

THE DEVIL YOU SAY

(3823 words)

It's quarter to three.

There's no one in the place

Cept you and me.

So, set 'em up, Joe.

I got a little story you oughta know...

The Kingfish had closed at the legal two o'clock but, tonight three stragglers were hanging around watching the last two warriors duke it out on the shuffle board.

“Not drinking after two, officer,” they would say when the cop came in, “Just finishing up this last shuffle board game.”

“Then what I see in all your hands is mother’s milk, right?”

“Paid for ‘em before two. We sip.”

“Who’s winning? Dennis again?”

“Not this time.”

Brian sent the puck smoothing down the sand, knocking Dennis’ remaining puck off the table entirely, crashing it into the wall below the blue and gold Cal Bear Football Schedule. It clunked onto the floor as Brian’s puck twirled on the brim, but did not drop. Game over Brother.

Hard to believe there was enough room on Brian’s back, as they walked out, for all those congratulatory pats he received for that shot.

It was busy earlier. Jim Flaherty's birthday party. That's why Joe and I worked behind the bar that night. Normally, we had only one bartender. When everybody left, Joe poured us a beer. We never drank on duty. Couldn't handle any fights if we were gassed. Joe leaned on the bar waiting.

"Why don't you come on over and grab a stool?"

"You told me you had a story to tell. I only hear stories behind the bar. It's my culture."

"OK, here ya go, Joe."

Been away for two years, so I was out of touch with what was going on here. BJ told me about a party over at Roy Button's house, but I didn't want to go. I hadn't seen Roy since high school and didn't have much in common with him then. The only time I remember doing anything with him was when we went to Lake Temescal and we all got in a row boat and they threw me in the water to teach me how to swim. Roy encouraged them to do that. I almost drowned, but I did learn to paddle.

"I think I'll pass," I told her.

"Oh c'mon Francis," she urged me. "It'll be fun. I think Angelina Oppedisano is coming."

Angelina Oppedisano was the girl who sent me the 'Dear John' letter they handed me on the rifle range at Fort Carson. I was lying in the snow in 30 below weather trying to figure out how to make a spot weld that wouldn't break my jaw when I fired my M-1. Not exactly the enticement I needed.

"Joan Burke's coming too."

Now that was better. What I remembered about Joan Burke was looking down into her cleavage at the Temescal Pool. I always talked about her as having an alluring personality, but I think I was talking about the cleavage.

Joan Burke would be the first attractive girl I'd see since Colonel Braxton's daughter when I stopped in Fort Slocum.

"Ok, I'll come." I told BJ. "Better than sitting in the living room with mom and dad watching Liberace on TV."

I climbed up the back stairs to Roy Button's kitchen because everybody seemed to be doing that. There were 40 or 50 people jammed into that house. Naturally, more than 30 in the kitchen. It was BYOB so the primary activity of the evening was bruising oneself over to the four-legged cast iron stove, under which one could find the large galvanized bucket where the ice was stored. This was the only amenity provided by the host.

Angelina Oppedisano was there with her rock band drummer boyfriend. She was friendly and cheerful. Said I looked good. Joan Burke was not there. But you know who was? Tom Roberts! The last time I saw Tom was in Germany. He was a sportscaster and I was a newswriter for AFN radio. He got out eight months before me and headed home to New York. We said goodbye thinking that was the last time we'd ever see each other, since I lived in California. And voila! here he was. He had found a Filipino gal in the kitchen and they were leaving for another party.

"Wanna come with us?"

"Nae, you two have fun. We'll hook up later."

“You hungry?” Joe interrupted. “There’re a couple of Dorothy Cronin’s tunafish sandwiches in the frig.”

“Sounds good,” Francis answered.

Joe poured us another draft.

