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Three Furies: The Mythic and the Mundane

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THREE FURIES: THE MYTHIC AND THE MUNDANE

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05/07/2004

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THREE FURIES: THE MYTHIC AND THE MUNDANE

A Thesis
Presented to
The Faculty of the Department of English
Western Kentucky University
Bowling Green, Kentucky

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

By
Adam Howard Jolly
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Directed by: Dr. Nancy Roberts, Dr. David Lenoir, and Dr. Lloyd Davies

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Western Kentucky University

This thesis, consisting of three short stories, proposes to explore ubiquitous motifs by exhibition of symbolic, mythological conceptions and personalities relating mutually with the everyday and the exceptional in a plausible way. These stories are intended to include effectual inquiry and still be inventive and entertaining.

Source materials for this thesis range from Norse mythology to Homer to the Charlie Daniels Band.

FOREWORD

These stories are intended to examine universal themes through the presentation of legendary, iconic images and characters interacting with the mundane and the extraordinary in a believable way. I wanted these stories to contain both effective inquiry and entertainment value. More important to me was that they be imaginative and original. In his *Biographia Literaria*, Coleridge argues that imagination is paramount among the human faculties, and its development is the simultaneous imperative and intent of poetry. Coleridge views exercises in imagination as metaphorical journeys of perception through which the writer astutely observes self and world, then reveals these observations through a creative medium and is thereby changed, presumably for the better.

It is with this philosophy in mind that I wrote; these three stories attempt to hold to this ideal. I hope to create developed characters, worthwhile themes, and appropriate mood. I endeavor to communicate ideas clearly and with intelligent, effective use of language. I try to be true to what Coleridge suggests by making use of concepts outside the realm of the strictly possible. When presented with unfamiliar or bizarre images, a reader has no choice but to stretch his or her imagination as well.

Other writers who ask this indulgence of their readers influence me. I admire H.P. Lovecraft's mastery of tone and mood. I'm a fan of Harlan Ellison's deft commentary in the guises of spaceships and aliens. I respect the easy, rich characterization and deep insight found in the works of Ray Bradbury or Ursula K. LeGuin, the lush, magnificent settings of Robert E. Howard, the flowing, hypnotic action

of Edgar Rice Burroughs. I respect the excellent dystopias brought about by George Orwell, Margaret Atwood, Catherine Burdekin, Anthony Burgess, and Aldous Huxley. These three stories represent the beginning of what I hope will be my own contribution to this canon.

Through these stories I hope to enter a conversation of educators, scholars, and writers that includes millions of voices and has lasted centuries. I want to make my own contribution to that discourse, but even more I desire the opportunity to listen and to learn. My area of emphasis, and of lifelong personal interest, is creative writing. All art, be it a painting, a dance, a piece of music, or a work of literature, has a story at its heart. All themes come from stories told by someone, or by a group of someones down the ages. This particular segment of the conversation is the one in which I hope to participate. I want to voice my own thoughts in the discussion, thoughts sparked by whatever I heard last and sparking whoever hears them next, forever and ever amen.

“The Rest Home of the Gods” is about loss, especially spiritual loss. It is about the loss of autonomy that comes with aging. It is about the loss of dignity and humanity that comes with being institutionalized, a loss that here affects even those who were never human to begin with. It is intended to comment in a larger sense on the spiritual loss humanity suffers by losing touch with its own mythologies, by twisting and cannibalizing once-venerated stories into humbler forms. We consign our legends to a demeaning place in spite of their continued value, and Elysian Fields is a metaphor for that place.

This mythological “twisting” recurs in “Love Knows No Species.” The traditional Orpheus myth, one of the saddest and most pathos-packed in all mythology, is altered and reworked here. “Love Knows No Species” is intended to illustrate how far myths can bend and what can be lost or gained in the process of bending. The events unfold in a mostly parallel fashion in either version, but the devices of character and tone skew the overall impact of the tale in a new way.

The central character of “Revenge of the Marvelous MerMonkeys” won’t get along with anyone. His refusal to function socially in a socially demanding world leads to ruin at the hands of well-established mythological ruin-bringers. The central concern of the story is that it is important to make an attempt at getting along with those one has to live with, and outright refusal makes the world less livable for all concerned.

My hope for these stories is that they prove positive investments of their reader’s time as well as my own. If they paint a picture that would have otherwise remained unseen, their task is fulfilled. If they spark a thought they have accomplished their goal. If they fire an imagination, they represent time well spent.

The Rest Home of the Gods

The waters of primordial chaos broke on the barnacle-crusting shell of a tortoise bigger than the world. Kaleidoscopic foam sprayed up the star-high carapace, bits of color exploding across sloping armor like chipped slate. Drops of the wash splashed the thick stumpy toes of an elephant standing on the tortoise's back. A shiver passed through the creased, cloudy ziggurat of its leg, rippled up and across a plain of furrowed flesh to terminate at the mountainous ridges of the creature's spine. A tremendous dragon coiled there, black tongue flicking. A trio of serpents corkscrewed sinuous around the dragon's legs; they gnawed the roots of a vast tree, without bark or thorn, growing from the elephant's back. Smooth white branch after smooth white branch spread out and away to infinity, worlds dangling from them like ripe shining fruits over the churning tumult far below. Nestled secure in a fork from which three stalks thrust their delicate fingers to the void, high above the crashing, swirling sea of oblivion, was the Earth.

Past the Earth the stalk narrowed, tapered, disappeared. The wood grew gray and worm-gnawed as the shoot sharpened; fruits were few and far between. One withered pod clung to the extremity of the limb, only a slender twig between it and the yawning void. The abyss exhaled, shivering the sphere. The gust slid low along age-blemished skin, whispered close across spots and wrinkles that were the islands, rivers, and continents of a withered world.

The abyssal wind moaned along desolate plains, keened past blistering wastelands of bubbling mud, sobbed over icy tundra. It howled by broken hill and barren dale until reaching a spot of green on this otherwise colorless, lifeless world. The draught sighed

past shaggy, creeping hedges, over cobblestone pathways winding through landscaped gardens of tough, scrubby flowers. It passed through a collapsing, vine-clutched volleyball net drooping between two knotty wooden posts and diffused into a gently weeping breeze. Mournful bits of dandelion puffed in their wake; they settled listlessly on patches of brown grass skulking through the scattered sand court.

Other wisps rode the last insubstantial gasp of wind until even that was gone, drifting to rest near the legs of a tall metal sign beside a winding blacktop driveway. The sign read, in pink and pastel green, “Elysian Fields: Welcome Deities, Enlightened Ones, and Anthropomorphic Personifications.” It was spattered in white goo and blue seeds; birds made themselves welcome too.

A U-shaped building sprawled at the center of the grounds, green-shingled, low, dark; though institutional, it was neither hospital nor prison. Those are meant to be places of transition; in this structure nothing changed. The people of Earth had stored their relics here for a long time. Small windows ringed the ruddy brick exterior. The panes reflected blank and bright. Blind eyes, they glared empty through cataracts of sunlight at flitting birds and shady trees and cherub-supported fountains stained green with slow trickles of water and slower trickles of time. Below them, a gaunt form wove down the cobbled footpath, threadbare blue bathrobe gathering bits of greenery from the hedge.

Dew-slick brown slippers stepped, staggered, swished beneath the robe, off the path and across the shuffleboard court. Their meandering only marginally disturbed a contest between a retired Celestial Bureaucrat and a fox spirit. Fleshy but not stout, the

competitors played leaning on metal walkers. Y-shaped sticks clattered against stainless steel legs pressing split, pale yellow tennis balls into once-burnished concrete. The brown slippers slapped a few final paces against the court and stopped. A few moments later, they stepped off the court and around the hedge.

Six feet or so above the slippers a pair of eyes narrowed, focusing upon an escape route from the invisible hunters galloping close behind. A skinny hand slipped slyly into the pocket of a fuzzy blue bathrobe. A gnarled knee pushed olive pajama pants into the earth behind the hedge, drenching the thin fabric; the color deepened in the moist grass. Hidden from view, an erstwhile god brought his hand triumphantly from his bathrobe pocket. Shaky fingers clutched a silver flask. Bacchus unscrewed the cap. It squeaked.

“Oh yeah, come to Poppa...” He drank deeply, his wiry throat rising and falling three times, working the liquid down in scorching streams. He winced, an afterthought, and re-capped the flask. The metallic silver tang left in his mouth offset the thin, fiery aftertaste of the stuff. Bacchus would have preferred wine. He would have preferred to recline on a pile of silks and gulp hearty, full-bodied rivulets squeezed from stitched goatskin bags by laughing, fur-clad Maenads. Falling happily, drunkenly asleep to the sounds of shepherd’s pipes and worshipful chanting while adoring supplicants cast ambrosia and honey into sacrificial flames for the glory of Bacchus would have been his preference. Sneaking furtive sips of grainy, bitter moonshine from a dented metal flask while cowering behind a hedge was his grim reality.

Domovoi sold the alcohol in Elysian Fields. They distilled something or other in a location that, in spite of frequent and enthusiastic searches by the Management,

remained secret. They sold the fruits of their labors, an opaque, sediment-crusting booze without so much a taste as a burning sensation, to the other residents on the facility's small but energetic black market. Bacchus didn't like having to talk to the little gray-furred creatures for long. They were shifty, easily irritated, and smelled of topical cream. Technically the Russian household spirits were not even deities. They'd been appreciated at best, never properly worshipped. Nonetheless, they lurked around the grotto behind the green-scummed Duck Pond as if they owned the place, lounging on weathered concrete benches and smoking cheap cigarettes.

The isolated grotto provided an ideal spot for the Domovoi to run their illicit speakeasy. None of the other residents were ever near the Duck Pond, with the nearly meaningless exception of Prometheus. That muttering, sweat-suited Titan spent his days leaning from a motorized scooter on the bank, feeding a few mangy, ill-tempered ducks. From time to time he took a hissing hit of oxygen from a silver and green tank at his feet.

Mouths hidden behind stringy, greasy beards, the Domovoi spat hard Russian syllables at each other when Bacchus approached their grotto. Then they laughed. Bacchus paid for his booze and scurried away like a rat, exotic mockery ringing down the path behind him. He clutched a brown paper bag inside his bathrobe like a snatched nugget of cheese. In one way, what the Domovoi sold was better than wine: it concentrated more alcohol into less fluid. It was a lot easier to sneak around with. That was important.

A crisp voice snapped across the hedge. "Mr. Bacchus, what are you doing?" A pale, severe face appeared behind the leaves above Bacchus. It peered down stern at the

kneeling bygone god, eyes dark and intent, hair razor-parted and greased down with some oily substance. A downy blonde moustache adorned the upper lip, wispy fluttering hairs making his face paradoxically boyish. A security pass clipped to the uniform's collar swung below his narrow neck like a pendulum. "Brad" was the largest word printed on it. "Activities Director" was slightly smaller. Brad curled his lips and raised his eyebrows.

"Shit," Bacchus mumbled, trying to find a surreptitious way to get his flask back into his pocket. Plans flashed through his mind, schemes to divert attention, spectacular displays of sleight-of-hand to foil reason and confound the senses. His resolve withered in Brad's soul-sapping activities director gaze. "Someone must have dropped this." He weakly held out the flask. "I was just picking it up before somebody...tripped on it." Bacchus's lie tasted bad. He would have liked to spit it out. Even the moonshine was better.

"That's your story?" The activities director took the flask, sniffed it. "Mr. Bacchus." Brad disapproved; his lips curled differently and his eyebrows came down. The wispy moustache fluttered, enigmatic, betraying no emotion. "What did the doctor tell you?" Brad tilted his head towards Bacchus and nodded, head bobbing slightly. The security card jiggled on his collar as he wobbled his narrow neck. It was distracting. "About drinking? On top of your medication?" Brad's eyebrows lifted with each question, sinking alarming furrows into his forehead.

