bubbling sound as it ran under the old steel truss frame of the bridge. A path led to the old bridge, the only remaining sign that a road had ever come to the bridge. Sitting on the bridge was the boy she had met in the park, the boy who is Lucifer. Gathering her courage, she walked to where he sat with his legs dangling over the side.

"Sit down," the boy said, waving a hand to indicate a place beside him. She sat next to him His boyish face made it easy to forget momentarily that he was Satan.

"Why do you torment me, Devil?" she questioned pointedly.

His smile was warm and inviting. "I am not here to torment you, my friend. I am here to offer you the truth, to give you knowledge beyond others."

She trembled and said shakily, "As you gave knowledge to Eve?"

"Ha Ha Ha no, not as that serpent of yours did."

"Why do you call it my serpent?"

"The tale of the serpent is not of my making. It's of yours, I mean, your people, of course," he said slightly amused.

The girl looked at him, confused. Lucifer took advantage of the silence to continue, "That book you read faithfully, how would you react if it were mostly false?"

"It's not fake, it's the word of God." She said defensively.

The boy shimmered and became a ghost of the old man she had seen earlier in the day. Then he was the young boy again. He said calmly, "You are correct in part. Some of it is the word of God and some of it is a fabrication by man and the evil that exist in universe. Remember the text in the Bible that tells how Satan is the ultimate liar?"

"Yes"

“He is truly that, and he uses many names, but only one is mentioned in the Bible, and that name is ”Iam”,” Lucifer said, pausing

She looked at the boy, trying to see the evil in him as she had been taught to see, but it wasn't there. As her beliefs were being torn apart she asked, “If all this is so, then why tell me? You should be talking to the pope or some other religious authority.”

Shaking his head in dismay, he replied, “I have done that in the past and was crucified for my troubles. In other times, I have been called a heretic and burned at the stake.”

Reality came crashing down on the girl with the force of a hammer. His words made sense, it covered many of the questions she had wondered about, “I am beginning to understand what you say, but what I don't understand, is, why do you tell me this?”

He smiled warmly, “I am planting a seed that could some day reap the flower of truth.”

She looked to the boy, puzzled. “If you're really God, why not just make everyone know the truth?”

The boy laughed heartily and replied, “I am Lucifer. I have never said I am God.”

Bewildered, she asked, “I don't understand.”

His hand touched hers comfortingly and he said, “There is no all empowering God. If there was a God as you worship, then he or she could make everyone a believer, as well as remove all evil. Oh yes, there is the “freewill” clause to explain this, my dear. I could go on for the next century explaining things to you but there is no time for that. If you have questions I'll just answer them.”

She stared at him blankly as the boy was no more and had transformed into the image of the old man. The old man sat with her on the bridge and waited on her questions. “What is it you want me to do with this knowledge?” She asked.

“Why nothing, if that is your wish, my friend. Do nothing.” He said flatly.

Bewilderment had passed and pure shock had set in. She stared at the old man and wondered what she would do with the knowledge she had been given. “Then why tell me if I am to do nothing?”

A smile that contained amusement and warmth had spread across his face. He said, “I never said you were to do nothing, I only said that you are to do nothing, if that is what your wish. No matter what you do, I warn you to beware of my brother, Iam. He exists only for worship, and he will do whatever it takes to get it. Look at the wars that are fought in his name. He delights in this, as he would delight in your death in his name. The biggest help I can give you is that the Bible has been manipulated for his cause”

Her head ached from the jumble of thoughts that ripped apart almost everything she had believed in. Everything she believed with so much fervor was not true. In fact, it was nearly the reverse of the truth. It was becoming an unspeakable lie. Janice had turned to speak and Lucifer was gone.

As she made her way home, the sun was getting low in the sky. The last thing she wanted this day was to be alone in the forest at night. The house seemed no different than it ever had. The smell of her mom's roast beef permeated the air. A soft voice called out, “Janice, is that you?”

“Yes Mom.”

“You shouldn't be out so late, it's nearly dark. Come and eat now.”

Not thinking of her clothes, Janice went to the dining room and heard her mother's gasp, “Those pants. What in God's name, are you doing wearing those? They are so tight and revealing. I thought I told you to throw those jeans away.”

Not caring at this moment, she casually replied, “I'll do that tomorrow.”

