

The Devil I Know Is the Man Upstairs

The Satanist goes up the stairs carrying groceries sacked in paper, not plastic. He comes down the stairs carrying dirty laundry in a wicker basket. He goes up with library books, Blockbuster rentals, a double dip chocolate chip ice cream cone. He comes down with stacks of neatly bundled newspaper, aluminum cans, and glass bottles, which he loads into the trunk of his car and hauls off to the community recycling center.

The Satanist drives a burgundy 1993 Chevy Lumina. Though the Lumina still has his parents' names on the title, they have all but given it to him. He keeps a red plastic El Diablo bobblehead on the dashboard, its black eyebrows high and arched, its teeth white, its lips curled into a devilish smirk. An exotic dancer the Satanist was interested in taking out to the movies turned him down, and the reason she gave was that she didn't care for his El Diablo. She was a Christian girl, she said, and that devil bobblehead gave her the creeps.

The Satanist is twenty-six years old. His features look nothing like a goat's. He doesn't have horns or a barbed tail or cloven feet. He doesn't have blood red eyes or flames shooting out of his mouth. His ice cream cone doesn't melt any faster than yours. Smoke does not come out of his ears or his nostrils.

The Satanist doesn't smoke. Not cigarettes or cigars or a pipe. Not even marijuana—not even a single tiny hit at a party when everyone else is having some. The Satanist doesn't do drugs. He's never done drugs, doesn't see the point. He'll drink a beer or two—his favorite is Guinness, though Beck's is a close second—but only when he's out somewhere. He doesn't drink to get drunk; he doesn't drink at home; he doesn't drink alone.

Every Sunday, the Satanist calls his parents in Cedarburg, Wisconsin, a suburb of Milwaukee. He asks what's new with them. His mother teaches third grade at a Catholic school, and he likes hearing about the kids in her class, the cute things they say and do. He asks his parents how they're doing, how they're feeling, how's Grandma? The Satanist's grandmother is getting older; her health isn't good, and his father isn't well, either. He has Lou Gehrig's disease, a condition that's almost always fatal. The Satanist can't help but worry about the people he loves. Sometimes he thinks about moving back to Cedarburg, moving back in with his parents so he can be there for his family, so he can be a help.

But other times, he thinks about taking a chance on his dreams. He wrote a screenplay about the mad monk Rasputin and Rasputin's role in the fall of the Romanovs. Sometimes the Satanist dreams about moving to Hollywood where he would sell his screenplay then make a career out of writing more. Other times, he considers applying to PhD programs so he can work on a degree in Film Studies.

While he mulls over his next move, the Satanist has a regular weekend gig spinning records at wedding receptions. "People like to do the chicken dance," he tells me. "They like polkas and the Hokey-Pokey and the Y.M.C.A. It's irritating, but the Macarena has made a comeback."

The Satanist's mother hasn't exactly been hassling him, but during their Sunday telephone conversations, she's made her wishes clear. She is a practical woman, nice-smelling, more than a few gray hairs, an excellent cook, a devout Catholic, a loving wife and mother. She would like her son to find a job, a good job, one with a 401(k) plan and health insurance that includes eyes and dental. She thinks it's high time he enter the real world.

The Satanist assures her: "Okay, Mom, okay! I'm looking for a job, okay?"

The Satanist loves movies, especially scary movies, slasher pictures and horror flicks, and those cannibal exploitation films that came out of Italy in the 1970s. His favorite is called *Cannibal Holocaust*. He also likes the Planet of the Apes movies and films directed by Wes Craven, and he especially loves the movie *Jaws*.

The Satanist wears a shark's tooth on a cord around his neck that he bought at the Minnesota State Fair. He wears baggy jeans and he has a collection of baggy dark T-shirts. One of them has Marilyn Manson on it. Another says "666" in red letters. Another says "Team Satan," while yet another has a little devil on it and a caption that reads "I'm horny!"

One of his T-shirts has a great white shark on it—“SHARK ATTACK!” it says—and still another has the shark from *Jaws*.