Bacchus stood, stuffed his hands into his bathrobe pockets so that Brad wouldn't see them trembling. He certainly wasn't afraid of him. He wanted another drink to kill

the dry, sour taste in his mouth. Bacchus stared down at his faux-leather houseshoes; they were waterlogged from the dewy grass. He had mud on his knee. Green stains had developed on his socks and the cuffs of his pajama pants. Bacchus didn't care. Brad held the flask, brow ridged, watching and waiting. Bacchus kept his eyes on his grass-stained socks. He muttered, "not to." This admission tasted worse than the lie had.

One of Brad's forehead ridges smoothed. "That's right, Mr. Bacchus." Brad tapped the flask with his fingernail. "This stuff is just plain bad for you. Given your age and the condition of your liver, serious health issues could result from irresponsible binge drinking." Brad paused, grimy nail pressed to the engraved letter "B," waiting for Bacchus to offer eager consensus. Bacchus wasn't paying much attention. His tongue rasped inside his dusty mouth. His stomach churned. He wanted to lie down. His eyeballs felt furry and blinking didn't help.

Brad kept talking, which didn't help either. "...I understand that as a former deity you can make your own decisions, but I have a responsibility as an employee of Elysian Fields to see to it that you don't hurt yourself." His finger tapped the flask one final time with extra emphasis. Sad and stern, Brad unzipped his fanny-pack and dropped the flask inside. He zipped the bright pink plastic zipper back around immediately, sealing the vodka safely away from Bacchus's liver behind an Elysian Fields logo. Brad continued explaining himself as he zipped. "We want to make sure that your years here are healthy and happy ones, don't we, Mr. Bacchus?" Brad's lips twisted crisply, waiting again for an answer. The moustache fluttered, impatient.

Bacchus's temper cracked like a marble column under the weight of centuries. Whatever he'd become since arriving at Elysian Fields, he'd been a god. This jerk could at least get his name right. "Listen, buddy. It's Bacchus. Just Bacchus. No mister. No surname. Like practically everybody else here, I just use the one. I know you know that, because I've told you before. Lots of times! Can you get it through your thick head?" Emotion shivered his words; they quavered weak and plaintive. He glared at Brad, wiry neck straining, spotted fists slowly unclenching and regaining their tremble as his rage dissipated. He stuffed them deep into his bathrobe pockets, stretching the terrycloth fabric over the bony knobs of his knuckles. Bacchus spoke again, his tone flat and without force. "I'm the God of Wine."

Pity crept over the crisp edges of Brad's smile, making it a little soggy. "Of course you are. But cirrhosis is no picnic, Mr. Bacchus." He brightened, chirping, "Unlike Mr. Prometheus, you only get one liver! Now, come with me. It's almost time for arts and crafts!" Brad fingers met gently around Bacchus's upper arm. The ex-god bristled at first, but his fury was spent. He shuffled along, allowing himself to be led, meek, head bowed, bathrobe flapping in the warm breeze. His houseshoes squelched wet footprints into the cobblestones as he walked.

"If you want, Mr. Bacchus," the activities director said, "maybe you can be God of Macramé for today. Does that sound good?" Teeth gleamed under the fluttering moustache, but Bacchus didn't see them. He walked too far behind and his head was down.

The low-ceilinged, smoke-strangled common room was a study in despair. Badly beaten furniture crouched along the walls, occupied for the most part by nodding, scowling immortals. Crayon drawings by forgotten Art Gods curled yellow from thumbtack-laden paneling. A bookshelf slumped against the wall just inside the door; it held dusty, flattened, split boxes full of board game components. Helios and Thor stared out of a fingerprint-spotted window on the east wall. Helios, halo of golden light askew, mentioned that it looked like rain. Thor was noncommittal; he only chewed his lip. The collective tired frustration of a roomful of bored, depressed former gods hung a fog of misery in the still air. It mingled with thick cigarette smoke until they were the same vapor.

Venus slumped in a battered recliner to the left of the window, muttering into a cup of Passion Fruit Pink Jell-O. A few glistening gobs of the stuff jiggled halfheartedly on the pages of her unread *Cosmopolitan*. Above her head a large black-framed sign filled with tiny print and bland, gray clip art promised knowledge of “Your Rights as a Resident of a Long-Term Care Facility.” Ra, suffering from psoriatic arthritis, carefully avoided a potentially skin-drying ray of greasy sunlight as he made his way to a pair of vending machines. A gilt-framed velvet painting of a blow-dried-looking Jesus kept the wall between the machines interesting.

Bacchus slipped through smoke and misery; they swirled in his wake. Official policy was that residents could make their own informed decisions regarding cigarettes, but alcohol was strictly prohibited as a health hazard. Bacchus no longer appreciated this irony. He passed the low, chipped counter of the nurses’ station, where Brad released his

arm. The activities director opened the half-door between the station and the common room and went inside. He smiled and nodded, dirty-nailed hand resting on hot pink fanny pack, until Bacchus shuffled out of sight down the nearest hallway.

Brown-painted metal doors with tiny windows lined the cracked concrete hall. One, "Community Bathroom" stenciled on it in sloppy pale blue, opened as Bacchus passed by. Diana the Former Huntress gave him a baleful look as she exited. She adjusted her shawl, exhaled forcefully, and trudged back towards the common room. Bacchus kept going. Thin black wires crisscrossed the window of each door in diagonal grids. Nine wheelchairs spaced out between the doors held gray, exhausted, birdlike things. They twitched under blankets and ground their toothless jaws in fragile jerks. The odors of sour sweat and old urine clung to them. They inspired little but dread and perhaps pity. The rest of the wheelchairs crouched empty. Silent, useless warnings not to get too old waited patiently on crumbling rubber tires.

Room 317 was his; two screws held black plastic numerals one and three on the wall above the door. A number seven's pale outline hung beside them, unbleached by the long fluorescent tubes on the ceiling. The numeral and screw had long ago fallen to the floor and been swept into some lonely corner. His door was unlocked.

The room was small, stale, and musty. Two gray beds sagged in lightly corroded metal frames, one piled high with antique issues of National Geographic and Reader's Digest. The other bunk drooped under a faded poster of clean, smiling farmers laboring in a hillside vineyard. They worked in an explosion of vines; heavy clusters of grapes swelled beneath thick, twisting bunches of leaves. The foliage crawled across the width

of the picture and up the sides. Once-white letters, a quarter the height of the poster, spelled out “Italy.” Cottony sheep grazed on rolling pastureland in the background; atop a far rise ruins deteriorated endlessly into the soft meadow.

Outside and below the picture, a translucent orange plastic forest of pill bottles rose from wadded Kleenex foothills on the flimsy pressboard nightstand beside Bacchus’s bed, white caps for snow-crowned branches. The nightstand’s sharp corner dropped like a tan, speckled cliff to the ragged glacier of the tissue-heaped trashcan. Blue-labeled water bottles from the vending machine in the common room, empty except for a few clinging transparent drops inside, stuck out like crags of ice.

The dorm had been much more orderly when Apollo shared it. The former God of Light and Beauty kept a neat room. He was more particular about that sort of thing than Bacchus, and they had trouble coexisting. After a reasonable period of trying to get along, the two of them petitioned the Residency Council for a room switch. The request was granted. Bacchus had no hard feelings, but suspected Apollo of spreading rumors about him. He’d had no roommate since, and there had to be some explanation. The Residency Council representative assured Bacchus that everything was fine.

Bacchus pulled the door closed. Careful and slow, he lowered himself flat to the cold floor tiles and reached under the bed. The toes of his houseshoes pointed with effort from the stretch. Semi-solid drips of yard-mud shook from them. He squinted and groped into the darkness.

His grimace became a grin of triumph. Bacchus drew his arm from under the bed and slung it over the mattress, pulling himself up. His sinewy fingers pushed another of

the vending machine water bottles into the hard, thin pad as he pulled. Clear liquid sloshed inside; the bottle was nearly full. Bacchus rose more quickly than he had descended and stood beside his bed. Hand on the small of his back, he twisted. The old god's spine crackled like an untended altar flame in the stillness of the sad little room. He did not notice his sigh as he uncapped the bottle and sipped.

Warmth splashed slow and thick into his stomach and spread. He twisted the cap onto the bottle and slipped it into his pocket before stepping back out into the hall. The drink had taken hold; he could feel it working out from his center and through his veins. There was almost a bounce in his shuffle as he passed the Muses in their chairs. He all but floated by a pay phone mounted on the wall beside the Community Bathroom door. A wizened black woman in a lumpy lavender pantsuit and matching scarf hunched there, eyeing a handwritten sign above the phone through enormous plastic wraparound sunglasses. Four arms stuck out of her dressing gown, neat holes ripped for the pair extending from her ribcage. The sign read, in dark and adamant Magic Marker: "Residents need to be getting calls on this phone, not on our business phone. Use this phone for personel calls. Thanks, Staff."

The crone accosted Bacchus on his way past. When she spoke, her dentures slipped up and down on her gums like pistons. She fiddled with the cloth belt of her gown, pushed her glasses back on her nose, and yanked on Bacchus's sleeve all at the same time. Three gray whiskers jutted like angry warnings from her chin. Bacchus knew her; Kali always wanted something and wasn't embarrassed to ask around until she got it.

Over the course of eternity she'd hit him up for thousands of things. "Gimme a cigarette," she rasped.

"Sorry, I'm tapped." Moving on, he continued, "You better be careful. Those things will rot your teeth out."

Kali extended two of her skinny middle fingers with an ill-fitting scowl. She tottered away mumbling. "Damn Olympians never have any smokes..."

Bacchus grinned all the way into the common room, moonshine nestling comfortably in his stomach like a warm, fuzzy, interior pet. His friends were sitting around a card table across the room. The cinderblock wall behind them wore failing pastel blue paint, an ostensibly soothing, inspirational word stenciled on each brick. "Peace, Love, Friendship," said the cinderblocks. They reminded Bacchus of Valentine's candy hearts, each bearing a meaningless little affirmation of nothing at all.

In the common room the old gods were cliquish. Olympians played cards with other Olympians, Asgardians assisted other Asgardians with crossword puzzles, and prehistoric Hunt Spirits preferred to swap Rice Crispy Treats from the cafeteria with other prehistoric Hunt Spirits. There were exceptions, but most of the residents were afraid to break up their respective pantheons. That bit of cohesion was one of a precious few things connecting them to their former divinity, and they segregated themselves with efficiency.

"About time you got here. We went ahead and started without you." Athena looked irritated behind her bifocals. Thin white ringlets hung down from her helm. She'd put on a lot of weight since arriving at Elysian Fields. Bacchus remembered the

way she looked when she raised the olive grove from the rocky foundations of what would one day be Athens. She'd been strong and straight and clear-eyed, salty wind from the Aegean whipping her robes and hair out like sails from the cliffs as her city was born around her. The current version spoke again, and broke his reverie. "We wait too long to get started and I'll miss my afternoon nap, and then I won't be able to sleep all night."

"Couldn't be helped," said Bacchus. "Orderly took my booze again. I had to stop by my room and refuel." To emphasize his point, he took a swig from his water bottle. "So, c'mon, deal me in."

Across the table, Zeus rocked his folding chair back on two legs. They groaned under his weight. White, level eyebrows dug together, carving harsher lines into his imperious weathered-statue face. Eyes the color of thunderclouds glared down a long, straight nose at Bacchus. His beard spread in ivory rivulets over a yellowed Elysian Fields Safety Jamboree '93 T-shirt. Bacchus edged around the table, discreetly keeping his distance. The thundercloud eyes widened. The former King of Olympus lost his balance. He barely caught himself, arms flailing, and slammed his weight forward in the chair. All four legs chunked noisily into the floor tiles. Giggling, the Lord of Sky and Lightning rocked his chair back again, repeating the process. He seemed to have forgotten all about Bacchus.

