

Another Day at the Office

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My body senses the morning before my lids. Leaden and defiant, reluctantly they deem to commence their rising. My instinctual fear of the dark and the nighttime gives way to a more profound dread of the waking hours. There is nothing in my fevered dreams that can compare to the realities I have witnessed.

Nothing.

The alarm sounds and I see the thin, wasted sun coming through threadbare curtains, it's rays carrying the dust of this room drifting down to the tattered carpet. The shrill peal of the alarm echoes off the walls. I set it more out of habit these days.

Sleep hasn't come to me in months. I find it difficult to close my eye for any length of time.

I lay there a moment longer staring at the darkening water stain over my head, thinking of the other poor souls in the building above and below me. More fodder the church has tucked away, sweating and screaming at shadows; until a withered hand taps you on the shoulder and it's "Once more into the fray, my boys". Then you bow your head, kiss the rings and take whatever might be left of yourself out into a world that no longer resembles anything worth salvaging. Just you and a worn, leather book against it all.

Maria lies next to me, her breathing even and deep. I watch her chest rise and fall before running a broken hand down her back. She raises her head and turns, stares at me for a long while, then gets off the bed and leaves the room.

Silent as always.

I hurt.

Wherever it is possible for a man to hurt, I hurt.

The thrumming in my skull, the knife- point pains though my chest, the sour roiling in my watery bowels. This seems to be one of those mornings when I can feel it all. Every scar, every hidden, broken part of myself. Every failure. They are numerous and make me want to lie back and pull the damp sheet over my head, reluctantly returning to that twilight state I reside in during the moonlit hours, but nothing aside from monsters and memories await me there. I swing my legs over the side, plant my feet on the ground and wait for the pain to reacquaint itself.

It doesn't take long.

My hands shake again, and I awkwardly rub them together hoping to get the blood warm and flowing. I think its the fear that causes them to tremble. They sense what is coming and try their hardest to keep me from holding anything too tightly or for very long. They have suffered. Three fingers gone on my left, two on my right. They have earned the right to tremble.

I take a moment to look at the scars, recalling them. The ragged tears, the clean departures of flesh from bone, the black burns at the announcement of each absence. So much has been taken. So much have I given. I look to the deeper scars running down from my wrists. No burns here I am ashamed to say. No, these are clean and precise, the long cuts down my arms and the shorter wounds across my

wrists form crosses of a sort. I wept when I first realized this, so I try not to think about them for too long.

I reach over to the nightstand to retrieve my ring, kiss it once and place it awkwardly on a remaining finger. It fits, though a bit uneasily.

My balance is off when I stand. The tiny room spins slightly, and I call for Maria but there is no reply. She is off somewhere, the kitchen maybe. She has been acting strangely as of late. I pray I don't know why.

I pull the chain, a dirty light bouncing across the space of the bathroom. The ice has just about melted in the tub from the night before, my fever seemingly broken, at least for the time being. I run cold water from the tap and try to splash some on my face. Its comical. I pat down my hair a bit and raise my head instinctively to look in the mirror only to be met with blackness. I covered it long ago. I don't look at myself anymore.

Too many things could be looking back.

My eye throbs in the dim light, focusing for two. I press a thumb into it to try and relieve some tension and recall the burning. I feel the heat and the red, shrieking agony as if it were yesterday when I dropped my guard and bent too close. When she spit her foulness in my eyes, I was too slow in my fear and surprise to react and could only wipe away enough of its filth from one eye in time to save it. I thought it infected and wallowed in dank fear as to what godless infection this thing could harbor within its fluids. Then the visions began.

My Christ...the visions.

I could never have imagined such things. No one could have imagined. Whether open or closed they were there, waiting. The tortures and blasphemies poisoning my vision... I am nauseous in the recall. My good eye wept constantly and maybe my tears helped cleanse it, I'll never be sure, but I could not bear what played out in my sight, unending..

Then I saw the flame on the stove dance as I heated the teaspoon to a glowing red and dug that corrupted eye from its socket, still weeping as the visions faded to a blessed black before I retched into the sink.

Jesus, that was a desperate night.

I reach for the bottle on my sink and a single pill rattles at the bottom. I seem to be going through them more frequently now. They help some, but not as much as they used to. A warm swallow of tepid wine and I wait for the tick at the edge of my mouth to subside. One pill won't do much but at least it will allow me to make it out the door. That hasn't always been the case.