Although he doesn't like getting up early—he's not a morning person—the Satanist likes breakfast food. Juice, toast, potatoes. Bacon and eggs. I've seen him eat a tall stack of pancakes. I've seen him eat a ham and cheese omelet. On Monday, when we went out for breakfast, I didn't ask him if he wanted my home fries, I just said move your toast, and I slid them on his plate.

The Satanist is a big-but-not-fat, awkward-moving, sweet-looking guy with a round face, round glasses, and high, thin eyebrows that make him look both skeptical and surprised. He has a nice smile. He has big brown eyes. His hairline is receding. He has pinchable cheeks. I think as raw material, he has potential. He just needs a new wardrobe, better-fitting jeans, and T-shirts that aren't black and faded and advertising things related to sharks or Satan. He needs to trim those fingernails. He definitely needs a better haircut. What he needs is a girlfriend. The love of a good woman is what he needs to forget all about this Satanism business.

Al says it's fine for me to take a Satanist out for breakfast, but what that boy does not need is me meddling in his personal life. “He already has a mother who worries about him,” Al says, “and you already have a son. You should worry about your own son.”

I point out that my son isn't a Satanist.

“No,” Al says, “your son is a thirteen-year-old capitalist.”

Al believes the Satanist should be entitled to his own decisions about how he wants to live his life, without interference from me. “It's not like I'm trying to witness to him. I'm not out to convert him,” I say.

“Well, you're no Jerry Falwell,” Al says. He squares his fingers like he's a movie director studying me through a camera's lens. “Actually, I see you more as the young Tammy Faye Baker type.”

But maybe I do have a hidden agenda. Maybe these Take-a-Satanist-to-Breakfast-Mondays are part of my secret mission. I wouldn't dream of offending him, but maybe—because I like the guy; I think he's smart and funny and entertaining and sweet—I don't want him to be a Satanist. Maybe I fret about the condition of his soul and worry over where he's going to spend eternity. Maybe I don't want him to go to hell.

Miss McCade, my childhood Sunday school teacher, warned me about hell, and if she were here now, she would tell me to watch out! Be on guard! Pray! Because maybe I'm being tested by God. Or maybe

I'm being tempted by the devil. You never know what form he may take. Maybe Satan will come knocking on my door claiming he just happened to be in the neighborhood. Maybe he'll tap on my shoulder and ask may I have this dance. He might say smoke this, he might say drink that. He might say take this, it's yours. He could very well call me up and say let's you and me hit the casino. Satan might look me in the eye and tell me breakfast is his favorite meal of the day.

Being friends with a Satanist freaks me out. I can give money to Planned Parenthood, I can wear a T-shirt that says "The Only Bush I Trust Is My Own." I can support candidates in the Democratic Party and write letters protesting my local government's decision to display an enormous concrete tablet featuring the Ten Commandments in front of the county courthouse. I can offer dollar bills and my cheek to Miss Wiley Jane, the ruby-lipped drag queen who has just delighted me with her lip-synched performance of "Red Neck Woman." I can conjure up all sorts of wildness, all kinds of wickedness, a variety of wantonness, but ask one little Satanist does he like grape jelly on his toast and I'm hearing Miss McCade's voice in my head. She's whispering *Girl, you are on the highway to hell.*

Al doesn't have a Miss McCade in his past, but that's because he was a Unitarian. That was a long time ago, and only for a short while, and only because there were cute little hippie girls at the Unitarian Universalist Church. Al remembers these girls fondly. They loved Jesus and they were real wild. Al says they prayed for him, but they also turned him on to some good drugs. He says he dropped mescaline in that church once, courtesy of the hippie girls. He also says those Unitarian hippie girls were loose.

"Another plus in my book," he says.

Even though that particular church had a lot to offer, once Al returned home from Vietnam, he put religion forever behind him like it was an incredibly hard test he crammed for only to pass and forget about. He survived a war, and rather than thanking God for getting him through it, he questioned why any God who loved him would send him to Southeast Asia in the first place. Thus, Al has no interest in or tolerance for religious concerns, my own or anyone else's. I can't even get him to go to Christmas Vespers to hear the choir.

