

POSSESSION

By Patrick Gallagher

“When an impure spirit comes out of a person, it goes through arid places seeking rest and does not find it. Then it says, ‘I will return to the house I left’” (*Luke 11:24*).

Christina Bloom chewed the end of her pen and wondered whether the two men by the water cooler would ever get a move on.

She had been watching them for a week. The tall one would saunter over with his empty bottle and the one with the beard would immediately stiffen. He would lean on top of the cooler to say something and the other would laugh loudly. As office romances went, it was a match made in heaven. Except not. Because one would walk back to Finance and the other would walk back to HR and it would happen exactly the same the next day. It was a dance. Someone had to take the first step.

Christina heard the clacking of a keyboard in her ear. She smiled and tapped her headset.

‘Are you still there, Peter?’ she asked. ‘You were going to tell me what you thought of my proposal.’

‘It needs more pictures.’

Christina laughed. ‘Quite right. If that’s what tickles your pickle, there’s a dotted line on the last page. What did you think of that?’

‘I’ll only sign if I’m convinced your software can help me enforce business compliance. In my experience, people don’t need a guiding hand. They need a forceful one.’

‘Once again, you are absolutely right. I’m going to tell you all about it but before I do, I’d like to understand your challenges a little more. Can I come back to you in thirty seconds, please, Peter?’

‘Of course.’

‘Thank you so much.’

Christina whipped off her headset and left her desk.

‘Did she just put him on hold?’ someone whispered behind her.

Her heels rapped the tiled floor. The water cooler was against the floor-to-ceiling window and close enough to The Gherkin that Christina could look down into the upper floors. Every office was the same. White, modern and ugly.

‘You boys coming to Cathy’s leaving drinks tonight?’ Christina leaned against the glass, throwing her dark hair to the side. Her eyes glinted like sunlight on steel.

‘Cathy’s leaving?’ The tall one remarked as he filled his bottle. ‘Is it because of the fight at Roxy’s?’

‘No, Sarah left because of the fight at Roxy’s,’ said the one with the beard. ‘Cathy’s leaving because of the fight at Wagamama’s.’

‘Oh, yeah, that was great.’

‘Fab!’ chimed Christina. ‘Roxy’s after work.’

‘I didn’t think you knew our names,’ said the tall one.

‘Finance and HR,’ she smiled back. ‘I’ve got you on LinkedIn.’

‘Are you going?’ asked one to the other.

‘I’ll go if you go,’ he replied.

‘Peter!’ Christina exclaimed as she replaced her headset at her desk. ‘We can talk more when we meet tomorrow but, thinking ahead, I don’t think compliance is going to be an issue.’

She slammed her glass onto the bar. Vodka leapt up the sides. She tried to pick it up again but it was fastened to the sticky surface like a mollusc to a rock.

‘Well.’ Christina turned to a man with brown eyes. ‘You’re just going to have to buy me another one, aren’t you?’

Two hours later, they were sitting in a booth. The tall one and the one with the beard were in the booth next to them, getting better acquainted.

‘Sales is all about believing in yourself,’ Christina was talking loudly over the music. ‘It’s not about convincing someone to spend a hundred grand on a computer program they’d never heard of five minutes ago. It’s about convincing yourself that you’re worth their investment. Every time I pick up the phone, I know I can steer any conversation into one that gets money on the board.’

‘The board?’ asked brown eyes.

‘Oh yeah, the board. It’s got our names on it and every time you get a deal, it goes up on the board. Tomorrow afternoon, I’m meeting a prospect who’s out for contract for 90k. If I close that deal, it will get me over my target for the quarter. It’s a lot more exciting than it sounds but, as exciting as it is, I’m more excited to know when you’re going to ask me to dance.’

‘I was planning to.’

‘Sure.’

Her friend locked eyes with her across the dance floor. Christina winked and the girl looked away.

‘You might want to find something to hold on to,’ smiled Christina.

Two hours after that, they were girdled by writhing people. The smell was a hot mix of sweat and alcohol. Christina's hair was plastered to her forehead and neck. She moved her body and he followed. She raised her hand and skimmed her fingernails over the back of his neck, feeling the hairs prickle. Christina smiled. He was a puppet on a string.

