

Devil

Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour. Peter 5:8

It had started off innocently enough. I'd checked my Facebook and there it was. A post with a list of questions. You were to answer them honestly and send it on to another four nominated people. A complete waste of time, I'd thought, but that hadn't stopped me from reading what had already been written. I stopped reading at question four, logged out of Facebook and switched off my phone.

What's the scariest thing you've ever done?

That was question four. The answers were predictable enough; swam with sharks, sky diving from ten thousand feet, bungee jumped off a rickety bridge. One brave soul, Declan Masterson, had written 'got married'.

I didn't feel like oversharing on this occasion. Certainly not with the truth.

The scariest thing I'd ever done was trying to raise the devil. I could just imagine the reaction if I'd actually written that, lots of LOL's and sarcastic comments. It may well have resulted in a few minutes of distraction from the day to day but some things shouldn't be let loose on an unsuspecting world.

I knew how to do it. We'd all known at one time. Decades ago, when we were all different people, open to trying new things with our eyes open to all sorts of ideas. Self-experimentation was an ongoing pastime. I'd always been too timid to stick anything too sharp in myself or inhale anything too potent but I wasn't closed off to new ideas. When Jacob Jones said that he'd raised the devil and it had been *mind-blowing* then we'd all been keen to know how he'd done it and give it a go ourselves.

I'd thought at first that it was going to be an excuse to round up a few chickens, draw pentagrams and hang out near the crypts in the graveyard when the moon was full.

"Na, you don't need any of that," said Jacob. "All you need is a mirror and a steady gaze."

He showed us all how to do it and like the rest of them I just couldn't get it to work.

"Look yourself straight in the eyes. Keep staring until everything else starts to blur out of focus. Hold steady for long enough and you'll see something else starts to appear," said Jacob.

We had a laugh staring into a mirror but the emergence of a horned demon just never happened. We were all disappointed.

"So Jacob. This devil you managed to raise. Where is it now?" I'd asked when we'd all but given up on our own attempts.

"He's still in there," replied Jacob, nodding to the mirror. His face had turned to an ashen grey. He looked older.

"I thought you said you'd raised him?"

"I did." He looked at me, held my gaze and with a seriousness I'd never seen in him before he said, "I didn't let him through. No good would come of that."

"Right. So you saw him in the mirror be he didn't step through and run off into the night?"

"I know, I know. It's all a bit of a laugh. I understand. You've all had a wee go at it and nothing's happened so you think I just made it up. I didn't. It didn't work for me the first few times I tried it either. It's not something that's just going to happen every time you look in the mirror. Can you imagine how that would end? Every time you brush your teeth or comb your hair some little devil steps through and runs riot. No, there's a knack to it. It takes

time. You might never get there. If you're lucky. If you do manage it then for God's sake don't let it through."

There was a long silence after that last remark before we all fell about laughing, including Jacob.

We'd all gone home that night with something to think about. I know that some of the others thought that Jacob had just made the whole thing up. I knew that he hadn't. When I'd looked, that very first time, I had seen something. I just didn't let on.

I hadn't thought about it in years. I supposed I'd blocked it out of my mind. Not because of what I'd seen on that first attempt but we had all moved on. Life had happened. Thoughts of devil raising didn't fit with the day to day. And then there had been what had happened to Jacob.

Jacob had been the best of us. Certainly the smartest, he'd ended up with a first in Maths from Edinburgh University and I'd heard that he'd been pursued by some secretive government department who'd wanted him to work for them. He'd always had a reckless edge and while at university he'd set up a website where he'd guarantee to double any invested amount within one week. Exactly how he did this I've no idea but it certainly seemed to work. He only ran it for a few months but the money he made had set him up. That sort of venture is always going to be high risk. Making people money can make you very popular but there's always two sides to the story. Where had the money come from? Who lost out? How many enemies had Jacob collected along the way?

There wasn't much left of him to find. One theory was that his head had been carried off from the actual scene by an unidentified wild animal, partially eaten and then discarded near the site of an abandoned badger set. No trace of his brain was ever found. Or his eyes. I remembered them clearly: large and blue with a sparkle of laughter never too far away. His torso had been sheared into two main parts, probably by the result of going under the wheels

of the train that he'd walked towards. He'd been missing for days. Part of his head was found by a Jack Russell whose owner had been horrified by what his pooch had dragged out and dropped at his feet. Jacob was only identified by his teeth. Close examination of the CCTV footage at Edinburgh Park train station had shown a man, dressed completely in black, with camouflage style markings on his face slip quietly onto the line at around ten thirty on a dark November night and then walk towards an oncoming train before lying down across the tracks, face up. The driver had reported hitting some 'debris' on the line but otherwise no suspicions were raised.