Now, where was I? Oh yeah, Roy Button was sitting on a kitchen stool behind a bag of potato chips that he discovered was now empty, so he got up, went over to a drawer and pulled out another bag. He was much taller than I thought he would grow up to be. Thin, but not weak looking. Curly black hair, thinning prematurely on top. Wore a baker boy hat, even indoors. Part of his persona. Dark goatee. Round bass voice. Keenly alert.

“Who are you? he asked.

I told him and he thought a bit.

“Oh yeah. Your baptism in Lake Temescal,” he laughed. “The good ol’ days.” At these kinds of walk-in parties, people showed up, checked out the scene, latched onto any food and any free booze that was available, and moved on to the next party. Since all that was available at Roy Button’s was ice, the party thinned out fast. In not more than an hour, only ten of us were left. Six on the couch. The others on chairs they dragged in from the kitchen. Most classmates of Roy Button in high school talking about how everybody had changed, especially Roy Button. Not exactly a roaring orgy. I was about to join the escapees when Janice Monahan asked Roy Button to do some of his magic tricks. He was known for that. I decided to stay a little while longer to see if Roy had mastered that trick with the garter snake. Back then, it was supposed to end up in his top

hat, but found itself slithering up Joan Burke's leg. That couldn't happen now, of course, since Joan Burke was not at the party.

Roy Button did not have a garter snake, but he did have a Central American Squirrel Monkey he acquired in Costa Rica. Actually, the monkey acquired him. Jumped into his coat pocket and hid there until he got through customs. Cute little bugger. Less than two pounds. Tiny white ears. Roy used him for his card tricks. Roy told me to pick a card from the deck. He then placed the card back into the deck and shuffled it, handed the deck to the monkey, and told the monkey to choose the correct card which, of course, he did. Everyone loved it.

"Those people who left don't know what they're missing," Janice said.

"I heard you can hypnotize people. Is that true?" asked Ann Rapeto.

"With a little help from José," Roy Button answered, pointing to the monkey.

"José will choose the ..ah..victim."

Everyone laughed.

"Ok José, who's first?" he asked the monkey.

José jumped from Roy Button's lap onto Penny Prendergast's head. Penny is the princess in the group.

"Get 'em off! Get 'em off!" she screamed.

"He won't hurt you." Roy assured her.

Turning to the monkey, Roy coached,

"José, sit on the coffee table in front of her."

José dropped on the table.

"Penny, look into his eyes."

Roy Button hunched down behind José.

“Look into those tiny black eyes,” he told her.

José squeaked what seemed to be a squirrel monkey sentence.

“What’s he saying,” she asked.

“He’s saying Look into my eyes,” Roy Button answered, imitating Count Dracula.

Everybody cracked up. Still behind the monkey, Roy Button cautioned,

“No, seriously, look into his eyes. Keep looking. You are now relaxing, aren’t you? Yes. Relaxing. You are now feeling sleepy. Very sleepy.

“Yes,” Penny answered dreamily.

It wasn’t long before Penny was under. Now, this was always meticulously dressed Barbie Penny, who drank her Doctor Pepper with her pinkie in the air. Now she was crawling around the living room meowing like her cat Muffy, eating scraps people had dropped on the musty Persian carpet.

“There’s a potato chip over here, Penny.”

Side splitting laughter when Penny crunched it.

“Click your fingers José,” Roy Button ordered.

Penny looked around wondering what everybody was laughing about. She was mortified when they told her.

“OK José, who’s next?”

José looked about the room. Then he went around smelling people. He chose Mathew Smith, and Roy Button put him under.

“Who is this guy?” Roy Button asked.

“Mathew Mark Smith. See his t-shirt?,” somebody offered.

It read, JESUS LOVES ALL OF US.

“His brother’s name is Luke John Smith,” somebody said.

“Did it again. He can sniff ‘em out a mile away,” Roy Button laughed, pleased.

Roy Button gave José a big hunk of a Big Hunk candy bar for that. Mathew Mark Smith was now crawling around on the old rug like a dog. If Muffy had still been there, he would be chasing her. He stopped at Christopher Emanuel’s sandals and began licking his toes.

