

The very best of all things

They gave no special warning before he arrived, no fanfare, no advance notice. It was just simple, gentle, and unbelievably easy. I looked out of the window that morning and he'd arrived – poetry in motion, galloping and cavorting around the old corral as though he had always been there, dodging the broken timbers, ignoring the flank-high grass, evading the weather-worn potholes with a precision born of long practise. He just knew it all as though it was home and always had been – a vital, equine joy in gleaming black, animated obsidian – quicksilver in jet.

Only – I had never seen the horse before that day, and I had no real idea how he got there.

In the end, I didn't care.

Her expression when she saw him, the look of pure,

unadulterated joy, despite her immeasurable, unbearable pain, made his presence heaven sent. She loved him from the moment she saw him. And so did I, for her sake.

When I finally recognised what the horse was, I kept my darker thoughts – the deeper, more primal terrors – to myself.

Time was too short.



A dream came before the storm – evil, dark, cold, a gale-filled nightmare of bleakness and horror and death-screams from the void. It was a harbinger: a tear-you-from-sleep-in-a-drenching-cold-sweat-type night terror that you never forget for as long as you live as a creature emerged from its depths, mocking, languid, an oily slick of pure, cloying evil whispering sour nothings of doom and horror and awful, painful, pointless death.

That was the night, some time in the early hours, my gorgeous little girl's mother died.

Sick only a handful of months, before the doctors finally found the thing sucking the spirit from her and managed to capture an image of the malignant plug of rebellious flesh that was to seal her fate and take her life.

Months of tiredness, of the pale, wan and ghost-like; the stomach cramped, the head-scarfed, the bleeding. And no drug, no chemical, no satchel of liquid, intravenous near-death was able to do a thing to help her. And so she died only a matter of months from first diagnosis to the end.

Estranged as we were, I was still glad of that small mercy, if for nothing else. I remembered why I loved her and what I loved about her, even if all of it had been soured by the stupidity that was the condition of being human and jealous and petty and blind and trapped forever as the children we were, are, and always will be.

Our beautiful little Laura fell sick the same day.

Not psychosomatic, she felt the symptoms before I told her what had happened to mummy. It was how I knew what was happening to her, too; knew what she had; knew the ordeal she now faced; knew the final fate that was to come.

The same thing that had killed mummy was killing our little girl and there wasn't a damned thing I could do to stop it.

In that instant I fell ill without being sick; felt detached while still present; felt wrong in every way and for no logical reason.

Life as I knew it was ending and I didn't understand even the tiniest part of what was making it so.

I was at my weakest and most vulnerable.

That was when it came.



The signs arrived late at night. The clocks stopped – all of them at the same time. The temperature dropped to near freezing, the air becoming brittle and sharp, and slightly painful to breathe. The pungent, metallic smell of ozone laced the atmosphere like a garrotte, a deep sub-sonic harmonic playing at the same time, rumbling the glassware, shaking the fixtures, rattling the pictures on the walls.

Following the sound, I found my little girl standing in the half shadow cast by the nightlight in the hall – transformed into a statuesque creature in faint monochrome, and with snow-white, glitteringly bright eyes that glowed in the dark.

“Do you not tire of this?” she asked.

It was not her voice, or her, that spoke to me now, though. It was deep, resonant, like two voices were speaking to me at the same time. Stark terror choked any possible reply. “No,” she/it said mildly, answering its own question when there was no response, “clearly not.” It posed for a moment, head and shoulders forward, fist poised beneath its chin – the thinker. “Tell you what,” it mused after a moment, an oddly long, otherworldly forefinger slowly uncurling and then gesturing skywards, “why do you not consider – an alternative?”

Fear boiled, panic paralysing any rational response. But then something intervened. The terror lessened, fear's vice-like grip on my throat slackened. Reason, in the face of unreason, slowly returned.

“*What* – alternative?”

The thing inhabiting my little daughter stood frozen, statue-

like while I spoke. When I'd finished speaking, it looked at me long and hard, a definite note of amusement in its glittering, flashing eyes. It smiled then, lips breaking, widening like a shark's. Then it moved my daughter's body, the motion striking, as though it and she had suddenly been released from a state of standing paralysis.

