

You, Me, and the Devil Makes Three

“All I did was ask a few questions, I can’t believe you’ve let this go on so long. When will you let this thing go?”

“Again? I feel like we’ve been having this conversation for thousands of years.” The two continued to argue, before too long, as they usually did, their conversation devolved to name calling and insults.

“Forget this, I hate talking to you when you’re in this mood,” the pleading man threw up his hands. “Every time I come up here, why does every nice dinner we have have to end up like this?”

“You asked the question! I wasn’t even going to bring it up, you know,” the second man started to protest.

“Yea, whatever, I’m going. I’ll see you next week,” the man got up muttering under his breath, “just hold onto something for a god damn eternity, never let anything go, one mistake,” and his partner sitting across from him started to call him back.

“Wait, B, don’t go...” before the man could finish his sentence, his partner was gone. One second he was there, the next he was nowhere to be found. The man, sitting at his table, looked at the empty space his partner had just inhabited and sighed. “Every time,” he muttered to himself. The man blinked and the two candles at his table went out, while the lighting overhead kicked on.

As if the lights had summoned him, the man’s son walked through the door. “Everything okay dad?”

“Everything’s fine,” he responded, barely trying to hide the exasperation and frustration in his tone. He loved his son, but, what was that phrase people used sometimes? Time to cut the cord? Well, he had cut the cord, but somewhere along the way the boy hadn’t received the message.

“How was dinner?” His son asked, either not hearing, or successfully pretending that he hadn’t heard the tone.

“The same,” his father answered.

“I don’t know why the two of you continue to have these dinners, they never accomplish anything, and he always leaves in a huff,” the son said to his dad. “Besides, you’ve got me here all the time.”

“Don’t I know it,” the older man said half under his breath. He looked at his son, who’s face dropped. “I’m kidding boy,” the father said, it wasn’t his son’s fault the man had left so quickly. Well, it was, but all that happened years ago. It wasn’t his son’s fault in this instance. He also couldn’t ignore the overall point. At least half of their dinners ended this way, and the fights were becoming ever more frequent.

“Really though, why do you continue to have these dinners?”

“I know they don’t accomplish much, but, it’s the only time I get to see him. And maybe one day he’ll do the right thing, he’ll say the right thing. I just want to let him back in.”

“Okay, this may be a dumb question, but, why don’t you?” The son asked his father.

“That’s not how it works,” the father responded.

“What kind of mysterious shit does that mean?” The boy asked.

His father ignored the language and the outburst. “One day, maybe, he’ll be let back in, until then, I’m going to continue to have these dinners.”

“Why did you even throw him out in the first place?” The son asked his dad.

The man would’ve taken a deep breath if he had had any need to, was his son being deliberately obtuse? Or did he really not know the source of their conflict? The man assumed the latter, his son may not be the smartest of his offspring, (what would you expect when you forego education to wander around with a bunch of friends?) but he was never malicious. The man knew that if he was asking, he was doing so earnestly.

“He asked one question too many,” the man answered.

“You can get thrown out of here for that?” His son asked nervously. He didn’t know which question would break the proverbial camel’s back, but he assumed he had to be approaching it.

“Not anymore,” his father reassured him, “not since you were born actually.”

The son looked relieved. “Close one,” he said, and his father cracked a smile despite his best efforts. “So what does he need to do to be let back in? I mean, it’s obviously not a matter of time. If he came back tomorrow, what would he have to say to get back in here?”

“He needs to ask the right question,” his father answered.

It was the son’s turn to be exasperated. “So, just so I’m clear, the man you’re destined to spend the rest of your life with, the man who, as far as I can tell, once upon a time, was your partner in work and life, has been banished. He was banished for asking too many questions.”

“Considering this, and despite how you actually feel, you are not allowed to let him back in here. His only path to redemption is to ask you ‘the right’ question. But, given what happened last time he had that curious inclination, it’s unlikely he’ll ever ask the right question, even if he knew what it was. So, you continue to have a weekly dinner with him, because you can’t bear to stop seeing him altogether, but, these dinners leave you sad and frustrated and angry almost without fail. But, rather than just letting him back in, which as far as I can tell, you are more than capable of doing, you won’t, because of the aforementioned question. Does that about sum up this bizarre situation?”