“That’s gross.” Anna complained.

“Washing of the feet.” Roy Button commented.

To reflect attention away from the objection, Roy Button quickly added,

“Let’s see what else José has for him. José?”

José scooted over to Michael Mark Smith and whispered something squirrely into his ear. Michael stood up suddenly and looked around. He spotted Penny. Went over and stood her up from the couch. Began humping her leg and screaming, “I love you.” She was screaming “I hate you.” All the others were screaming, “Stop him.” So Roy Button told José to click his fingers and added, “OK, no more hypnotizing tonight.”

They all sat back and listened to Ella Fitzgerald singing ‘Lullaby of Birdland’ with the George Shering Quintet. The playlist was soft and cool jazz after that, and people were dozing off, waiting for the torrential rain to stop. It had come out of nowhere.

“You with me Joe?”

“You betcha kemosabe. Want another draft?”

“Porque no?”

All right, back to Roy Button. On one end of the couch, Penny and Anna were whispering, so as not to disturb the rest. In the middle, two people Francis didn't know were making out. At the far end, Lucy was snuggling with Roy Button.

All of a sudden, she tears herself away from him and scrambles off the couch, falling over the coffee table onto the floor. She's screaming. “He's the devil. He's the devil.” Over and over, now sobbing uncontrollably. “He's the devil. He's the devil.” She bolts out the front door, falls on the wet landing, and is frantically trying to get herself up when I reach her.

“It's OK. It's OK. I'll take you home.”

“It's not OK. He's the devil.”

The sheeting rain made it difficult to get her down the long flight of stairs, more so because she was glued to me out of fear.

“Where do you live?”

“Not far. In a duplex behind Shuey's Creamery. That's how I remember where it is.”

We pushed against the hostile rain.

“So you haven't been here long?”

“No. Came out here from New Rochelle with my cousin Tom. He was at the party. Left with that pretty Filipino girl.”

“You’re kidding! Tom Roberts is your cousin? He and I worked at the radio station in Frankfurt. Last time I saw him before tonight was at the pool table in the tower of our castle. I kicked his ass.”

The rain and the cold and the talking had directed her away from Roy Button by the time we reached her house. When I asked her if she’d be alright, she said she’d be fine. There were dead bolts on the front and back doors and the couple in the other apartment had a big mean dog.

The next morning the phone rang in Tom Roberts’ apartment.

“Get your ass up.”

“Francis? You sonofabitch. It’s only 10 o’clock.”

“I’m coming over. Going to see Roy Button. Got to set him straight. You have a stake in this. He scared the crap out of your cousin Lucy last night.”

“Her name’s not Lucy. She just made that up to give herself a fresh start. She’s lovable kooky that way.”

After breakfast at Larry Blakes - Tom never does anything without breakfast – the two of us walked down to the newly painted victorian on Telegraph Avenue where the party was held the night before.

“So what’re you gonna say to him?”

“Basically, I’m gonna warn him to be careful with that hypnotism shit.”

“Lucy said his eyes were going right after her soul.”

“You were not listening earlier. Her name’s not Lucy. Ella Mae. Ella Mae Braxton.”

“The Colonel’s daughter? Can’t be. She’s got black hair.”

“Bottle job. Doesn’t want to be a dumb blonde anymore.”

“Your job is to help me scare him a little bit. Tell him to stay away from your cousin or he’ll have to deal with both of us. He’ll think you’re dangerous.

Everybody thinks you’re dangerous.”

When we got to the pink victorian, a chubby man we later learned was Mister Oyarzo was hammering a FOR SALE sign into the parking strip in front of the house.

“Damn’ kids. Always taking my signs down. You two looking for somebody?”

“Roy Button.”

“No Roy Button around here.”

You mean he’s not the owner?”