I knew him well. Or I thought I did. It just didn't tie up. He wasn't depressed or one for wild alcohol sessions or drugs. Sometimes these things don't make sense but there was something about what he did to himself which made me wonder about what had possessed him to do such a thing.

His funeral was held on a bleak, bitterly cold day. His friends and family had huddled around the open grave while the minister's words were drowned out by the howling wind. There had even been an almighty crack of lightning above the church followed by a ground shaking roll of thunder. The whole scene was like something out of a Hammer horror film. All that was missing was the sight of Jacob rising out of his coffin and grabbing the neck of some poor unsuspecting aunt.

"I'm really sorry," I'd said to Jacob's mother when I came face to face with her near the cemetery gates. She looked at me, not recognising me at first.

"I can't believe he's gone," she said.

"I know. Does anyone know what happened?"

"Nobody can explain that. I spoke to him the night before, he said he'd be up for Christmas."

"He sounded okay?"

“Yes. He said he had a noisy neighbour and he was going to have to speak to him. I told the police but they said that no one had lived in the next flat for months.”

She'd tuned out after that and had got into a car with blacked out windows and a driver with a peaked hat.

That was when I started thinking about it again: raising the devil.

I wondered what had really happened to Jacob and whether his devil, if there ever had been such a thing, had anything to do with it. Once the thought had slipped into my mind it just wouldn't go away.

“What harm would it do?” said a voice that sounded a bit like mine as it whispered in my ear while I sat trying to concentrate on watching the third series of *The Wire*, again.

“It'll be a bit of harmless fun,” it said. “It's not real after all, is it? There's no such thing as the devil. Is there?”

We'd moved house. I was staying there myself at night while we did it up. I slept on a sofa bed in the living room, surrounded by the smells of new paint and old dust. The place was still dressed in someone else's clothes. They'd been old. The family had cleared the house but there was still traces of them; boxes of light bulbs never opened, picture hooks left waiting, curtains and carpets where drinks had spilled, crumbs around the edges of the oven. We felt like squatters. The house had been left alone too long, abandoned you could say and had developed behavioural problems. Its bones creaked as you walked around. Some of them sounded bruised, others broken. In the night it would let out sudden anguished moans as its ancient heating system cooled down or heated up. Gurgles and swooshes would rush across the ceiling. Its lifeblood sludged through its veins in fits and starts: its heart was in trouble. I didn't dare pull down the attic ladder and poke my head up in case I saw it lying there like a wounded animal, beating fast and weak, ventricles feeding into the copper pipes, a lazy bloodshot eye scanning for predators.

When I settled down for the night on the sofa I'd drop off into a restless sleep. The ghostly fingers of the old house would reach out to brush themselves across my face. I'd find myself in a dreamlike state, wandering fearfully up the staircase looking for the source of the creaking rhythm being played out above. I'd open the door to an empty room and come face to face with a white horse which stood angry but motionless except for its flailing nostrils before dissolving into the carpet. I'd be left looking out into the back garden through a curtain-less window. The shadows of trees huddled together at the edge of the garden. They swayed in a weird dance before pausing and moving back to their own trees, their whisperings disturbed by my unwelcome gaze.

The downstairs toilet was bitterly cold. We'd ripped out the combination light and heater for fear of burning the house down every time someone went in there. The result was an icebox with a noisy toilet and air so cold you could cut yourself on it. I hated going in there. There as an old mirror built into one wall. I grew to fear that mirror.

I couldn't sleep. I'd wake up with my bladder bursting. I'd leave it until the last possible moment before rushing through into the icebox. I couldn't escape myself in there. No matter how hard I tried not to I was drawn to the mirror.

The reflection didn't look like me. I'm not saying it was someone else that gazed back. It was me but my reflection looked older, stranger and scarier. It was like the reflection of a twin brother who I'd not seen for years. Perhaps he'd been in prison or banished from the family in disgrace. Whatever he'd done I didn't like to look him in the eye. He set my teeth on edge and the little vibration in my ear was triggered, the same one I'd had when I looked at the python lying coiled and deathly still in its glass cage at the zoo which had suddenly opened its eye and looked right through me.