"You drink too much," said Old Greasychops, an Appalachian Hill Demon. He sat in a folding aluminum chair at Athena's elbow, dirty gray-white fur ruffling as he flexed his short, limber neck. They called him Reese. Reese's black nose twitched

between his drooping whiskers as he chuffed reprimands at Bacchus. Bacchus had heard it all before, a million times. Reese's demonic purpose was to torment perpetrators of a mostly-defunct sin; the transgression required hallowed ground, an extinct species of terrier, a waxing crescent moon, and a Methodist virgin. It hadn't been committed in significant numbers in generations. Bereft of purpose, Reese played cards and complained down the eons. An excuse made his lamentations all the more strident.

"I already got the health and safety lecture from Brad. Save it." Bacchus slid into the seat across from Athena and beside Reese, his back to the wall. His shining head obscured most of the word "community" on the brick behind him. The bottle rested underneath the card table against his thigh, safe and secure beneath a fold of bathrobe. His fingers toyed with the corrugations on its twist-off cap. He was ready for another drink.

"I'm not telling you for your health. It's annoying. You discard out of order and then everybody has to wait while you catch up," Reese scolded, shaking the box open. A neat winding staircase of playing cards slid out. He swept it into his free paw and split the deck into halves, then shuffled them together. "You're slipping. Step One is admitting you have a problem." Three old Gods and an older demon began a game of cards.

"Rummy again? We always play rummy." Bacchus scowled as lank, nimble, black-nailed paws spun the cards facedown across the table. "I hate rummy. Can't we play poker? Spades? Even bridge would be better than the daily Rummy-thon." The

edges of the cards were soft, with white creases across their blue and red crosshatched backs.

Athena cut Reese's response short. "I hate rummy, too. As does Reese." The demon's mangy snout bobbed up and down in affirmation as he put the remainder of the deck in the middle of the table in two stacks, one facedown, and one faceup. Athena went on, "...but rummy's about as complicated as we can get. Oos-Zay isn't what he used to be." Zeus perched on two wobbling chair legs. He looked delighted.

"None of us are. I ain't, but I can still keep up with five-card draw." Reese's snout bunched as he reviewed his hand. "It's basically the same thing."

"For a demon, you're all heart. So, what are we going to talk about today?" Athena fanned her cards, rearranging them according to suit. No one spoke. Bacchus sighed at jacks and fours. Reese's snout moved with irritated delicacy over his hand. Zeus stopped rocking his chair and gaped in the direction of the television, head bobbing a little. He hummed quietly, lips working, eyes locked on the TV. Athena kept trying. "We could talk about the weather..."

"What about it?" He'd resigned himself to the jacks and fours, but there was also a six of hearts to consider. Bacchus sighed at it.

"Umm...I dunno. It's out there, I guess," replied Athena. Zeus made a muffled chirping, grunting noise in the back of his throat. His gape continued unabated. He clutched absently at his pajama bottoms, his cards lying facedown on the table where Reese dealt them. His eyes fixed on the television; an infomercial featuring a young

blonde girl in a bikini doing household chores (in half the time and with no fuss) seemed to have captured his imagination.

“We could talk about those damn mortals,” said Reese, laying down three queens and drawing from the stack of cards in front of him. He shook his card at the television. “They seem to be having a fine ol’ time. Cleaning the oven and going swimming. Never a thought for...”

“...and he’s off to an early lead with a piss and moan combo, ladies and gentlemen...” interrupted Bacchus.

“That’s all you ever want to talk about,” said Athena. “Those damn mortals this, those damn mortals that, those damn mortals are ruining the planet, those damn mortals are no damn good, blah blah blah blah blah. Give it a rest. It doesn’t change a thing.”

Reese looked around the room, surveying the gray, wrinkled fragments of legend. “Well, you can see how I’d be a little bitter. After all, they put us here.”

Bacchus rested his face in his hands. “How many times must we have this conversation?” he mourned. “You’re not a little bitter. You’re obsessed. Get a hobby.” Bacchus brought his bottle out, glanced towards the nurses’ counter, and took a quick slug. Smacking his lips, he replaced the liquor beneath his bathrobe.

Reese settled in his chair, preparing to defend his customary position on mortals. “Well, if that group of ingrates hadn’t just turned their backs on us the first time some new God came along, we never would have ended up in this...place.”

“Maybe if we’d been better Gods, they wouldn’t have abandoned us.” Athena discarded a three of clubs.

“Has anybody seen my thunderbolts?” Zeus became suddenly lucid. “I just had them a little while ago, but I can’t remember where I put them.”

Zeus, in fact, hadn’t had them since he had gone on a minor thunderbolt-hurling rampage in the cafeteria. He saved a month and a half’s medication and took it all at once. The meds helped regulate his behavior, level him out, when taken in the recommended dosages. When taken by the handful, they enhanced a preexisting tendency towards fits of destructive euphoria. It took the staff more than three days to clean the pureed vegetables from the ceiling. Sinister violet stains still lurked on the ice machine. The administration confiscated the thunderbolts and locked them in a filing cabinet behind the unassailable barrier of the nurses’ counter.

“Well, uh, I’m sure they’ll turn up, big guy,” Bacchus reassured him. Zeus, dejected, stared at his cards. One of the table legs was missing its plastic floor-protecting tip, and the whole thing rocked every time Zeus leaned against it.

“So, anyway, about those damn mortals...” said Reese.

“Take a breather. Look, I’m gonna play this on your sixes. Pay attention. Step One is admitting you have a problem,” said Bacchus.

“Well, they’re just such...such jerks! They put us in this miserable hole, they never call, they never write...”

“Somebody’s bitter because nobody commits his sin any more,” Athena observed, eyes on her cards, smirking.

“Hey, they commit it! They do! It’s only mostly defunct!” Reese did not sound altogether convinced.

“Suuuure they do. Two sections and a coupon insert in yesterday’s paper were devoted to the dangerous spread of the Reese cult. Methodist virgins and extinct terriers are on the run. The picture was really quite funny,” responded Athena.

“Oh, shut up,” said Reese.

“Terriers.” Athena snorted. “What kind of people need a demon for that?”

“I come from a rich tradition of folklore about which you know obviously nothing. You’re putting your ignorance on display. Goddess of Wisdom, indeed,” retorted Reese.

“Goddess of Wisdom beats Punisher of Ridiculous Methodist Terrier Sinners in any divine hierarchy I can think of. At least I don’t sit around bitter all day.”

“Will you two knock it off and just play cards?” asked Bacchus. Beside him, Zeus began to cry softly. His chin burrowed into his spreading beard. He rocked forward and picked up his cards, ponderous shoulders shuddering with quiet sobs. Bacchus lowered his voice. “You’re upsetting Oos-Zay.”

They continued the game, drawing, discarding, and listening to the hum of the air-conditioner and the shuffle of houseshoes across threadbare carpet. On the television, the infomercial ended. It was replaced by a situation comedy set in a funeral home. A misunderstanding about casket capacity between a sassy single mom and a bereaved but amiable widower brought the live studio audience to a state of frenzied comedic rapture. Bacchus watched, hypnotized. He drank from his bottle, this time without sneaking a glance towards the nurses, and left it uncapped against his leg. His sips were more frequent now.

The characters on the show played out their roles. It was a pretty good program, Bacchus thought. They squeezed every drip of humor from death and all its repercussions on the living. Death defined mortals, and ended them. They feared it, studied it, and called upon powers greater than themselves to be spared it.

And they laughed at it. They crafted living jokes out of their obvious dread and discomfort. They bantered at the thought of the Grand Finale. Bacchus wondered if the gods around him would do the same, faced with such an eventuality. They didn't seem to find much about immortality very funny. Or perhaps they weren't immortal at all. The gods of the dead were all there, too. They met once a month to play dominos on a picnic table by the pay phone. That had to mean something. Perhaps Elysian Fields was a sort of afterlife, a hell for the obsolete rather than the malevolent or merely unobservant. It certainly wasn't any sort of heaven.

“Snap out of it, Bacchus. Sober up. Trying to play rummy, here.” Reese tapped his cards on the tabletop. His soulless black eyes shone annoyed and impatient. “We still got a lot of game left.” He examined his cards as though staring at them might change their suits and numbers. A thought struck him visibly. “And it's not like they even replaced us with anything! Have you seen them lately? I mean, honestly, what kind of Gods do they really have?”

“We back on that again?” Bacchus sipped once more from his bottle, no longer noticing the stinging taste. It was more than halfway empty.

“What makes you think we ever left? This guy's tenacious. Like a terrier or something.”

“Stick a terrier up your ass.” Reese’s voice acquired a sharp, yipping quality when he was angry. Athena grinned at his retaliatory yelp. The demon’s black lips wrinkled to bare small, sharp fangs. He tired of being laughed at. Athena laughed anyway.

Louder laughter bubbled from behind the nurses’ counter. Brad the Activities Director performed for of a trio of snickering women in white medical scrubs. They all held steaming styrofoam cups full of coffee. Brad was really bringing the house down. A pretty redheaded nurse, just coming back from lunch, laughed along with the others. She put her keys on the counter and hung up her jacket. As she turned, Bacchus could see his flask in Brad’s grimy-nailed hand. Whatever the joke was, it was on Bacchus.

They caught him looking. Brad’s mouth turned into a guilty black circle below his moustache. He yanked out a squeaking drawer on the filing cabinet, dropped the flask inside, and jerked it shut. It locked with a dull click that Bacchus could hear across the room. The nurses composed themselves. None of them looked even in the general vicinity of Bacchus’s table until Brad stepped through the half-door and in front of the counter. He adopted a wide stance, arms neatly folded behind his back, a gentle condescending smile beaming out to the room. He made a big deal of just standing there.

After posing for a few more moments, Brad clapped his hands above his head and said, “Attention! Attention, everyone! It’s time for Arts and Crafts!” He waited, as if for applause. There was none. “We’re going to have some big fun today! We’re going to go all the way out to the yard, so get ready to travel!” His eyes were wide, shining, transparent pools of false enthusiasm, and his lips stretched up in a painful-looking rictus.

“We’re going to find pretty leaves to press between the pages of our Memory Journals! Won’t that be fun?” He paused, then clapped again. No one moved. Across the room, in the fog of smoke, someone moaned. The nurses came out from behind the counter.

Some had to be prodded and some had to be wheeled, but eventually everyone in the common room went outside. Athena and Reese traveled in opposite directions to avoid bloodshed. Bacchus soon lost sight of them. In the press, no one noticed Zeus tottering to the nurses’ counter. Only Bacchus saw him cover the pretty redheaded nurse’s unattended key ring with one big hand. Bacchus, half-pretending, staggered unsteadily past a pair of unoccupied nurses as Zeus struggled with the knob on the closed half-door. They helped him catch his balance, each taking an arm to assist him outside. Zeus ultimately failed to work the knob and climbed over the waist-high obstacle. He fell behind the nurses’ counter with a thump. No one heard over the groaning forced march to the yard.

They gathered on the grass, muttering. The nurses helped Bacchus to a concrete bench and moved on to the next invalid. As they left, he put his bottle to his lips, turned it up, and tapped the bottom, trying to shake out the last few drops. With a deep sigh of regret and a profound sense of loss, he dropped the empty container into a trashcan beside the bench. The yellow paint of stenciled letters disagreed with the brown can: “Keep Elysian Fields Beautiful...it’s Your Eternity!”

Waving his arms, Brad stepped again to the front. He positioned himself carefully before a dilapidated equipment shed hunkering near the east wing of the

building and cleared his throat at the assembled throng. They weren't talking much, anyway, and decided to listen. "Good, good. Isn't this a beautiful day? Isn't it nice to be out here instead of cooped up inside? Now, I want us all to use the Buddy System while we're looking for leaves. Safety first! Line up in two rows and I'll assign you a partner." The nurses began the extended and unpleasant process of herding feebly resisting residents into coherent lines.