"You are curious," it gravelled. "How pleasing, in a quaint, and frankly pathetic way." It peered around the room, taking in its surroundings with obvious distaste. "Many of us choose to like that. It confirms a certain prejudice, you understand."

I watched it silently, uncomprehendingly, unable to really speak, although my fear was finally under control.

It peered at me in return then, leaning forward again, one hand on its knee, the other on its hip, like some gangling, white-haired Entomologist examining a strange, newly discovered and vaguely disgusting insect.

"What," it said, "if you did not have to watch your little one die?" My daughter's white eyes gleamed at me – although they were not hers anymore. "What price will you pay for never having to see such a thing again for as long as you still have to live? What will you give for such a prize?"

Again?

It knew about Laura's mother?

Of course it knew.

"I – don't understand," I said, its words registering but their meanings falling deaf.

"What will you pay for a choice?"

"Choice?"

It nodded *her* head knowingly, then slowly straightened up, regarding me speculatively. "Your life for," it looked down, gestured at itself with two flourishing sweeps across its breast, "hers."

Now I understood.

"Any price," I said.

The demon nodded. "We know." It looked at me sadly then, through her eyes, and with obvious pity. My attachment to my little girl, my preparedness to give my life for her, must have seemed like the ultimate weakness. But maybe its sorrow was

for itself – for its inability to feel or even *do* something similar. “There is one price even you may not pay,” it said.

One price – for my little girl’s life – for the most precious thing in my universe – for the universe itself.

I cannot consider it – not the impossible.

I will pay anything.

The demon’s eyes glitter as it watches me – two sets of eyes as one; as it has watched countless times before, and through countless eyes not its own.

How many little girls has it looked through. . .

My terminally sick and still sleeping daughter arched her spine, both hands in the small of her back, easing non-existent cricks as though she were an old man, although the demon inside was ageless, as old as time itself.

I shuddered as I watched her – my little girl as someone – *something* – else. Then I answer the fallen one hiding behind my daughter’s eyes: “I *will* pay anything.”

It doesn’t hesitate: “Your immortal soul.”

The price. . .

Time stands still.

Images fly through my mind, some thoughts clearly mine, others not, others alien, evil, dark and unbidden.

“What happens?”

“If you pledge your spiritus sancta to the Lucent One?” it asked without pause.

I nodded.

“When you die, you are damned for eternity,” it said quite matter-of-factly, as though it was delivering the tiresome and obligatory part of some standard spiel. “Your soul is devoured and driven to the Saturnian pit with the host of the shells. You are tortured under the nine sigils of the thirty-six legions, your being is subjected to torment beyond space and time for all time to come.” It shrugged, gave him a broad wink. “To be honest, though, it’s really not all that bad.”

“How does it work?”

It cocked *her* head to one side. “Do you mean, what happens if you agree? Nothing,” it went on in response to my nod, “not straight away. There is no signature in blood,” it said then with a

chuckle. “No rituals of binding or summoning. The thing is – done.” It turned slightly, peering from the window, out into the moonlit night. “And you die. *All* of you – dies.”

“And my little girl?”

It snorted softly, its gaze drifting upwards into the night sky. I think it was peering at the moon, taking in the silvery light as though it was breathing the lucence. “She dies, of course,” it said. “Just a little later,” it added, smiling in petty amusement at my momentary loss of composure.

“She lives?”

“She does not die of this thing that devours her now,” it clarified.

“My life for hers?” I persist, my distrust for this thing rooted in the deepest core of my being.

It frowns at me. “I shall tire of you soon.”

I nod frantically, understanding its warning, biting my tongue against the flurry of questions I still want to ask it.

“May I ask one more question?”

It paused for a long time while it watched the night, as though it were stringing out the time we had, savouring its last few moments in this world before it had to return to its own. Its shrug of agreement, when it came, was so slight I almost missed it.

“How long will I have?”

It broke out in a wide grin. It knew this question, and precisely what it meant – but it still didn’t look around.

