

THE DARK SIDE OF LIGHT

INS|PID

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Insipid
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TO THE ONES WHO HAVE ESCAPED
THE RESEARCH LABS.

KEEP LAUGHING.
KEEP RUNNING IN THE SUN.
KEEP POINTING THE WAY TO TRUE FREEDOM.

HOW DO THE MASSES LEARN
TO DESIRE THEIR OPPRESSION
AS THOUGH IT WAS THEIR LIBERATION?

SPINOZA

PART ONE

ONE

Leo was three when his dad used the jumper cables the first time. He was too young to remember the moment but the scar that runs across his cheek and nose reminds him anyway. It has faded over the years, but like most pain, it hasn't entirely disappeared. As he sat across from me, in my favorite suburban coffee shop, I stared at it and got a lump in my throat. Like I always did. It just about killed me every time I tried to imagine the length of it on the much smaller face of a three-year-old Leo. It would have filled the whole damn thing. I tried to move my eyes.

"Looking at my scar again?" Leo asked.

"Shit," I responded. "I'm so sorry."

He smiled, showing off his unexpectedly beautiful smile. The gods of teeth had somehow given him a perfect set while he was growing up with a family that barely knew orthodontists existed, let alone ever took him to one. He had only been to a dentist once in his life and that was thanks to a nice donation from someone in my church. The dentist told me later that he had never seen such an immaculate mouth from someone who had come from such poverty. He called it a miracle: the immaculate expression. Apparently the Indigenous Australians had perfect teeth too, though, and that was from not eating sugar. Maybe Leo just didn't eat much sugar—although that would have been a miracle in itself, given the "home" he grew up in.

Either way, the teeth definitely helped the smile. But more than that, the smile revealed some kind of joyful energy that comes from somewhere humans have trouble explaining after years of jumper cables, two-by-fours, glass bottles, and savagery from the guardian he was supposed to be able to trust in life.

"It's alright, my friend, don't you worry about it." He laughed, sending his sharp, dark, and distinctive eyebrows up toward the sky. Scientists say those kinds of eyebrows are associated with narcissism but Leo didn't have a narcissistic bone in his body. Not that my narcissist radar could find at least.

"I'm sorry," I repeated, finally looking away. It would have been

nice if I had been able to look away from Gwen and her low-cut shirt the first time I had met her to talk about her marriage problems and create a collection of my own. I carried my own set of scars, not as visible as Leo's, and maybe a bit more painful because of all the secrecy.

"Pastor Seth, I really do need to get going." Leo stood up from his chair.

I wish she had said and done the same thing a little over a year earlier. I wish *I* had. Unfortunately, life doesn't give "undo" keys even if I wished for that too. "Leo, you know I hate it when people call me pastor. Just Seth." I stood up too.

"I know." He grinned, showing off that enchanting smile again. "That's why I done it."

I laughed and reached out my arms to give him a hug. As with every time I hugged Leo, I felt like I needed to put on about thirty pounds of muscle in order to lower my risk of instant asphyxiation or organ damage but I managed to survive one more time.

"Keep on rocking, man," I said.

"You too," he answered before turning around and walking his massive, muscular frame toward the door.

I stared for a moment, basking in the leftover energy of Leo and letting my manufactured smile (from years of braces) stay on my face in response to his natural one.

Both eventually faded and I sat down again. My next visitor would be arriving in minutes. It was the dreaded *triple-meeting-morning*. Back to back to back. Leo was the only good one, which meant the next two put a small pit in my stomach.

As I watched Leo get into his 1992 Toyota Camry that used to be maroon before it become whatever color hard water, sun, and rust had turned it into, I thought of the Hero's Journey and wondered whether Leo was just stuck in wilderness for longer than most or if there was an alternate version of the mythic story for people handed the cards he was that never included gifts or heroic returns. Instead—abuse, hate, violence, and an eventual cell. I have a friend who works with prisoners. He says he has never met one that wasn't abused as a child.

I knew Leo didn't wake up one day and decide it would be fun to hurt other humans. I don't think any human does. But abuse is an infection that keeps spreading from one person to the next, until someone, somewhere finds an antibiotic. When your dad cracks a two-by-four across your back and says that he does it because he loves you, well, years later, Leo was just showing love to his girlfriend in the only way he knew how. Unfortunately for Leo, that girl was the daughter of a judge and that judge did not care much for anyone who wasn't white.