A flash so bright it could almost be heard pulsed out from the building behind them. It baked the backs of necks, laid across the crowd like a tangible thing. Those who turned too quickly could see only a hulking outline in the open double doorway leading from the common room to the yard, a dark, dense center to the brilliance. Eyes adjusted; the silhouette came into clearer focus inside its aurora. Zeus stood at the eye of the lightstorm, smile broad and drooly as divine electricity snapped around loose, powerful, upraised fists. The Sky God had regained his thunderbolts.

A Domovoi in a surgical mask and a heavy rubber apron peeked out of the equipment shed's doorway through thick goggles, alerted by the commotion. One furry paw clutched the long handle of a metal ladle. At the sight of Zeus, fists on high and crackling with godly electricity, the dwarfish spirit burst out of the shed, knocking Brad aside. It dove into nearby underbrush and burrowed, shrieking in Russian and clearly in the negative. The ladle spun to a clattering stop on the stones where it fell, slopping out puddles of a clear, watery solution. Brad dusted himself off and sat up in the open shed doorway. He slowly lifted his head. Zeus was looking at him.

Understanding dawned on Bacchus's face. He moved to Zeus, aspiring to stay the hand of heavenly, drug-addled retribution. He did not know how he could intervene in the face of such unchecked annihilative bliss, but he had to try something. Bacchus clutched the sleeve of Zeus's T-shirt, his drunken grip weak and ineffectual. "Wait," Bacchus said. It was too late. Zeus let fly his muddled vengeance.

The thunderbolt blasted the equipment shed into a rolling orange billow. It blazed and roared, high and bright and immediate, licks of flame crisping leaves from nearby treetops. Tiny chunks of scorched wood peppered those nearest the core of the eruption. The victims shambled backwards, hands upraised and patting at smoldering bits in their hair and on their clothes. Prometheus, scooter overturned by the fury of Jove, struggled to pull himself upright. He didn't struggle long. The green plastic casing on his silver oxygen tank rippled in the heat, and there was another detonation. Flaming ducks rocketed quacking away in all directions.

Soon the trees caught, and the spread steadied. The inferno flowed along branches and dribbled fiery drops onto the roof of the main building. It charred slowly but surely, green shingles coiling and blackening as the flames crept down the walls. Thick clouds of black smoke poured from the windows. The surviving residents, after hobbling, limping, and crawling to comfortable distances, watched it all burn. They built a pajamaed, stony-faced firewall of elderly indifference. This place had been no one's home.

Bacchus stood just outside the smoldering double doorway, fingers twisted loosely in Zeus's cotton T-shirt sleeve, and watched the flames as well. Zeus loomed

beside him, reeking of ozone. He hadn't taken a step since he'd hurled the thunderbolt, only grinned and rocked back and forth in time with the flickering flames. "I'm the King of Olympus. I haven't taken my meds in weeks." His face reflected orange and black. "Here you go," he said, extending a lightning-blackened hand. Zeus held Bacchus's flask. The God of Wine took it and was grateful.

Zeus clapped his charred palms at the holocaust with unbridled, slobbering joy. His finger slipped briefly into his nose. He scratched his ass through his pajama bottoms. Singing and skipping, Zeus thundered his fury down again, over and over, until that whole world was clamoring clouds and searing white slashing from the low, angry sky. Fat, well-fed flames curled high into the purple air. Bacchus drank the last of the Domovoi moonshine.

Their storehouse burned, and the people of the Earth did not even notice. They made war and love and money. They cast down old idols and raised up new ones. They forgot and remembered and forgot again, with interest. The sun rose and set. The rains still came. Volcanoes erupted according to seismological predictions. Plagues were poisoned with antibiotics, and the rivers only ran red when rich topsoil washed down from the mountains. Humanity churned on forever across the flesh of a fruit of the Tree of All Worlds, where three stalks thrust their delicate fingers to the void.

Past the Earth the stalk narrowed, tapered, disappeared. The wood grew gray and worm-gnawed as the shoot sharpened; fruits were few and far between. One withered pod clung to the extremity of the limb, only a slender twig between it and the yawning void. When it fell smoking into the riot of waves below, much was lost.

Love Knows No Species

Once upon a time (since that's how stories like this have to start, by law) in a magical pixieland called Kentucky, at the end of Peanut Brittle Boulevard in a house made all of birthday wishes and Christmas Eve dreams, there lived a young musician named Orville. Orville established his virtuosity with accordion, kazoo, and zither early in life. During his idyllic youth Orville excelled at bagpipes and bassoon, as well as the comb with a piece of Kleenex folded over it. The gods granted Orville the gift of mastery over all nerd instruments. However, Orville's charm and verve were so great that nerd and non-nerd alike welcomed his performances. Small forest creatures scampered out of the tall grass to nuzzle at his feet when he played. All this happened in olden times, over twenty years ago, when people were wicked. But when Orville picked up an unconventional or underappreciated noisemaking device, every heart filled with joy and leapt with gladness, and no man could harm another.

Orville did not perform alone. His possum, Camille, assisted him in recitals. Orville dressed Camille in pirate or ballerina or clown costumes. Camille perched on things and bobbed her snout along to the music. Audience after audience cheered the antics of Camille and the musicianship of Orville, and everyone was very happy. They were soon household names throughout a tri-county area, at least.

Orville and Camille's happiness didn't end on the stage, either. The two of them spent many sunny afternoons frolicking in the tall grasses at the park by the interstate, frisking about in a carefree manner. They chased each other around picnic tables, then collapsed in a laughing heap when exhaustion overtook them. Camille fanned Orville

with palm fronds, and Orville fed Camille grapes while she lounged in the shade. Sometimes Orville tossed around the ol' Frisbee, which Camille completely ignored since she was a possum and not a golden retriever.

Camille was loved by many, too much by some. Aramis, a juggler and sometime unicyclist, envied the talented possum. He operated a competitive marsupial novelty troupe and wanted her for his own. Most of their routine was mime, not Camille's forte at all, but Aramis insisted he could make her a star. He often insisted at the top of his lungs from Orville's yard in the middle of the night. He swayed, bellowed, and urinated in drunken violation of the restraining order.

In spite of Aramis and a handful of less determined stalkers, Camille and Orville enjoyed their local celebrity. They appeared on commercials for local businesses and spoke about safety at area elementary schools. The community loved the pair so much that they decided to have a parade. The County Fair Board planned a grand celebration. They painted cardboard floats, they inflated balloons, and they bought bags of hurling candy. The homecoming queen would smile and wave from a slow-moving convertible. Camille and Orville prepared to lead the parade as Grand Marshals. Then, like a snake whipping out of long grass to plunge poison and death into some collective, unprotected heel, tragedy struck.

The morning of the festivity bustled with streamers and cotton candy. Pitch-Til-U-Win booths sprouted along the gravel fairgrounds overnight. Fairgoers milled among steaming mesh-fronted hamburger stands and belching, slurping pie-eating contests. Parents cautioned their teenagers from inside a corral of folding picnic tables. Grease-

spotted white paper covered the boundary; portable plastic coolers sat underneath. “Beer Garden 21 to Enter,” said a hanging cardboard sign in blue ballpoint scribbles.

Aramis lurched into the sign with a crash and sprawled across its table for a moment, knees bent, blinking. He pushed off with a grunt and whirled away to the promenade proper, somehow not falling down again. His red-rimmed eyes slipped from side to side. He licked his gummy lips. Impaired but determined, the juggler clumped one shoe after another into dusty rocks. He slid his hand along the peeling white rear of the wooden bandstand. They were getting ready to start the parade. Shouted commands wafted over the wall. “Move to the left...no, put your feet on the tape. Okay, now I can’t see Santa or the Easter Bunny at all. Just a minute, I’ll come down there.”

Fortune shone on Aramis in the shadows. A tall concrete post marked the edge of the stage, set to prevent trucks from backing up too far when unloading equipment. A thin, furless pink tail clutched the base. With no other possums in attendance, the tail could belong only to Camille. A crowd milled around the post, but the man in the shadows ignored them. Aramis, all self-control converted to urine, pounced. He grabbed Camille’s hindquarters in one grubby hand and lit out for the parking lot. Camille was much too reserved and dignified to do something as feral as biting, though she thrashed about and squirmed inconveniently.

Aramis almost made it to the road before his inevitable drunken stumble. Camille took full advantage and escaped, scrabbling down the grassy bank as he sprawled headlong. She rolled into the roadside ditch and bounced. Her plump gray body plopped onto the shoulder. She sat up on the painted white line and shook her snout from side to

side, clearing her head. Camille looked to the top of the rise and saw Fair Security stomping Aramis in a thorough and enthusiastic fashion. Her last thoughts were happy ones.

A large white church van traveling in excess of sixty miles an hour rolled over Camille. She didn't suffer. Orville, face pale and slack, rushed down the embankment and across the ditch to Camille's weakly aspirating side. He dropped to his knees and held her. A short distance past them, the van slowed, pulled onto the shoulder, and reversed as traffic sped by. The driver, apparently more considerate of possums than the general motorist, hopped out and hurried to Orville and Camille, van door swinging behind him in the wake of passing trucks.

"Oh, my God...I mean, gosh, I didn't even see it! It was like it came out of nowhere! I've never seen a possum move so fast!" The driver wrung his hands and shuffled his wingtips.

Camille lay in the breakdown lane, unconscious and expiring, thin greenish foam clinging to where her lips would have been, had she lips. She was a goner. As Camille passed from this world, Orville cradled her head in his arms and gently kissed her snout. He shook his fists at the sky and screamed "Why, God, why? She was a good, kind, soul! It should have been me! It should have been me..."

Orville felt a hand on his shoulder. "There there. It's going to be all right. Everything is in God's plan." Orville looked up and there, outlined against the noonday sun, was the driver. "You needn't curse God. Everything will be fine."

“I’m sorry,” choked Orville. “It just seems so unfair. She was in the prime of life.”

“No, no, it’s not like that at all. I’m just saying that there can still be Good News. I’ll share it with you, if you like.”

“You mean it? I see by your uniform that you bring a message of hope for the hereafter. Are you saying that I’ll...I’ll see Camille again?”

“No, the Bible doesn’t say anything about possums. She’ll probably go to some special, animals-only afterlife. I guess. I don’t know, but I don’t need to!” This lack of knowledge seemed to excite him. His face lit up as he witnessed. “It’s all part of God’s plan. Trust in Him and it’ll all work out. Have faith, and have a tract. Go in peace!” The driver handed Orville a pamphlet, got back in his van, and drove away.

Orville sat in the breakdown lane, corpse of his beloved possum cooling on his lap, and opened the tract. It told the story of a farmer who sold his soul to the devil for a fortune in jewels. The farmer was going to go to Hell, but a deathbed conversion saved him and he got to go to Heaven after all. The tract was full of pictures of people burning and twisting in the horrible clutches of the denizens of the Abyss. There were numerous eviscerations and gougings. Cackling demons and sulfur references abounded. Special emphasis was placed on the eternal duration of these torments. It ended with a message of God’s love and a recommendation that the reader get right with Jesus. Orville sat by the road for a moment. An idea hatched. Eternity was a long time. Death could not shatter the special bond between a man and his possum. The forces of the universe were

too weak. Love would find a way. Filled with determination Orville stood, his beloved Camille in his arms, and decided to contact Satan. He had a deal to make.

Orville laid Camille in state on his coffee table, surrounding her with garlands of flowers and scented candles. After a short trip to Waldenbooks' New Age/Spiritualism section and a pleasant evening's reading beside a dead possum, Orville was prepared to raise the Lord of Darkness from the bowels of Hell. By that time, he also knew how to cause a surly co-worker to get an uncomfortable rash and how to make sure his loved one's heart remained true by sprinkling henbane into her butt-print on the couch and examining the pattern.

