

Child of God

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I.

The pastor's son didn't cry—at least, that is what the pastor would tell you. The child was born silent, motionless, staring at the midwife with eyes that shone black from pupil to sclera. The midwife fainted, the child slipping from her careful hands, and the pastor dove forward to save his son.

When he saw the eyes, he nearly dropped the infant himself. He held it at arm's length and strode from the room, down to the cellar, and placed it on the dusty mat at the foot of the stairs. He would tell you that it didn't cry. It didn't reach toward him with a pudgy, newborn fist, didn't implore him with its evil black eyes.

He marched back up the stairs, washed the blood from his hands, and waited.

II.

The pastor's demon grew horns and learned to walk. The pastor sat on the bottom step and watched it toddle around the cellar, playing with dirt and chasing spiders. He'd never fed it, but it seemed to grow anyway, at the same rate as a human child. He kept expecting it to belch fire, or crawl on the walls. Instead it watched with rapt fascination as a beetle scuttled across its foot. He rested his chin on his hand and sighed. "Foul demon."

It turned at the sound of his voice, tufts of black hair tossing against its horns as it stumbled toward him on fat little legs. He stood swiftly, putting an arm out to ward it off. The movement gave the demon pause. It swayed for a moment, mouth agape. Then it tipped too far and fell on its bottom. Its black eyes welled up with tears, small shoulders trembling.

The pastor marched up the stairs and shut the door.

III.

Even when the demon was cleaned and presentable, the pastor felt filthy having to be around it. As he gave the demon its lessons, sitting at a plain table under the cellar's single lightbulb, the thing suddenly tugged at his sleeve. He recoiled, giving it a sharp look. "What?"

The demon shrank back, making an inarticulate noise. It wasn't picking up language well. The pastor had begun to wonder whether it might take better to Latin. Finally the thing pointed to the stairs with a sharp little fingernail, and then pointed at itself and made a questioning grunt.

"No." The pastor's chair toppled. He towered over the demon, gripping the hair around its stubby horn. "Foul creatures like you do *not* belong up there, do you understand me?"

Its black eyes stared back up at him, uncomprehending. When he finally released it, it scrambled out of its chair and pressed back against the wall, letting out a distressed whine.

The pastor sighed and shut his Bible with a *thump*. He double-checked the deadbolt on his way out.

IV.

The demon had a tail now, with the blackened texture of a whip and an arrow-like point at the end. The tail flicked back and forth as it did its lessons, swinging in time with its feet dangling from the chair. "Stop that," the pastor snapped.

The demon flinched and went still. "Sorry, sir." It had a lisp from losing its two front teeth. The adult teeth were growing in pointed, like a dog's.

The pastor shuddered to look at it. He wondered, not for the first time, whether the demon could be fixed. Perhaps its tail could be docked; its horns (longer now, beginning to

curve) could be sawed off. Even the teeth, as gruesome as it may be, could be pulled, and the demon might finally become a boy. Surely the thing could be put to use somewhere.

But the question of the eyes eluded the pastor. Those eyes, black as the night, that still unsettled him after years of watching the demon grow ... No, there was nothing to be done about the eyes.

The tail swished again, and the demon's eyes wandered to the stairs. It flinched as the pastor slammed his Bible shut.

V.

The pastor's wife rushed into the living room, her face white. "It's in the kitchen."

The pastor leapt to his feet and pushed past her. He heard a clatter and followed the noise to the curled form on the floor. The demon's head whipped around, red dribbling down its chin.

"You!" The pastor grabbed the demon and hauled it to its feet. A bowl slipped from its claws and shattered, scattering cherries across the floor.

The demon's shoulders hunched. "I'm sorry," it whispered through grotesquely stained lips. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry—"

The pastor dragged it past his trembling wife, who let out a shriek. It twisted away from her, but it didn't resist the pastor. He reached the cellar door and pinned it against the frame. "You're not to come up here again, demon," he hissed, "do you understand me?"

Its eyes brimmed with tears. "Yes, sir."

The pastor would tell you he didn't pause outside the door, didn't listen to the *thump*, *thump*, *thump* down the stairs. He would tell you that, when it hit the bottom, it didn't cry.

VI.