They were all seated and her mother asked Janice to say the blessing. She opened her mouth to begin but the words caught in her throat. Somehow, this didn't seem the right thing to do anymore and begged off. As her Mother blessed the food, she watched her dad ignore it as usual and begin to eat. Most nights this caused an argument but thankfully, this night her mother ignored it.

She watched her parents as her fork wandered aimlessly around her plate. Her Dad, Martin, was a supervisor at the factory. He made a good living. He was nearly the perfect dad other than his lack of beliefs. She studied the black curly hair that tipped his ears, and thought of his kind smile that made him the type of man she wanted to marry some day. She nearly laughed aloud as she realized he might have been the only one right all along about Christianity.

Her mother, Delores, seemed to love Martin, but she could not get over his lack of faith. She would have had Janice at the church praying all night if she had told her what had transpired that day. Janice watched

her mother eat. Most thought Delores had a pretty face, Janice's was much like hers, only her mother's darker blonde hair set them apart.

"Are you going to eat or just stir that food until it's worn out?" Martin jokingly asked.

"Are you alright Janice, dear," Asked her mother?

"I'm fine mother, I'm just not hungry. May I be excused so that I can go to bed early? I have a big exam at school tomorrow?" She lied

This had been the first lie she had ever purposely told to her parents and it made her gut wrench. It hurt, but she felt there was no choice without being asked questions for which she had no answers.

In her room, she stripped off her clothes. She looked at the jeans she had promised to throw away and then at the trashcan. She decided to keep them and dropped them in the dirty clothes hamper. Janice found her favorite white linen gown. Without thinking she knelt before her makeshift shrine and the day's events flooded her mind. She knew that after this day she would never be able to pray to that God the same way. She said a short prayer and then took the picture of Jesus and placed it in the closet. Janice then removed the candles and other trinkets that made up her shrine.

Janice threw herself on the bed, looked at the opposite wall, and stared at the emptiness that had been her shrine. Regret began to fill her mind. What she had seen today could have been just a trick of the devil. Maybe if she slipped out and went to the church, she could think clearer, her theologically trained mind wondered. There were questions she hadn't asked Lucifer that day, questions to which she desperately needed answers.

The phone rang, and she crawled along the bed to get it from the floor where it had fallen earlier in the day as she had slammed it down. "Hello?"

"So you have questions." The familiar voice of the old man asked.

Not near as surprised as she should have been, the girl replied, "Yes. I need to know about heaven and hell."

"My Child, you already know about hell, it's as described in the bible."

"Hell fire and brimstone?" she asked confused.

The older wise voice on the phone laughed and replied, "No, no my child. It's kneeling before Iam for eternity."

The phone crashed to the floor as she dropped it. Her mind now saw the obvious and wondered how she could have been so deceived. Still, her mind screamed that he was lying to her. She reclaimed the phone and noticed for the first time that the cord was still not plugged in. "Still there?" she asked.

"Yes"

"Tell me about...err Heaven or wherever it is where you come from."

Lucifer hesitated and said, "It's not much different from here. Only, you remember all there is that you are not allowed to know here. I shouldn't tell you much but I can say it's a nice place with no violence"

The phone went quiet and a dial tone buzzed in her ear. She dangled the plug in the air and cried for the first time since all this started. All that she had known was a lie. In all her years God had never talked to her directly and now, she had seen and talked to the one that she has been taught to hate, the one she had been taught was the king of deceit. Something in her heart begged that her mind believe him.

That night she slept fitfully. Her dreams were of angels chasing her through a maze of burning pylons. A voice boomed in her head, "They are all liars, trust only your God... keep the faith. I am thy God, thy only God. Forsake me and burn in hell for all of eternity."

One of the angel's faces changed to that of her mother and said, "I never thought I would see the day my daughter would turn away from God. You have sold your soul to the devil for a pair of tight jeans. " Her mother, the angel, charged at the daughter and grabbed her throat and began to deny her the life giving air she needed to live, and said, "I would rather see you dead than to see you defy my God."

Sweat soaked the bed as she woke from a night of tossing and turning. She rolled from the bed, dropped to her knees, and began to pray fervently. Janice kept asking God for forgiveness until her mind cleared enough to remember the previous day's events. Again, she looked to where the shrine had set and saw its emptiness. Torn, the girl weakly pulled herself onto the bed, and cried.

