

The Poison Oracle

“You ever met the devil?” he said, just like that. Surprised me a bit, I guess, but not that much. You know how it is, place like this, full of little white churches rising up from the dust like ghosts themselves. Crossed my share of their thresholds, though not by choice. Sometimes, in the summer, when it was so hot the air shimmered even on Sunday mornings, I thought those churches might waver right out, would disappear like they didn’t even really belong in this world.

But this wasn’t summer, it was that winter before and it was night, and I remember how round and bright the moon was, and how it surprised me when it appeared when I shut the trunk of the car. I had been looking with satisfaction at the neat row of brown paper bags of groceries I had set down, but I must have started to look up, maybe when I grabbed the lip of trunk. The light of the moon mixed with the red glare of the Safeway sign and the taillights of the Buick LeSabre with mama already in the front seat, because it was a cold winter night and I was at the age when I took some pride in doing the things for her that my dad usually did.

I turned and the dark shape was standing there, waiting, and I caught my breath before I remembered that the bag boy had followed us out, even though we told him we could manage. I thought he would have gone back in by now, but he had stood there, waiting, while I loaded the groceries, and he seemed to be waiting still.

His name was Tyrone – I’m sure of it because I saw my own name marked on the plastic tag he wore. “Well,” I told him, with him looking at me. He was older than me,

full grown, but still a young man. The whites of his eyes seemed as bright as the moon, and you could see the whole dark circles floating in them. Grandma always said it meant that the person was crazy, or had a spirit about him, when you could see the whites go all around the iris. You know I love her, but I didn't put much stock in that, or any of those old stories she would tell between humming music from long ago. Because my dad is a dentist and my mom is a teacher, and we all knew Grandma was from a different time. But I did think of her words, then, and I don't know if it was the words or his eyes that made me look around, made me feel like running.

"Okay," he said, and almost seemed ready to go. But then he peered at me and said, "You ever met the devil?"

I don't really know what I told him, but it was some kind of no. But like I said, all those churches raised up from the delta dirt full of families even like mine, the devil wasn't ever far out of mind. But it was a little unusual in the winter moonlight in the Safeway parking lot.

He nodded, as though he didn't care about my answer. "I have," he said. I think I asked him what that was like. "It's surprising," he said, like he knew, and kind of leaned in on me. "It's really not what you think." I might have nodded or said something back, but it didn't matter because he had said what he needed to say and went back into the store, and I stood there in the empty lot, hands in my pockets.

Later, sitting around the table, the little bird dying under the harsh hanging light, its beak opening and closing slower and slower, some kind of fluid, ichor, maybe blood, dripping from the corner of its mouth, I looked around, looking for a place to run, and all those eyes seemed like his, wide and bright and staring from all those dark faces. It

wasn't a fair test. I knew that. Everything I had learned and known about the world told me so, like the Salem trials. It was the poison, of course. It wasn't fair. How could it not die?

But the eyes. And I looked down at the bird as it died, now a leg twitching and going still, and I knew there was nothing I could do, but I stroked the feathers of its head, tiny brown sparrow feathers, its own dark eyes going dim, and I willed it to live. Willed it to get up and fly out the window into the night. Willed myself to join it in escape. Wondered what my own eyes looked like. But I didn't even know what question was asked.

I never expected the man at the Safeway who spoke to me about the devil, any more than I expected to be sitting at that table. And yet those things happened, and so here I am. Grandma would say it like that.

Another thing Grandma would say was that we had never left Africa, that the old stories told us that long ago our land cut off a piece of herself and set it drifting on the sea, and that piece came to rest against another distant land. And then the little baby Africa land, lonely, waited for her people to come back to her. I didn't believe that either, until one day in geology class I read that scientists agreed that a large piece of the American South was millions of years older than the rest of the American land mass, and that their theory was that a part of the African plate had broken off settled into this one via continental drift.