But I've always had a religious streak. When I was little and someone asked me what I wanted to be when I grew up, I said a Catholic. It

seemed like the easy religion, and the most fun. I envied the Catholic kids at school. Their CCD classes. Their Christmas midnight mass. Their accessories: rosaries, medallions, candles, a Saint Francis birdbath for the garden, a plastic Jesus for the dashboard of your car. I liked how Catholics played bingo—with cigarettes and daubers, with gusto and nuns. Their weddings lasted for hours and were followed by spaghetti dinner receptions at the town fire hall. It seemed to me that, unlike people from my church, Catholics knew how to throw a party, knew how to worship God and still have a pretty good time. I wanted to wear a lacy white First Holy Communion dress. I wanted to pick a confirmation name. I wanted a party, a sheet cake, and a kind-hearted priest who'd act as mediator between me and God, the way my mother did when she was breaking it to my father that I'd gotten another bad grade in math. I wanted a religion where followers didn't seem so fixated on where they'd spend the afterlife and knew where I could buy a raffle ticket that might win me a thousand bucks at the St. Vitus Bazaar.

People from my church said Catholics aren't true Christians. In fact, people from my church said Catholics are misled, misguided, just flat out wrong. Satan has tricked them, and because of their willful blindness, Catholics are going to hell.

It's partly because Catholics gamble and worship false idols like the Virgin Mary and all those weird saints, and what is with that hocus-pocus jibber-jabber to Saint Whatshisface they run in the classified ads?

It's partly because Catholics don't read the Bible. Some of them don't even have a Bible. How can they ever know the Word of God if they don't read the Bible?

But the big deal breaker, what truly keeps Catholics locked outside the gates of heaven no matter how good they've been, no matter how much good they've done—and Mother Theresa, this includes you!—is that they have not accepted Jesus Christ as their personal savior. They haven't invited Jesus into their hearts. It's a real Christian's moral obligation to explain to them that this is the wrong road. That this is the one true highway to hell.

Jewish people are going to hell. Muslims, too. So are Mormons and Christian Scientists, Jehovah's Witnesses and Unitarian hippie chicks. So are Hindus and Buddhists and Rastafarians, queers and lesbians, feminists and communists, Quakers and Mennonites, Democrats, and all the Baldwin brothers except Stephen (he went born-again after 9-11). So are the native peoples in places like the Congo and the Dominican Republic and the Ivory Coast.

Satanists are most definitely going to hell.

So are you.

Unless you accept Jesus Christ as your personal savior. Unless you welcome Him into your heart.

Which I have.

More than once.

I went to church every Sunday morning when I was growing up. My mother woke me, then my two brothers. She poured us bowls of cereal or fried us some eggs. She made sure we were nicely dressed, our faces washed, our teeth brushed, our cowlicks slicked down. Then she sent us off to church with my aunt and her family, kindly people who agreed to assume responsibility for our souls on Sundays between 8:30 and noon.

“Bye-bye, kids,” my mother would say.

Sometimes, when we got home, there would be a box of Dunkin’ Donuts on the kitchen counter or the house would smell like bacon. Sometimes, my parents’ bed wasn’t made. Sometimes, my mother would be singing and my father would be taking a nap. As far as my parents were concerned, they’d come into a win-win situation: they had the house completely to themselves for several hours, their children were learning about God from experts, and this baby-sitting/moral instruction didn’t cost them a dime.

The Christian Missionary Alliance church my brothers and I attended had two items on its eternal To-Do list:

1. Send Christian Missionary Alliance missionaries to places like the Congo, the Dominican Republic and the Ivory Coast to spread the Good News about Jesus; build Christian Missionary Alliance churches; and convert the natives.
2. Prepare for the Second Coming.