Breakfast was no different from that of any other day. Her mother and father sat eating and reading the morning paper. With the horrid dreams of the night before still fresh in Janice's mind, she felt nauseated

looking at the food. Not having eaten the night before caused her body to take over from her mind and ate all that was on her plate, and asked for more.

The next three days were a blur to the girl. She replayed the events of that Sunday over and over in her mind. With each replay she always came to the same conclusion, the church had to be wrong. No one she knew had ever seen real definitive miracles. Lucifer bringing life back into her dead body was surely a miracle. There was only one other explanation... she had gone insane. It would take some time before Janice would totally discount the latter.

They all sat quietly at the table eating, each doing their morning ritual. Breaking the silence her mother said, "We need to leave early this evening for the midweek service, so be sure to be ready."

The fork dropped to the plate with a twang as Janice stopped eating and looked at her mother and, hesitantly, said, "I'm not feeling well. I think I will stay home tonight."

Delores leaned over and pressed the back of her hand to Janice's forehead, and asked, "What is wrong with you child? Should I take you to the doctor? You don't feel feverish to me"

"Oh, no, mother, I'm just worn out from school. This semester has been really tough," she said, determined to ease her mother's worries.

"If that is all, then going to church will make you feel better. You know how uplifting church is for you." Delores said piously.

That night after her shower, she sifted through clothes looking for something to wear to church. Her favorite spring dress lay bloodied in the trash. Her hands shook as she took the first dress that her hands clasped onto. The girl deftly put it on, unaware of its color or description.

She and her mother sat on the first row as usual. The preacher seemed to be stuck on the theme of hell since the past Sunday. The girl's hands fidgeted with a small bow on the light blue dress. Suddenly, she heard the preacher say her name. He said, "Janice Crandall, you will burn in Hell's fires for consorting with the devil."

She jerked to attention and her mind screamed, *how could he have known this?* Her mind focused on the minister and he was talking normally and not to her. Janice wrote it off as weariness from the tormented dreams she had been having. She tried to shake them from her mind and concentrate on the minister, but to no avail. This was the first time in her life she was in a hurry to get out of church. Something was terribly wrong there.

At last, the sermon ended and people began to file out the door. The line moved slowly as the minister shook hands and greeted each person, sometimes stopping to talk momentarily. Her mother was in the lead, and the minister shook her hand and thanked her for her work in the church, and for helping with the upcoming spring fair. Janice offered her hand to the minister and he said, "You demon child, be gone with you! Never come into my house again or I will bring down my wrath on you and your family. I'll cast you into the fires with your new friend, Lucifer. "

Janice slipped back to the assumed reality, and the preacher was pumping her hand and saying nice things about her. She then realized, it had not been the minister talking to her...but God himself!

Making an excuse Janice left her mother at the church, ran into the woods, and began to sob. Could the things the voice said to her be true? What kind of fool had she been, going against everything the church had taught her? The kind voice of Lucifer said in her mind, "Have you seen the anger from me, that you just saw I am display."

Bewildered, she looked around for the source of the voice and said, "You are lying to me. You are being nice to trick me."

The voice of Lucifer drifted in the air as he sighed sadly and said, "Then I will go and leave you be. Go back to your church and whatever fate it brings you."

"I have one question." She said quietly

"Yes?" There was an anxious tone to his voice.

"Why me?"

The voice was silent for several moments and it finally said, "That is one of the hardest questions you could have asked. Also it is one I can't give you all the answer to." He stopped, hesitated and continued, "Every few hundred years some are born that have a bit more of us than usual. You have heard of some of them in your history books. You might recall 'Joan of Arc'."

Janice interrupted, "Didn't she fight for God?"

Chagrined, he said, "She did fight for Iam, I never said all were persuaded to my side. Thousands died because she fought for Iam and some mortal king. Iam's way is death and destruction, all the while pretending to be good and blaming the ills of the universe on me."

Thoughtfully she asked, "What can I do that you or anyone else could never do?"

The wind began to pick up as if a storm were rising as he replied, "You may be able to do no more than to spread the truth. One soul that you save is worth our efforts. Child, I don't think you wish to spend eternity on your knees before an unthankful God. I don't think you would want to see anyone one else spend eternity that way, especially those close to you."