I'm not saying Leo shouldn't have paid for his crime but he *really* paid.

Somehow, he still smiles.

I should smile more like Leo.

The sad thing is that Leo found "god" in jail. There are lots of gods, I suppose, but he found one that also shows love by punishing his children with two-by-fours, even if they are shaped into crosses. It all makes sense on some twisted level. They say we store trauma in our brain stem. I would have thought Leo's was full, but maybe he was just addicted to father abuse/trauma and wanted some more from his heavenly "father" too. I love Leo and he loves me. He's put up with more than I can imagine. We've spent a lot of time together but he prays for me because he thinks I don't know god like he does. He's right. I don't. Leo doesn't come to my church anymore and now, I guessed, neither will Bob, who walked in just after I watched Leo's car, with the fish sticker on the bumper, drive away.

I looked at Bob and waved with a fake smile. I'm pretty skilled at fake smiles after years of practicing in front of douchebags like Bob.

A few minutes later, Bob was wrapping up the speech he had prepared for me and probably gone over with his wife a few times the night before. He informed me that he was leaving my church because he felt it had gotten "away from the Bible a little too much." I was, as he said, "propagating the kind of false religion that Jesus warned everyone about in the Bible." He said "he understood the temptations and pressure" and then capped it off with "Jesus come quickly, right, Pastor Seth?"

Well Bob, I wouldn't count on Jesus coming back real soon. I'm sure, thanks in no small part to people like you, he's too embarrassed of the religion started in his name to ever show his face again.

Well, that's what I wanted to say but I don't usually say what I *want* to say. Authenticity is a word that sounds nice on paper, but I'm usually massaging my thoughts as they move from brain to tongue to make them a little less authentic and a little more accepted.

Especially when I'm "Pastor Seth" talking to "Bob."

Especially if Bob is practically begging me to lie to him.

So, I faked a grin and massaged the truth.

"I understand. We're not for everyone. There are lots of other great churches in town." *And they will teach you just what you want to be taught: gay people and Muslims are going to hell and you aren't, even if you're obscenely rich, own four assault rifles that you would gladly use on any intruder, and had an affair that your wife still doesn't know about. I'm sure they'll let you play your guitar on the worship team too.*

He leaned in very sincerely. His cologne had a nostalgic cabin

sweetness to it that I'd always liked, even if he did wear way too much. I would miss the cologne. Who was I kidding? I was going to miss the whole family. I didn't mind that we didn't agree. Unfortunately, that feeling is rarely reciprocated, especially in religious circles, where agreements determine your eternal fate, which could include being tortured in the most painful way possible for eternity. That's all. No big deal. If the choice was between burning our relationship or burning forever because he had listened to me propagate a "false religion," it did seem a pretty clear choice.

I definitely would not miss his below-average guitar skills.

"Seth, you've been instrumental in our faith," he continued with a generic patronizing tone. "We've grown tremendously because of your words every Sunday. I just think it's time we move on."

Of course, because you definitely want to leave a place where you've grown tremendously. I'm sure he wasn't really saying what he wanted to say, either. We all have our invisible rules. He was probably being nicer than he wanted.

"I get it," I answered. That was true. I was a little sad, a little frustrated, but mostly fine. He wasn't the first person who had told me they were leaving and he wouldn't be the last. I still liked him and his scents.

"We'll miss you," I said. "Really will. And I hope you find love. And peace. And friends that can share it all with you." I meant all of it. Authentic words for the first time in our conversation.

"Thanks, Seth." We both stood up and I reached out to give him a hug. He seemed surprised, even though we had hugged a hundred times.

"And listen," I added. "Let's not make this awkward. If we see each other around town, we don't have to pretend we don't." We both laughed and he reached out to shake my hand—his preferred method of human interaction for the type of goodbye we were involved in.

"Are you headed out?" He pointed toward the door that Leo had walked out of fifteen minutes earlier.

"I'm actually going to hang around here for a little." I nodded toward the table. "My wife is going to pick me up later."

"Something happen to your car?" he asked.

"No, just sharing today." I smiled. *You know, trying to save the planet one tiny bit.*

"Alright, see you around, Seth. God bless you and your family!" Everyone in the store could hear him—which I assumed he intended—and he waved happily before turning around to leave.