Orville drew a circle on the floor. He didn't have any graveyard mud to draw with, so he used a brown Magic Marker. He spaced five candles (one Fresh Lilac, one Summer Rain, one Peruvian Waterfall, and two Country Apple, the most infernal of the air freshener fragrances) equally around the perimeter of the circle. The wind began to howl. Thunder cracked the sky. Rain splattered against the windowpane in great fat drops. Rippling glass blurred the world outside as he read words from the Damnable Text (Avon Press, \$6.95) that would give him power over those who controlled life, death, and the souls of marsupials. This narrative will not repeat those words. They are far too damnable.

The room darkened. The candle flames guttered, gradually eclipsed by an illumination so subtle that it at first appeared to be darkness. Dull red light pulsed up from the Magic Marker circle. Orville continued reading damnable words. A chorus of the invisible Damned, their voices chanting from under the floor, joined Orville's refrain.

A pulsing crimson glow from the Magic Marker ink filled the room. Thunder pealed outside once more. Smoke filled the room, pouring from the tear in the fabric of reality inside the Magic Marker circle.

Orville paused in his reading to cough. When his eyes reopened, a small red fellow in a black pinstripe suit was standing inside the circle. He held a briefcase in one hand and a smoking cigar in the other. He squinted at Orville through yellow cat eyes, dragged on his cigar, exhaled a long plume, and spoke.

“What?”

Orville could only stammer.

“Oh, great. A rocket scientist. I said ‘what.’ It’s an interrogative. Used, in many cases, to request clarification of an unclear situation or statement. In this instance, to request your motivation for summoning me.” The red guy twirled his moustache.

“Well, I, uh, I got this possum, and she got run over, and...huh?”

“Should I go slower? Or, no, I know what it is. You’re new at this, aren’t you? Yeah, you are. Okay, I’ll do it the conventional way.” The little red guy threw back his head and cackled. Long black claws sprouted from his fingertips. Smoke curled from his nostrils. Horns burst through his gray fedora. He grew approximately six inches. He spoke, and his voice was the shrieking of a thousand uncomfortable crickets. “Oh mortal, why have you called me forth from the Magma Lakes of Perdition? What tasks have you to set before me?”

“Umm...well, I was thinking about trying to resurrect my...uh...that is...”

“What? Why do you stammer, oh ephemeral creature? Is it my fearsome aspect?”

“Well, don’t take this the wrong way, and I don’t mean to be disrespectful or anything, oh Dark Lord, but I’d always pictured Satan as...well...taller.”

“What? I grew, like, six inches! What do you want from me?”

“Yeah, but you’re still only about five three.”

“Only five three? Only? Hey, I’ll have you know that there’re plenty of perfectly evil entities out there under six feet tall. You’ve got a common bias, pal, but a rare nerve. Heightists like you should be ashamed of yourselves.” The red guy glowered at Orville reproachfully.

“I wasn’t trying to say that you aren’t a good Archfiend or anything, it just took me off guard, you being so...”

“Did you want something, or did you just call me here to be prejudiced and ignorant at me?”

“Sorry, sorry. I did want something, really. My pet possum, Camille, was run over by a church van today. I wanted to find some way to bring her back to life.”

“And so you thought you’d call up the Prince of Lies, make fun of his height, and then ask him to break the laws of Hell and death for you. Is that about the size of it? Could one say that’s the long and short of it?”

“Well, yeah, I had kind of hoped so. Oh Lord of Darkness.”

“I don’t mean to be short with you, but who do you think you are? You’ve already made one mistake, too. I’m not the Lord of Darkness.”

“You’re not?” Orville said, confused.

“Nope. I’ll keep this short, don’t worry. I haven’t been promoted yet. As of right now, I’m just the Lord of Dimness. That’s why I still make house calls. And unholy resurrections are definitely out of my jurisdiction.”

“Oh, no!” said Orville. “Then you can’t help me?”

“Well, just between you and me, you don’t really need any help. Animals have an entirely different behavioral code that they’re held to. Possums don’t go to the same hell that you may be familiar with from medieval artwork and nightmares and Vacation Bible School. That one’s just for human sinners, those who have transgressed against a set of rules designed for humans and only humans to follow. Animals, however, have a different set of rules, a different standard, and a necessarily different hell with torments expressly designed for their particular needs. I’d bet you dollars to doughnuts that’s where your possum is.”

“So there’s hope! Oh, happy day! But...Camille was a good, caring, generous possum. Why would she go to eternal punishment?”

He shrugged and picked a bit of dirt from his talon. “We don’t make policy on this end.”

“What about heaven? Couldn’t she be in Possum Heaven?”

The demon tapped his cigar; ashes drifted to the glowing pentagram underneath him. “Look, pal, there was a blot on her record somewhere, because she’s in hell. You want to know every little thing so bad, go find a psychic. I’m not here to pass metaphysical notes between you and your departed loved ones.”

“Why do animals need to be punished at all? Why can’t they just go around being animals?”

“Where’s the struggle in that? What a terribly dull existence that would be. Besides, then what justification would there be for an afterlife? What would we immortals do for eternity?” He narrowed his eyes and pursed his thin red lips. “Are you after my job?”

“No,” Dwayne sighed. “How can I get to this sub-hell, oh Monarch of Malefaction?”

“Well, if you’re not going to have me slay your enemies or bring you vast riches or anything, I need to be getting back to the Inferno. If you want, I’ll drop you on the way.”

“Would you? That would be great! Just let me grab a couple of things...”

“It’s Hell. You don’t have to get all dressed up.” The demon rolled its yellow cat eyes. Orville was a fastidious young man, though, and pocketed his lucky comb before stepping into the circle and following the Lord of Dimness into the Abyss.

The world dropped away from Orville. Swirling smoke and the reflected glow of far-off flame were all that were visible as he plummeted into the Void. Gradually he gained some other sensory input. The smell of hot tar and burning rubber filled his nostrils. Thunderous crashing shrieks assaulted his ears. Finally Orville hit bottom, landing on a patch of gravel in a gigantic asphalt wasteland. Smog hung heavy over the desert. Yawning cracks in the pavement radiated out as far as he could see, and he heard a faint moaning from deep within them.

“Ow!” said Orville.

“Later, mortal. Hope you find your possum,” said a voice, fading into the yellow-black sky.

Orville squinted at the jaundiced clouds, trying to catch some glimpse of his demonic benefactor, and was nearly crushed by a huge tractor-trailer bearing down on him at breakneck speed. Its mechanical bellow was bigger than the world, and Orville leapt to the side more from instinct than from any conscious understanding of the danger he was in. The big rig slid to a stop about fifty feet from Orville. On the back, stickers had been applied. One said, “I’d rather be crushing damned souls into pulp.” Another was, “I brake for perpetual suffering.” There was also a “My child is an honor student at Diabolicus Infernum Junior High.” The door opened.

A blocky person in a red flannel shirt with the sleeves rolled climbed down from the cab. He wore grease-stained jeans, oily work boots, mirrored sunglasses, and a hat with the MOPAR logo on it. He took out the toothpick he’d been chewing on, spat a long stream of scalding brown bile from the side of his mouth, replaced the toothpick, and walked to Orville.

“I think you took a wrong turn, boy. This here’s Roadkill Hell. Ain’t meant for the likes of you. You best git on. End up in a world of hurt,” he growled.

“Well, uh, sir, actually, this is the place I was looking for. You see, my pet possum was run over this morning, and I…”

The driver cut him off. “A possum? You come down here looking fer a possum? You know how many possums we get down here every day, pardner?”

“Uh...a lot?”

“Yer damn skippy, a lot. Ain’t no way to find a particular one.” He spat again.

“Well, sir, I’ve been through a lot getting here, and I’d like to at least try. Could you direct me to somebody in charge, maybe they could help me? I’m looking to make a deal with the Devil.”

The Hell-trucker grinned a brown tobacco grin. Orville’s reflection looked distorted and pitiful in the sunglasses. The trucker spit out another stream of caustic juice, and spoke as it sizzled into the heat-baked ground. “Oh, you’re looking to make a deal. With the Devil. Why didn’t you say so? What kinda deal you looking to make?”

“Actually, I’d rather talk to the genuine Devil, if it’s all the same to you.”

“Son,” said the trucker, taking off his sunglasses and wiping them on his sleeve, “I’m him.” The trucker’s eye sockets wriggled, full of gray maggots. He smiled broad and friendly as he put his shades back on. “Now, start talking.”

Turning green, Orville choked, “You mean to tell me that Satan is a truck driver?”

“That’s just how I look in this portion of Hell. And only on Tuesdays and Thursdays. Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays I’m a soccer mom. On weekends I have another guy come in and drive around, and I play golf.”

“A soccer mom?”

“Yes, a soccer mom. What? No good?”

“No, no, it’s just...”

“Spit it out. If you’ve got a problem with the service, I want to know about it.”

“I was just picturing you with a perm and a minivan. Like you said, troubling.”

“Ah. I understand. The scenery here is kind of set up to torment animals, more so than people. There are few things more horrifying to a small woodland creature than a half-ton of fuel-inefficient doom being semi-piloted by a distraught woman on a cell phone. The little guys just freak out when I do that one.” The Devil looked quite satisfied with himself.

“I see. Okay. Anyway, I wanted to find my possum and bring her back to the realm of the living. I don’t have anything to trade, but I am a renowned musician, and I would be happy to perform for you in return for this favor.”

“Yeah?” said Satan. “I’m a great music lover. What do you play?”

“All kinds of stuff. I play accordion, and zither, and dulcimer, and...” Orville’s voice trailed off as he came to a grim realization.

“But you didn’t bring anything to play on, did you?”

“Well...”

“I guess that means that your possum stays here with me in everlasting torment. Sorry ‘bout your luck, bud. Don’t let the dimensional aperture hit you in the ass on the way out.” The Devil turned back to his truck.

“Wait!” shouted Orville. “Do you have a Kleenex?”

The devil turned, puzzled. “Yeah, I think so, hold on.” He rummaged in his shirt pocket and pulled out a travel-sized pack of Kleenex. “Here you go. You allergic to despair? We get a lot of that down here.”

“No. I’m not allergic to despair. I’ve got something to show you.” Orville took his comb from his pocket. Folding the sheet of Kleenex carefully, he placed it over the

teeth of the comb. “Now listen up.” Orville then played a rousing rendition of “Roll Out the Barrel” on the Kleenex comb.

The Devil shrugged. “I’ve heard better. You may not have known it, but I’m a Kleenex comb player too. Are you a gambling man, Orville? How’s this...if you can outplay me, your possum goes home with you safe and sound. But if I win, I get to keep you both down here with me. Forever. And this is a one-time only deal. After this, no more rearranging the huge but delicate machinery of the universe on the basis of musical egotism. What do you say? I’ll even give you my golden Kleenex comb if you win.”

Orville was filled with dread. He understood the stakes for which he would be playing. Never before had he performed under pressure such as this, with the eternal damnation of two souls riding on him. “Let’s do it,” he said.

The Devil played first. Chains clanked on racks, providing a percussion section. One heavysset demon in a beret and sunglasses plucked maniacally at an upright bass strung with smoking entrails. A million victims of highways and parkways and bypasses and interstates shrieked a refrain behind the Devil’s golden Kleenex comb. The halls of Hell echoed with the Devil’s buzzing virtuosity. In the annals of Kleenex comb performance, this was a presentation without precedent. At the crescendo all of Hell joined in ear-pulping cacophony. The Devil’s playing was dark perfection. He put down his Kleenex comb and looked at Orville, triumphantly.

