

Sympathy

The Devil walked the streets of London. He wore a white shirt under a charcoal suit and a billowing black overcoat that was just old enough to be back on the bleeding edge of fashion. He had wild, jet black hair, tan skin, and startlingly bright brown eyes. The lamplight never seemed to catch up with him, as if each stride cut him away from the world itself. People who saw his face felt they had seen it before, and it had an unsettlingly seductive quality, like a bad idea that remains appealing despite itself.

It was a crisp night in early December, and the city was rich with snow. The young man arrived at a square that had been transformed into a skating rink, and garnished with evergreen. Parents guided their children onto the ice with both hands, while teenagers teased and flirted their way across the rink. An older couple sat at a park-bench with one scarf twined between them, sharing hot chocolates and pepperminted kisses. No child wailed for gifts. No mother or father was worn too thin by the stresses of the season. No one was tormented by loneliness. The scene was an absolute cavity of holiday cheer.

An old, grandfatherly man approached the young man led by a waddling beagle, and actually tipped his hat at him. The young man smiled at him in return, while thinking with purest sincerity, *I hate happy people.*

Though the devil was incarnated as a human, Luciferian sparks still lingered in every human heart, even those happy folk gathered in the square, but they were to his blackened soul as a speck is to the entire blackened expanse of the night sky. Miniscule though they were, those stray infernal specks, paired with eons of experience, allowed this Lucifer-as-a-man, to read other people's emotions with a glance. He flipped through the crowds' fears and desires like the pages of a particularly dull phonebook, searching for a soul wracked with sorrow and discontent. But that night, happiness was all there was to read.

He furrowed his brow and swept out of the square, waiting for the pain in his chest to subside. It endured. He clenched his fists as tightly as he could, struggling to hold on to his vow. He would not ask for help. Not again. Not so quickly. But the pain persisted, and in five minute's time, he put his palms together, and looked to the sky.

"I could use some assistance."

One of the many reasons he loathed asking for help was that he didn't always immediately recognize the hints he received. But he knew they were always provided upon request, and they would cost him the same whether he recognized them or not.

Another young couple passed by on the street, laughing and talking loudly. *Oh look. More happy people.* Lucifer looked away in disgust as they approached, but snagged a thread of their conversation as he passed.

"What was it again?!" the girl asked the boy, giggling.

"Okay, so the devil walks into a pub, and he..."

The rest faded out of earshot as Lucifer rounded the corner. *That's all I need. Well, that and finding a....* Relief turned to indignation as he saw wooden sign hanging from one of the establishments on the block in front of him. It had a Blackbird gripping a mug in each talon with a cigar in its beak and the words *Ravenglass Pub* printed across its spread wingspan.

“You don’t need to be that blunt about it,” he muttered, and before opening the door he added sardonically, “Stop me if you’ve heard this one before.”

The Ravenglass was an archetypal pub. Its bar had an old-fashioned counter, complete with a brass rail and a row of wood-backed bar stools. Each seat offered the usual view of liquor bottles, lined legion against mirrored-glass. A cabinet contained a rabble of charmingly mismatched mugs and glasses, catching the glow from a perpetually mute television hanging from the ceiling. Opposite the bar there was a billiard room with a few booths. Lucifer was greeted by the faint murmur of conversation and the enduring aroma of cigarettes smoked long ago. A golden retriever snoozed against the warm base of a cherry jukebox and managed to wag its tail in welcome without waking up.

It was a small crowd that night. Two codgers were watching the tube with disgust, and three women chatted idly with the flaxen haired waitress. Lucifer looked opposite the bar to find a dimly lit hall occupied by a young couple playing billiards. Next to them, a group of men were playing darts on a board that had become more hole than cork. There was a waitress, excited that her shift was near an end, asking a small group of friends if they wanted any more appetizers before the kitchen closed. The food had been bland, but they were ‘perfectly happy.’

Happy. Fucking. People. Lucifer turned to leave when he caught sight of a man he had missed before. This alone impressed him, as it takes some doing to be so plain that you escape even The Devil’s notice. He was sitting alone at the far end of the bar beneath the broken television set.

Lucifer began to read him. His name was Collin Mathews. He was balding, bespectacled, and had a pink complexion that turned red with drink. His chubby body was covered with a pair of simple khaki pants and a wrinkled white business shirt that made his face look all the redder.

All of Collin’s attention was focused on a standard sized sheet of paper. He held it above the counter with one hand, while cradling his head in the other, as if this helped him read. He switched the note for his glass and drained it for the fifth time that evening. Instead of placing it back on the counter, he studied it carefully and concluded he wanted two more beers here and a shot of something harder at home before he kissed the world goodbye.