I thought maybe it was a coincidence, a lucky guess. But then I thought it was more likely that Grandma's story wasn't that old. Someone had learned what was in the textbook, maybe my mom, and told her. Then Grandma made up the story in her head

and spread it around. Not trying to be deceitful or anything, but it floated around in her head and came out in her own words. It had to be, because no one could have been around millions of years ago to remember.

But sometimes, when I looked at the sun, that yellow and huge sun hanging over the wide delta horizon, or stared into churning brown river water, or listened to the cicadas thick in the heat-limp trees by the lazy, crawling bayou, I did wonder. Grandma said that people do not remember the land; it is the land that remembers the people.

I will confess it. I will confess it all, now.

It was the end of summer, hot and still, and school had not yet started, but already football practice had started, two-a-days. We were at Grandma's house. The old, bad part of town. That's what I thought. The wrong side of the tracks, which lay two blocks down, and every now and again the freight trains would rumble by but even they would not raise a wind. The houses full and the streets dusty and empty in the heat of the day, everybody inside or on the porch or sitting on stoops, and I was looking at the bags of water hanging from the eaves against the flies. Another superstition. I love Grandma, but I never did like going to her house. My dad was still at work, and my mom was cleaning up in the kitchen, and Grandma was rocking in her chair, the glare of the day flashing in her huge glasses that made her look like an owl.

The car drove up. It was LaMarcus. Grandma stopped rocking, and that was strange. She never stopped rocking. Did she know already? Did I know?

His face told something, downcast and worrying, and he was always so good-natured. I thought too much so, sometimes. I heard the screen door open and clatter back and my mom went and stood against the railing, twisting a dishrag.

“It’s Cedric,” LaMarcus. He told us. About the accident. He told us how they were painting the field at the high school, so for today the practice was at the old Helman’s stadium off Barraque Street, but we knew that already.

“I was there,” he said. “When it happened. We was doing wind sprints. Cause we was goofing off. But not Cedric. You know he’s like not like that.”

Serious, determined. I knew. I had heard it so many times. I tried for the team, of course. But it was never for me. I was better with my head in the books. Isn’t that what they say you should do? Get an education. But I never got any credit, not from people around here, not from this neighborhood, not from the street.

But everybody would say, Cedric, he was going to get that athletic scholarship. People were already sizing up the star of the Dollarway Cardinals for a Razorback uniform, or Crimson Tide, or Auburn. Some were already talking about which pro team would come calling. I thought that was crazy, tried to talk about how long the odds were on that, how short a pro career usually is. Only did it once or twice before I was hushed up. Said to me how good it would be for me when my cousin went pro.

“How?” Grandma said, looking at LaMarcus, her voice dried out and cracking.

LaMarcus shook his head. “Coach was making everybody do another turn, everybody already sweating buckets. Sends Cedric up to the old bleachers.”

Grandma waited, the white glare of the day filling her glasses.

LaMarcus took his hands and made a folding motion. “They all come down. Like dominoes. The whole set of bleachers. Every last one.”

Grandma stood as LaMarcus held out his hands. “He’s not – he’s in the hospital. But...it ain’t good.”

“Felicia know?”

My aunt, she’d be weeping for her baby boy, that’s for sure.

He nodded. “She there now. And Deandria.”

That name made me catch my breath and flush. I shook my head. “They should have never gone to that Helman’s stadium,” I said. “It’s too old. Probably hasn’t been used for ten years. Wood must have rotted through.”

Grandma set herself back down and started rocking again. “No. No, it ain’t that,” she said. She stared straight ahead at nothing like she could find something inside it and then she said, “It’s witchcraft.”

I rolled my eyes and looked hopefully at my mom. Worry was twisting her face, and the sun off the water bags fractured and set their mottled light against her skin and for a moment I didn’t recognize her. She’s a church-going woman and that’s what made me a church-going boy, but only that. I didn’t believe even what most people believe.