'I'm going to make you kill yourself.'

Cold rushed through her in the sticky heat, as if she had been standing in front of a moving train. The voice was thick and warm and sweet like rolling treacle. It wasn't a man with brown eyes she was dancing with. It was someone else, whose hands were rough. They threw her right and left and dragged up and down her. The feeling of his nails made her want to tear the skin from her body like a shroud from a statue.

'Are you alright?' Brown eyes was shouting in her ear. Christina realised she was utterly rigid. Through the pulsing coloured lights and gyrating bodies, she could see eyes staring.

'Get my jacket,' she replied.

Christina hugged her arms around herself. The pounding of her heels against the wet pavement was clearing her head. She drank in the freezing air and watched it escape her mouth in quivering bursts.

'Wait!' It was brown eyes. She listened to his running footsteps and tried to walk faster. They were alone on London Bridge. The Shard and Tower Bridge cast their glittering reflections on the Thames. Christina could hear the water lapping slyly at the banks, leaving a creeping mark on the walls. There was the wet smell of sewage. She only needed to make it to the tube station and she was home and dry. And he needed to go away.

Christina spun. Brown eyes clattered to a stop. He had his hands on his knees. His face was red.

‘Is everything alright?’ He panted.

‘I suppose it would be better if I had something to hand to you. I didn’t realise there was a relay on. I’m walking home. I suggest you do the same.’

‘You seemed to seize up in there. You turned very cold. Are you sure you’re feeling okay?’

‘I’m fine.’

‘Would you like me to walk you home?’

‘Definitely not.’

‘Okay, okay.’ Brown eyes straightened and squinted, smiling a little. He leaned against the railing as if trying to hide how exhausted he was. His eyes darted across her face as if they would find the words there. ‘Well, you seem like a good girl. I’d like to see you again, when you’re feeling better, of course.’

‘I’m not all that good,’ replied Christina. She turned and left him there.

Christina dreamed of rosary beads clutched in her mother’s quivering hands. She dreamed of unlit figures standing over her bed, throwing water that burned like acid.

She dreamed of thin hands with outstretched fingers slithering down the walls from the shadows above.

‘Bless me, Father, for I have sinned. It’s been way too long since my last confession. I wouldn’t have come this morning except, well, last night, I had a bad dream.’

‘It’s not a sin to have nightmares.’

‘I know it’s not, Father. The thing is, this was a dream I had when I was awake. It was... Jesus Christ, it was terrifying.’

‘I don’t like that kind of language in here.’

‘Sorry, Father. Like I said, it’s been a while. You might say I’m feeling jumpy. I’m actually used to being on your side of the veil in a way.’

‘Why don’t you start at the beginning?’

‘Okay. I will. I’m just finding this difficult.’ Christina sighed and leaned her head against the wooden corner of the box in which she was kneeling. The latticed shadow of the divide between her and the priest fell across her face. She could see his dark form through the wooden mesh. His head was cocked, waiting for her to begin.

‘It happened when I was twelve. I would have bad dreams. My mum would burst in and dry my tears and the same thing would happen the next night. I know that’s normal. Every girl has bad dreams. The problem was the dreams started to become one. I’d have the same dream every night.’

Christina moved her hands up and down her arms. Scars that had long faded were beginning to itch again.

‘I’d be asleep in bed, frozen, unable to move. It would be dark but I always knew someone was in the room with me. A visitor.’

‘A visitor?’

‘That’s what he called himself. When I first saw him, He was peering at me from behind the wardrobe in the corner of the room. He stood there for hours and hours. The next night, he'd stand at the end of my bed. Worst was when he'd crouch next to me, right by my face, staring at

me. It was dark but I could always see him, because he was darker than dark, darker than black. He had huge twisting horns, and goats' hooves for feet.'

'Would he speak to you?'

'I'd ask him what he wanted and he would say...

"I want you."

'One night, I watched his hand reach across the bed and felt his fingernails on my skin. I woke up screaming, with blood running down my arm and the sheets drenched with sweat and... other stuff. That's the morning my mother called the Church.'

She heard the priest shift on the other side.

'What happened when your mother called the Church?'