Lucifer snickered to himself as he removed his coat and hung it over the seat next to Collin.

“What can I get you love?” Susan the barmaid asked pleasantly.

“A glass of your cheapest for myself, Susan. And a shot of your best for my friend.”

“Coming up.” she answered with a cheerful tilt of her head.

Lucifer flashed a perfect smile and she blushed as she left. Collin had looked up from his paper to observe this, and continued to look at Lucifer with lips slightly parted and brow heavily wrinkled.

That’s right, you stupid pink bastard. I’m talking about you. Lucifer thought savagely, maintaining a pleasant but mild expression. He waited for Collin to ask the occasion. Instead the accountant returned to his examination of the crumpled piece of paper on the counter.

“It seems like you’ve hit a rough patch, and well, I can relate.”

“With that suit?” Collin said despondently, bothering only to glance over his shoulder. “Yeah, I’m sure you have it real rough. Hell, you don’t even need it. Any woman you want would drop her knickers with that smile of yours.”

“Works on men, too.” Lucifer grinned humorlessly.

Collin bristled as the bartender set the drinks down on the counter.

“Preciate the offer,” Collin slid the shot back to Lucifer “but I’m not that sort. And I’m not your friend.”

“I didn’t mean to presume.” Lucifer said glibly, sliding the shot back. “Other than the shot, the only thing I have to offer you is a laugh at my expense.”

“Really? Seems like you’re after it the other way around to me, and I’m not in the mood. So take your shot and piss...” Lucifer held up a hand.

“I don’t know what your problems are, aside from my annoying you, and I *do* apologize for that. But no mater what they are... I can *guarantee* you, that my problems are worse than yours.”

“What are you on about?”

“Trouble. Discontents. Burdens to carry. Crosses to bear...” Lucifer took a drink from his beer “Mine are worse than yours.”

“By what bloody measure?”

“Doesn’t matter. Regardless of how miserable your relationships make you, or how many debts and demons are in your past. *My* job makes my life worse than your life, *guaranteed*.”

“Really? Have you heard of Crown and Finch?”

“I’m afraid not.” Lucifer lied. He liked to let people talk.

“Of course not. Well, it’s one of the larger firms of the Chartered Group, where I had the misfortune of working for the past fourteen years. The pay was rubbish considering the hours, and my boss was a right prick. Still, I was good enough with numbers so I stuck it out and hoped for the best. But in September we came under fraud investigation by Europol. Evidently they found our section to be guilty as sin, and we all got axed, even though most of us, myself included, had no idea.”

“Sounds like a windfall to me. You managed to escape jail and a miserable job.”

“Right. This was waiting for me in the morning post with today’s bills.”

Collin slid the piece of paper he had been reading over to Lucifer. It was a summons from Europol regarding the Crown and Fitch investigation. He was to appear in court in a week’s time with the legal counsel that would serve as his defense against accusations of fraud that were seven digits severe.

“I’ve barely got enough to keep the lights on, let alone hire a lawyer. I’m going to be convicted, and I’m going to go to jail for fifty years, assuming I have that much life left to live.”

With this pronouncement, Collin knocked back Lucifer’s shot.

“That’s unpleasant to be sure.” Lucifer affirmed with a nod then took a sip of his beer. “But like I said, I’m worse-off.”

“Let’s have it then.” Collin demanded, curling back his lower lip into a grin.

“Okay. Every day, I have to do some selfless good in the world.”

“What?” Collin replied in utter confusion, then laughed scornfully, “How is that even a job?”

“Strictly speaking it’s closer to a public service sentence than an occupation. I don’t have a choice in the matter.”

“Public service? How is that even comparable to what I’m up against?” Collin laughed “Just go help someone’s Nan cross the street, and call it a holiday.”

“There aren’t as many Nanas wandering around as people tend to think. And it’s really not that simple. You see, I have to do a certain amount of good each day, a quota if you will. And all of this good has to be *completely* selfless. Any benefits that I receive, such as money, gifts, the attention of a pretty girl, or even something as reasonable as the pleasure of relieving frustration, is measured and subtracted from the total good I do.”

“And how the hell does your boss figure all that?” Collin asked incredulously.

“I have spent more time contemplating that than you could possibly imagine.” Lucifer returned after taking a gulp of beer. “I’ve got a few of his rules figured out, but how He measures things is still a mystery. It gets better, too. Any pain, discomfort, offense, or inconvenience I cause another individual, regardless of whether I intended it or even realize it, is also measured against me.”