“Mom,” I said, almost pleading. “You go to church, you can’t...”

“This shall come to thee in a moment, the loss of children,” she said, and it sounded like a chant.

And Grandma finished, “Stand now with thy enchantments, and with the multitude of thy sorceries, wherein thou have labored from thy youth.” She shook her head. “The devil goes about.”

It was crazy. I knew it was crazy. But I told myself that, psychologically, people need a way to make sense of things when random tragedy strikes. They can’t believe that it’s just chance. Because then it doesn’t mean anything.

We visited. We were all there. My dad met us and I was relieved to see him. We all stood around the bedside as long as we could, and I wanted to go. Deandria was there, still beautiful even with the tears on her face, eyes puffed out from crying, sniffing. I flushed, first with desire, then I guess embarrassment. I had made my play at the end of the last school year, but of course that didn't go anywhere. I never had much luck with girls.

And all the times after, at the hospital. School started, but nothing changed. We would go again, and again. It all runs together. It's like a nightmare. I'm still there. I can't get out. That's why I'm here now.

Some people don't like hospitals, or doctor's offices. I never minded. I liked visiting my dad's office. Clean, modern. Everything in its place. The smell of disinfectant, the quiet of waiting rooms. Soft voices.

But now I began to hate it. The quiet beep of the machines, like mechanical insects. I would stare at the dripping IV bag and it reminded me of the water bags hanging from my grandmother's eves. For flies.

The doctors couldn't explain it. All the scans were clear. There were no signs of permanent trauma. Showed us x-rays, lit them up clear as day and we could see the bones all whole and the skull with the little fractures knitting back together. Cedric was young and strong, they'd say. But they couldn't say when Cedric would wake up, why Cedric wasn't waking up. Witchcraft in the whispers.

Football season came and went. Of course they did the investigation of the accident. It was the fire department, I think. I wondered if they were qualified, but when the newspaper article came out and it said that the inspection came up with termites

eating at the wood for years I was excited. I almost jumped out of my chair. I had gotten it almost exactly right. I waited for my dad to come home and I showed it to him. He nodded.

“Termites,” I said. “Tell them, dad. Not witchcraft. Insects.”

He shifted in his easy chair and looked at me. “I know,” he said. “But it’s a different way of thinking. Your Grandma. Your mom.”

“But...termites,” I said.

He shook his head. “It doesn’t matter. It’s not about the termites. It’s about Cedric, and why he was sitting there. At that exact time. In that exact place. The coincidence of space and time.” He brought the edges of his big hands together, palms up, and touched them together softly. Like he was bringing me a gift.

“The bleachers could have fallen at any time. You see? It’s that they fell at this particular time. That’s the witchcraft. And why Cedric isn’t waking up is because the witch hasn’t been found. It’s not about *how* something happened. That’s termites. It’s about *why* something happens. That’s the devil’s work. But if you find the witch, there can be reconciliation. That’s what they’re thinking about. That’s how they’re thinking about it.”

And then last time, at the hospital. It was cold again, winter. My dad wasn’t there. I thought he was working late. The rest of us were all around the bed, like we did every week, like it was church. But I was furious. The beeping machines were singing insects, the quiet rooms were filled with mad talk, the IV bag was charming away flies. I had lost something. I had lost that clean, quiet place, that sane place, that place my father

inhabited that wasn't full of drumbeat and street talk and primping and flashing jewelry and gleaming rims. I had lost it.

Grandma was leaning over, touching, looking down, tearful. "Witchcraft," she whispered.

I couldn't help it. I felt the words coming up hot and bitter from someplace down inside me. "It was termites, Grandma. Termites. Not witchcraft. There's no such thing as witches."

They all looked at me and I threw up my hands. "It's like we're not even living in the real world," I told them, accused them. "Who could be a witch? They live in Jefferson Heights, or down on Harding? Who's got spell books and a pot of potions around here? Who's got a haunted house and some black cats?"