“This is my place. You looking to buy? Been on the market a long time, so the price is right. Half of what the other places are asking. I’m gonna lose my shirt if it goes down any further. Don’t know why it hasn’t sold. People go in there and they get queezy stomachs. Maybe because I painted the kitchen green.

Sometimes, people actually get scared. God knows why. I got all the rats out of the walls.”

“There was a party here last night.”

“Yeah, left a mess. Broke the lock box to get in. Second time this year.”

“You mind if we look?”

“Suit yourself. Only \$180,000 for this great big place. Even has a standup basement.”

The house was clammy in the daylight. Obviously, something wasn’t right. When Tom went into the bathroom to take a leak, he felt something following him. Of course, when

he turned around, nothing. We thought we saw something squirm through an open window into the basement from the backyard, but when we climbed down into the basement to check, nothing but a bare concrete floor. But something was in that house. We both knew it.

“Know a priest? Tom asked.

“What for?”

“I’m thinking exorcism.”

“You sound like a detective from a film noir.”

“Maybe not film noir, but I’m in the business. I bought *Sam Spade and Girl Friday’s Detective Agency* for not much more than the cost of a magnifying glass and brass knuckles. That’s what brought me to Cally Fornication.”

“I’ll be damn’d.”

“Careful what you say around here.”

“How’er you doin’, Joe? Ready for the devil? Oh I forgot. He’s already got your soul.”

“Go Stanford!” Joe confirmed, as he poured another beer for them.

Father McCabe was tending the roses in front of the priest house. When he saw me, I got the traditional Father McCabe greeting.

“Howz your ala ka bu za lum?”

“Just fine father, how ‘bout you? I know, I know, they keep filling up the cruets at morning Mass, and you haven’t turned into a wino yet.”

“Something like that, but more compassionate,” Father responded.

Tom got to the meat.

“Know much about exorcisms, Padre?”

Tom, Ella Mae, and I went over to talk to Mr. Oyarzo. Get his permission for the exorcism. On our way there, I had a question for Ella Mae.

“Why’d you change your name to Lucy?”

“Ella Mae sounds like a dumb blonde southern chick who thinks she’s made it in life when she becomes a pom pom girl.”

“Ella Mae goes good with your southern drawl.”

“That’s the one ‘dumb card’ I can’t change. Did the name. Did the hair. But I’m stuck with ‘y’all’, if y’all know what I mean. You made some changes too.”

“I did?”

“Yup. You put some muscle on yor bones. Hair on yor head. Got rid of those godawful army fatigues. Same beautiful blue eyes, tho. Remember you singing ‘Summertime’ in the talent show at Fort Slocum. Beautiful voice. When we’re through with this exorcism, sing me a song.”

“Love to.”

“Well, I guess it can’t do any harm, Mister Oyarzo said.”

“If it works, you should have plenty of buyers,” Tom surmised, as a detective should.

“The first step in the exorcism, Ella Mae added, “is to re-paint your house. Father McCabe says get rid of the pink. Paint it white. The devil hates white. Stands for purity and all that.”

Father McCabe was already in the kitchen. He beckoned them to stand behind the table. He whispered. Not so the devil couldn't hear him, but to put us in touch with the seriousness of the ritual.

“Lord, heed my prayer.”

He nods to them to repeat after him.

“Lord, heed my prayer,” they repeat.

“And let my cry be heard by you.”

“And let my cry be heard by you.”

“The Lord be with you.”

“The Lord be with you.”

Tom, Edna Mae, and I add, “May He also be with you,”

“Let us pray.”

“God, Creator and defender of the human race, who made man in your own image, look down upon this house.”

Father McCabe sprinkles holy water as he walks around the room.

“This house is now in the hands of the unclean spirit, now calling himself Roy Button, the unclean foe of our race, who befuddles and stupefies the human mind, throws it into terror, overwhelms it with fear and panic. Repel, O Lord, the devil's power, break asunder his snares and traps, put the unholy tempter to flight. By the crosses we now paint on the walls of this abode.