“Right.” Collin said uninterestedly “I’m assuming we’ve stepped into the realm of the hypothetical here, since there’s absolutely no way someone could track this quota.”

“Say my boss is God then. Wouldn’t be so trivial then, would it?”

“Oooh,” Colin said as he drew his head back then bobbed it forward in what he thought was a sagacious nod. “I understand now. You’re a man of the cloth. I never had much faith, but I admire those who do.

At least you can say you’ve used your life to do something you believe in, and changed things for the better. Damn site more gratifying than number crunching that’s for....”

The accountant abruptly realized his drinking partner was glaring at him.

Collin had received plenty of glares throughout the course of his life. A few people, mostly just his mum and a sixth grade English teacher, had glares that would last him a life time. But the young man’s stare was an entirely different breed. The glare seemed to rise up from within, just as lightning rises from the ground to meet the clouds.

Collin saw spots and blinked, but he didn’t know whether to look away or try to make amends. Before he could decide it was over. Lucifer looked away, took a pull from his beer, slammed the glass down, and shook his head with a cathartic gasp.

“If you hate it so much, why bother?”

“I never said I was a clergyman, or that I wanted to work for God. The first thing I mentioned, in fact, was my lack of a choice in the matter.”

Susan returned with a second beer and he extended an arm to take it from her thanklessly. Before the glass touched his lips though, he winced as if physically struck, and lowered it back to the counter without taking a drink. He bowed his head, took in a deep breath and exhaled it heavily, then turned to face Collin, who was glancing nervously at the door.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to snap at you like that. It was wrong of me, and I apologize if I offended you.”

“It’s alright,” Collin replied. He was uneasy, but genuine. “How exactly did you end up serving this sentence to God?”

Lucifer lowered his head, appearing quiet and pensive, even though his mind was a hurricane. He parted his lips as if to speak, only to close them in a bemused smile as he raised his head and casually swept a hand through his hair.

“Have you ever heard of the Apocalypse? End of days? Final shooting match between The Almighty and... The Other Guy for all the marbles?”

“Once or twice.”

“Mmm.” Lucifer acknowledged mid-drink with a quick nod, then returned his glass to the counter, exhaled and answered, “I lost it.”

Collin withdrew his head looked downward while pouting his lower lip. It was clear that the alcohol was catching up to Collin and slowing him down, but Lucifer let him take all the time he needed to draw his own conclusion.

“I didn’t know an Apocalypse was the sort of thing one could misplace.”

“You can’t.” Lucifer replied with a snicker and smile “What I meant to say was that I was beaten. I botched it. God won. I lost. And now he’s gloating. This job is my penance.”

“Wait...what?”

“I’m The Other Guy. In the flesh.” Lucifer said with the same winning smile and tilted his beer toward Collin before taking a sip. “Or just another drunk with delusions of the profoundest grandeur. Whichever helps you tuck in tonight.”

Lucifer’s delivery moved Collin to laugh. He snickered, snorted and then fell into fit of laughter six drinks deep.

Lucifer managed to play along perfectly by fantasizing about the various misuses of liquor bottles he could use to visit violence on the Accountant. Within seconds, he had exhausted all the basic bludgeoning and stabbing possibilities, and had reached ‘bottleneck through the eye-socket,’ when he realized all the laughter had drawn Susan’s attention.

Collin’s face had turned from red to purple and Lucifer barely managed to keep him from falling out his chair. He continued to laugh, but frantically searched his mind for a reply that would excuse the outburst. *A little hysteria is fine*, Lucifer thought, *but I have to avoid humiliating this man at all costs*. Before he could think of a response he deemed adequate, Collin spoke up.

“I guess now wouldn’t be the best time to order another beer, love?”

Lucifer managed only a weak chuckle, as he was sure the accountant’s cheek would have them thrown out but Susan looked at him and smiled.

“He’s your responsibility.”

“Absolutely.” Lucifer said with smile.

Things were looking up. Give this man a few more laughs and we’ll both be able to welcome another day.

“So hold a minute here Beelze...*bub*,” Collin chuckled at his own cleverness.

“I’m no Bible reader, and I admit that I’m not greatest authority on the Apocalypse, but I remember there being talk of trumpets blasting things, four horsemen, and a dragon with a temptress... or was it a whore?” Collin pondered this distinction for a few meaningful seconds before continuing with a shrug. “Some sort of tart. Anyway, I’m fairly certain that Jesus was scheduled to make an appearance at the end of it all.”