"Take care, Bob." I responded so he and everyone else could

hear my response—that didn't include arcane religious clichés—and took my seat back at the table in front of my lukewarm coffee, wondering if I should get a hot refill.

I pulled out my phone and started looking over some news feeds, choosing the more convenient addiction to numb myself instead.

"A Mexican Demon Named Charlie Is the Internet's Newest Urban Legend" was the first title I clicked on. According to the article, summoning a demon was the new rage for teenagers. They were drawing crosses on sheets of paper and putting "Yes" and "No" into the four quadrants of the shape before stacking two pencils crosswise and saying, "Charlie, Charlie, are you there?" The top pencil would rotate and the demon would answer *Yes* or *No*.

There were some videos. I watched one with the phone close to my face so I could hear the screaming of the teenagers as the pencils moved.

The kids on the video seemed to be having lots of fun. More fun than I was having. I decided I should probably have more fun and maybe meet a demon. It was like a homemade Ouija board. The rest of the article was about gravity making the pencils move and the fact that there is no demon that goes by the name of Charlie in Mexico.

I definitely agreed with that. *Really, there are probably no demons at all.* Unless people like Bob were demons when they lied about why they were leaving my church.

"What a dick, right?" I heard the words, but wasn't listening. Another skill of mine, honed to perfection, with years of practice. Instead, I kept reading about the kids searching for Charlie and the dire warnings of dabbling with the occult from religious leaders.

"I heard the whole thing, man," the voice said again. "That guy is a real dick." In case I didn't hear the first time.

I looked up at a very normal man. I don't know what normal means but whatever I imagine when I think of the word, he was it. Familiar, almost. Ordinary ... known even? At least recognizable—in a déjà vu kind of way even though I had definitely never met him. Normal haircut, normal clothes, normal skin, normal eyes, normal face, absolutely nothing to make him stand out in any way. Boring. And yet he did stand out because no one is ever *that* normal. Or known, or familiar, or ordinary. Was he so normal he wasn't? Did that make him unique? Did that make any of us unique?

He looked directly at me and showed me his teeth. Also normal. Not inspiring like Leo's and not bleach-white-too-perfect like Bob's but ... normal.

I laughed, nodded at the man, as though to say I hear you and

see you, listened this time, and still don't want to talk to you. I looked back to my phone.

"Don't you get tired of that?" he asked.

I looked up again. "Of what?"

"You're a pastor, right?"

"Yeah," I admitted begrudgingly. Once it's out there the whole conversation always changes. The word might as well be UPS, it carries so much baggage.

"So," he started again. "You've got to get real tired of that. Rich dude. Greedy as hell. Affairs. Everything is wrong, unless *he* does it."

I obviously looked very perplexed, not because he was wrong but because he was right. "Do you know him?"

"In a way," he answered. "That's complicated."

"Alright." I didn't want to know more. The conversation was already uncomfortable enough.

"My name is Ehs." He reached out his hand for mine.

"Ehs?" I repeated, not sure on the pronunciation but reaching out my hand. There was something oddly normal about his skin even—as though the temperature was exactly what I was expecting it to be.

"Yep, Ehs. Pronounced just like the letter before *t*."

I assumed he had said that sentence a million times in his life. "Cool name. Not sure I've heard that one before."

"That's the English translation." He glanced over at the line of people anxious for the dark liquid that would feed their habits before work and then looked to his watch. "I don't have a lot of time. So, maybe we should get right to it."

"Oh ..." I said, wondering what there was to "get to" and why he thought I was "in" on the getting-to. My next meeting wasn't scheduled for another fifteen minutes because Bob had mercifully made his conversation short.

"Seth," he said, immediately stalling my brain. *Have I told him my name?* "I'm here for a reason. And I know this is out of the blue, but just give me a second. Will you do that?"

Maybe he had once gone to my church. Or maybe he was a regular that I had never noticed. It was hard to keep track of everyone, I told myself.

"My wife is going to be here soon," I answered, looking out the window, hoping to see our car already waiting even though she was not supposed to be there for another hour.

He ignored me. "I know this seems weird but, trust me, it's not. Just a second?"

"Sure," I answered much more enthusiastically than I felt.

Statistically zero means that, according to the numbers, there is a zero percent chance of it happening. For example, there is a statistically zero percent chance of being eaten by a grizzly bear. As I waited for his words, I told myself there was a statistically zero percent chance that the normal man was dangerous.