Following instructions given to us before the ritual began, Edna Mae, Tom, and I paint red crosses on each of the bright green walls of the kitchen, as Father McCabe holds a large wooden cross high above him.

“Graciously grant, O Lord, as we call on your holy name, that the evil spirit, who hitherto terrorized this place be thrown from every source into your blinding light. Through Christ our Lord.”

“Amen, we agreed.”

“I cast you out, unclean spirit, along with every Satanic power of the enemy, every spectre from hell in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. For it is He who commands you, He who flung you headlong from the heights of heaven into the depths of hell. It is He who commands you, He who once stilled the sea and the wind and the storm. Hearken, therefore, and tremble in fear, Satan, you begetter of death, you corrupter of justice, you root of evil and vice; seducer of men, betrayer of the nations, fomentor of discord, author of pain and sorrow.”

The house began shaking and twisting. In that room, North became East and East South as what appeared to be an earthquake has taken hold of it. Tom grabs a chair. Ella Mae the table. I grab the priest. Father McCabe uses this unexpected opportunity to bless me with heretofore unused annointed oil. A loud thud on the ceiling. We look up to see worms and snakes and octopuses twisting with the force of the building. One vomits purple bile on top of the refrigerator, producing a stench that would repel a pack of Wolverines.

“Why, then, do you resist,” father continues. “Fear Him, who in Isaac was offered in sacrifice, in Joseph sold into bondage, slain as the paschal lamb, crucified as man, yet triumphed over the powers of hell.”

The room becomes extremely cold now. Ice crystals form on the sink and stove. We hear a gurgling demonic voice that appears to be coming from the water pipes. The three of us

are terrified, but Father McCabe stands waiting. After a while, we are able to absorb some of his tranquility and we wait with him for we know not what. When the voice stops, holding the wooden cross above him, Father McCabe blesses himself and continues.

“In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Give this place to the Holy Spirit by this sign of the holy cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with the Father and the Holy Spirit, God, forever and ever.”

Father McCabe is now angry.

“Depart, then, transgressor. Depart, seducer, full of lies and cunning, foe of virtue, persecutor of the innocent. Give way, you monster, give way to Christ. For He has already stripped you of your powers and laid waste your kingdom, plundered your defenses. He has cast you forth into the outer darkness, where everlasting ruin awaits you.” To what purpose do you insolently resist? To what purpose do you brazenly refuse? For you are guilty before almighty God, whose laws you have transgressed. Begone! BEGONE!”

The room began to swell. Looked like it would burst any moment. Unexpectedly, we heard hissing and the room begins to deflate. Getting smaller and smaller, the walls moving in. We feel a squeaky little voice rushing by us like a strong draft. Squeaking around the kitchen, again and again, until it reaches the open window. And then there is silence. We are now aware of birds chirping in the yard.

“I need another beer.”

“Me too, Joe.”

“What am I going to do with these crosses on the walls,” Mister Oyarzo protested.

“I’d try a light yellow,” Father McCabe advised. “As you know I’m partial to the wearing of the green, but a green kitchen makes people sick.”

“So glad he’s gone,” Ella Mae said.

“Not gone, Father McCabe corrected. “Moved.”

At least the pink was gone. No one could be absolutely sure whether it was repainting the house or getting rid of Roy Button that did it, but offers came pouring in. Buyers bid the price up well beyond Mister Oyarzo’s most optimistic dreams. The sky was blue and the weather was warm, and Francis and Ella Mae were sitting around holding hands all the time.

“Totally sickening,” Tom protested.

The following Saturday, a client showed up at Tom’s *Sam Spade and Girl Friday’s Detective Agency*. A husband. Missing persons case. Can’t find his wife. It seems she and her sleeping toddler had been seen last in the back of a bus next to a tall man with a goatee wearing a baker boy hat. When he got off at Bancroft, witnesses said, the woman got off with him. Nobody noticed the toddler sleeping in the back seat until the bus reached the end of the line.