

All Your Friends Are Dead
By Trevor Ballanger

“Tell me what’s going on. Please.”

A friend, the stable kind, leaned forward over the table. Neither of them had touched their coffee, and from the looks of it, Adrian didn’t need his. There was a tremor to his hands, which was sometimes typical of the young man whom his friends had come to describe as “excitable” when he wasn’t in the room. On this particular July afternoon, and in a Brooklyn patisserie clad in stainless steel, exposed red brick and reclaimed wood, one wouldn’t have bothered a second look at someone so unsteady with dark circles under his eyes. This was New York, after all. The heroin-chic look was always en pointe.

Adrian was neither chic nor on heroin, but Sam had noticed the bruises blooming from under his friend’s forearms at the wrists. There were purple-black snakes slithering around his throat. This was a man who appeared ill without a shred of passé irony, no obligatory eyeroll aimed at expensive clothes manufactured to look filthy. And Sam supposed this is why he was here with Adrian. And now he wanted to know.

“Adrian,” he said, putting his elbows on the table. “What’s going on? You are starting to scare me.”

Something had captured Adrian’s attention, something behind Sam that had him cocking his head, making him recoil back in his chair like a scared animal. Yellow grit had accumulated on his eyelids, bloodshot and slick with the natural oil of a long-unwashed face. Traces of blood were notable on his lips. From chewing perhaps? But it was also at the corners of his nostrils, even visible in the wells of his ears. Sam got the feeling none of this was going to end well, whatever *this* was. Could everyone really be saved? He liked to think so. He liked to think he had been, the most impossible mountain to climb of all.

“I need to ask you something,” Adrian finally whispered. Sam remained as close as possible for any sign of alcohol on his breath—there was none.

“I’m listening,” he said, brows furrowing in genuine concern.

“Oh, god...”

Adrian’s face twisted in agony, tears broke through their seal and streamed down his face. He held his closed hands to his forehead as though he were praying. “You’re going to think I’m insane.”

“Hey,” Sam replied, “I would never think that of you.” He meant it.

“But *I think* I’m going insane.”

“Have you been taking your pills,” Sam asked. He’d known about Adrian’s struggle with depression for years. This conversation was familiar, incidentally. But there was an edge to it, an unfamiliar glow behind Adrian’s gluey flesh that had piqued Sam’s interest.

“I need to ask you something.”

“Then ask me.”

Adrian sat in shame for some time, staring at his hands in his lap. High tension suspended the conversation while he built up the courage to look Sam in the eyes for the first time since they’d met today. Sam wanted to be patient, but the process was getting uncomfortable, and he had a question all his own that he felt should be considered. Just as he was about to suggest calling Adrian’s parents and then the in-patient clinic Adrian stayed the last time, he spoke: “Do you believe in the devil?”

If there had been a word of advice at the tip of his tongue, it was gone now. Sam stared back at Adrian speechless. What a question! *Do you believe in the devil?* He let the words sink in deep like a stray bullet to the head, disarming and utterly obscure. And finally, Sam came to the conclusion that this conversation was playing at the edge of crisis. Still, he did not think his friend was crazy. He *would* not. The power an opinion like that would have? It would be a betrayal he knew Adrian would never recover from. A mere flash of skepticism appeared in Sam’s eyes while he contemplated the question. Adrian had seen Sam’s suspicion and now slumped back into his chair with his face in his hands. It’s the kind of moment you want to chime in real quick, Sam thought, and felt a pang of regret somehow for not being instantly supportive. But really? The devil?

People were starting to murmur in annoyance as Adrian gently sobbed, clearly defeated. Sam started to perspire under his arms, acutely aware of the pressure on him to control his friend. These pink-haired fucks and their horn-rimmed glasses, men with rippling biceps and tattoos who’d never even been in a fight, trust-fund blondes tossing nasal accents back and forth over mimosas with “the girls.” They could go fuck themselves.

“Hey,” Sam said, reaching out. “Hey, it’s ok.”

Adrian refused to look at Sam, or simply could not in this state of despair. His fingertips were gray as though he’d been smearing charcoal on the walls, dirt clung to the underside of his nails, which needed a trim.

“It’s going to be ok,” Sam repeated. He breathed deep, exhaling a frustrated sigh. This was going beyond his capabilities. Maybe he needed to call his own sponsor.

“You haven’t answered me.”

Sam took a deep, wide-eyed breath before answering with the truth. "I've never really thought about it, honestly," he said. "I believe in good and bad, if that's what you mean. I believe... I mean, I'm spiritual, I guess. But the devil? Never really crossed my mind."

"I think might've done something terrible."

"Adrian, I need you to tell me, and tell me honestly. Have you been using again?"

Now Adrian was standing, the barstool crashing to the floor with a horrendous clatter that startled several patrons. Coffee splattered to the floor as he thrust down on the table, grabbing Sam by the hands.