“I’m a demon,” he started.

I would definitely have said there was a greater chance of talking to a mass murderer than a demon. He might as well have said he was an alien. I laughed at the absurdity.

He continued as though he had said he was a car mechanic. “Right. Well that’s not actually what we are but it’s the most common word.”

Unfortunately though, some people *are* eaten by grizzly bears. I wasn’t sure if I wanted him to be a mass murderer or a demon. Or a bear. All were pretty bad choices.

Breathe, Seth. Breathe. Not that big of a deal.

The man obviously had mental issues and happened to *believe* he was a demon. Or maybe he was going to talk to me about the Hebrew word and tell me its original meanings and that we were essentially all demons. Like someone else had once told me. Just another weird Christian.

Seeing that my mind was busy figuring out how to even begin to believe anything he was saying—and, thus, preventing me from forming my own words—he kept talking.

“Demon, vampire, ghost, angel, imp, troll, god, alien, I’m called all of them. And in every language. We get used to all the words but none of them are exactly ... accurate. And, again, I know this is all a bit weird and hard to believe.”

Weird? That doesn’t begin to cover it. Did he say alien? My brain was somewhere between the present moment and a possible stroke. “Right,” I managed, as though I was in full agreement.

“But I ... I feel like you can handle this. I’ve been watching you for a while and ... well, that probably makes things more uncomfortable but it’s true. And it’s not as creepy as it sounds. Really. It’s not. I promise.”

How? How did he sound normal? *I’ve been watching you* should always seem creepy. Always. Yet, it didn’t.

I looked around the room. People were laughing and reading and drinking coffee completely unaware of what was happening at my little table. I was about to be killed by a normal man and they had no idea. I was jealous of their ignorance. I wanted to be one of them.

Can a normal person be a murderer?

Thoughts were swarming like dollar bills in a game show booth. I couldn't grab any, even though they were all I could see. I casually took a sip of coffee and did manage to focus in on how cold it was. And how weird it would look if I ran for the door.

"Well, what is the right word?" Instead, I threw out that gem.

"What?" He seemed taken aback.

"If you're not a demon, you're a ..."

"Right. Good question." He nodded. "Shadow."

"Shadow?" I chuckled, hoping to make him chuckle and then hoping that we could laugh together about how I thought I was going to die. "Like the comic book character?"

He did smile, showing his normal teeth again. "No, more like ... the dark side of light."

I stopped chuckling.

"Shadow is just an interpretation." He looked around, a little nervous. Normal nervous, like I was. "I can say the word in the original language if you'd like?"

"Like Hebrew or something?" I asked, confused.

"Hebrew?" His expression was as knotted up as mine.

"Yeah."

"No, no." He smiled the kind of smile a teacher gives the new student. The *very* new student. "The original." He said *original* very slowly so I would get it.

"Original?"

"The only true language." He looked around the store like someone who was gauging how much of a scene they wanted to make. "The initial. The one all other senses and languages reference. Well—" he interrupted himself. "I mean, basically, all things are communicating."

"I'm sorry."

"What?" he asked, confused.

Why is he acting like the confused one?

"I did not follow that. At all," I said.

"It's fine."

"It is?"

"Do you want to hear it?"

"Yes?" I asked.

"Okay, I'll try to be quiet," he answered, very politely.

"Wait."

"What?"

"What are you going to do?" I asked.

"Just say the word."

"Okay." I looked around, as though I would find approval

somewhere.

“You want to hear it.” It wasn’t really a question.

“Right,” I obliged.

He leaned in real close. I could see a nose hair. Very normal, although it did make me wonder how mine were doing.

Just for an instant.

The sound ... was it a sound? It was not *just* a different language but a different way to speak—almost a hiss and a roar radiating under water—there was nothing human about it. It was the kind of thing sound engineers talk about in making-of documentaries. I could imagine Jan from Sweden with a black background and his name below him telling us how challenging the sound was to replicate as he played with the cries of dying birds, the roll of ocean waves, and the snap of some obscure deep water fish.

Why are you thinking about sound and not running for your life?

The thing hung for a moment in front of my face, after my ears no longer registered it. I could almost see it continue to reverberate through my senses. I felt it after I heard it. There was no way anyone could reproduce it. The proverbial Jan from Sweden was screwed if Ehs was ever featured on a documentary.