“Metaphors and mistranslations.” Lucifer said, exaggerating each syllable. “Your much-celebrated religious texts got a few of the really obvious things right, but when it

comes down to the details... well, let's just say God is none too grateful for the artistic license. That tart with the dragon for example? Figment of a sexually frustrated monk's imagination.

And because things didn't go about the way you all had planned, you take no notice and go about getting your daily bread. Don't feel bad though. Millions of people who were *supposed* to be watching for it specifically missed the whole thing for the same stupid reason."

"You sound somewhat bitter." Collin replied mockingly. "Some of your associates fail to come through?"

Lucifer pretended not to hear the question as he extracted a pack of cigarettes from his coat pocket. "Do you mind?"

"Course not," Collin said "but it *is* illegal. Wouldn't want to increase your debt now would we?"

"Breaking mortal laws won't add to my burden unless they cause actual human harm or discomfort." Lucifer said dismissively as he extracted a cigarette and placed it in his teeth, but paused before taking out a lighter "You think it will bother them?" he jerked his head to the other customers.

Collin shook his head, then held up a finger. "May cause cancer though."

Lucifer paused for a moment, then shrugged and lit up. He relished every ounce of the aroma and released the smoke from his nostrils with a deep sigh.

"Oh I *like* that." Collin teased "It's very draconic, you know?"

"I do my best," Lucifer smiled pleasantly, wondering how smart Collin's tongue would be if he stubbed his cigarette on it.

"Now tell me something, if the Apocalypse has come and gone, with God as the victor, and The Devil *in his service* no less, why is everything still so fucked?"

"The term god-awful springs to mind. Really it's just another misinterpretation. The Apocalypse is only the end of the known world if *I* am the one who wins it. Otherwise, things pretty much keep on going as they have been *ad-nauseam*."

"So you are stuck doing divine community service for all eternity?"

"Oh goodness no," Lucifer said with a cute laugh. "Eventually he'll let me go. I'll bum around Europe for a few decades, maybe have a plague or two, and when I get bored, I'll take another real stab at it."

"Ah, but of course!"

"I don't know where you silly mortals got the idea that it was a one shot deal."

"Right. So when did the last one happen? The last apocalypse?"

"Well, I'm not really supposed to say," Lucifer said with exaggerated self-importance, "But let's just say reality television didn't pan out quite like I hoped."

"Bloody hell, you *are* diabolical."

The pair shared another chuckle. There was a lull in the conversation and a momentary hush spread throughout the pub as most of the patrons had left for the evening. Lucifer spent the interlude contemplating how easy it would be to burn the wooden structure of the Ravenglass to ashes.

"So does God hang around in bars as well?" Collin asked

"Not really. He's more the coffee shop type."

"I can picture that. The Lord sipping a latte. What else can you tell me?"

“Well, I know you people like to think that he loves all his creatures equally, but it’s common knowledge amongst the heavenly host that he’s partial to cats over dogs.” Lucifer said matter-of-factly, and knocked back the last of his drink. *He seems cheerful enough. No thoughts about suicide or anything that would drive him to it now.*

“So how do you check this quota of yours? God give you a call every hour or so?”

“Sometimes. But usually, it’s more like checking the back of my hand as if it were a watch.” Lucifer said, making the gesture.

“So what happens if you don’t come through with it?”

“I spend more time in this wretched state of affairs.” Lucifer answered with a quick smile.

It was true enough as a statement, but far from a straight answer. The worst part of Lucifer’s punishment was not the limitations of human mortality, but man’s soul. As Lucifer lived in man’s flesh, kept his company, and acted in accordance with their laws, something resembling a soul grew in him. It was like a tumor of sympathy and it forced him to sympathize with the mortal masses. He was wracked by literal pangs of guilt for his deeds as The Great Adversary. Like the patient of a slow terminal illness, he had his good days and his bad days. Most days were bad, others were tolerable, and some were excruciating to the point of complete incapacitation.

“Well, listen, if your looking to do some selfless good, why not just go to a soup kitchen? Or set up your own volunteer organization?”

“I spend a fair amount of time in community kitchens, but my profit margins aren’t all that great. Giving a truly needy person help in their time of need will do them good but a lot of time it just allows people to become complacent. They perpetuate whatever stupidity brought them there to begin with. And while I can tell who needs what, people will get jealous if I give one guy a hot bowl of soup and another guy a long talk on not drinking quite so much...”

Collin pursed his lips and tapped the beer bottle on the edge of his chin. “So He wants you to be creative about it.”

Lucifer sighed. “I guess.”

“Have you thought about bridges? Lot’s of George Bailey’s this time of year.”

“First place I went to actually.” Lucifer smirked.