She turned around as she looked up, her eyes searching for substance to the voice she heard and said, "Today God...err...Iam spoke to me in church. In the past, I had thought I had heard him speak to me but nothing like this. He threatened me and my family."

Sadly, Lucifer said, "I am aware of that. I can tell you, that your family and friends are in danger, but he cannot hurt you as long as you are defiant of him."

Anger rose in her voice, and she said, "How can I protect my family from 'God'? She began to cry, exasperated.

The older form of Lucifer was suddenly standing next to her with a consoling arm around her shoulders. She leaned in to him and cried for several minutes. This is when she knew what she must do. Something deep inside had given her the correct answers, "I'm going home!" She blurted suddenly. Lucifer was already gone before she had spoken.

She had been in the forest longer than she had thought. Darkness was falling quickly and the wind hinted that a storm was closing in. The wind began to pick up debris and toss it in the air. Lightning cracked closer than she liked. The dress she had worn to church threatened to lift and expose more than she wanted. In the wind, she thought she heard laughter as lightning struck a tree only feet from her. Janice stumbled and scraped her knees on the ground.

Tears in her eyes mixed with the beating rain as she began to run. Lightning struck closer and trees fell, missing her by inches. It had become obvious to the frightened girl that this storm and the accuracy of the lightning was no accident. It had become clear to her that death would be imminent if she continued. The lightning was circling her, closing in. She did the unexpected and stopped, looked defiantly at the sky and shouted, "Go away, I hate you!"

The rain suddenly stopped, the sky cleared, and a sliver of moon appeared in the night sky. Amazed she stood staring in disbelief. Even her dress, that had been rain soaked, dress was completely dry. Familiar warmth surrounded her and she knew immediately that it was Lucifer... he was near.

On her return home, Janice's mother called to her as she closed the front door and said, "Dear come sit on the couch with me, we need to talk. I've noticed the last couple of days you have been acting strange, so I prayed on it and God told me you are troubled."

The girl cringed, not knowing what to expect, with the lightning fresh in her mind, she asked hesitantly, "What did he have to tell you?"

Delores began to sob as she said, "He told me you had stopped believing in him and were now a devil worshiper. He says you have to be cleansed. I am to take you to a church that can remove the demon from your soul."

Pleadingly, the girl said, "Mother, I have to tell you all that has happened and I hope you will believe me." She retold the events of the past two days. When she had finished, her mother dropped to her knees and began to pray fervently to save Janice's soul. In the next moment, her mother had drawn a knife and was lunging for the girl. Janice was struggling with her mother when Martin entered the room, without looking, only hearing the raised voices, and asked, "What's going on in here?"

When his eyes caught sight of his wife and daughter on the floor, he lunged for his wife and pulled her from his daughter and shouted angrily, "What in God's name are you doing, Delores?"

His wife replied, feigning innocence, "Thank God you arrived just in time, Martin. She tried to kill me when I tried talking to her about her strange behavior the last couple of days."

Recovering, Janice looked startled, and then angry. "She is lying dad. She is the one that tried to kill me."

“Calm down, the both of you. Let’s the three of us sit down and talk about this, with no knives,” he said explicitly.

Once again, Janice related the events of the past two days and when she had finished, the room was swallowed by silence. Martin paused and said to his wife, “What was it that you said to Janice to have her attack you?” Janice started to protest his phrasing of the question, but he raised a hand and pointed a finger at her. She stopped talking and sat quietly.

Delores said reassuringly, “I told how her our minister had suggested a church where the minister was an expert in troubled children...that’s when she attacked me.”

The girl’s father wasn’t sure about Janice suddenly becoming a troubled child, but he was compelled to listen to his wife. He did agree that Janice had been acting differently the past couple of days. His first thought was that she might be taking drugs, but he knew that was improbable.

Her father sat between them raking his large hand through his black hair and finally said, “When can we see this place that was suggested.”

Delores replied, “The minister thought it best to bring her tonight.”

“Hold on now, we are not *taking* her anywhere. We will go to this place and see what it’s all about.” Martin said empathically.

Janice was at least thankful that her father was being cautious and going slowly. Somehow, the girl would have to get him alone and try to convince him that she was telling the truth. She was coming to realize that she could not trust her mother, and that hurt deep within her. The sudden realization that this was about the *truth* terrified her. If she could not convince her parents, how could she convince anyone else?