Christina's lip shook. She could already feel the tears welling in her eyes and working up her throat like a fist. She swallowed painfully and pulled her hands roughly down her face. She sniffed and continued. When she did, her voice shook.

'I only remember fragments. I don't want to talk about it. I just know the dreams stopped and never came back. Until last night.'

There was silence from the other side of the divide that lasted nearly a minute. When the voice did come, it was little more than a whisper, as if it didn't want God to hear.

'Confess.'

'What did you say?'

'Whatever sin has caused this malevolent entity to return to you, you need to confess it now before God and He will forgive you.'

'This isn't happening because of anything I've done!'

‘Listen!’ The priest hissed. ‘An oppressing spirit will try and force you to commit the ultimate sin. Murder, or worse. You must cleanse your soul and regain the grace of God before it’s too late!’

The box shook as Christina hauled herself to her feet and staggered out of it. She threw the confessional door shut behind her. The noise boomed through the cavernous archways and towering columns of Westminster Cathedral. Faces stared from shadowy pews. Candles flickered from hanging brass chandeliers just above her head.

Christina strode down the aisle and didn't look back.

Believe in yourself.

Christina wanted to scream it at the mirror that was the rear wall of the lift. The woman staring back at her was leaning on the handle with both hands as if it were a sink in which she'd just vomited. She was breathing deep, heavy breaths. Christina looked into her eyes. She was in control. She'd be damned if she wasn't.

Ding. The lift doors opened.

‘You prepped?’ Her sales director was on her before she had made it to her desk. He was the sort of man who wore a suit every day even though the dress code was smart-casual. A grin was cracked across his face but his eyes were anything but smiling. He leaned against a pillar beneath the board. Christina threw her leather jacket onto the desk.

‘Of course I'm prepped,’ said Christina. ‘When's he getting here?’

‘You can wait for him in the boardroom. You want me in there with you?’

‘Don't insult me.’

‘You just look a little off.’ He tapped his pen on the board above his head. ‘90k. You going to get it done?’

‘You might as well mark it up now.’

Christina picked up her notebook and looked across the office. Everything was the same as it had been the day before. The mundanity was suffocating. Christina felt utterly removed from it. There was the sound of keyboards clattering and hushed conversations of salespeople pitching over the phone. Everyone else was gazing at their computer screens. The tall one and the one with the beard stole glances at each other from across the room.

There was a glass wall on the far side separating the boardroom from the rest of the floor. Christina realised she would feel a lot better when she was on the other side of it. She left her sales director by the board. As she approached, she could see the prospect at the end of a long table, looking impatient. The floor-to-ceiling window was filled by the blue of the sky.

‘Ah, Peter. You’re here already. So sorry to keep you.’

‘Don’t worry about it.’

He stood up as she entered. The prospect was a large man in an even larger suit. His sleeve swung from his arm as he reached to shake her hand. She smiled brightly, making sure her handshake was eager, but not too eager.

‘Honestly. Traffic was a nightmare,’ Christina shook her head. ‘Did you manage to get here without too much hassle?’

‘It was hairy getting into Waterloo but once you’re on the Jubilee, it’s plain sailing.’

‘That’s the thing with Waterloo. Everyone gets off so you get a seat.’

‘Exactly.’

‘Well, hopefully, the commute hasn’t got you in too bad a mood. Thanks again for meeting me. Now, we both know how this works. I’m not going to assume you’ve come here with a shopping list. You’ve read my proposal. Are there any concerns that spring to mind?’

There was a projector between them. As Christina spoke, she leaned forward and turned it on. A red square emblazoned with her company logo was thrown on the white wall behind her. Text in the bottom corner announced it as Slide 1 of 5.

‘We spoke yesterday about business compliance,’ the prospect drawled. ‘I was wondering if you had a case study explaining how your software has helped previous clients in this area?’

Christina picked up the clicker that would move the slides. Standing in front of the projector, she too was drenched in red.

‘I’m really glad you asked, Peter. This presentation details a business transformation undertaken by a partner who publicly credited our software. In fact, Slide 2 has a breakdown of statistics I think you’ll find interesting.’

Christina changed Slide 1 to Slide 2. She looked up at a photo of her own dead body. She changed Slide 2 back to Slide 1.