Grandma shook her head, and I think it was pity. She pitied me for not understanding. "It's not like that," she said. The lines of her hands were like old dried streams and the folds of the earth, and she smoothed the blank white bed sheet along its edges. "Don't you see? Anybody could be a witch. Anybody. Sometimes they don't even know it."

I crossed my arms, exasperated, and waited for visiting hours to end. The quiet came back and surrounded us.

I don't know how it happened. She must have caught me looking. Looking at her some way. Desire. Embarrassment.

"It's you!" Deandria shouted, her eyes wide. "It's you! You're doing it!" She lunged at me, face twisted with rage. LaMarcus and my mom had to hold her back.

I backed up to the door. "This is crazy! You're all crazy!" I shouted. I looked around desperately, but I saw doubt in Grandma's face. In my mom's face. I couldn't believe it.

Grandma went back to smoothing the sheets. "There's a way," she said, quietly. "The poison oracle."

"I'm not listening to this," I said, and I stormed out. But I didn't go down the hall. I stood by the door, the cold metal of the handle still in my hand, and I listened, catching the fragments. A little bird, a bit of poison, we ask the question, and then we know. If the bird dies... Grandma whispering these things, no one saying anything against. Not just letting her finish. Really listening. I knew everyone loved her, respected her. I loved her, too, loved the smell of the kitchen when she was cooking, humming, singing. But she was old and from another time.

Mom was quiet on the drive back. I would catch her glancing across at me in the rearview mirror but then she would go back to staring hard at the empty streets, the lonely stoplights spilling red into the dark.

Back at home she made me a grilled cheese sandwich. I looked in on her, saw her standing very still with her head bent over the pan, shifting the bread around with a wooden spoon. She wasn't saying anything and I didn't try to talk to her. I ate half the sandwich and went up to my room.

I laid on my bed and shut my eyes tight and waited for my dad to come home, waited for the nightmare to end. He could talk some sense into them, if anybody could. For a moment I worried that he wouldn't, because it was mom and Grandma. He didn't care about what the others thought, but those two. And he usually let things go, sat

quietly and let things go. But he could do it. I had seen it before. Maybe because he did not do it often, did not hold out his big hands and shout, "Enough!" in his big voice, that when he did, everybody listened. Us kids, mom, even Grandma.

I thought about that and sank into that comfortable feeling so much that I almost fell asleep. But then I started to worry that they wouldn't even tell him. That they would keep all their craziness secret, go behind his back.

But it was all ridiculous. Where would they even get a bird? Who even knew how to catch one? Mom couldn't, Deandria was scared of animals. LaMarcus couldn't catch anything. Maybe Grandma had some trick. But they would still have to get some poison. I couldn't believe I was even thinking about it.

Finally I heard my dad's car and I sat up in bed and let out my breath. It was late, and the living room was already dark. I thought mom had already gone to bed. Only the kitchen light was on, and it spilled a little light into the living room, and also a strange chill. I almost ran up to the door to open it for him, but I held back and stood, anxious, waiting. I heard another car come up. Strange. The engine cut off and doors, one, two, three, thumped shut in the night.

I tore open the door and my dad stood there and I smiled and looked up into his face. But his face was sad.

I looked down. In his big hands he held a little bird, flapping helplessly.

I think I screamed.

They were all standing behind him, dark shapes in the night, just their eyes bright, eyes I used to know. Like a tide they took me into them, carried me to the kitchen with the one lamp left on and the one window left open, and there we watched the bird die.

I didn't fly out the window with the bird. I didn't escape. I can't. I'm trapped here, like you. So that's why I'm here now, back at your bed, where you sleep, dreamless. Envy, they call it. Envy and the pride that it comes from. I wanted what you had, Cedric. Worse than that. I don't even know if I really wanted it. I wanted you not to have it.

"You ever met the devil?" he said, just like that.