Orville steeled himself. He felt a gritty determination sweep through him. Tapping “a one, a two, a one, two, three, four” with his toe, he placed the comb to his lips. As Orville started to play, a strange thing happened. Hell was filled with beautiful

music. The doomed souls in the Lake of Fire stopped screaming. Demons turned from impaling people on mile-high spikes to listen. The smoldering gates of Hell swung open to embrace the exquisite composition from the Roadkill section. For a few brief moments out of the whole span of eternity, Hell wasn't so bad.

Orville reached the coda. Hell waited silent, hoping to hold the ghost of an echo of the beauty it had just heard. The Devil turned away and pretended to have something in his eye, dabbing at it with another of his pocket Kleen-X. Maggoty tears fell onto his dusty boots, bounced off, and wriggled on the asphalt. Orville took the comb from his lips. For the second time that day, a miracle happened in Hell. One of the cracks in the ground showed motion from deep within. A tiny pink paw reached into the smoggy air.

“Camille!” Orville wept with joy. He pulled his beloved possum out of the crack and into a fervent embrace. “I thought I’d never see you again!” Camille just sniffed. She didn’t lick Orville’s face or anything, because she was a possum and not a golden retriever. The two of them rose into the light of a beautiful day back on earth.

From that day forth, everything was wonderful. Orville and Camille became overnight sensations, and were frequently seen on Hollywood Squares. Life was terrific for both of them, and (since this is how stories like this are supposed to end, by law) they all lived happily ever after.

Until Camille was run over by a truckload of migrant laborers making a beer run after work.

THE END

Revenge of the Marvelous MerMonkeys

It wasn't fair at all. She'd asked Dwayne to move in with her in the first place, not the other way around. If his girlfriend's ex-husband hadn't suffered a rare fit of fatherhood Dwayne wouldn't have had to move again. Her kid had seemed all right in the beginning. The boy read all the time, though his lack of interest in going outside made him a pain in Dwayne's ass. He moped; Dwayne couldn't relate to him. Of course, the kid perked right up when his "real" dad finally dragged in two hours late after a six-month absence with a pile of his castoff childhood crap. The heap of old comic books he brought might as well have been winning lottery tickets, the way that kid lit up.

The ex-husband sat there and mooned over the kid and pretended he'd been around for the past half a year. The kid beamed and asked questions he already knew the answers to. The whole thing was a little faggoty and a lot phony, to Dwayne. He went silently alone to the back bedroom, shut the door, and watched the small TV on the dresser. The snowy picture wobbled up and down. No program good enough to distract him from his mood came on. He felt like an ill-mannered dog locked in the garage for barking when company arrived. It wasn't supposed to be like this. This was a hell of a way to treat the man of the house.

Dwayne could hear them through the wall. After one game show, a courtroom drama, and two news briefs Daddy got up to go. Dwayne came out for another drink as father and son exchanged goodbye hugs. He stood in the cool sour air inside the refrigerator door and pretended not to be listening. "I'll drop that card in the mail

tomorrow morning, kiddo. Start checking in a few weeks,” he said as he walked out the door. Hard telling what kind of bullshit that guy was telling the kid to look out for.

Nothing good, that was for sure.



Time rolled by. Dwayne looked for work some mornings. It was hard finding much in the winter. He explained to his girlfriend that sometimes the jobs just weren't there, but she still acted like his unemployment was his fault. She didn't get it. She didn't know how it was. She had it easy, pouring drinks at the diner all day. That wasn't a real job. She had a lot of nerve telling him to try harder when he was always up reading the classifieds pretty soon after she left. It was part of his routine. He did it right after he checked the mail.

Every morning he toweled off a dewy folding chair with his bathrobe and waited for the square white truck with the eagle on the side. The mailman was an unfriendly jerk who acted like he resented Dwayne's questions, but Dwayne could sit outside his own house and speak if he wanted to. It was a free country. The guy could take a couple of minutes out of his busy mailman schedule as a common courtesy, if nothing else. That was what was wrong with people. Nobody took time to shoot the breeze any more.

One morning, Dwayne tucked a stack of his girlfriend's bills, cardboard inserts, and slick-papered advertisements inside her folded newspaper and went into her bathroom. He kicked a pile of dirty laundry closer to the wall, unbuckled, and sat; the cold seat stuck to his warm skin. An open-faced news sandwich topped with plastic-windowed envelopes and take-out menus balanced on his thighs. A small flat package

slid from the mound and towards Dwayne's lap, heading for the narrow escape route to the sea. Dwayne snapped his legs together to catch it.

The package was addressed to the kid. That was funny; the kid never got any mail. Kids didn't get mail, especially not packages. Everybody knew that. But this one was sure enough addressed to the kid, big black block letters spelling out his name. Dwayne remembered the comic books. He sliced into the brown envelope with his thumbnail and peeled back the paper. The rip bled bright orange.

Dwayne pulled the bit of brightness from the plain brown wrapper. It was an odd little parcel, waxy, more or less the size and shape of a bag of M & Ms. Orange mermaids frolicked along the side. "Marvelous MerMonkeys," the label proclaimed. "Like magic! Add water and watch them grow! Amaze your friends!" There had been an empty aquarium on the kitchen table for a week. His girlfriend had refused to explain it. Now Dwayne understood. This package held the beginnings of all kinds of hassle, if he didn't do something.

Whatever he did, he had to take care of it right away on general principle. This was his house now. He made the rules. That was how a person could tell a man, by the way he ran his own house. Common knowledge. And it wasn't like he was being unreasonable. That aquarium would end up a glass box full of stinking black water. The kid would never clean it, and his mom damn sure wouldn't either. She didn't clean anything. The house was always filthy. For another, those stupid Sea Monkeys didn't work. They were just bags of powder. He'd heard about it. The boy would just end up disappointed. It was mean to little kids, really, the way those companies did.

For yet another thing, that kid thought too much of his “real” daddy anyway. It wasn’t like the guy was around. It was for the best to take him down a peg or two in the kid’s eyes. Maybe the boy would stop sitting around stuffing his head with nonsense and go outside once in a while. Besides, Dwayne had been inconvenienced by that child hundreds of times. Why should this guy get so much credit for cutting out an ad in the back of a comic book he’d probably had for years?

Dwayne crumpled the brown wrapper and shoved it into the pocket of his pajama pants. He looked at the orange packet a little longer. The mermaids on the side seemed to eye him back. Weren’t mermaids supposed to be sexy? These didn’t look sexy to Dwayne. They looked like fishy orange threats flipping boldly into his world.

The bathroom door slammed open. Dwayne’s head snapped up, eyes flashing guilt; he jammed the orange packet into the magazine rack between the toilet and the tub. The kid stormed in, nose red and dripping, backpack falling off his shoulder, unzipping as he walked. It dawned on him that the room was occupied; his eyes widened behind winter-fogged glasses.

“Crap! Sorry! Didn’t know you were in here.” His fingers left his half-open fly and pushed the falling backpack further up the bright red sleeve of his coat. It immediately slid down again. His glasses were clearing up a little. “Do you have something in your hand?”

“No! Nothing! Grown-up stuff! Get out of here!” Dwayne flopped his arm at the kid from the toilet, one hand still buried in the magazine rack. The kid backed up a

step, struggling with his backpack. “Give a man a little privacy!” The boy backed out of the room. Grimacing, he shut the door. “Why aren’t you in school?”

Through the door the kid said, muffled, “Missed the bus. Dwayne, I’ve really got to...”

“Missed the bus?” Dwayne interrupted. “You shouldn’t have been screwing around so much on the way there, then. You’ll have to call your mom to come get you, you know. She’s not going to be pleased.” That’d give him something to think about. Dwayne stared at the door in disapproval, as if the kid could see him through it. Several long silent seconds passed.

“Can you take me? Mom said she can’t afford to leave work any more in the mornings. She said that’s when she makes her tips. I know you’re busy, but...”

“No, I can’t take you. I’m job-hunting.” Dwayne rustled the newspaper a bit. “You’re just going to have to listen to her gripe. It’s nobody’s fault but yours. You have to take some responsibility for your actions. It’s all part of becoming a man. Go ahead and call her up.”

Several more hushed moments stretched by. Dwayne listened, waiting to hear the kid talking on the phone. All stayed quiet. The sink dripped. Dwayne had never noticed before.

“Dwayne, I’ve really got to use the bathroom.” That kid was still on the other side of the door! He had his mother’s nerve. Dwayne leaned up, balancing the stack of papers on his lap, and turned the lock on the doorknob. Should have done that in the first place.

“Go call your mother! Quit giving me a hard time!”

“I think I’m gonna piss my pants, Dwayne!”

“Don’t do that...get the stool in the kitchen and piss in the sink. I’m going to be a minute.” He added, “Use the half that the dishes aren’t piled in. And rinse it out with good hot water.” You could never be too careful with kids. They weren’t the cleanest. God knew his mother didn’t wash a dish unless she was practically forced to. “After that you better call your mom. You’ve got some explaining to do.”

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It hadn’t been long after that Dwayne had to move again. His girlfriend decided they weren’t compatible and that she’d be happier if she had some time alone. Plus, the kid was acting weirder than ever. Dwayne didn’t know what was going on, and just hit the road. He didn’t need that hassle. She and that kid were spoiled and lazy anyway. If she didn’t want the benefit of his company, it was her loss. He’d find another place to stay. He’d get a place of his own: a place that wasn’t dirty all the time, with kid’s junk strung from one end of the house to the other. He’d show them. This time it would be different. This time he’d keep his own house in order. He was going to hit his new apartment like a tidy, organized whirlwind. Things were going to work out, because Dwayne had things under control.

Dwayne loaded all of his worldly goods into a rusting Honda hatchback and a rented trailer, damaging nothing. She cried a little when he got in the car, which Dwayne thought was pretty stupid. She’d broken up with him. He watched them get smaller in

his rear window, between the piles of shirts and pants on his back seat. The kid didn't even wave.

It hadn't taken him long to find an apartment; he read the classifieds every day. He reached the new place well ahead of his estimated time of arrival. He only had to cut off three other drivers the whole way. All of his worldly goods were out of the hatchback and trailer fourteen minutes before he had planned to start setting up. Dizzy with his own competence, Dwayne set about unpacking.

The box marked 'Bathroom' contained matching plastic travel cases for all Dwayne's toiletries. It balanced on the toilet tank, two corners hanging nervous beyond the edge. The box was big; Dwayne liked to buy his bathroom supplies in advance and color-coordinate them. His disposable razor handles matched his shampoo, which always matched the lettering on that month's tube of toothpaste. The magazine rack tucked along the side of the box was exactly the same green tint as the shower curtain folded beside it. Nestled deep between issues was a flare of orange.

Dwayne knew what it was right away. He pulled the packet out and scowled at it. The cartoon mermaids grinned back at him, cheerful, chipper, mocking. He hated the little bitches. This bag of silt was indicative of every problem in his life. The whole chaotic mess needed to be systematized and quantified and put the hell away before somebody got hurt. He was doing his best. Why were the mermaids still laughing at him?

The phone blared in the next room. Dwayne reacted with spasmodic alarm. The slick surface of the packet slipped between his fingers and fell into the open toilet with a

small splash. Dwayne rushed to answer the phone, making a mental note as he went. That stuff could form a clog and ruin his pipes. Whoever it was hung up after a couple of rings. Dwayne made it back almost immediately.

The packet was soggy, and the glue holding it closed had dissolved. Clumps of orange powder stuck to the porcelain. Dwayne fished out what he could with a toilet brush and flushed until the water's orange tint had swirled away back to the screaming chemical blue he preferred. In the morning he would scrub the whole bathroom.

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The glowing red numbers on the clock said 2:30. Dwayne considered rolling over and trying to tough it out for another five hours. He soon sat up, momentarily confused at his surroundings, then remembered he'd moved to a new apartment that day. Dwayne swung his legs over the side of the bed, toes settling onto unfamiliar carpet, and tottered to the bathroom.