I was scared of my own reflection.

Ridiculous, I thought as I pondered this one night as I lay on the sofa with a swollen bladder and little prospect of getting off to sleep.

It's nothing but your own reflection. There's probably a medical condition for it. What exactly are you scared of? It's not like your own reflection is going to reach out of the mirror, grab you by the throat and strangle the life out of you. Is it?

I knew what I had to do. I needed to get off the sofa, walk through there, put on the light, look my reflection straight in the eye and tell it that I'm not afraid and it wasn't going to spook me anymore.

That was what I'd convinced myself of as I strode into the icebox in the middle of the night and found myself staring at the mirror man. Big mistake.

It was cold in there. There was a faintly unpleasant smell, like the corpse of a small rodent that had squeezed into a too tight space, got stuck and slowly expired. The light was dim but dazzling giving the air an odd misty gloom. My breath hung like cartoon ghosts in an eerie silence. I looked my reflection straight in the eye. I felt it, that moment when eyes meet. That connection. I looked awful. I was sure I'd aged since the last time I'd looked. I studied my own face. There were blotches on my cheeks and broken veins on the bridge of my nose. The edges of my lips were pale and cracked and my teeth were a mustard yellow colour. I could see my scalp clearly through my thinning hair and there was a patch of angry dry skin between my eyes. Even my eyes looked older: was that even possible? They were framed by deep, dark lines and as I looked in them there was something there that I didn't recognise. They were troubled as if they'd witnessed something awful, events which I had no memory of. Where had I gone?

I covered my face with both hands, pulling down on the skin around my eyes. I caught my reflection as I did this. I looked like a ghoul from a silent horror film. I rubbed at my

scalp. The top of my head felt dry, I had a brittle patch over on one side. I met my eyes again, this time staring straight into them.

My eyes locked with my reflection.

I couldn't look away.

My vision began to swim out of focus and then back again. Those eyes held mine in their sightline. They were wide and bloodshot, filled with anger.

Those aren't mine.

I knew it. I couldn't pull away from them. I was transfixed. I focused on the dry patch between the eyes and the rest of the face began to melt out of focus and then slowly began to re-emerge.

The reflection was no longer mine. The figure that was reanimating in front of me was someone else. Something else.

My eyes were jammed open, held fast as if they'd been sewn into place with steel thread. Despite this the eyes of the reflection closed slowly and remained shut for a dozen tortured heartbeats before slowly opening. They'd changed. They no longer looked anything like my eyes. They were cold and sharp with large black pupils at the centre of an ice grey edge. I stared at them and they stared right back at me.

"I suppose I should thank you," it said.

It had spoken. I was sure it had. I must be losing it, I thought. Or dreaming.

"No, you're not dreaming. You may well be losing it," it said. "You took your time getting here. That's a fact."

At that point I'd had enough. I tried to turn away from the mirror but I couldn't move.

"We're not finished," it said, "in fact we're just getting started. Where are my manners? Let me introduce myself. My name is Mr Geddes. You may be wondering who on Earth I am? I'm going to recommend that you don't trouble yourself too much with that right

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now. There's always time for reflection later, isn't there? I've been waiting for you to come back. It's been such a long time now. Much has happened. I am glad that you've finally got around to looking me back up. Now, let me tell you how this is going to work. It's really all rather simple. I'm going to step through you and into your world. It's not going to be painful. Not really painful. Not eyeball squeezing painful. Not finger nail pulling painful, nothing so unpleasant. It's more like brushing against something a bit prickly, a rose bush let's say. A few little scratches perhaps. You won't even think about it in a week's time. All those little scabs will have been scratched off by then. You will, however, think of me. We are, how can I put it? Joined. Like brothers I suppose but much deeper. After all you've been carrying me and now it's time for me to carry you. You may realise that I am about to be in your debt. We'll settle that, *in time*. Our paths will cross from time to time.

You should remember this: I make an excellent ally but the most fearsome of enemies. As for tonight and our little chat, well, you might not remember too much about it. It'll feel like an old memory, something overheard, a glimpse of the profound. That sort of thing. You can't move? Don't worry. I've no intention of harming you or yours. I have a rather long list of things to do. There's much to be done. I hope that we can co-operate if necessary in a spirit of mutual respect. I do so like the old ways, there just seemed to be more time to get to the heart of the matter, don't you agree? If, or should I say when, you require a service from me then all you need to do is issue a summons. You already know how. I'll look forward to our next face to face."