I was already screwed. Lucky Jan.

“You alright?” he asked me.

“What *was* that?”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t think it would spook you like that.” Even his inflection and sincerity were normal. I did take a slight offense to him saying I was spooked, even though I definitely was. “Like I said, Shadow is the closest English translation.”

What if?

What if I am actually sitting next to a demon at this coffee shop?

Statistically zero was becoming less persuasive and comforting.

“I don’t think I believe in demons,” I said.

“You don’t think you believe?” He smirked and, for the first time, there was something not normal about him. It was more arrogant. “That’s a thought, isn’t it?”

He did have a point. “I don’t believe in demons,” I reiterated.

“You shouldn’t. I told you I’m a Shadow.” He smiled.

I did not. Not even a fake smile.

“I realize this is hard to believe.” He was back to normal. So *damn* normal.

“You think?” At least I still had my sarcasm.

Another smile.

“It’s just ... well ...” I was no longer capable of putting words

together. Speechless is the word people tend to use to describe the feeling.

“Again. I know this is a lot. Fortunately, I don’t have much time.”

“Fortunately?”

“I’ll tell you what.” He looked around again, quickly. “Do you see that truck in the drive-thru?”

I did. I had. It was massive and hard to miss, even with my new friend introducing himself to me. Everything was big about it. The tires, the mufflers, the subwoofers, the amount of air between the ground and the chassis, and, probably, the ego of the driver who was desperately trying to make up for something somewhere that wasn’t big by surrounding himself with so much other “big.” He was looking over his array of coffee nicely displayed on cardboard holders and happy to be winning the race for big things.

I was winning the judgmental pastor award in that moment.

“Want me to wreck it?” he asked, probably knowing there was a chance I did.

I stared. Thinking.

“Well?”

“I mean ...” *Did that mean that I believed he could?*

“Dude, just kidding. I can’t do stuff like that.” He grinned.

“Do demons crack jokes? And have a sense of humor? And say dude?” I was obviously struggling and doing it out loud.

“I’m not a demon.”

“Right. Right.” The truck tore out from the parking lot, obviously wanting to get those coffees hot to the people he had bought them for. I could hear its muffler just louder than its pumping bass and tires laying rubber. “Actually. Can you?”

We both laughed like old friends from high school. Things were too comfortable five minutes in. With my demon.

“Small male dogs will tend to lift their leg higher when they pee so they can appear larger than they are.” He looked back toward the window. “So don’t hate him, he’s just living his primitive, animal self.”

I was speechless again. Not only was he reading my thoughts, he was assuaging them.

“And if you ever want to appeal to those small dogs, just promise big walls, big gods, big tanks, big ... mufflers. Big anything. They eat it up every time.” He smiled.

He smiled? Why was he smiling?

“Okay, Ehs.” I knew I had to grab the reins of whatever beast was trying to take the conversation and show it who was in charge again.

“I don’t really know what to say. I don’t believe you’re a demon—even if you can make a weird sound. I don’t even know you or what you’re trying to do but, honestly, I think I need to go.”

Yes, there were probably much better ways to regain control of a conversation but at least I was trying.

“Can we go outside?” he asked.

Whatever conversation I had tamed, left. Panic gave birth to its babies in the corner of my mind. I thought of my wife and kids. I wondered if I was ever going to see them again.

I could feel sweat forming. Adrenaline and the other chemicals that start to appear when you think you’re about to die were suddenly the majority of my bloodstream. On the plus side, these chemicals, I had heard, enable us to do superhuman things to escape oncoming perceived threats of death. I was going to have to run real fast.

Fight or flight, as they say.

I’d never been a fighter anyway, especially in a battle with a demon. Or worse, someone who thinks they are a demon. I would need flight—superhuman speed. I began to visualize the parking lot. I’d practically be wearing a red costume with a lightning bolt on it. I’d throw in some s-curves to dodge any potential bullets. I hoped to make it to the highway and maybe the big jacked-up truck guy had a big gun that could protect me. I hoped he would notice me in his big rearview mirror and want to be a big hero.

I needed big. I felt small.

Ehs was still there when my senses returned to the present. He was still normal, inquisitively waiting for me to return. “Is that alright? It’s not like I want to kill you or something.”