“Not long.” The demon crosses my daughter’s arms. “When you agree, when you tell us ‘it is so, and so it is so’, then it shall come to pass and you shall know when the time is close and that it is close. At the end,” it said, its arms outstretched as it pointed a long finger in invocation, “the messenger of your death shall come as the very best of all things.” It laughed then, a slithering, consumptive rattle that rolled about its throat like a kettle drum full of gravel. “Never let it be said that the Light Bringer is not merciful. Let us wait no longer than the next gibbous moon.”

Then it nodded.

Things were done.

My little girl fell where she stood, crashing to the floor, a dead

weight. At first deeply unconscious, then waking as though torn from a sleepwalker's dream, disoriented, tearful, frightened, she leapt into my arms and I held her, the two of us sprawled on the floor, rocking gently in time to the night's gentle eddies.

We were going to die – both of us.

I knew that now.

But then, we're all going to die.

It's always ever just a matter of when.

The demon had given me that much insight, at least.



Time passed quickly. The possession fell fast into the realm of dream. She remembered none of it, not even the awakening. My recollection faded almost as fast, as though it had been nothing more than my dream, rather than *her* nightmare.

In hindsight, it was an impossible event, had I *really* thought: our mutual forgetting. For that time, though, it was not strange. Nothing was strange anymore.

And I forgot what it told me with the passing of time – such short time. The weeks passed, and her health seemed to improve, her colour and energy returning. With time, the demon's words receded further into background.

She was well and life was well and all was well.

Then it ended.



Her relapse came just as we had both forgotten the fear and the revulsion of first understanding: the thing she and her mummy had horribly in common: awful, painful death at the hands of her own, rebellious, senseless flesh. Pointless – contrary to her life and to all life everywhere – the ultimate malfunction of the skin: the body killing itself in an unknowing pact of certain suicide.

That was when the second dream came.

It was quieter this time, deeply dark and insidious, like a trap was closing and there was nothing I could do to stop its jaws completing their work.

The dream figure stood in the half shadow cast by the nightlight in the hall, just as my daughter had done the last time the demon had come calling, only that time clothed in her flesh.

In my dream, though, I knew it was the demon again.

This time it came as a parody of my dead wife: taller, stark naked, an elongated, statuesque creature in faint monochrome and with snow-white, glitteringly bright eyes that glowed in the dream dark.

“The gibbous moon has come,” she said to me, her tone accusing. “And it has gone. Did you not understand what you were told?” Her expression said that she knew that I had. The question was nothing more than a torment.

I shook my head in answer, but we both knew that was a lie.

“Why didn’t you come as my daughter again?” I asked, the question appearing from nowhere.

The demon that looked like my dead wife lifted a long, sinuous forefinger – left it hovering in the air in front of its face, then drew a series of quick, side-ways figure eights in the air.

“We,” it said, its voice suddenly breaking into a high-pitched wowl, “are no longer permitted.”

It was a strange response. I wondered what it meant. Was some guardian angel present now, standing over my little one, keeping the fallen at bay? Then I remember – the horrible disease that has seized her tiny body and is eating her in slow and utterly foul stages and I wonder at the kind of angel that can stand by and watch such a horror and remain unmoved by the darkest aspect of mortality that it or any other of the heavenly host will ever see. . .

No kind I wanted by my side now.

I waited for the demon to compose itself.

Something had changed – for both of us.

“I want to accept,” I said. I paused, recollection flooding back.

“I want to pay your price now.”

It cocked its head, then smiled its shark-like smile.

“We know,” it said. It looked wistfully at me then, its angular face lit obliquely by the nightlight – *compassion in one of the damned? Who would have guessed?* “We always do,” it said. “Venality is *our* creation after all.”

I bit my tongue. Who would have guessed the fallen would be pushing for a deal? Then again, I didn't doubt they had invented that concept, too. "Can you do it?" I asked.

"Answer your *prayer*?" It voiced the Word strangely, as though it was a torture and a triumph at the same time – pleasure and pain. And that made a strange kind of sense.