Mr Geddes closed his eyes and I was released from the trance. It felt like I was looking at him through a frosted window. He leaned closer and my nostrils filled with an awful stench. It was the smell of bloody fields strewn with the dying, the aftermath of some terrible battle. He leaned in towards me. Instinctively I tried to step back but he was already on me. My body spiked with the feeling of incredible strength together with a surge of

murderous rage that tipped my blood straight to boiling point. I felt the back of my head split for a moment as he passed through.

Then there was silence. I sensed something behind me. I tensed and closed my eyes, waiting for the blow to come. I heard the front door close and his footfalls on the path echoing into the night.

I looked again at my own reflection. My face had drained of all colour. I was a ghost. I wondered if it had all been a dream. Was I going to wake up back in the living room, bladder at bursting point? I knew I was awake. Wide awake.

I didn't tell anyone what had happened. How could I? My wife and little girl were moving into the house any day. The news that the devil had climbed out of the toilet mirror wasn't going to go down well. I decided to adopt my default position when faced with something too difficult to know what to do with. I decided to do nothing. There didn't seem to be any evidence of what had happened. Perhaps I had imagined the whole thing. I didn't believe that for a moment but saying it to myself did help me get to sleep at night. Sometimes.

For weeks I carried on as if nothing had happened. The new house was feeling much cheerier after gallons of paint and numerous skips were filled to the brim. I pushed thoughts of Jacob and Mr Geddes to the back of my mind. Until the nights grew darker and those shadows walked into my world.

If I'd only taken another route back to the car. I could just as easily walked down the next street but I suppose that wouldn't have been part of the greater plan, if the greater plan does exist. We'd gone to the fireworks display. She'd sat on my shoulders and we'd watched the colours exploding in the sky. She'd wriggled and giggled as she held her sparklers to the sky with a look of happy wonder on her face. She was only little so we had left before the main event. The burning of the Guy on the huge pyre that had been built in the centre of the

park. I didn't think she was old enough to see that. Call me overprotective but there was something about the sight of a life sized figure being tied to a stake and burned in front of a large cheering crowd that I didn't want branded on her mind. There would be a time when I couldn't protect her from such things but that time was somewhere in the future.

I'd parked far enough away to avoid getting caught in the mass exodus afterwards and we ambled back happily until those two trolls fell through the pub doorway and almost knocked us flying.

I picked her up protectively and the first one gave us a sly glance before they both staggered off up the pavement and disappeared around the corner. They were both in their twenties, six feet tall, long dark coats and they'd had a skin-full. They'd dropped in front of us like a couple of creatures that had been kicked out of heaven and I felt my blood rise and my skin crawl at the sight of them. I thought they'd gone. As we rounded the corner they stepped out of the shadows and one of them grabbed her.

"We're not going to hurt her," said the first one. I lunged at him and he slammed me in the face with something heavy.

"You don't want to be doing that," he said.

I heard her scream and an almighty pulse shocked through me. It didn't help. He pinned my arms back and had me by the throat. He yanked me to my feet, turning me to face the other one who had her tucked under his arm like a rolled up sleeping bag. His hand was over her mouth.

"Give us your coat, your wallet and your pin numbers and you can walk away."

I couldn't help it. The sight of my little girl being held like that. If I'd had a gun I would have shot him but I didn't so all I could do was fight back the tears as I gave him what he'd asked for. My voice trembled through my tears as I told them my pin number and

handed them the card. They looked at each other and laughed before dropping her on the pavement and strolling off casually as if nothing had happened.

I held her to me. She didn't say anything. She wouldn't look at me. I checked her over. She wasn't hurt but I knew they'd terrified her. Something inside me clicked into place. I made my plan: I was going to take her home, tuck her up in bed and then come back and find them. When I did I was going to ... well, I just didn't know what I was going to do.

It didn't happen. When we got home she was fast asleep. "Did you have a nice time?" asked my wife. I just nodded. I didn't know what to say. I went to bed that night feeling ashamed that I'd not been able to protect her. I knew what I wanted to do but I had no idea how to find them. I fell into a troubled sleep and sat bolt upright in the night, wide awake and bursting for the toilet.

The place was freezing. I'd fixed the heating in here, I thought, as I watched my breath hang in the air in front of me. I washed my hands and looked in the mirror.