She turned to the prospect. He was looking at her expectantly.

‘Is everything alright?’

‘Yes. I’ve just got a problem with the clicker.’

Gripping it tightly to stop it shaking, Christina changed Slide 1 back to Slide 2 which was now a screenshot of a detailed spreadsheet.

Only she had seen it. It had been for less than a second but the image had been branded onto her brain. Her body had been lying, broken, on what looked like the pavement, a rag doll

thrown from a great height. Her matted hair had been splayed over her face but it had definitely been her. And she had definitely been dead.

The prospect was still peering at Slide 2. Christina wiped her face and hoped the prospect hadn't noticed she'd turned pale. She was in control like she always was.

'Any questions, Peter?'

The prospect shuffled papers and cleared his throat.

'Everything seems self-explanatory. I have just one niggle. I'm wondering when you're planning to kill yourself, you fucking whore?'

Christina's eyes whipped from the presentation to the prospect. He was sitting as straight as a pike in the ground. All his clothes had disappeared and he was entirely naked. His bloated body hung off him in what looked like rolls of pockmarked, uncooked pork. His face was hard and pointed and he was wearing a crooked sickle of a grin.

Christina was frozen yet she knew she had to get herself as far away from the man as possible. It was as if she was staring at a pink, bloated spider. She had no doubt as to whom she was now speaking.

'I'm not going to kill myself.'

The prospect's black eyes shone and his grin grew wider. He raised an arm. Veiny fat shuddered as he did so. Christina's eyes followed his gnarled finger.

Slide 2 changed to Slide 3 without her touching the clicker. It was another photo of her, grey and face down on a litter-strewn beach. Dead.

'Stop it,' said Christina.

Slide 3 changed to Slide 4. Christina was hanging from a black tree in a swirling mist.

'I said, "Stop it!"'

Slide 4 changed to Slide 5. Christina was a misshapen silhouette engulfed in a billowing bonfire.

‘Listen,’ said Christina. She leaned forward and placed her hands on the glass table, trying desperately not to let the hysteria show on her face. She spoke slowly and surely. ‘I’m not going to kill myself. You are not going to touch my body again.’

He stood up suddenly. His flabby buttocks rolled the chair across the floor. Christina nearly screamed. His body smelled of sour milk.

The prospect spoke but it was not the prospect's voice. It was a voice like butter melting in a pan, and they were seven words that chilled Christina down to the marrow of her bones.

‘How are you going to stop me?’

Then he was on the table, scrabbling towards her. His knees squeaked on the glass surface. Every obscene piece of his body swung from side to side. Christina let fear freeze her over. She was unable to move just like she had been, a little girl in her bed fifteen years earlier. Outside, no one looked up from their computer screens.

The last thing she saw and felt was that foul grin and him thrusting his arm down her throat, all the way to the shoulder, and climbing inside her.

The wind was whistling in her ears and grabbing at her clothes. Christina could see the spider plants that lined the square edge of the roof, along with the blue sky and scattering of wispy clouds. These were reflected on the Thames which snaked through the grey sea of low buildings,

and on the slanting panels of The Shard. The people scurrying about the pavements were utterly tiny.

Christina realised she was thinking very much about what it would be like to join them. Gravity would ripple her face, her stomach would rise inside her and, once she hit the pavement with a bloody smack, so would everything else.

The next thing Christina realised was that she was dancing again. Her hands were clasped in his. He turned and she turned with him. Gravel crunched as she took long strides with one foot and slid the other to join it. Christina had followed the steps more times than she could remember. What was nightmarish about this instance was that there was no one else there. If someone were to stumble onto the roof, it would be as if she were dancing with her shadow.

'You're going to jump.'

That familiar cold numbed her arms and legs, as if ice had touched the back of her neck. It was the silken voice that had led her, one step at a time, from the boardroom, up the stairs and onto the roof. In an act of what could have been kindness but was certainly one of cruelty, he wasn't going to make her jump. She was the one who had to do it.

Despite it all, it was what Christina saw next that made her clutch tighter at his spectral form. She may as well have been grabbing at smoke. Her eyes bulged as if they were going to ooze from their sockets like snails from their shells.