My reply took no thought at all. "You know what I want."

After a short pause, it responded with a pattern of four rapid nods – then another four. Its ritual complete, it finally replied: "We have always known."

It knew. *They* knew. Of course they did. "Then you will give me what I want?"

"Speak your mind," it said without hesitation.

I pause. What is it I want to say? Save my little girl? Spare her life? But that was the thing, wasn't it. Was I to make such a request, would the fallen even listen? Or would they act out of spite on principle?

Would my asking *doom* her life rather than save it?

"Speak my mind?"

It nodded. "So as you have been told, so you speak."

Riddles again. But I understood what it meant.

Speak the litany.

It cocked its head to one side suddenly, its ear almost resting on its shoulder. "It will not be as it was once," it said, and smiled that smile again, the one that bespoke the creature's licence to bring all things undone – to pollute, torment, terrorise, contaminate, besmirch, cheapen and befoul whenever and whatever that licence permitted. This thing was not my friend and never had been, and it was not here to help me or my little girl.

It was the ultimate deceiver, merely fulfilling its destiny.

I felt a sudden icy thrill. *Things had changed.* "What do you mean?"

It lifted its hand and wagged its finger. "The gibbous moon was come."

"Yes – but what does *that mean*?"

If the demon intended to reply, it didn't get the chance. At that moment it slowly faded from my dream sight, smiling its gentle,

deadly smile, and never returned.

I'm not quite sure when it was I awoke. There was no actual realisation, now I think about it. Dream consciousness and wakefulness just seemed to merge into one, a seamless transition that suggested that, for now, for me, the two were as one.

The time has come. Time to broker my deal with The Devil – to speak my mind. . .

I reach out to a Dark Space; that place the demon said *they*, the dwellers in the nameless void, the shells of creation, will always be – *anti-places*. Like the right hand corners of darkly painted rooms, the dim places in the blind stairwells under a final flight of stairs, the null-like greyness at the back of deep cupboards, the spaces beneath the keystone of walled-up doors, the horizon point of long, long corridors, the blind doorways set into nameless walls that look like they lead to nowhere.

When I think about it, I instinctively know – as I have always known – that *is* where they are listening – that is where *they* will be.

The words come then and I speak them without hesitation.

“It is so, and so it is so.”

I pause, half expecting some earth-shattering response: a peal of thunder, the faint shudder from a sudden tectonic shift, the thrumming harmonic of a powerful, rising wind.

Only, nothing happened.

Just the night, breathing back at me – quiet, calm, a distant dog barking – and a high-pitched shriek, a harpy's scream from somewhere far, far away.

The horse appeared the very next morning.



Poetry in motion, I watch him out there now, as I have watched him for the last forty-eight hours: the image of him never really changing, as he dances out there in the sunlight, looking in at us every now and again – moving as though he dances in slow motion – his mane flying in sweeping fans of pure black gossamer as he tosses his magnificent head, as he laughs at the

light. His powerful legs propel him again and again, tearing the earth into great clouds of dust as he starts another performance – an equine ballet – and another lightning circuit of the corral he has chosen to inhabit for all this time.

My little girl thinks I have arranged this last, wonderful gift for her.

And in a way, she's quite right.

There is no doubt in my mind that the demon has kept its word. The moment I saw the magnificent horse, though, I realised that its penalty for my tardiness was a simple and yet devastatingly cunning one.

What else had it said to me, what felt like a lifetime ago?
Never let it be said that the Light Bringer is not merciful.

A strange mercy, it was very simple, really, this hellish punishment for my failure.

For my beautiful little girl, the very best of all things is a magnificent black stallion, dancing for her and her alone, out there in our garden.

For me, though – *for me* – the very best of all things is nothing more than the pure pleasure a magnificent, black stallion brings to my beautiful, dying little girl. . .

I do not know who death's messenger has come for.

I watch the deadly creature out there in my garden, wondering whether my answer will come sooner – and I wonder if this is hell.

In a way, I hope so. Maybe that means I already have my answer. Maybe it means our deal is done.

Because I'm there already.