

INFERNUS

The grave is gone.

The earth was freshly tilled when I left it last, the grass a parched and sickly yellow, breaking with every footfall that neared each stem. Splashes of dirt were still wet from tears, dripping down empty faces as though the Lord had set another flood into motion. The headstone was an insipid gray, a color so lifeless it faded against the rising fog. The flowers left behind were withering, planted in an empty vase stapled to the stone's edge, loose powder left to withstand the creeping stages of decay already evident in each petal. I knew this grave. I dug it shallow. I planted the body shallow, so that rot may creep in sooner, give what is left of that wretched thing to the earth to start anew.

But now it's gone.

The others cannot know.

My rounds around our garden of remembrance have long since gone unnoticed. Without clear leadership, the denomination has shifted my duties elsewhere. This whole situation does nothing to soothe my nerves. They ignore my duties, the ones he put in place. They take my work and turn caring for uncaring faces instead of for the pace I helped build. I've continued to take on my original duties. For my own conscience, I've taken the liberty of letting them remain unlogged. In time, I will have time for confession. But only once this business has been fulfill, until then I must abide. The flesh is unwilling and the spirit is so frail, but the Lord does not give us trials without cause. That Lucifer is stronger than man means that to err is to be human, and sin is assured, not feared. That is why I make my rounds, even if it goes against the will of my congregation. This is my penance for the act, but not for the man. Make no mistake, he deserved the Hell

UT MIHI POCULUM INANE CURRIT, SIC SANGUIS IN VENAS HOMINIS

HABET. SI FIDES SINE OPERE TUM MORTUA EST, NOVAM DOMUM

RECIPIAT IN ARMIS SPIRITUS *I wrought for him. But he is not here.*

Something has gone wrong.

I buried the Father in a patch of earth near the center of the cemetery. I made sure to keep it in tradition with the others; the same decorations, the same remembrance. I even sprinkled holy water from his study over his body before I shoved the loose dirt atop him, a rite undeserving of monsters such as him. But he deserved some protection until judgement, as there was no time for a coffin. In shallow layers of dirt and gravel I buried him, content to keep him below the surface. I have heard stories of copper wires being woven around the fingers of the dead, of ringing in the night, of miracles of reanimation. He did not deserve a chance to escape the grave. I made sure no miracle could have hoisted from that patch, even if the Lord himself reached down to pick him up. Leftover mortar from the church enshrouded his remains. A model inscription was placed upon the gravestone with no name. What belonging he had in life was not freely given in death. He was gone, I was sure of it. I washed the blood off our hands myself.

None of them must know what he did.

I must retrace my steps, and quickly. In his office is where I did the deed. Candlelight held my vision as I entered the chamber, to see him standing there, holy book in hand. As if nothing he did was wrong. The pages turning sounded like the rustling of wind moving through the branches of so many sweet memories. But I knew what was inside that book. None of it was holy. It was a record of her. In my hand held a crucifix, the other a blade so slender it fell beside my palm, becoming one with my veins. To bless my actions and to send him to the one in Heaven. Both were buried into his heart by the end of the struggle. Even after all of this time, his strength remained. But I learned how to best him long ago. I just never expected to have to use it like this.

I wanted him dead, I had to do the deed. But I didn't want that symbol in that man. Righteousness in a sinful's man body, the cross forever defiled by blood that could not be washed away. I didn't want to slander our Lord like that. But it had to be done. I buried the symbol with the body. And now it's gone, along with him. He must be found. He has proof of my actions. And he knows they can kill as well as any knife.

I never wanted the Father to be a demon, just a sick man. For a while, I convinced myself of this lie. I believed him to just, to be true. Someone who would hold my heart in his own hands. But I could not see my own lies forever, and the Lord did not sway my hand, so the host on high can forgive my lack of transgression. The changes in his mood started months ago, but I should have seen them years in advance. I saw the glint in his eye when he started to look inwards at the crowd of the congregation. I saw how he looked towards the widows, towards her, the frailest of the crowd all praising his name. I saw when he left the church with her, walked across town. I saw them enter her home. I saw the late walks, alone, following every sermon afterwards back to the shack he called a home, how brazen he became. For months, I saw this play out. But how could I confess? How could I tell him that I watched him, all the while? How could I betray our own trust over jealousy? Everything we had built would fall apart into nothing.

But I should have, I knew the moment I heard her scream.

The flowers grew on her grave as the burial passed. Fellow roses, I remember them well. He tasked me to plant crimson, and I did. But the Lord works in mysterious ways, and we both knew what the Father did. As he told me in conscious, an intruder in the night, someone from outside the village, killed her. Stormed into her abode and tore her neck asunder. He stood there and blessed her grave as I held the shovel over it, ready to cover her. But he lied. That was the moment I knew he had to die. The night before, I saw that he didn't return home. He stayed in her house, slowly rummaging through it. Tracing steps from a window I saw him break. Tainting the scene. I saw him take off his boots to walk barefoot to the forest's edge, careful to step back in the prints to the house. I watched all of it. And I still don't know why. Even now, I'm in the dark as to why he killed her like some animal.

I did the deed that very night.