The pastor's congregation had a newcomer; he was a devout man and an excellent hunter. Good at taking care of pests, like the fox that had been killing the neighbors' hens.

The hunter stood tacitly in the cellar, his gaze locked on the demon. It was backed against the wall, eyes on his face, mindless of the shotgun slung over his shoulder. A thick silence filled the room before the hunter spoke. "What is this?"

"This is the pest I told you about," said the pastor. "I'd like you to dispose of it."

Confusion sparked in the demon's dark eyes. *Pest. Dispose.* It looked to the pastor, searching for answers. The pastor didn't glance at it.

The hunter's bushy eyebrows rose. "He's just a boy."

"It's a demon," the pastor hissed. "A monster. I'm asking you to do your Godly duty—"

"A *child.*"

"A burden!" His temples throbbed. He was so close to being rid of it. "It's not a sin to kill a demon!"

But the hunter was shaking his head, gazing at the demon with pity as he stroked his beard. "I can't kill a child. I might be willing to take him off your hands, though."

The thought of it sent dread curling in the pastor's stomach: the demon unleashed upon the world, infecting others with its sin. "It leaves here dead or not at all."

The hunter's pitying expression didn't change. "I'm sorry, Reverend. I can't help you."

The pastor wrenched the gun from the hunter's hands.

The pastor would tell you that the demon descended on the hunter, pierced his skull with its demonic tail and ravaged him with its wolfish teeth. If someone were to find the body, buried six feet beneath the dirt floor, he would tell you the demon buried it there. He would tell you that

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the demon didn't cry. He would tell you that he didn't, either, staring at it down the barrel of the shotgun.

But, of course, he will not tell anyone this, because consorting with demons is a sin, and children of God mustn't sin.

VII.

"Daddy, what's in the cellar?" asked the pastor's daughter, swinging her feet from her chair.

The pastor patted her pale hair. "Nothing you need to worry about, precious."

"Then why do you go down there so often?" She gazed at him curiously.

"To pray." The lie tasted bitter on his tongue. His wife glanced at him before she silently turned back to chopping vegetables.

His daughter just giggled. "Daddy, you're silly. Why do you need to pray down there?"

He ran his hand through her hair, admiring her light blue eyes, the smooth, round adult tooth taking root in her smile. "Don't you worry about it, precious."

VIII.

The demon's head nearly reached the pastor's shoulder now. Or it would, if the pastor would allow it to stand that close. Its black horns were long enough to curve inward, and they glinted as it stood against the wall with a Bible in its clawed hands and recited the Ten Commandments in a clumsy, unpracticed tongue. "*Remember the Sabbath day ... Honor your father and your mother ... You shall not—murder ...*" It stumbled, its gaze darting from the

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tamped down floor to the pastor. The pastor's eyes flared. It buried its nose in the book and hurriedly read off the rest, and when it finished, it kept its head down, waiting.

"I want those memorized the next time I come down here, you understand me?" said the pastor. "You're too old not to know your Commandments, demon."

It stared into the Bible. "Yes, sir."

IX.

"What's up the stairs?"

The pastor loathed seeing the demon even more now that it was beginning to develop the lanky limbs and attitude of a teenager. There were days when he considered tossing away the key to the cellar, but then he'd be letting its evil go unchecked. "Nothing of your concern," he said briskly.

Its voice was low, almost musing to itself as it crossed its arms and flicked its tail back and forth. "What is it that you don't want me to see?"

"It is not what I want, demon. It is God's will that you do not mix with good Christian men."

The demon leveled its black gaze at him. "God never told me that."

Its head snapped to the side, red blossoming over its colorless cheek. The pastor loomed over it. The top of its head was almost level with his chin. "Do not speak such blasphemy," he snapped. "It is not your place, as a wretched, sinful creature, to interpret the will of God."

Slowly, it straightened its neck and met his gaze with dry eyes. "Yes, sir."

The pastor jerked back from its blankness. He turned away and hastily took out a handkerchief to wipe his palm.

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X.

The cellar door hung open on its hinges. Blood roared in the pastor's ears. He hadn't been down there in days. Hadn't he locked the door last time? *Hadn't he?*

His daughter yawned, corralled in the living room with his wife. "Daddy? What's going on?" His wife hushed her, eyes sharp.