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The drive to the Church took the better part of an hour. It was in the next city, about forty miles away. Trees lined the road on either side. Her mind flashed back to earlier in the woods and the “storm”. Janice had thought of escape when they reached the church but where could she go? The earlier events in the forest had been terrifying and to face that or something similar this far from home terrified her even more. She had no close friends. All her spare time had been given to the church. The girl surrendered her fate into the hands of her parents.

Cars passed on either side as they eased their way into the large city. During the night, the tall buildings always reminded her of some gothic city in a world different from her own. She imagined the buildings with tall crooked spires that reached into the sky as far as the eye could see, filled with gargoyles and demons.

Tires made a crunching sound on gravel as the car came to a stop in front of the church. Looking at it in the darkness made Janice realize that calling this place a church was a far-fetched supposition.

Exiting the car, she looked up and screamed in horror. This was what she had imagined the other buildings to be. This was no church. It was some medieval castle! She grabbed her father’s arm, and with panic in her voice, exclaimed, “Dad, Can’t you see what this is?”

He looked at his daughter, bewildered, and said, “Of course dear, it’s one of the older churches in the city. A beautiful piece of historical architecture, if I must say so myself.”

The structure Janice saw was nothing like what her father had seen. This building could have been created only in the bowels of Hell. The sharp towering spires tore into the dark clouds above. There were no lights, or were there no windows; she was not sure which. Dead vines snaked their way up the side of the structure. Sounds that sent shivers up her spine came from within the building.

The door opened, the bright light causing her to blink. Suddenly the building was no different from any early seventeenth century Catholic Church. The sky reaching spires transformed to typical parapets. A monk greeted them and graciously invited them in. The interior of the church was of no doubt. Surrounding the huge room were golden religious artifacts. Janice was awed by the glare of the gold. At one time, she may have bowed and began to pray from the inspiration, but now it only made her shiver with fright.

A nun entered the room and the priest nodded to her. She approached Janice, took her hand, and led her to an adjacent room, and closed the door. The priest explained, “I would like to talk to the two of you alone. She will be safe with Sister Agnes.”

Images of Mary and other holy symbolic paintings covered the walls of the small office. Even at Janice's age, she knew that many of the paintings were famous and priceless. Why the church held such priceless treasures while begging for money had never occurred to her until this moment. A golden antique clock rang eleven times to announce the time. Through the door, she could hear the voice of her parents and that of the priest who had greeted them. Soon the voices faded and she heard a car drive away.

The priest entered and looked angrily at the frightened girl and said, "So you are the demon bitch we have been hearing about. We're going to put you where you will never cause anymore trouble."

"I've not caused any trouble," She pleaded.

"The day you spoke to Lucifer you became trouble. No one can know the truth... any that do must die." The priest growled angrily.

To hear a priest talk like this was as shocking as the events of the past two days. The nun grabbed her arm roughly and said, "Come with me, we have places for people like you."

Janice tried to jerk away but the nun was stronger than she looked. The girl shouted angrily to the priest, "Let me go, I want to see my parents."

A wicked laugh came from the priest, and he said, "Your parents have gone and left you in the safe hands of the sister and myself."

The nun in her long dark foreboding habit led the girl out of the office and into a narrow passageway. They slowly descended. The farther they traveled, the older the church looked, and fewer adornments littered its walls. Finally, they came to an iron door that was barely wide enough for the nun to fit through. She pushed the door. It creaked as if it had not been opened in years, and Janice was led through it.

They descended the downward spiraling stone stairs. To Janice, this looked more as if it had belonged in the vision of the medieval castle that she had seen upon arriving. The farther they traveled, the air thickened with mold and dampness. At this point, Janice was sure she should go no farther. She tore loose from the tight grip of the nun and began to climb the stairs in a run. Just as she reached the door, it was slammed shut by unseen hands.

A cold hand grabbed the back of her neck and the nun said, "You are wasting your time trying to escape. God himself protects these halls. "

Resigned to her fate, Janice followed the nun to the end of the stairs, and they stared off into darkness. A torch was lit by means the girl could not detect. Along the corridor, the wall was lined with steel doors. They walked down the corridor, and inhuman sounds came from behind them. The nun stopped at one of the steel doors and opened it. The nun's spindly hands grasped the collar of the light blue dress and flung the girl into the darkness that had been behind the door, "Enjoy your eternity in Hell little girl."