He clutched the doorjamb and groped the darkness, seeking the slick, hard plastic of the wall switch. He found it, flipped it, and went blind. Cursing, he flipped the light back off. Porcelain shone out of the dimness like a shadow in reverse. An immaculate toilet rim wasn't in the cards that night. Still only half-awake, Dwayne pulled down the elastic waistband of his boxers and prepared to make a moderate mess.

A tiny stabbing pain lanced into his upper right thigh. A similar pain in his lower belly immediately followed it. He shouted in pain and surprise.

"You want to watch where you're pointing that?" A voice spoke from the darkness below Dwayne's knees. Dwayne cried out and staggered back, slipping in what

he hoped was a puddle of water and landing hard on the linoleum. The back of his head smacked against the wall, knocking a bottle of shampoo from its artful but precarious perch on the shower shelf. It clattered into the tub with a series of hollow, echoing thumps. Dwayne shrieked and leapt away from the bathtub, skidding across the few feet between it and the bathroom wall. He finished in a semi-upright position, clinging to the sink and breathing hard. Squinting, he flipped the switch once more.

He immediately wished he hadn't. A trio of dwarfish orange monsters floated in the bowl. Sinuous scaled tails flipped below muscular waists. Easily rippling fins flicked back and forth in the water. The creature in the middle's long white beard framed rubbery lips. Its short green-gray hair curled over a crown of tarnished gold, while small eyes darted like minnows above a flat nose and a large mouth. The creature carried an air of authority, in spite of the fact that it floated in electric blue toilet water. Brandishing a miniature trident at Dwayne in one extraordinarily long arm, the merman asked, "Were you planning on doing what it looked like you were planning on doing?" Its voice was like bubbles of gas rising through thick mud, each word bursting moist and slow upon contact with oxygen.

"Uhhh.... umm.... uhhhh," said Dwayne.

"Sounds like a yes to me, my liege," said the beardless merman to the bearded one. It glared at Dwayne with minute fury.

"I say we kill him," chirped a mermaid as she backstroked. Her long black hair spread out in the azure water around plump, ruddy cheeks. "We can't have him despoiling our environment with his waste products. Only one way to deal with his

kind.” She paused, sat up, and grinned. “Swift death.” The mermaid dipped below the water and came up near the other two, where she joined them in angry glaring. Her eyes were blue and bright.

“Wait, wait,” the leader said. “It is not our way to go to war in anger. First we must attempt to find a peaceful solution. We are intelligent beings.” His voice bubbled with watery authority. Dwayne clung slack-jawed to the sink, his boxer shorts halfway down his thighs. “Surely we can find a way to live in harmony if we work together?”

“Look at him,” the mermaid replied, eyes glinting. “He can’t even close his mouth, much less pull up his underwear. How is anybody supposed to negotiate with that? Let’s go ahead and kill him. I’ll get the spears.” She dove again and swam away up the pipe.

“Sorry about that,” the leader of the toilet creatures said to Dwayne. “She’s young and impatient. We’ve had a busy afternoon and she’s tired.” He looked away down the pipe with a fond expression. Returning his attention to Dwayne he said, “I’m sure we can all coexist. Come now, close your mouth and pull up your underwear and we’ll talk. I am the Monarch of the Marvelous MerMonkeys. Your name?”

Dwayne’s lips gradually worked their way together and reopened. Adjusting his shorts, he found two slightly-larger-than-toothpick-sized spears jutting from his body, one in his lower abdomen and one in his right thigh. Wincing, he removed them. They left puckered red pinholes in his flesh. He placed the spears on the edge of the sink. “It’s Dwayne,” he said. “My name’s Dwayne.” He extended a finger. The Monarch smiled

and nodded regally as the other merman took Dwayne's finger in both dripping webbed hands and shook.

“Marvelous. Absolutely marvelous. I can see we'll get along splendidly.” The Monarch gave Dwayne a bright smile and continued. “As I said earlier, we are the Marvelous MerMonkeys. We live in the pipes now. It's not ideal, but we're making the best of it, I think.” He paused, and his voice gurgled low and grave. “Of course, that becomes difficult with you draining biological material into our home. You're not used to thinking of it this way, but your actions are irresponsible. You are no longer alone in this house. We would be immensely appreciative if you'd stop.” He looked, expectant, up at Dwayne.

“Did she say she was coming back with spears?” Dwayne asked. “Because those things hurt.”

The non-bearded merman looked pleased. “Yes, we are mighty in the ways of war. You would do well to remember that. You will cooperate fully with us or suffer our power and wrath.” The little merman pulled himself halfway onto the rim of the toilet and glowered at Dwayne for a moment. He slipped back into the water and circled the bowl, a tiny orange shark.

“Are you threatening me? You can't threaten me from my own toilet!”

“Calm yourself.” The Monarch gestured majestically with his trident. “We will have no problem if you will only stop flushing your muck into our homes. All we want is to live free from the feces of the surface world. That's not asking too much, is it?”

“A feces-free life is asking entirely too much, if you live in my toilet. Where am I supposed to leave my feces?”

The Monarch beamed, glowing with golden magnanimity. “We knew you would ask that question and have arrived at a solution. The pipes running from your kitchen bypass our living area almost entirely. Working together, and with only minimal effort, we could rearrange the space we need so that you could use your kitchen sink for disposal of...”

“My kitchen sink?” interrupted Dwayne. “That’s gross! I wash dishes in there. I’m not doing that.”

“Everyone will have to make some sacrifices. But isn’t it better to compromise and live in peace than to be obstinate and have slaughter and bloodshed?”

Dwayne, incredulous, gaped at The Monarch. “Slaughter and bloodshed? You’re little tiny toilet mermaids armed with toothpicks! You’re disturbing to me on several levels, but you’re not in the least intimidating.” A silence hung in the air between man and MerMonkey. Dwayne broke it, shouting with frustration. “Get out of my toilet! I’m not turning my bathroom over to a bunch of...owww! Dammit!”

Demented laughter rang from the toilet. The mermaid had returned. She clutched a bundle of spears under her left arm and flung them in rapid succession at Dwayne with her right. Small shards peppered his face and chest. His arm was punctured numerous times in vain attempts to ward off the attacks. Dwayne backpedaled towards the door. The flurry of spears kept up, driving him out. “Take that, environment despoiler! Haaaaahaahaaa!” she shouted.

“Power and wrath! Power and wrath!”

“We tried to reason with you...”

Dwayne managed to both pull the door shut and protect his eyes from flying spikes. A few more little javelins thudded into the door. Then there was quiet. After a long moment a muffled cheer echoed inside a porcelain tank. Other voices joined in, celebrating and splashing behind the door. Dwayne stood staring. The Marvelous MerMonkeys celebrated his utter defeat. Their victory splashes declared him officially removed from the bathroom.

Dwayne seethed. The bathroom was a little bit of the universe bought and paid for. Thanks to the little orange things it no longer filled its intended role in the cosmos. They claimed squatter’s rights on the toilet and Dwayne couldn’t pee in his own home. This was no way for a man to have to live. Dwayne’s eyes narrowed. He grimly picked the barbs from his flesh and threw them aside. “Okay, if you little...” Dwayne paused, unsure how to refer to them, “...life forms want a war, then I’ll give you a war.” This was not over, not by a long shot. He would not go gentle into that good kitchen sink. Dwayne turned and stalked down the hallway. A plan was forming. The first step was to get some peroxide on his puncture wounds. The offending articles had come from the sewer, after all. Then he’d go get some household sundries and maybe a sandwich. Then, genocide.

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It was a lovely day in the MerMonkeys’ bathroom. An elderly mercouple lay on a tiny beach towel on the edge of the sink, sunning in the glow of the row of incandescent

bulbs over the mirror-fronted medicine cabinet. Merchildren splashed happily in the water under the watchful eyes of their mothers. Merfathers in miniature “Kiss the Cook” aprons grilled miniature hot dogs on miniature floating grills. Mergirls bounced a beach ball from one side of the toilet to the other. Merboys observed them and tried to look cool. Their king sat on his throne on the towel rack above.

One of the merboys flopped out of the water and across the tank, unnoticed. He slithered onto the flush lever and hung from it. The water swirled downward with a great whoosh, dunking everyone. The entire group was forced to swim like mad to avoid being washed away behind the walls. One mermaid, sitting safely upon a dolphin-shaped decorative soap, uttered such dulcet and harmonious breath that the rude sea grew civil at her song.

A matronly merwoman came up sputtering and reprimanding. “I suppose you think that’s funny?” She wiped water from her eyes. She burbled, “There’s always some little...ninny like you who has to ruin things for everyone! I hope you know that this kind of horseplay is very dangerous and...”

The bathroom door crashed inward, interrupting her speech. A colossus in hip-waders and a violently pink scuba mask burst into the room. In one hand he held a toilet brush. The other hand lurked behind his back. Dwayne’s lips pulled back from his teeth in a feral approximation of a smile.

“Hi there, your majesty,” bellowed Dwayne. “Remember me? I’m the guy who lives here. I’ve been away for a while.” He looked from side to side behind the thick

plastic lens. “It looks like you’ve all gotten settled in.” He paused dramatically. “But I must regretfully inform you that it’s moving day.”

“Have you forgotten your defeat so soon?” The Monarch replied. “The terms of surrender were quite unconditional, I’m afraid...”

“Surrender? Oh, no. I’m just getting started.” Dwayne grinned, a glimmer of lunacy sparkling in his eyes. It was possible that recent events had unhinged him. He brought his hand from behind his back. Seeing what he held, the merpeople screamed and fled down the pipe, not taking the time to gather their beach towels, hot dogs, or tubes of light bulb block. In an amazingly short time, only the Monarch was left, steadfast and resolute. He hopped down from his throne, landing upright on his muscular tail.

“You wouldn’t...you wouldn’t honestly use that, would you?” asked the King. His voice very nearly betrayed a note of fear.

“Oh, yes,” Dwayne responded. “And I’ll enjoy it a great deal. You guys brought this on yourselves, you know. You could have colonized some drainage ditch out in the woods, or a bathtub in an abandoned building or something, but no, you had to come to me. To my bathroom!” He uncapped the gallon jug of drain cleaner and took a step towards the toilet.

“Are you mad, man? You’ll kill us all!”

“Kill us all?” Dwayne laughed ominously. “No, I’ll be fine. And my bowl will be deodorized and rust-free for up to two full months,” he said, examining the label.

“You won’t be fine, I can promise you that.” The Monarch said, swallowing hard. He slid nimbly into the bowl. He might have been sweating under his sheen of toilet water. “Are you familiar with the concept of mutually assured destruction? We’ve changed some things down there. We’ve opened up a whole world, in fact. Things will wake when you pour that chemical onto them, things you can’t imagine. You can’t possibly fathom what you’ll unleash if you tamper with our delicate ecological balance. Don’t do this.”

Dwayne raised the jug and cackled. “Don’t try to talk your way out of this one. It’s too late for that.” He gazed heavenward. “I have become Death, the destroyer of worlds...” Dwayne tipped the jug, releasing the clear fluid into the water.

“You fool!” The Monarch shouted as he disappeared into the pipes. “You’ve doomed us all! There’s worse down here than MerMonkeys!” His voice echoed against the porcelain as he swam away.

Dwayne watched the drain cleaner mix with the water, creating a light film of whitish bubbles on the surface. He stood watching the bubbles circle, chuckling gutturally. He flushed. He wasn’t sure, but he thought he heard a faint faraway gurgling scream. Still chuckling, Dwayne tipped the jug and began again.

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It was once again a nice day in Dwayne’s bathroom. A light, airy scent of pine stirred in the mild breeze from the vent. Fixtures gleamed, not a spot of toothpaste or shaving cream was to be found on faucet or handle. The porcelain of the toilet sparkled

in the light. Clean towels draped over the rack, and the magazine caddy between the toilet and the tub held relatively recent issues of Rolling Stone. No dampness stained the brown and green duck pattern on the bath mat. There was no sign of MerMonkey infestation anywhere. Dwayne's second strongest feeling whenever he entered his bathroom was always pride.