Shotgun in hand, the pastor searched every inch of the house, his wife and daughter looking on anxiously. The closets, the attic, beneath the front porch—all empty.

Finally he circled back to the cellar. The door was pristine, unscratched. The room was exactly as he'd left it, except for four words scrawled into the dirt floor.

Gone to find God.

A weight settled in the pastor's bones.

XI.

It was quiet for a long time before the sightings began: a devil in the forest with eyes black as coal, a tail like a whip, horns sharp as a stake. Always lurking, watching, waiting for the moment to strike.

The pastor and his search party reconvened at the tavern empty-handed. The men sat with their drinks, strategizing.

"Wish we still had that bearded fellow from the church around," one man muttered. "I heard he was an excellent hunter."

The pastor knocked back his liquor in silence.

XII.

It was quiet as the pastor sat on the porch with his daughter. It had been quiet for a long time, but the pastor watched the trees with apprehension.

His daughter gazed out with skepticism. The rocking chair creaked as she leaned forward. “Dad, do you think there was ever really a devil out there?”

Something rustled in the trees; a shadow passed. The pastor sat up straight. A deer came into view, took a brief glance at the house, and then bounded back into the forest. The pastor slowly sank back in his chair, calming his racing heart. “I don’t know, precious.”

XIII.

“Hello, sir.”

The low voice chilled the pastor to his bones. He turned from the wood pile, his axe clutched tightly in his hands. He’d heard no approach, no crunching of leaves, no rustle of movement. But there it was.

It stood a head taller than him, its horns only adding to its height. Its tail flicked lazily as it stood between the trees. “Fear not,” it said in a deep, matured voice. “I’ve come bearing a message for you—from God.”

“How *dare* you,” the pastor hissed, hands tightening on his axe. “How *dare* you claim to be a messenger of God!”

The demon held up its hands placatingly. Its claws glinted in the dimming light. “I’ve spoken to God many times since I left you. He tells me that I was a test.” It leveled its black gaze at him. “A test that you failed.”

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Coldness seeped into the pastor's bones. His nails dug into the axe's wooden handle.

"Lies! You are an agent of the Devil, sent here to—"

"Sent here to test your commitment." Its voice remained quiet. "He does not doubt your commitment to Him, but to those around you? To your family?" Something dangerous flashed in its eyes.

"I am a man of God," said the pastor, burning with indignation. "I am faithful to my wife, good to my daughter; I have served my congregation well—"

"And me?" The demon's tail stopped flicking. It stood still, cocking its head. "And the man buried in your cellar?"

The axe swung in a wide arc. The demon's tail wrapped, viselike, around the pastor's wrist. He let out a shout as the blade dropped from his hands. He gazed up into the demon's soulless black eyes. "I am a good man," he snarled. "All my life, I have followed God's will—"

The demon's claws dug into his shoulder. Its head bowed toward him, its horns almost touching his forehead. "Whatever compelled you to lock me down there," it murmured, "it wasn't God."

The pastor's chest constricted, the deep black eyes staring straight into him. Then the tail uncoiled from his wrist. The demon turned its back.

"Goodbye, Father."

XIV.

The pastor took feeble breaths as he laid in bed, his wife holding one hand, his daughter the other. His wife looked somber, but his daughter was crying quietly. He squeezed her hand.

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“Don’t cry, precious. We’ll be reunited in Heaven someday.” If asked, the pastor would tell you that he knew with conviction he’d be there to greet her.

“I know, Daddy.” She wiped her tears and squeezed his hand back. She hadn’t called him that in years; it took him back to when she was little, with her gap-toothed smile and her curious questions. She’d grown into an incredible young woman. His chest ached to leave her.

But it was his time. He felt his heartbeat growing sluggish, each breath shallower than the last. Over the years, he’d served his congregation and his family well. He would tell you that he had no fear now, that God was good and He would deliver His loyal follower to the gates of Heaven. The pastor would tell you that his conscience was clean, that his mind didn’t wander to the black eyes that had bored into him all those years ago, the low voice informing him of his failures. He’d tell you it was heretical nonsense. He did what was right; he did as God willed.

As his eyes slipped shut and he exhaled his last breath, he wouldn’t tell you that his final thoughts were of his son.