

Soft on the Devil

by

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One day the heavenly beings came to present themselves before the Lord, and Satan also came among them. The Lord said to Satan, "Where have you come from?"

Satan answered the Lord, "From going to and fro on the earth, and from walking up and down on it."

The Lord said to Satan, "Have you considered my servant Job? There is no one like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man who fears God and turns away from evil."

Then Satan answered the Lord, "Does Job fear God for nothing? Have you not put a fence around him and his house and all that he has, on every side? You have blessed the work of his hands, and his possessions have increased in the land. But stretch out your hand now, and touch all that he has, and he will curse you to your face."

The Lord said to Satan, "Very well, all that he has is in your power; only do not stretch out your hand against him!"

So Satan went out from the presence of the Lord.

Job 1:6-12

Chapter 1

One of my uncles used to say judging other people based on what you can see is dangerous, because what you see isn't always a reflection of who they are. He said the world has a way of slanting things to make a person's life look different than it truly is, and sometimes people look better, and other times they look worse. He said more often than not when something bad happens to a person, sickness, tragedy, death, he or she had that evil coming because of the bad stuff they'd done and hadn't repented of, but occasionally, something terrible happens to someone who doesn't deserve it at all. Like with Job, God allows it as a test, to prove His faithfulness and eventually show forth His mercy and compassion. I don't know whether or not my uncle was right, I just thought that was a good way to start the story I'm telling, about what I've seen and heard since last summer.

A woman in my apartment complex went missing last June. Cindy Myran. Most of my neighbors assumed she was dead, given her reputation as a drunk and an addict, and the way she came and went at odd hours, the people who picked her up always shouting, laughing, and making a scene out in the street. My upstairs neighbor, Gary, said he thought she'd been murdered.

“Women like that get killed all the time,” he told me, a real serious look in his eyes. “They go out partying and strut around town, hop in cars with the loudest, meanest guy that takes an interest, and sooner or later he gets tired of her yapping and loses control. Or maybe she gets real unlucky and goes off with a really evil man who breaks her neck one night for the fun of it.” Gary twisted his hands like he was uncapping a pickle jar.

“Don’t you think she might have moved away,” I asked, “or gone to stay with a friend out of town somewhere?”

“She didn’t tell nobody. Kelly says she always calls and asks her to get her mail if she’s gonna be gone this long.”

“I know, but it’s possible she forgot to call Kelly, or thinks she already did, like a slip of her memory.”

Gary sneered.

“No, wait. I’ve got a sixth sense about stuff like this. I think we’ll see Cindy again.”

I remember being at work that week and feeling a dark cloud over everyone, even with the sunlight pouring through the windows and the people walking in from the lake all tired and rosy. They’d order a slice of gourmet pizza and a microbrew, and I’d ring it up on the register. I worked at the café counter of an EarthWay grocery store in the county, where those who could afford it shopped for organically grown, locally farmed meat and produce. The majority of my customers were married women, and I had to be careful because some of them liked to flirt. A

few of my coworkers liked to flirt too, which may have been why my boss, Vera, put me on the register and kept Rob and Casey on the food line. The Friday after Cindy went missing, one customer started flirting with me, but it turned out to be something else entirely.

It was after the lunch rush, one-thirty or so, and she walked up as I was counting and clipping the small bills, a lady with straight black hair down to her shoulders, white skin, and dark eye makeup and lipstick. She scared me a little, I looked up and she was there.

“Can I help you, ma’am?”

“I’m checking out the menu,” she said slowly, her eyes scanning the items overhead.

I set the stacks of ones and fives aside and waited.

“The Portabella Melt sounds delicious,” she smiled.

“It’s one of the favorites,” I said. “Is that what you want?”

“I don’t know,” she replied, a hint of playful agony in her voice. “What would you get if you were me?”

“I like the salmon avocado pizza,” I said matter-of-factly.

“That sounds nice.”

I waited while she scanned the menu a little longer.

“I’ll have the Portabella Melt,” she said at last. “You look like that actor, from those old movies. What’s his name, um...”

“Joseph Cotten.”

“Is that his name?”

“It’s what people say.”

“Maybe. Anyway, you’re very handsome. How much do I owe you?”

“Would you like a drink or dessert with that?”

“No, thanks.”

“Your total is twelve forty-three. For here or to go?”

“To go, please.”

After running her credit card and handing her the receipt, I told her the food would be ready in a few minutes and we’d call her name at the end of the counter. Later on, at about seven o’clock as I was leaving work, I saw her again, the same woman, sitting in her car in the EarthWay parking lot nearly six hours after she’d left the café. She was watching me when I saw her so I turned away real quick and kept walking calmly to my car. No one followed me out of the lot, but I took a detour from my normal route back to the city just in case.