His strongest feeling was what brought him to the bathroom that morning. Dwayne selected a magazine from the caddy, unzipped, and took a seat. He mentally prepared to catch up on some leisure reading while nature called gently in the background. Slow, fat drips of water rippled down the sink from the faucet, into the drain. He reached over, twisted the knobs, and the trickling stopped. The fan hummed overhead.

Something fleshy and wet brushed his scrotum. Dwayne leapt away from the toilet and scooted across the floor, his pants around his ankles. The magazine had torn during his headlong plunge; pages scattered across the linoleum. Dwayne collected his wits and half-stood, pulling up his pants as he went. He started speaking on his way up, and only stopped once he saw what was in the bowl. "All right, round two, I guess. Back for a little more..."

A white tendril, purplish veins running across its mottled surface, waved over the rim of the toilet. A small dull hook of some horny, yellow, callused substance thrust from the tip. The hook plunged down and grabbed the rim of the toilet. Dwayne could see muscles working in the tendril, separating wetly, convulsing the thing into view.

It looked nothing like a spider, but that was what Dwayne's mind seemed to want to call the thing clambering over the edge of the toilet. It had far more than eight legs, all of unequal lengths. Some, undersized or boneless, slapped down next to the hook-ended tendril and slid away helplessly, while others clutched there beside their brother with surprising strength. Its body was a series of whitish lumps, loose flaps of skin hanging from them as if the thing had been badly burned. Thick, ropy veins pulsed between the moist pale lumps of its body, ichor leaking in maroon rivulets down onto its belly. Eyes of wildly varying sizes covered about a quarter of the thing's visible surface area, some covered in opaque cataracts, some burst and oozing from their sockets, some seemingly functional. A perfectly formed eye, its brilliant blue iris surrounding a deep black pupil, rolled blank and terrifying. The thing shifted its bulk towards the side of the toilet closest to Dwayne. It surged out, tumbling onto the floor with a wet thud.

Dwayne screamed. He leapt backwards, away from the oozing monstrosity. The doorknob caught him in the middle of his back, and he started to fall, only grabbing the edge of the sink and righting himself by pure fortune. The thing dragged across the floor toward him, leaving a trail of thickening muck behind it. Its spindly legs were too weak to support the monster's mass. Only a few of its extremities pulled it, inch by inch, towards Dwayne's bare feet.

Dwayne hurtled out of the room and into the hallway. The thing wasn't moving. Pallid sides stopped heaving; the creature had dragged open its thin skin on the bathroom floor. Its remains lay on a ripped advertisement for Altoid mints. "Curiously Strong," said the bright yellow lettering across which the thing's legs sprawled. Dwayne huddled

in the hall, immobile. He cupped his genitals and moaned, staring at the dripping fiend that had climbed out of his toilet. The world turned gray for a while.

Dwayne wasn't wearing a watch, so he had no idea how long it was before he woke up. The light dribbling through the window at the end of the hall seemed dimmer. He suspected it might have been an hour or more. He could hear his television murmuring something about the weather. The spider-thing lay puddled where he had last seen it.

He got to his feet, eyes wide, keeping his back to the wall. The thing hadn't moved an inch. He supposed he was safe. Dwayne, unsure of how to proceed, reached out to pull the bathroom door shut. He didn't know how to get that thing out of his bathroom. Until he figured it out he wasn't taking any chances. "It's still my house, dammit." Dwayne muttered. "Scare tactics won't work, either." Dwayne's voice rose as he addressed the bathroom. "I'm not leaving. You can't force me out of my own home. I'll spit on all of your graves! I'll...I'll install a screen or something! Do you hear me down there?"

Dwayne leaned into the bathroom, addressing the toilet. The huge tentacle that shot out of it almost snagged him. It splashed water to the ceiling, where droplets hissed against the naked light bulb. This appendage was far larger than the first spider-thing's, but otherwise similar. There was no way a creature large enough to have such a limb could ever fit through the pipes, much less enter the bathroom. Yet there it was, clutching blindly while Dwayne screamed and tried to avoid its grasp.

It slung around the room. Sightless, joints creaking, it flexed around whatever it contacted. The thing's convulsions tore the towel rack from the wall and slung it into the bathtub. The floor below the toilet moaned and bulged, linoleum cracking from the immense upward pressure. The tentacle smashed the medicine cabinet; it crashed to the floor. The mirror shattered into glimmering shards, a thousand nightmare feelers wildly flailing in reflections across the floor.

In the course of its thrashings, the tentacle brushed against the spider-thing's corpse. It hesitated, sliding lightly along the remains. It had found what it was looking for. The tentacle wound around the carcass and shot back down the toilet, dragging the spider-thing with it. The floor under the toilet bowl settled. Dwayne, his sweat-slick hand already on the knob, pulled the bathroom door closed.

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Dwayne crept through the shadows of the dusk-cloaked street in front of his house. He carried a small metal trash can, careful not to spill the contents. Glancing around furtively, he approached the gutter at the end of the driveway. He looked to the left, then to the right. No one was around. Dwayne tipped the can. Dark, semi-liquid shapes plopped onto the wet leaves in the drain.

A pair of headlights swung around the corner at the end of the street. Dwayne shook the can and stayed low to the curb. Hopefully the driver would keep right on driving. Dwayne didn't want to explain himself. Tinny smacks echoed off the nearby houses as he tapped the metal base. The headlights swelled, beams merging as the car drew close. The engine rumbled. White headlights washed over his back. A crouching

shadow stretched away for yards, stubborn black shadow-shape finally sliding out of elongated shadow-can. He watched his monstrous scarecrow-self give it a final furtive thump as the car's door opened behind him. Dwayne tucked the can under his arm. Stooping, he turned to dash across the yard. His foot slid, perhaps in leaves. It shot away slick, leaving him on his knees in the grass. He'd fallen in something wet.

His ex-girlfriend stood about ten feet away, in front of the idling car. Her arms crossed her chest, a cigarette smoldering between two stiff fingers at the crook of her elbow. Stark halogen backlight cut black streaks across her; she could have been smiling or snarling. A whorl of smoke plumed from her shadow-pit face. Her toe tapped the gutter.

Behind her in the car, a pale smudge gleamed against the dim backseat. The kid's eyes and mouth were great dark craters in a cautious moon. Some guy was in there, too, up front. His hairy forearm hung out the driver's side window, down the door. Thick, slow fingers drummed primer-coated metal. One of them wore a chunky gold ring.

"We're here to get the car, Dwayne," she said. "You were supposed to bring it back last month. Don't give us any trouble, all right?" He looked up at her. She released her elbow long enough to take a quick puff from her cigarette and flick it away. It bounced into the wet gutter near him and hissed. The butt floated to the grate, trickling water working it in jerks and slips through a layer of sodden leaves. It dropped into the sewer without a sound.

Dwayne stood, pushing against the can. Deep hurt quavered in his voice as he rose, asking, "why would I give you any trouble? It's your car." What kind of jerk did

she think he was? Anyway, he really had meant to bring it back. Time had just gotten away from him. He'd had a lot on his mind. He craned his neck, looking past her.

"Who's that in the car?"

"What's that in your hand?" She tilted her head and her hair slipped into the shadows across her face. She brushed the wayward strands behind her ears and crossed her arms again. "You look rough, Dwayne. You need to shave and comb your hair. And what's that smell? It's definitely disgusting."

"I don't smell anything." He put the can down in brown dirt patched with browner grass and wandered the driveway between it and her. He didn't get too close; he hadn't showered in weeks. "Listen, there's not hardly any gas in it. I haven't had a chance to get to the store. I can bring it back to you tomorrow full up. Oil changed, too." He chewed the inside of his mouth and scooted the can back a few inches with his foot. "Just as long as my check comes in."

"I can put gas in it. Give me the keys, Dwayne." Her hand left her elbow and opened to him from the shadows, extending like an offering into the white glare. Headlight-manufactured shadow bordered her fingernails; it thickened the black lines across her artificially pale palm. Dwayne fished a set of keys on a faded plastic tab from his pocket. They dropped jingling into her hand.

She got into the car, adjusted the rearview mirror, and flipped the headlights on. They spotlighted Dwayne against the front wall of his new home. His driveway was a blacktop stage, two carloads of audience waiting for a performance he didn't know how to give. At least three pairs of eyes were on him, maybe more. It was still early in the

evening. Who knew how many of his neighbors were pushing aside curtains or peeking through blinds across the street? He had to say something. “Wait!” That’s what they always said in the movies. “I’m sorry...I really am sorry.” She scooted the seat forward and nodded along with his apology. He knew she was waiting for something else.

He didn’t know what. “Do you think we did the right thing? That we’re doing the right thing?” She turned the key; the engine shrieked in metallic agony. He talked faster. “I mean, I know sometimes I act like the whole world revolves around me, and I’m trying to work on that. I’m going to take some classes or something.” She looked over her shoulder to check her blind spots. Dwayne appreciated safe reversing procedure as much as the next guy, but he was pouring his heart out here. It wouldn’t kill her to listen. “Are you sure you don’t want to? Work it out, you know? I mean, I’m working pretty steady now.” He paused, squinting at the ground as he stepped out of the light, around the side of the car. “There’s no sense staying mad. I mostly just want to make sure we can all get along.”

The car’s frame shuddered as she levered the gearshift, and the engine’s squeal changed pitch. Dwayne continued to try to hide his empty but reeking chamber pot. She watched him. One brow raised, she asked, “since when are you worried about getting along with anybody?” He thought she might say something else, but she instead pressed her lips together in a resigned smile. “You have shit all down your leg,” she said as she backed out of the driveway. The cars slowly rolled away down the street, two pairs of red taillights dwindling and finally vanishing in the night. The kid didn’t even wave. Dwayne wiped his feet as best he could, picked up his can, and went inside.

Dwayne slipped off his shoes and placed them in a rack beside the welcome mat. He padded in his socks along the protective plastic floor strip to the kitchen. He rinsed the can in the kitchen sink and placed it in the hall closet. He stepped out of his soiled pants, put them into the washing machine, poured two cups of detergent on top, and let the water run. Returning along the strip, Dwayne sat down on the couch and picked up his drink from a coaster. He settled in for a night of watching television in his own living room.

In spite of the drama in the yard, Dwayne more or less felt good, felt a sense of accomplishment. Even if she wasn't going to come around any time soon, he could still take solace in a different personal victory. He was the man of this house. Nothing was going to crawl out of the sewer and chase him out of his established corner of the cosmos. All that had been necessary had been a certain shift in outlook.

Dwayne was prepared to accept that all battles produced casualties. In the final estimation, he supposed he hadn't had to pay that heavy a price. Wet, muffled thumping sounds slopped away down the hall. Dwayne pointed the remote control at his entertainment center and turned up the volume. The wet noises were no longer so prominent. Once he'd nailed boards over the bathroom door, the pounding had stopped. Now it was just that sloshing sound every once in a while. He could live with that. It was rather comforting to Dwayne that, though living in a place where the merfolk were as plenty as cockroaches, he'd never again have a right view of one. He'd had to give up some facets of his personal hygiene, but he'd stopped them at the bathroom. They'd

gone no further. Fair trade. What was his was still his. Pretty much. What more could a man ask for?

Dwayne put down his drink and remote. He walked along the protective plastic floor strip to the kitchen. A milk crate sat beside the sink, out of place in the otherwise debris-free kitchen. Dwayne climbed onto the crate and unzipped. Sighing with relief, he listened to the stream patter against stainless steel. If he rinsed the sink with soap and really hot water right afterward, it wasn't so bad. Lost in reflection, he may not have noticed the sinister high-pitched laughter echoing through the pipes.

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