Stumbling back to my room I take in the stained sheets and the pages ringing my bed. All those words. All those promises. So much expected to be taken on faith when reality has its hands around your throat on a daily basis and breathes its filth into your face and you have nothing to do but hold your breath until your lungs collapse. You can rub your baubles and chant your lines, kiss your beads and hope for the best but eventually you are going to need to breathe. And when finally you relent and pull that corruption into yourself, breathe deep that tainted air, you pray someone has been listening with something resembling mercy in their heart.

You look down into that thing lying in the bed and it stares back at you, unblinking, a black nothingness pulling at you. You realize you're utterly alone and those are not merciful, brown eyes staring back at you.

Not benevolence. No. Not even close.

I take my new robes from the closet, tear open the plastic and lay them out on top of my bed. They are stiff and smell of incense. The old ones I would take to the incinerator until I found that some wouldn't even burn, but just lay in the flames and smolder, black and putrid. Something about the

regurge and its composition not being susceptible to fire. I leave those problems to more qualified individuals. Now I simply seal them in thick, rubber bags and drop them at the rectory for disposal. I guess some stains can never be removed.

I walk past the toast I left to burn last night. All my food tastes like urine now.

I assume my beads and vestments are on straight. Relying on muscle memory at this point.

Maria stares from the doorway, saying nothing. Appraising me, I suppose, in her way. She is a comfort though, her companionship, her warmth. She reminds me of the love I was once able to access in my heart.

The book is still open from the passage I left off on last night so I pick it up and reread a line or two, steeling myself. I read much slower now, obviously, and in a way it is a good thing. I find myself more in touch with the words, taking my time and pulling out as much conviction and meaning from each syllable as I can. Feel them forming in my chest and filling me with purpose and warmth and, on the very rare occasion, something resembling hope. I need that passion. I need to compel. And I've come to love the Latin. The way it unfurls over the tongue, the sheer power within the words. You can feel their strength even as they form, your throat stirring with anticipation.

It wasn't always this way.

I was brash and foolhardy in my youth.

Thought I could handle things. Thought the teachings were outdated and archaic and all it would take was a new approach, a new energy and we would start seeing progress. Start making headway. I altered the scripture in slight ways to strengthen the impact of certain words. Played with the tone and cadence of my voice thinking to alter the emphasis of certain phrases and lessen dialogue that has existed for centuries. Even, in my hubris, incorporated original passages of my own making.

Such an arrogant fool!

And the damned paid the price.

They lay before me, contorted and blistering in the heat of their torments, howling words no human tongue should form. While I search the void behind their eyes for any semblance of their true selves hoping to throw a light to guide them up out of the dark, they curse and spit and writhe, straining against unseen shackles, jaws snapping just out of reach.

And while I stood there stammering through my new vernacular, they laughed and wailed, frothing as the innocent ones being held in their black claws went spiraling off into the void. I could actually see the light dim and the emptiness fill their eyes as I lost them, as the chasms claimed their prizes. Theirs are the names I recite while praying my rosary. Theirs are the names I have written on scraps of paper in my books, my pockets, scratched across my chest lest I ever forget.

Theirs are the names I whisper to the devils while they slumber between agonies, hoping to hear some familiar, faint cry echo out of the nothing. I strain my ears for any weak glimpse of a voice, any plea from beyond the light.

Any hope of our redemption.

But there is nothing.

Ever.

Experience is a brutal teacher, and I withered under her tutelage. My tremors and incontinence can attest to that.

I will be twenty-eight this year.

I roll my shoulders and crack my neck and button my collar. I grab my satchel off the chair and kiss the crooked cross hanging beside the door. Looks to have shifted slightly again overnight so I straighten it. My head bowed, the words come to me and as my recital ends, I open my eye. I take in His gaunt features, softly touch His downcast eyes. My fingers come away red. I pretend not to notice.

Then turning to say goodbye to Maria I see her off in the corner, her back arched and her hair raised. She hisses, her green eyes flashing, and I know. I know and I attempt a smile, if only for her sake.

Maybe she'll see something still in that smile to make her want to stay.

Maybe she'll abandon her indifference and nuzzle my legs like she has in the past.

Maybe she'll be here waiting when I get home tonight, but I doubt it. Animals sense things long before we do.

I will miss her.

A fly buzzes somewhere as the door softly closes behind me.

I grip the banister awkwardly and slowly make my way down the stairs. Pain shadows my every step.

There is a dead bird in the stairwell.

"Another day at the office" I chuckle to myself.

It is a hollow sound.

I open the door and walk out into the world. A defeated light finds me as I step into the sun and raise my face to a fire that holds no warmth but burns regardless.