The following week I turned on the tv—I usually watch a half hour of news before switching to a movie or doing some reading—and on the Tuesday night in question there was a story about the school district I lived in, Meremac South, being under investigation for allegations of fraud and abuse of public funds. They didn’t say anything else about it, the anchor just left it at that, which kind of frustrated me because I’d gone to high school at Meremac South and if someone was stealing money from those schools I wanted to know.

I read the Bible before bed that night, and I remember exactly what I read because of what happened in the middle of it. Chapter 1 of the Book of Jeremiah. “Now

the word of the Lord came to me saying, ‘Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you. I appointed you a prophet to the nations.’” I must have read for at least an hour, and as I was struggling over one of the Scriptures, a knock came on the door. The knock was quiet but had an energy behind it that made it feel loud. I closed my Bible and set it aside, stood up, and went to the door, careful not to make any noise in case it was someone looking for trouble. When I put my eye up to the peephole, there was Cindy Myran.

This was surprising for a number of reasons. One, the general consensus in my neighborhood was that Cindy was dead. I didn’t personally believe this to be the truth, but part of me had been afraid it was. Two, prior to her going missing she and I never talked. I’d lent her some quarters and dryer sheets in the laundry room a few times but we hardly knew each other. Three, I lived on the opposite side of the courtyard in our apartment complex, so even if she knocked on a random door for help the odds of it being my door were slim to none.

While hesitating for a moment to consider my options, I heard her say, “Open up, Ian, I saw you look through the peephole.”

“Okay,” I said back, unlocking the door.

“Can I come in, please?”

“Of course,” I nodded and let her walk past me. “Have a seat. I’ll get you a drink. Do you like Diet Sprite?”

“Do you have any beer?” she asked, sitting down on

the couch.

“I think so. Yeah, I’ve got a couple harvest wheat ales, and a—”

“It doesn’t matter.”

“Okay.” I brought her a beer and opened one for myself. “Cheers, you’re alive,” I smiled, raising my bottle.

“You think anyone’d care if I wasn’t?”

“I’d care. I mean, we don’t know each other, but— Kelly, she’d care.”

“Kelly only cares cause I get her high. She’d be sad about that, though, you’re right.”

“Can I get you some aspirin or something? How about food, are you hungry?”

“If you’ve got some granola bars or something I can take with me, that’d be great. I can’t stay here for long, they might come looking.”

“Who might come looking?”

She chugged the rest of her beer. “The kind of guys you don’t name unless you do want to die. Listen, Ian, everyone knows you’re a good person—”

I spat a mouthful of beer onto the wooden table between us, and some of it splashed up on her left knee and thigh. “I’m sorry,” I coughed, “I didn’t expect you to say that.”

“What? It’s true. You have a good reputation, you’re honest.”

“I guess so.” I handed her a paper towel from the kitchen and started wiping up the beer.

“I need fifty dollars for a bus ticket to Bradson City.”

“I don’t have fifty dollars. I have five.”

“You work in Pineville and you don’t have fifty bucks?”

“I just settled some overdue rent with John. I’m a pizza cashier, by the way—how’d you know where I work?”

“You don’t get out much, do you.” Cindy shook her head, planted her face in her hands. “Uhhhhhh,” she groaned.

“If you want, I can drive you to Bradson City.”

She peeked up through her fingers. “You’d do that?”

“Sure. I’ve got a full tank, you’re running for your life... It makes sense.”

“Thank you, thank you, thank you!” she squealed, jumping up and hugging me.

“I’ll have to call in sick tomorrow. We can wait till morning, can’t we?”

“No. Yes, we can,” she smiled. “Thank you.”

“Alright. I hope the couch is okay for you to sleep on. I’ll get you a blanket.”

In the morning, I woke up to find an empty couch, no Cindy, no note, only the blanket folded neatly over the armrest and a few empty beer bottles on the kitchen counter. “Guess I don’t have to take the day off work,” I said. I walked across the courtyard to Kelly’s place to ask if she’d seen her the night before.

“Honey, Cindy’s dead. I thought everybody knew that by now.”

“Everyone *thought* she was dead, but I don’t assume stuff like that. I had the feeling she might have dropped by here last night at eleven or twelve.”

“If she did then it was her ghost who showed up. They found Cindy’s body in the woods down by the lake. Don’t you have a tv?”

I heard Kelly’s voice speak these words and saw her lips moving, but their meaning didn’t sink in right away. I shuffled back to my apartment like a zombie and sat down at the kitchen table with a cup of coffee and a plate of untoasted poparts. Our conversation the night before revolved through my mind, Cindy’s face, her words, the urgency of her request, faded into the hollow ache of nothingness. I made myself eat, chewing quickly and washing down the synthetic sweetness with strong black coffee. Then, standing up, I approached the television, took a deep breath, and pressed the power button. The screen showed trees, police officers, and emergency vehicles, with a caption reading: “Woman Found Dead at Hoppersand Lake.”