The door slammed shut with an ear-shattering ring. Moments later, all light disappeared from the girl's immediate world. Janice lay in a heap in the middle of the darkened cell. Tears welled in her eyes. She cried until sleep overtook her, all hope evaporated with the extinguishing of the light.

Eventually her eyes opened and she was forced to confront the darkness of the room. Her fingers balled into a fist and rubbed her reddened eyes. A tear welled as she remembered the dark horror into which she had been cast. Finding hidden strength, she sat up. A scratching sound in the distance was all she could hear. The imprisoned girl had hoped the sound came from only a rat, even though she feared them. In this place, a rat might be the better alternative to what could be hiding in the darkness.

Somehow finding strength for her legs, she tried to stand. Her head hit something solid, knocking her to her knees. Dainty fingers, more practiced for primping, reached up and touched the rough-hewn stone ceiling of the cell. Getting on her knees, she crawled, feeling her way. The wall was only a short distance away. After careful study, she knew the cell was only a few feet across. It was more a tomb than a cell. She hoped her time in the cell would be only hours or days, but she was sure it would be a lot more than her mind was willing to admit.

A voice whispered to her mind, "Cast out thy demon and come unto thee for forgiveness."

"I'll fight you for eternity."

The Almighty's laughter shook the foundations of the church. Those above unaware took the tremors to be those of a moderate earthquake. The booming laughter faded to silence, the voice that came next was that of mild amusement. "You still have no idea why Lucifer chose you," he stated.

"No."

“Do you want me to tell you?”

Hesitantly, she finally replied, “No.”

God roared with laughter, “You hesitated too long, my child. You have given away your desires. The reason that he chose you is because you see the world for what it is. You saw upon arrival that the church was not as others see it.” He was silent and then he continued, “That is why you can never leave this room. In joining with Lucifer, you have created your own Hell. In here you can never die, you are here for eternity. You will find eternal starvation and darkness your only allies here.”

She wept.

Day and night became one as she sat and cried. Her belly ached from lack of food. She called for Lucifer, but he never came. The tortured girl was thinking that she had made a vast error. The God she met was not a malevolent god. Still, she wondered if his wrath was upon her because she had forsaken him. As time went on, she was sure that was the case, and began to call for God, but there was no answer. She came to accept that she was there only because of who she was or what abilities she possessed. Janice would curse God, Iam and Lucifer to pass the time.

Pangs of hunger and thirst racked her body. She lay on the cold stone floor in a fetal position, clutching her stomach. When the pain eased, she found too much time to think. Her mind occupied itself with the memories it contained. It started with times she had never remembered before and reeled on like a movie to the present. Each time she replayed the memories she began to wonder if they had ever existed or if it was something her mind had contrived in the insanity that had become her life.

Time became outdated as she lay, and sometimes crawled in the darkness. Long ago, a smell had entered the tomb that was her cell and she knew that smell was her own odor. The girl came to know each crack of the cell as she had searched for an exit. Each time she found a new crack, hope would rise that she had found a hidden exit. Each time this happened the disappointment would tear her apart.

Hope of escape had long passed. She moved around only to relieve her aching joints and to try to forget the abominable hunger that raged within her body. She came to understand how those stranded came to eat one another. The thought of cannibalism made her sick, but she understood the driving hunger that led some to it.

Loneliness and despair had become constant companions. Janice might have given up and accepted her fate, but she knew this was no jail term... her incarceration was for eternity. Her mind searched, in what had been in her world, day and night, for a solution.

Suddenly she sat up. Something God had said began to take hold in her mind. The neurons holding the information twisted it and manipulated it to find a meaning she had not thought of. Suddenly she had an epiphany. Iam had unwittingly given her the means to escape.

Legs crossed, she sat in the middle of the cell and closed her eyes to the darkness. Slowly and repeatedly, she whispered, “I will see only the truth. I will see only the truth.” Nothing happened at first and she was tempted to give into despair, but the girl knew she had an eternity to have it work.

How long she sat and said this, she was not sure, but suddenly there was a burst of light on the other side of her eyelids. She slowly opened them and winced from the brightness. Janice was sitting on the sidewalk under a street lamp. She stood on wobbly legs and looked around; her home was only a block away. Unsure of what would happen when she arrived there, she had no alternative but to go home.