Even has passed as I have searched, and now night has descended upon the town, but I am no closer to discovering his location. None of his books have shown any clues to where he would have gone. This is pointless, I must remain on my own memories. He knew I killed him, he'd be waiting for me. I know him. I know how he acts. I

remember our lessons together, his takes on the theology. I remember his lips, close to mine. No! What lesson is this, Father? Why do you mock me like this? I drove the dagger inside your heart, felt the pumping of your blood across my fingers. I know I did not miss my mark. I saw you die, Father. I heard your coughs and gurgles as the blood congealed in your throat. You're gone, you must be. So, why are you no longer here? How did you return from Hell CUR

CALIX MEUS CURRIT VACUUS? QUID HIC ADHUC VIVIT? FIDES SINE LABORE EXSTINGUITUR, NIHIL ENIM IN ARMIS TENEO, NEC

UNQUAM HABEO *and free yourself from the blood and soil? It is impossible. You are impossible. You are gone.*

Unless something took your place.

Demons, foul abominations cannot endure in this world. We are a pious town. We have kept the faith. I have kept the faith, even with what I have done. Even with him gone. Holy men have slain before. They were pardoned, if for a just cause. I was just. He was not. This must be my own crusade, my own path on the word of God. The difference between a worthy man and a broken one is a razor thin, falling deeper and deeper past the edge into depravity. But he was just a man. To escape the grave like that, with all my precautions, another life must be writing in his skin. Mothers tell tall tales of incubi stirring beneath the surface of thought, of dwelling someplace deep within the spirit, waiting for the moment to come free. A snatching of the body, perhaps? It would explain the nature of the gravesite, with no struggle to leave the earth. One snatched from the jaws of death would not take the time to smooth over where he was last buried. I should know. I put them in the ground. I am the groundskeeper for our church. I know my worth.

Perhaps the wound is what brought this thing across. The crucifix, the implement I used to justify my accusation against him, planted in his chest must have done the deed. If the symbol of the resurrection of Christ is defiled, can something rise in its place? Have I, in doing what must be done, allowed a greater sin to occur? We as mortals do not understand the

plan of the Lord; we are not supposed to have every detail laid before us. We are not divine, but are merely men. It cannot have been my fault if something arose out of discarded flesh. That is the work of fallen angels, of spirits deposed and forgotten. The Lord will judge them enough when they are culled from this earth. As for me and my duty, I must preserve the task I brought forward into this world.

Why does nothing remain in his journals? Before I depart, I would at least prefer to have one last look at the man I used to love. I remember our first meeting. In the forest of our village, against the slowly setting sun, we met in secret. By chance we came across each other, lost, isolated, the outcasts of the village. The brave new world they talked so highly about could not hold a candle to the loneliness of knowing that not a single soul would realize your soul had passed, should the new world swallow you whole. In the beginning he was but a man of faith: no station, no creed. I was nothing more than a name upon a creed, an empty prospect, to find a purpose or to die. A passenger to a new world we made together. Under the covers of darkened trees, we met to discuss who we were, who we could be. I was the one who inspired his theology. I saw his desire to know more and fed that flame. He inspired my dutiful construction, of caring for the woods, for shelter. We built that chapel together, with our own hands, nursed each splinter with sweat with the goods of the earth we cultivated together. And before we opened the doors together, we spent one final night in bliss.

He was mine, and I was his.

In a village full of eyes and teeth we made ourselves a home. And we opened ours to everyone in the village, to everyone who would have spurned and chose to do so. We made a home. And then he broke his faith. He broke my faith. He lost his way with a widow, someone needing comfort and guidance like he showed me. He broke her trust. He broke my trust. And then he dragged her through broken glass and lies and forced me to cover her blemishes with dirt.

He must be there, among that patch of earth. In the place we lay before our chapel came to be. Is he already there, under that shadow of our oak tree? Is that why all of his books run blank, the words a slog empty of meaning and empathy? A clue in his broken faith? He must have come back here, laid waste to the evidence he left behind, all the memories

we had together. Even the woodcarving we made is gone. Nothing remains but the scars each splinter left behind, and the

Hell CUR ME DESERIS? NONNE SATIS ERAT SANGUIS VITA MEA
AD SITIM TUAM SATIARI? FIDES SINE LABORE MORTUA EST, ET IN
TE OMNES OCULI FIGUNTUR, QUI FECIT FACTUM *that is being forgotten and*

tossed aside. If I was the one slain, perhaps none of this would have even happened. Perhaps then he would have confessed his guilt before I acted. But what good can a jury of men do against a chorus of angels?

The path to the woods is wrought with leaves, even as the air turns to falling shards of ice instead of rain. The wind blows cold against my skin, what little of it is left showing past the bundles of clothing taken from his poorly built shed. Together, we built a chapel with a steeple that peered above the canopy of foliage, but on my own he was left with rotting plywood and nails dripping rust. The path was never well worn, but is it now. My footsteps echo across trees that leer over me with the whistling of wind between their branches being laughter I can recall too well. In my hands, nails dig into my palms, grown from my flesh and plucked from the walls of my abode. I will have to strike him down again, I know this. I will leave him here, in the heart of this wood. Perhaps someone will find him and wonder, who is this man? Who died alone? Who died afraid? Or perhaps some beast will stumble across him, sink their teeth into rotting flesh, and soon naught will be left but bones.