The starting gun. No one ever says they are not going to kill you unless they are planning on killing you or unless they think that everything rational in the situation would indicate that they were going to kill you or unless they’ve at least had the thought cross their mind. But, sometimes the real psychopaths say they are going to kill you just to watch you squirm, which meant he was not a real psychopath and there was a chance I could get out alive. Or he was so overtly psychopathic that he loved to act normal and look normal and watch me squirm anyway.

The only thing I know about psychopaths is from movies and those aren’t real. Are they?

I couldn’t think of a scenario where it was anything but bad.

“I’ve got a wife and three kids. Ehs ...” *If you’re going to go kill someone, it probably shouldn’t be me. I’ve got more to lose than other people.* I didn’t say that last part because it seemed a little selfish. Again, we’re

never really *that* authentic.

He reached out his hand to touch my arm. I flinched even though there was no reason to. “Seth, just try to listen. I *need* you.”

I tried to process what that meant.

“I’ve been watching. From a distance. You’re what I’ve been looking for.”

Holy shit.

“And you’re well protected, believe me. Even if you weren’t, well, we’ll get to that. Just don’t be afraid. If anyone should be afraid, it’s me. Not you.”

The words *don’t be afraid* are often prophetic and they felt it in that moment too. The sweat started to evaporate and I was, baseline, listening again. Equally worrying though was the fact that a demon told me to not be afraid and I wasn’t.

Stop overanalyzing, Seth. Flow.

“I know your life isn’t that great.” He said it with a sincerity that was extra warm.

“What?” I didn’t like to be authentically insulted.

“Your life. It reeks of being ... decent, everywhere you look.”

Definitely not where I was expecting the conversation to go. “Decent?” I hoped my expression was as confused and insulted as I felt. “Thanks?”

“You’re welcome.” At least he owned the comment. “Mediocre, Seth. All of it. And I can make it ... rich.”

A demon disguised as a normal man telling me he was going to help me be ... rich? Was he going to promise me celebrity status in addition to some new cars and houses? So stereotypical. My temptation for fame and power and money was going to do me in, finish what my other temptations had already started. But there was something drawing me to him. I couldn’t get rid of it.

“And you’re a pastor stuck saying a bunch of shit you don’t really believe. If you believe any of it anymore.” He was serious. “You don’t like your job. Or your prison. Or your life. You know it.”

“I’m not *that* kind of pastor.” I wasn’t sure what that meant but it felt important to tell Ehs.

“That’s what I just said. I know.”

I nodded. Respect. *Wait, am I trying to earn respect from a demon?*

“You want out. Of it all.”

I didn’t say anything.

“Listen. This is crazy to you, I get it. It’s surreal. Unbelievable. Utterly fantastic. Yet, you believe it somehow.”

Most of that was true. “I’m not exactly sure that I do. I think you’re nuts,” I lied, or at least said hoping it to be true.

“Seth.” The way he said my name had authority to it as though it were a hidden hand that grabbed my chin and made me look into his eyes.

“Yes.” I felt I had to respond whether I wanted to or not.

“I know about her.”

“Her?”

“Yes.” He nodded. “Her. Fourteen months ago. Burner phones. You’ve told no one.”

I bluffed him with the most confused and insulted expression I could find in my arsenal. “Excuse me,” I said with as much power, persuasion, and passion as I could muster. I felt like it exploded on impact.

He sighed and rolled his normal eyes. “You can’t bluff me. I know. She had issues. Marriage number two, affair number ... five? Shocker, there were issues. But, it started right here. In fact, over at that table.” He looked behind me. “Right? Your favorite table hiding over there in the corner?” We had stayed inside. I wondered briefly if I should have taken my chances and gone out when he had asked.

My expression couldn’t hide my shock. “Five?” I managed to whisper.

“Started innocently enough, like they always do.” He probably grinned but I was looking down, embarrassed and unsure of my next move. “A look here, a look there. You didn’t move your eyes up and she didn’t mind. That navy blue shirt. You threw out a word to test the waters and gauge the reaction. A little more. And eventually you were at her house with her husband on a work trip. You’ve visited plenty more times. Though you haven’t told her you don’t want to visit anymore. Honestly—” He paused. “After the danger left, so did the attraction, which was pretty small to begin with. But, again, you can’t tell her that. You’re trapped. The walls are all around you and they’re suffocating you. Just one more prison. So you put up with a little—”

“Stop.” I was shaken to the core. “Please, don’t hurt me.” I looked into his eyes.