Christina was looking at herself. There was another her. She had the same clothes. She had the same everything. The other Christina was standing away from them, horribly straight with her feet planted on the edge and face towards the horizon. Her hair fluttered around her head and her skirt fluttered around her legs. What was truly horrible was how delicate Christina looked to herself. All it would take was a gust of wind and she would topple out of sight.

Before she could call out, she was spun away. Christina let his vaporous form draw close and wash over her. She scuttled her fingers up where she imagined his neck to be and sidled round again. She could almost feel him quiver. Christina allowed herself the flicker of a smile.

It evaporated just as quickly. The other Christina was facing them now, still perched precariously on the ledge. Christina could see her own face. It was as white as office walls and a portrait of pure terror. The other her was bellowing something but she couldn't hear it. She could only see her own clenched fists and mouth stretched so wide that her eyes were squeezed shut and streaming tears down her cheeks. She squinted at her own strained lips. Excitement tinged her heart like a flame to metal. Christina was trying to tell herself something and Christina knew what it was.

That's when she felt the very solid touch of his fingers and every nerve in her body shrieked. She was wrapped in his towering form. It felt like being inside a gigantic, moving scab. His face was dark. His horns curled into spirals. His hooves were dangling hair and dragged great clefts through the gravel. She could feel his hot, snorting breaths in the crook of her neck. His clawed hands grasped at her body. They moved under her clothes and clutched handfuls of flesh, manipulating it. His nails started to leave thin red lines on her shoulders. Her skin tore slowly. Searing pain hissed and blistered as if hot irons were being pressed against her. A gasp rose in her throat and escaped in a groan that was mostly frustration. The urge swelled in her to give up control, to surrender herself. It would be so much easier to let him have his way. Without him, she was a husk. She wasn't even going to hit her target for the quarter.

'We will be together,' came the voice into her ear, warm and seductive and hideous.

'We will be nothing,' Christina whispered, *'and so are you.'*

She dropped her hands and drove her knee upwards. There was a shattering connection which brought a wave of satisfaction, the kind that crashes over rocks and cascades up the beach.

What Christina realised next was she wasn't in the middle of the roof. She was tottering on the edge where the other Christina had been. It was as if she had been hurled from one body to the other. Her shoe scraped off the side and she flailed her arms. Her stomach dropped. The pavement spun in front of her. For a dizzying moment, she thought she was going to throw herself from the building regardless. Then she tumbled through the spider plants and onto the roof. She stood there, panting. It was warm. Christina realised for the first time that the sun was splashed over her. Closing her eyes, she swayed, allowing herself to enjoy the heat on her face.

She had returned from where she had been. Christina knew it, the way one knows they've been dreaming but only once they've woken up. She wheeled around to find the roof deserted.

'Just because you got inside my body, you think you're inside my head,' she snarled at no one at all. 'But I have control. I have control, and I've won.'

Christina managed to catch herself on the ledge and collapse onto it. Even under the white glare of the sun, she scoured the rooftop, eyes darting between the shadows and dark places. There was a door leading downstairs and a row of wooden benches that had clearly been chosen for aesthetic rather than comfort. Satisfied, she lay down. The metal ledge was hot against her back. The dancing leaves of the spider plants prickled at her skin. Christina smiled. For a moment, things had been worse than uncomfortable.

He would stir again. She knew it, and when he did, it would be because she was in a dark place. It just wouldn't be on a roof.

And she knew what to tell herself.

It was six months since Christina had walked out of the office and six months since she had last walked into it. She was sitting outside a coffee shop in Chelsea. The white garden table looked like something she would have found at her grandmother's house, as would the dry cake. Flower displays adorned the shopfront behind her. She watched girls line up outside the entrance to take a photograph. Christina sighed and dropped her fork. She had given up on the cake.

'Sorry I'm late.'

Dan rushed past her and dragged out a chair with a grating screech. He dropped himself into it and huffed, smiling at her and face red. He always seemed to be out of breath. Christina pushed the plate of cake towards him.

'Is it nice?' he asked.

'Delicious, but I'm all full up. You finish it.'

'Fancy a drink later?'

Christina glanced around.

'Definitely.'

'Where do you want to go?'

Christina Bloom looked into his brown eyes and smiled.

'Up to you,' she replied.