"Goddamn it, I'm trying to talk to you!"

A tall man in an apron called out, "Hey! That's enough!" and began hurrying toward them. The trixies seated adjacent to the men were frantic at the idea of their heels getting wet, shrieking like puppies as they bolted upright, investigating each other for signs of a stain. One of the horn-rims looked deliberately offended and ordered them to just get the fuck out, opening her arms and palms toward the sky like one of those old medieval portraits of Saint Mary.

"Come on," Sam muttered, pulling Adrian to the door. "Come on!"

"Um, excuse me!" the tall apron yelled. "You gotta pay for that!"

Sam felt his anxiety go haywire, nearly blacking out as he stomped back to the table and flipped the plate of macaroons to the floor. "Pay for what?" he snarled, adding a *Fuck you!* before slamming the door and hurrying into the street after Adrian. Where was he? There! Clinging to the cast iron gate entrance to an apartment building. Spittle flared out of his mouth, clinging to his lips and chin in long, dire trails like an animal. A near-inhuman guttural wail came grinding out of Adrian's throat and he began hitting his head again and again against the black bars.

"Oh my god!" Sam ran through traffic, nearly tripping over himself as the atmosphere of chaos began closing in around him like a cell. Someone would be calling the police, right? There! One of the passersby, a woman in athleticwear sucking down iced coffee, keys and iPhone in the other hand held up to her ear. She looked urgent, Sam thought, and watched as the only option he had flash before his eyes. He must get Adrian out of here, maybe in a cab? He couldn't bear to see him arrested, or worse. This was not Adrian's fault. He's ill. He's just sick again. A car horn blared at him while he bounded through the street.

"Adrian, please!" Sam put his hands around the man's shoulders, pulling him off the gate with all his strength. Nothing happened. Adrian remained steadfast, bashing his face into the bars until his nose ran with blood. From the ground where he'd fallen, Sam barely noticed the small crowd watching from a moderately safe distance, iPhones held high in the air. He felt himself beginning to cry. "Adrian," he begged. "Adrian!"

A flash of blood rained through the air as Adrian threw his head back releasing what looked like a laugh. The sound of it reminded Sam of something like rocks in a blender. Then there was a cry, a real cry that, in some way, gave Sam an ounce of relief. Adrian sounded human again, in human agony. And then he called out Sam's name, long and guttural.

There was a paralyzing silence after Adrian's howl, people standing slack-jawed and wide-eyed. What had they just witnessed? Had those long black bruises been on Adrian's shoulders before? Sam pulled himself up, yanking Adrian from his grip on the gate and held him in his arms.

"I've done something terrible! Ah! Ah! I don't know what to do!"

Sam could only hold Adrian, run his fingers through his hair. His tears dropped heavily from his own cheek and onto Adrian's, mixing in salty, shockingly human despair. "It's going to be ok," Sam said. "You're gonna be ok." There were sirens in the distance, an ambulance probably driving through the middle of the road, parting cluttered Sunday afternoon traffic like Moses and the sea.

"You don't understand!" Adrian's voice was shrill, piercing enough to startle Sam as though he'd heard a gunshot. "I can feel him! I can feel him!"

"Who do you feel?" Sam grasped Adrian's face in his hands like a vice, shaking him. "Who do you feel?"

The ambulance appeared in the background, customers from the coffee shop, and others, were gandering in awe and shaking their heads. Two men holding black duffle bags leapt from the glaring vehicle. There was little time left for an answer.

"I don't know what to do," Sam replied, sobbing now. "Tell me what to do!" There was blood on his sweater, droplets of red on his Pumas. Adrian unleashed another viscous scream into the air, the circle of people stepped back an inch. Now he grabbed Sam, yanking chunks of his hair, holding on for dear life. His eyes bulged black, he bared his teeth like an animal and tried to speak through clenched jaw.

"I can feel him breathing inside me!"

The world turned gray, flipped upside down, an inverted vision at the end of a pipe. Sam watched, literally in the grip of...what? madness? as Adrian pulled some of Sam's own hair out with a concrete-hard, claw-like hand. Saliva-diluted blood pecked at Sam's face while Adrian pounded as his own temple like marking an "X" on a map. A policeman pulled Adrian away and the EMTs began their work, opening zippers and pumping air through tubes. "Get back!" another uniform yelled out. "Keep movin', folks. Nothin' to see here."

Sam stepped away, hands shaking in front of him as Adrian continued to scream and thrash. He walked backward, aimlessly bumping into thrill-seeking spectators, continuing past the crowd, past the ambulance, past the street light. He continued moving backward, unaware of how he would end up back at home sitting on his couch, continuing to see Adrian in the distance like a mirage. What did he mean by that? Why would he say that to me? What have we done? Sam lamented his thoughts to the walls and continued falling back...back...back..., deep into the wiles of his own faults, and in his fevered sleep proclaimed:

“I believe in the devil.”