I looked exhausted. I bowed my head for a moment then raised it slowly.

"You don't need to thank me," said Mr Geddes. "Well, maybe you do."

His eyes fixed on mine. His mouth was moving but at that moment I couldn't hear any sound, just the rushing of the blood in my own head, drowning out everything else.

With an enormous effort I said, "What have you done?"

"Oh, you don't need to concern yourself with the details. Let's just say I've done you a service. I've removed one thing from your to-do list. Actually, as there were two of them I suppose it's a case of two down."

I knew then he'd done something to those things we'd come across. I felt glad.

"Good, that's how you should feel. After all, you didn't provoke them, did you? No, they invited themselves into your life without as much as a tap at your door and they were rather unpleasant, weren't they?"

“I wanted to deal with them in my own way,” I said.

Mr Geddes shook his head slowly, a crooked smile spread across his face, his teeth were stained yellow and lined with dark cracks like the keys of an old piano.

“Revenge just doesn’t sit well with you, does it? What were you going to do, give them a piercing look, tell them you’d report them to the police? Men like those don’t respond to reasonable arguments. They need to be dealt with in a more direct manner.”

“What have you done? Did you hurt them?”

“I suppose you could say there was a certain amount of pain involved but all things considered I’d say they were treated fairly. Harshly perhaps but fairly none the less.”

“What did you do?”

“Ah, you don’t really want me to go into the gruesome details, do you? The look on their faces, the dawning realisation, the struggle, the panic when they saw what I had in store for them. I must say that the cheering crowd was rather inspired. If you’re going to go then why not go out in front of an appreciative audience?”

“I don’t follow you. Are you saying you killed them?”

Mr Geddes didn’t answer the question. He shook his head, looked down, looked up, he screwed up his face into an odd canine snarl before fixing me once again with his cruel eyes.

“All in an evening’s work where I come from. Now, we must get to our business. It’s very important that we talk about our arrangement going forward.”

“I don’t understand. I didn’t realise we had an arrangement.”

“Of course we do. I made it perfectly clear at our last meeting. I was in your debt but now that I’ve carried out a service for you I believe that debt has now been paid. Do you agree?”

“I still don’t know what you’ve done.”

“Proof will be supplied, just check the news over the coming days. I am many things. Some may even claim that I’m difficult to deal with. A horror, I been referred to by some rather stupid people but payment of debts is something I take most seriously. It could be argued that you are now in my debt. After all, the service I carried out is not something you could have done alone. Shall we go down that path?”

He bowed his head slightly and waited silently for my response.

“No.”

“A wise answer. Something tells me that we haven’t seen the last of each other. Will I call on you at some future juncture? Perhaps. It may be you that needs my assistance. The unseen forces which shape our futures don’t reveal themselves easily, do they? Until then our business is concluded.”

I closed my eyes and felt a wave of dread wash through my stomach. When I looked up he was gone, replaced by my own reflection. I looked tired and withered but somewhere in the back of my mind I felt a nugget of warmth.

The following evening it was all over the news. The charred remains of two men had been found amongst the debris of the bonfire from Guy Fawkes Night. Examination of video footage of the fire had emerged apparently showing the head of the Guy crying out in tortured anguish. Another angle clearly showed a second face, their screams could be heard amongst the sound of the baying crowd. The real Guy had been found propped up against a tree on the edge of the park, dressed in the victim’s shoes and clothes. The police had urged anyone with information to come forward.

The following day the faces of the men had been all over the newspapers. I didn’t feel sorry for them. I knew then that what had begun as a silly game had touched upon something far deeper and far more sinister. If I could look in a mirror and summon up something unseen then what did that mean? Is there a devil in all of us? Is it a side of ourselves that is usually

hidden and what really happens when we come face to face with it and let it step into our lives? Is that what had really happened to Jacob? After all it had all started with him. Did his devil demand the service that Mr Geddes had spoken of? Had Jacob refused or not met the task? Was Jacob's devil still out there?

My little girl seemed to have erased the incident from her mind. She never mentioned it. She slept soundly each night like an angel who lived under the same roof.

My nights remain restless and broken. Of course I pray. I pray for my family and the safety of my wife and my little girl. I pray they're protected from the shadows that may pass their way. I don't address my prayers to any God. No god has revealed themselves to me. I pray to Mr Geddes and thank him for his service. One night, I'm sure, we'll come face to face again.