“It’s okay,” he responded warmly. “I get it. More than you know. I want out too. I need your help.”

I’ve had all kinds of people ask me for all kinds of help. Just about everything you can imagine. But never like this. Though I was barely able to process anything he was saying.

“I have a lot to tell you. A lot to show you. Some of it you’ll believe and some of it you won’t ... at first. I’ve been a Shadow for years. Far more than you could even understand. I’ve made mistakes ...” He

looked down, almost sorry.

If a demon makes a mistake, does that mean he does good things accidentally?

“I regret some things too, Seth.”

The amount of guilt, along with misinformation and irony and stereotypes and surrealness and confusion and intrigue and despair, that was soaring through me as various chemicals and thoughts and energies mixed in with them was simply too much.

“Is this too much?” he asked, definitely reading my mind.

Obviously. But, I couldn’t get the word out. I probably didn’t need to.

His eyes flickered red for a moment and I, instantly, felt like my regrets were going to grow.

“You’re special, Seth,” he responded.

I didn’t want to disagree but ...

“I’m sorry about the eyes,” he continued. “I’m exhausted. This is hard work. And if I keep this up, we’ll both be in trouble.”

I said nothing.

“I’ll come by your house tomorrow, if that’s alright. I’ll probably have a different body but”—he looked down—“James does work perfectly. He’s real normal.”

I was powerless to tell him that he was not coming by my house. Instead I asked a question: “Exhausted?”

“Yes, we get exhausted.”

“Who is James?”

“The guy you’re looking at.”

“And how do you know where I live?”

He gave me the kind of expression a parent gives their three-year-old when they ask how Santa Claus knew what they wanted for Christmas.

The eyes were red again, even longer, and I could have sworn vanished for a moment to what looked like two black holes. The black holes found in space, not in a head.

“Ehs, I can’t do this.” They say cats are good at staring into middle space. I was like a cat, staring right into a vast outer space in his eyes, somewhere.

“You have to.” He said the words like a counselor, not a boss. He wasn’t going to make me, but he knew I was going to make myself, because I ... had to. I somehow vaguely agreed with him.

“But ...” The word fell out of my mouth.

The eyes were gone. Black, red, emptiness. Flickering back and

forth. And suddenly the normal eyes were back.

“Tomorrow.” It was a barely audible whisper.

“But ...” I whispered back.

He didn’t respond. There was nothing. I looked around. Did anyone else see what had just happened?

“Holy shit,” I muttered quietly because I honestly didn’t know what else to mutter.

“What?” The voice was the same but something in the inflection or manner of speaking had changed. Subtle, but still enough to hook my attention.

“What?” I asked back.

“Sorry, man, that was weird.” The normal-looking man was looking around with an abnormal expression. “Did you want this table?” He looked as comfortable in a coffee shop as he would have been on the moon. He was an utter ball of confusion, with it written all over every piece of his body. “I didn’t mean to take your table,” he stammered.

“Are you James?” I asked.

His expression grew even more befuddled—like my whole body felt. “Yeah, James. Who are you?”

“I’m Seth. Good to meet you. Just wanted to make sure you were alright. Someone said your name was James and that you looked like you had fallen asleep so I just came to make sure you were alright. You good?” The lies came easily, as they often did. “Can I get you a coffee?”

“Yeah, yeah. Thanks. Weird.” He was shaking his head as though he could knock out the webs of confusion if he just shook hard enough. I knew he couldn’t. “Oh no, I’m fine. Thanks though.” He kept up with his worthless attempts to clean his mind. “So weird.”

“You have no idea,” I said, as though I were acting in a movie. I said it with real drama. I wished I was acting. In fact, I looked around for some cameras but there were just people as oblivious to me as I had been them.

“Oh, cool. Well thanks for being cool, man.” James was actively trying to recall his past and I wondered if he would ever be able to. I assumed not.

“Oh.” I looked at the door and stood up. “Right. Sure. Yeah.” I didn’t see my wife yet but I figured the fresh air couldn’t hurt. I left as fast as I’ve ever left any interior and breathed in air as though my lungs had never tasted it before.

Somehow, and you can’t ask me how, I managed to form a timid

smile. I wondered what Leo and Bob would think. Or my wife. Or my affair.

My smile eventually faded, like all good wounds do.