Item Number One didn’t seem so bad to me. The first Sunday of every month was Missionary Sunday, which meant a slide show that included photographs of mud huts and scrawny donkeys and women lugging jugs of water on top of their heads. At the beginning of the slideshow, we saw pictures of skinny, bare-footed, sad-eyed, dark-skinned children wearing skirts made of twigs and leaves. By the end of the show, these same kids had fattened up. They were wearing our surplus tie-dyed Vacation Bible School T-shirts from the summer of 1981. They were wearing Easter shoes we’d outgrown. They were holding Bibles. Those kids were grinning ear-to-ear, and they were giving a thumbs-up. They

were finally happy and at peace and well-fed. When they died, those kids would go to heaven. Because they knew Jesus.

Item Number Two, however, preparing for the Second Coming, gave me nightmares worse than the flying-monkey-from-the-*Wizard-of-Oz* bad dreams, worse than dreams of falling out of the sky, worse than the dream where I'm at the National Spelling Bee Championship, naked and unable to spell "formaldehyde" in front of my teachers and family and peers, and infinitely worse than the dream where Miss McCade stands before our Sunday School class and explains what Bob Seger meant when he said he was working on his night moves.

Miss McCade was a sweet old lady whose pantyhose wrinkled some around her knees and her ankles. She had tightly permed gray hair, and every week she wore the same lavender-gray skirt and jacket. It would take me years to identify that she smelled like old lady: rose-scented lotion and Ben-Gay. It was Miss McCade's job, her calling, to prepare children between the ages of twelve and seventeen for the Second Coming.

Preparing for the Second Coming means you have to be on call at all times, always on your best behavior. Because as it says in Matthew 24:36, "No man knoweth the day and hour," and since the Second Coming, also known as the Rapture, can happen at any time, it would not do to be caught in a compromising position. It would not do to be fornicating on the Day of Rapture, for example, or sitting alone in your bedroom spilling your seed, or even merely considering the secrets of what is under clothing, your own or anyone else's. It would not do to be caught swaying while flicking a Bic lighter at a Bob Seger or Black Sabbath concert. It wouldn't do to even be listening to Seger or Sabbath on vinyl, 8-track or cassette tape.

Don't you know the letters in KISS stand for Kids In Satan's Service? Miss McCade would say. AC/DC means After Christ, the Devil Comes. And don't even think about listening to that especially beguiling music known as Christian Rock. There is no Christian Rock. That's just another one of Satan's tricks designed to distract you from knowing the Lord, Miss McCade would say.

Every Sunday she'd remind us that we needed to stay on our toes because no man knoweth the day and hour. She'd say, "I sure wouldn't want to be sitting in a movie theater when Jesus comes." She'd say, "I sure wouldn't want to be playing poker when Jesus comes." She'd say, "I sure wouldn't want to be drunk on beer when Jesus comes."

Sometimes, during Sunday services, listening to the preacher call forth anyone who wanted a fresh start, anyone who accepted Christ's

redemption, anyone who needed God's forgiveness, I'd feel such loneliness and longing that I went forth to be saved, and I even said I was saved—I announced it, proclaimed it, declared it, but really, I never felt like it took. I never felt different than I did before. I wanted to believe, but I second guessed my motives. It wasn't Jesus' voice telling me to cover my ears when I walked past the duplex where the guitar-playing hippies lived and I heard them singing *I set out running but I take my time / a friend of the devil is a friend of mine*, it was Miss McCade's. Miss McCade's was the voice in my head when, annoyed with my mother, I purposely stepped on a crack in the sidewalk. *I sure wouldn't want to be breaking my mother's back when Jesus comes.*

For years and years, Miss McCade had the power to mess with my head. Fears about what I would and wouldn't want to be doing when Jesus came screwed up a lot of otherwise perfectly fun Friday nights at frat parties or keggers or in the back seats of cars.

Miss McCade's voice wormed through my thoughts especially insistently when I'd been smoking marijuana. *I sure wouldn't want to be doped up on Thai stick when Jesus comes*, Miss McCade would say, mocking me, and she tugged on the ends of her perm. One time, during a party at the Theta Xi house, Miss McCade hitched up her saggy pantyhose, then turned to me and quoted from Hebrews 10:26–27: “If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left, but only a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God.”