After a brief pause, Collin reached into the leather work bag slung over his chair and presented Lucifer with a manila envelope.

“Take this folder, and drop it off at the Alice Kidd’s office downtown. She’s the head of prosecution overseeing the Crown and Finch case. The documents inside will prove that my firm fired two thousand good people for financial fraud they were unwittingly committing. It will clear their names and open the doors for a settlement that will put food on their table for a good long while.”

Lucifer looked through the documents. They were legitimate. He looked up at Collin in disbelief. “You’re crucifying yourself here.”

“Well, that’s why I need you to turn it in for me. I have some cash stashed up, and a few connections the higher ups haven’t learned about yet. With any luck, I should be able to disappear by tomorrow. Besides, if they catch me... well, there’s always hell. And I’ve got connections there too, now haven’t I?”

Lucifer forced a laugh, but he wasn’t convinced by a letter of Collins lie. The accountant’s thoughts had jumped from hungry families to a hopeless trial, to a small

revolver resting in a drawer of his teak nightstand. The montage closed with the image of a cartoon hell, where Collin was boiling in a bulbous black cauldron and sharing a laugh with a red-horned, goat-hoofed likeness of Lucifer's mortal self.

All Collins' earlier reservations had dissolved. Worries of pain and the possibility of oblivion had been numbed by booze and the vague suggestion of an afterlife. He was as ready to die as any human could be.

A silly, self-satisfied expression came over his face. When the bartender came back, he gestured for one more drink, placed a five euro-note on the bar, and nicked a single coin from the tip jar.

"I could go for some mood music, you?"

Lucifer continued to stare. The amount of Good that would result from turning in the envelope would spare him from the sympathetic ache for weeks. As Collin reached the jukebox, the sleeping golden retriever got up and wandered over to Lucifer. This puzzled him. Animals usually barked, bared their teeth or just steered clear from him.

"Who are you?" The Devil demanded of the dog. "Gabriel?"

"Aren't I always the one who has to speak with you?" the retriever answered in a language too old for human ears.

"Look, I know I'm running behind, but I'll make my deadline just fine. That gentleman who disturbed your nap has given me plenty to work with."

"The folder won't count toward your quota unless you help him as well."

"Give me another minute and I'll convince him not to off himself." Lucifer muttered wearily.

"A life in prison is hardly suitable thanks for what he's given you."

Lucifer choked on his glass of beer and glared at the dog. He fantasized about snatching the creature by its pathetic ears and flinging it out of the glass window, into the street where it could be run over by a car. Preferentially one driven by an old woman with a heart condition, or better still, a minivan filled with children who could be forever scarred by the experience. Susan looked over with a concerned expression.

"I'm sorry! Is she bothering you?" she asked sweetly.

"Not at all, she's a delight." Lucifer answered with another suave smile, and then hissed into his glass when she turned away.

"He admitted guilt! What do you want me to do? Waste taxpayers' time and money getting him off in court? Or should I kill the guards to his cell and help him escape? Some how I don't think The Boss would look very kindly on either of those courses of action."

The retriever scratched its ear agreeably. "There's no need to be so melodramatic. Just take him with you."

"Beg pardon?" Lucifer replied.

"Hire him and hide him. Let him help you! You've trivialized your sentence and turned it into an accounting problem. Since you're so determined to play that game, he can help you. He can keep track of your accounts, so to speak. Give you suggestions on how to help people. Catch the things you're likely to dismiss."

Lucifer leaned back in his chair wearily.

"I see what this is. Our Dear Lord wants me to play with a handicap. Every day I'll have to expend divine power to fabricate money for that idiot's salary. I'll have to arrange transportation with him and keep him from getting himself killed."

“He wants you to form a relationship, Luci.”

“I hate it when you call me that.” Lucifer muttered savagely.

The Devil glanced over at Collin. He was still inspecting the jukebox’s selection, watching the pages of CDs clatter by with drunken slack-jawed glee. Then one title caught his eye and he hit a button. A pitter patter of bongos and maracas emanated from the glowing machine, and Lucifer pinched the bridge of his nose as the lyrics chimed in: *“Please allow me to introduce myself...”*

“You really want me to work with... *this?*” Lucifer gestured at the accountant.

But the holy presence had left the retriever, and it trotted back to the juke box to inspect Collin’s odd behavior. He was now bobbing his head and leaning from side to side in an odd rhythm that could never be confused with actual dancing regardless of how much you had to drink. The bartender chuckled and turned to Lucifer.

“Last call boys.”

“Thank you, Susan.” Lucifer said, and stood from his seat, turning to face Collin. “Mr. Matthews, how would you feel about a job?”



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