I am not a pious man, I am simply flesh and blood and convictions. I have my faults. And it is not my place to forgive them. I am bitter, jaded, and lesser than other men. I know this. But I know what is right. What is just. And the man the Father became was not the one I knew. To this day, I do not understand why he changed. There were no signs of turmoil behind his eyes. His moods shifted, yes, but when does the ire begin and memory fade? He was pure, he was good. But I saw the blood dripping from his hands as he left her house, and I knew he could not be saved.

When we first met, he talked of the innate vileness of the human spirit. That it was the duty of a man to fall. I fought against that. Because if we were so baseless a creature, how could I feel joy around him? I realize, now, that he was

right. Those memories have turned to soot in my mouth. Each moment tastes like spilt blood, and I'm some lapdog cleaning at the wound. I must free myself from him. I must murder the thought with him, along with whatever may be piloting his skin.

I'm reaching the hilltop where our tree is. I must return here, once the dead is done. Burn the vile thing to the ground. Let the ashes act as compost for the forest to build upon. Nature is not vile, I know this, but I cannot stand to look at this pillar of expectations of what could have been. The bark has gone dark with age, and patches have been torn off following the last storm that came across our village. Lightning lit the sky as if the sun was found among the storm, as if all the stars in the sky became that of fangs of some ancient viper, coiling through the air. The sky is clear, now, tinted red with the blood that will soon be awash across my hands once again. I must keep myself firm as I continue up the hill, to the base of the tree I know to be his true final resting place. Yes, he must be here. Where else would he return to? Where else would he seek absolution? Here, at the end of things, even vestiges bound by unnatural forces find their way to where they belong.

I remember his face, his grin, the way he would purse his lips as he stumbled over words that left me aching to hear. But his name escapes me. Strange. Why is that? Why do I remember him only as Father? That is the name of the Lord, not as a man. Why does that title hang around my neck? My hands shake, unsure of how to hold the nails in my hands. Why do I see his face before me but not a name, not a word? The Father, the Son, the Spirit. The trinity. Satanus, Antichristus, and Bestia. The unholy Trinity. I know these names, but not his. What is my own? My legs feel weak, I need a moment to pause, to reflect. The base of the bark where we once laid shall be adequate service for this. Names give meaning. We are born again with names upon our lips, so to know mine means that I am losing who I am, what the Lord tasked me to be. I must focus. I must not fail. I will not travel to Hell

TAM FRIGIDUS
SUM. TAM VACUUS SUM. ITA VEREOR. FIDES IN MORTE ESSE
NON POTEST, NAM VIVI IGNORANTIAM ELEGERUNT. NIHIL SUM.

where the Father reclines. I used his title again. Why did I use his title again. Something is wrong. Something is wrong.

The nails have dug into my palm. I can feel the rust seep into my blood, mingle and become one. He is not here, but before me lies an indentation. The grass has been cleared away, little more than brushing a hand to remove the dust off a shelf. Tracks lead down the hill a short distance before vanishing into foliage. Did he do this? Why is he not waiting for me? Why do I suddenly feel weak? I try to stand, but I am unable. I am welcomed into nature's embrace, and the ground is cool underneath my cheek. His hands were always cold. Why is he not here? Even I held him close as he died. The grass is a sickly yellow, and my life-blood, oozing into each stem, has become a miasma of mud and promises. I can feel a stream loosen and lay on the earth. Did it fall from my eyes or from my palm? The tree appears gray, now. Was it withering on the trek here? Yellow roses. I see them ahead of me. The wretch must have left him here for me. I knew he was here. I knew it. I must stand. I must see this through. I must complete the deed. I must. I must.

I must confess, my mind has gone to that of a blur. The sky has gone dark. I do not remember the sun setting. Before me my wrist feels inflamed. The rust must have spread fast. The pain is unbearable. What trial is this? I have done what the Lord asked. I have sought out the evil and the world and purified it. I have used his name. His name. What is that name? I cannot remember. Will he bury me here? I cannot move. Will someone? Will anyone? What have I done to deserve this? I do not know. I cannot know. The Lord's plan cannot be known, but why has it led me here? Against the earth, my blood crosses along my palm. No one will hear what deed I committed in his name now. The tree withers. And so do I.

I look down upon my chest, and blood spills from there as well. A gentle bubbling, echoing with each gasp as I feel the torrent lead back into my throat. No. This doesn't make sense. Did my hand fall upon my chest as I fell? I remember no sensation of pain. Shall I die like him, too? But why must I die without him? Will someone help me? Will anyone hear me? It's cold. It's so cold, here. There are no stars above me, anymore. I am truly alone.

If I die without him, then I must be in Hell NOLÍTE TIMÉRE, QUÓNIAM NON
SUNT DÓMINUS ET OMNES ÁNGELI EIUS. NON POSSUNT SINE
FIDE VIVERE, ET NIHIL HIC REMANERE. AMPECTERE ME.

The grave is gone.