“Will somebody please please please make that chick shut the fuck up about raging hellfire?” a frat boy said. “Because the way she's going on about it is really stomping on my buzz.”

When I was in fifth grade, at Vacation Bible School, there was a contest for memorizing Bible verses. The prize was a globe with brown crosses on all the countries where missionaries were bringing the Word to the natives and the natives to the Light. I was determined to win. The lazy kids all memorized “Jesus wept,” while smart-asses liked stuff from Leviticus—Leviticus 18:23, for example: “Neither shalt thou lie with any beast to defile thyself therewith: neither shall any woman stand before a beast to lie down thereto: it is confusion”—but I was obsessed with the verses that describe hell.

I still have a great imagination for the place. Hell is as far from heaven as you can get. The people there are cackling and crackling, flailing and wailing, weeping and gnashing their teeth. The image of weeping and

gnashing of teeth is referenced in the Bible in seven different verses (six in the Book of Matthew; one in Luke), and at age eleven, I could recite every one of them.

Twenty-five years later, I can't remember the exact words to those seven verses well enough to win another contest, but the feeling they gave me has never left. It's a creepy, jittery feeling but it's also enticing, like peeking at a scary movie through your fingers. Sometimes, in the mornings when I wake up, my jaw is clenched and aching, my head is pounding, I feel like my teeth are chipped, broken, in shards.

Al tells me I need to chill out. Because what if there's another possibility? What if when you die, that's it, that's the end, there is no God, no heaven, no eternal damnation, no fiery pit, no Miss McCade? What if there's just nothingness. Al says that's what he believes, so why not be a nice person but still have a good time.

When I was in college, I read *Pensées*, a work by 17th century French philosopher, Blaise Pascal, who encouraged me to put my money on God. Might as well, Pascal said. If you believe, and He exists, the pay off is huge. But if you don't believe, and God is real, you're screwed. If you believe, and it turns out there is no God, then really, what have you lost? Pascal believed people were lousy anyway—"How hollow is the heart of man," he wrote in *Pensées*, "and how full of excrement!"—so why not live a virtuous life? Why not believe, and live like you believe, and maybe, just maybe, you'll end up behaving your way to belief?

Pascal sounds a lot like Dr. Phil, who says you can behave your way to success, and Pascal also reminds me a lot of my father who said I do as I'm told because if I didn't there'd be hell to pay.

Something in me resisted my father; it's the same something that thinks it's Dr. Phil who is full of excrement. Maybe it's the desire to live a fiery and interesting life, a longing for adventure. Maybe it's that I have an appreciation for fornication, intoxication, and AC/DC. Maybe it's that I think Saturday night is more fun than Sunday morning, and if Eve didn't pick that apple, there'd be no apple pie.

Al says he's going to turn his beliefs into his own religion, his own church; he can make good use out of the nonprofit tax status. He says he'll be the spiritual leader of this new faith—no, actually, he will be God—and it will be my job to secure the compound, bring him virgins, and hang out at airports selling roses. He says he's putting my friend the Satanist in charge of making sure there are enough clean flowing white robes for everyone. He says his new religion is going to combine the

pacifist teachings of Buddha with the doll-making practices of voodoo. “I’m going to call it Boo-Doo,” Al says. “At the beginning of services, my members will chant *Who do Boo-Doo? We do and you do!* five times. Then we’ll drink some beer, play some poker, and have some laughs. Then church is over. Until next time.”

I laugh, but secretly, part of me is nervous. Part of me is pretty certain that God in heaven and—certainly—Miss McCade are annoyed at Al, but that they’re saving their real wrath for me. Because I laugh at blasphemy instead of setting the blasphemer straight. Because I haven’t brought the Satanist to the Lord. Because I was raised in the Christian Missionary Alliance Church, and that means I’ve been told, I should know, I’ve been given the truth and made aware of the consequences, so what part of eternal damnation do I not understand? Miss McCade pats me on the hand, saying *Girl, it’s going to be hot where you’re going.*