As she approached the door and stepped into the bright light of the porch, she noticed her dress was tattered and rotten with age. It would have taken years for her dress to reach this state. The unlocked door opened, and her mother said, “It’s about time you got home, we were beginning to worry about you. Hurry to the table quickly before supper gets cold.”

Janice was not sure what she had eaten, she devoured everything in sight trying to quench the terrible hunger that held her in its vice-like grip. It was only after she had satisfied the animalistic hunger did she realize her parents had not noticed her rumpled state.

With a full belly, her body settled into the hot bath and slept for the first time in a period she could not define. Dreams caught her as she slept in the warm water, and a haunting God chased her through a maze. At each turn, he stood, mocking the frightened little girl. The dream had wakened her and she climbed into bed without putting on a nightgown or drying off and slept peacefully.

A bird chirped loudly outside her window that morning as she woke. She stretched her small frame under the soft quilt and her eyes popped open in sudden awareness. Her mind fought to accept the reality around her. Janice closed her eyes and opened them slowly. She was still in her bedroom. A bright smile crept across her face as she realized she was truly home again.

Feeling a newfound power, she dressed and dashed for the kitchen. Her stomach still ached for food. As she opened the door of her bedroom, the girl stopped in thought. Her parents did not seem to be aware of what had happened. This meant Iam had manipulated them. The confused girl wondered if she could trust them...or anyone for that matter. Immediately, she knew the answer to her own question. She couldn't trust them with that knowledge... she knew she would be safer.

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The Nuns retreated to a corner as Father Daemon Nomaed ranted, "How did she escape? Which one of you let her out? When I find out, I'll have you in a Siberian monastery."

"Father." the Reverend Mother said, "No one let her out. We went to feed the other guest and she was gone." The nuns saw only typical guest rooms when they visited the dungeons. None noticed that they never took Janice meals as they did the others."

"Then who?" he raved, causing the nuns to tremble.

One of the nuns stepped forward and said demurely, "I saw her leave, Father."

"Oh?"

Choosing her words carefully, knowing it was going to come out wrong no matter what, she hesitated and said, "I was reviewing the security tape and she was sitting in the floor with her legs crossed and disappeared. I swear father... I'm not lying. She just wasn't there anymore."

Father Nomaed felt all his energy leave him. The anger was replaced with fear and worry. Something unholy had happened in his church that night, and he was going to find out what it was.

The next morning Father Nomaed drove the forty minutes to Janice's house. He parked across the street and sat staring at the house. It seemed normal to him. He wondered how the events of the night before could have transpired.

He waited out of site of the house, and tried to decide if he should confront the child. His first thought was to rush into the house and demand an answer. Unable to find a suitable plan, he decided to knock on the door and test the waters.

He drove around the block and parked in front of the house. He sat there for a moment with his fingers turning white as he gripped the steering wheel of the old Dodge. Weak knees carried him to the house and finally reached the door, he knocked once. It took only a short time before Martin opened the door. Father Nomaed held out his hand in greeting, "It is good to see you again Mr. Carter."

Martin looked bewildered at the balding priest and said, "Pardon?"

Speaking confident, and cordially, he replied, "Last night at the church, you brought your daughter to us."

"Is this some kind of joke?" Martin asked incredulously.

The Priest was sure the man was the one that had brought the girl to the church the previous night. He thought to escape quickly and said, "Is this 2251 Maple?"

With agitation growing, Martin replied, "No. This is 2215 Credence Drive."

The Priest begged the man's pardon and nearly broke into a run getting back to his car. Inside the protection of his car, he decided to drive down the street a distance and wait for the girl. Apparently she held all the answers.

As Martin closed the door, Delores asked, "Who was at the door?"

"Some weird Priest, I think he had the wrong house." He replied.

Delores responded, "I never trusted those Catholics all that much myself."

Crouched at the top of the stairs, Janice watched the confrontation at the door. The priest had a demeanor different from the priest of the night before. This priest had seemed as confused about the situation as her parents, yet he had come. That meant he had some memory of the events that night. That meant he was dangerous... he was the enemy.

When her parents were out of sight, she sneaked down the stairs and peeked out the window beside the door. The old Dodge was gone. Risking the chance that he may still be near, she had to escape the confines of the house and get in the open air. She had spent what seemed an eternity in darkness, now she had to have the fresh air of open spaces.

The cool air felt good on her face as she stepped off the porch and onto the walkway. The day was nice so she dared to take a walk and clear her mind from the trappings of her torture. She may not have shown it outwardly, but the torment of being locked in that hole for months or years was hell, one she didn't wish to experience again. Janice swore she would die before she would ever allow herself to be held captive again.

Her mind jumped back to the present as something caught her arm. The priest stared at her with cold eyes as his hand gripped her arm just above the elbow. Slowly he reluctantly released his grip and said, "Have we met before?"

Janice rubbed her arm where the priest had grabbed it. Taking a step back she replied, "This some kind of joke?"

"No joke I assure you."

Anger rose in her voice as she said, "You know damn well we have met."

Not sure how to proceed, since she obviously remembered what he perceived to be the previous night, he asked, "Do your parents remember last night?"

"No."

His stubby fingers rubbed his short manicured beard and he asked, "How did you escape your room?"

Her body tensed in anticipation of trouble, and she shouted, "Room? You dare call that hell a ROOM?"

A puzzled look framed the face of the ageing man as he said, "I don't understand. I had Sister Agnes put you in one of the nicest rooms in the church."

Anger overrode caution, and Janice leaned in close and said tersely, "Why don't you go spend a few years in that *room*?"

Even more confused, he asked, "I don't understand. What do you mean by 'years'?"

"Go ask that fucking god of yours how long I was down there. A moment of guilt passed through the girl for speaking of the god she had prayed to so often in such a manner. Time had no meaning in that dungeon. I may have been there for months or years, I can't say for sure. Let me show you my tattered dress and you tell me how long I was down there."

Father Nomaed stuttered slightly as he asked, "Can we go somewhere and talk. The more you say the more confused I am getting."

Not wanting to be alone with the priest Janice suggested they walk to the nearby park. This time of year with the weather turning warm the park would be full of people.

Several people shuffled by as the odd pair sat on a park bench. The warm air made it the perfect day for sitting in the park and chatting, while this conversation could only make the day only darker.

Too many thoughts tried to form into one question. Finally one came to the Priest's mind and he asked, "Tell me about this room. You said it was more like a dungeon."

She replied, "I did not say it was *like* a dungeon, I said it was a dungeon." Janice saw the continued confusion in the man's eyes and began to tell her story. She began with the long downward stone stairs and the torment in the dungeon in which she was held. Rage spilled from her lips as she described the endless starvation. She told of the rotten tattered dress that lay in the waste basket in her room."

"This is impossible." The priest exclaimed, He continued, "You are either mad or this is the work of the devil."

Laughter drifted through the park. Anyone near might have thought the girl mad...maybe she was. Suddenly she was silent and serious. "The so called devil is the one that saved me from the hell your god created for me."

"I will not listen to anymore of this blasphemy," he said rising from the park bench.

A calm she had not felt in the longest time passed over her and she smiled and said. "When you get back to the safety of your church, think of how I escaped your lair, whether it be a dungeon or the room that you saw."

Blood rushed from his face to form a pale canvas that had been forced to face the terror of truth. "May God save us all."

The priest had stood and turned to walk away when Janice reached out, grabbed his arm and spun him back toward her and said, "May your god spare you the pain he found so easy to give to me."

He said, "God save you child."

Chagrined, the girl stood, and said, "I'd rather sit in hell than watch your god's form of saving." She turned and walked home; a glimmer of the earlier peace still enveloped her.

That night on the news, a blonde reporter stood in the foreground of flashing lights and shouting firemen. In the distance, flames and rubble filled the small picture of the television. The reporter told of Islamic terrorists, and a car filled with explosives. She told of a letter found in the suicide attacker's apartment describing his fight against Americans and Christianity. The reporter went on to read off the names of all those that had been killed in the explosion. Father Nomaed's had been in the list.

Turning off the television she collapsed on the bed and knew the untold truth of what she had just seen on the television. That day she had planted Lucifer's seed in the priest and the explosion was Iam's retribution for the priest's seed of doubt. His words had not hidden what she had seen in his eyes, the priest had begun to believe her. That night he paid the price for that small amount of truth.

Even though the priest had locked her in that hell, she wept for him. She knew that he was but a pawn for something of unimaginable horror, the something that sought to destroy her.