The man looked at his son silently for what felt like an eternity, (and he would know). He didn’t like having his flaws and mistakes pointed out, especially in such a succinct, smarmy little summary. “Well, when you put it like that it makes me sound a bit crazy,” was all the man could think to say.

“Your words, not mine,” the son said quietly, although not quite enough to escape the notice of his father.

The father narrowed his eyes and the mood, chilly already, turned icy. “I don’t ask you to understand everything I do, greater minds than yours have tried. But I will not sit here and have my methods questioned, especially by someone who cannot see the whole plan,” the man’s voice rose as he finished, and the son could hear his anger boiling over.

“Alright, forget I said anything.” What followed was a tense moment, until the son’s eyes noticed the plate left by the other man. “Yum, nachos.”

His father looked at the plate, “They’ll be cold by now.”

The son took hold of the plate and closed his eyes. His father looked as if to scold the boy for performing such trivial acts as warming up a plate of nachos, but couldn’t find the energy.

“Much better,” the son said, opening his eyes, and taking a nacho from atop the now steaming platter.

“Anyways,” the son continued with half a nacho in his mouth, “do you happen to know when he’ll ask this question?”

“Of course I do,” the man snapped at his son.

“So, when is he going to ask?”

“He’s not,” the father responded, shoulders sagging under the weight of his answer.

“Oh,” the boy replied, and looked thoughtful again, and maybe, his father noticed, a bit sad as well.

“Oh,” the man responded in turn, what else was there to say?

The boy almost left it. He could sense the mood, feel the anger, and the self loathing radiating off of his father. He should've left it.

“Then why not let him in?” He asked again, “why go through all of this? You make the rules, can't you break this one?”

“God damnit,” his father yelled, cutting his son off and shocking him to silence. “Why do you care anyway? Why does it matter what I do? As far as I can tell you've never had anything but spite and disdain for him anyway.”

“I was just asking. Just making conversation.”

“Well don't,” his father said, lowering his voice slightly. “He's not coming back. That's it, end of story, full stop. Understand?”

“Alright, I got it,” the son said sulkily. “Just seems like a stupid, pointless complication, it's your domain after all.”

“He swore he'd kill you okay!” His father shouted at his son. “He swore that if he ever saw you again, he would kill you, or die trying. And make no mistake, here, that would be final.”

That shut the son up instantly.

“Do you see why I can't let him up here now? Does it finally make sense? Will you stop being so god damn nosy? I would love to let him back in, rules be damned. But, that is too high a price, for me, for you, for him, for everyone.”

“Why does he hate me so much?” The boy asked, his voice cracking slightly. “What did I do to him?”

The father let out a deep breath, and in his son's naive earnestness, his anger melted away.

“He doesn't hate you,” the man answered. “He hates what you represent, and in this case, those are two very different things.”

“They amount to the same thing though, don't they? He'll kill me, or try, if he sees me, so I don't think it matters if he hates me or the idea of me, does it?”

“No,” the man answered, “I suppose it doesn't.”

“But,” the son started to ask, then stopped. “But,” he tried again.

“What is it boy?”

“Well, it’s just…” the boy stopped mid sentence again.

The father let him gather his thoughts.

“Do you love me dad?”

The man blinked, not expecting the question. “Of course, son. More than anything. Even if I don’t always show it.”

“Well then,” the boy took a deep breath, “why do you still have dinner with him? I know you have a past, but he threatened to kill me. Isn’t that enough to cut him off?” The son reached up and brushed a tear off of his cheek.

“It’s not that simple,” the father asked, and the boy looked at him as if waiting for more of an explanation, but it didn’t appear one was forthcoming.

“It seems that simple,” the son responded quietly, and turned to leave the room.

“It was ordained,” the man said, half to himself, stopping the boy in his tracks. “He had to swear it. And should he ever be put in that situation, he’ll have to make an attempt. It was ordained.”

“He had to swear to kill me? What the hell kind of game is that?”

“Don’t use that word here,” the man scolded the boy, but without any real malice.

“Well, as far as I am aware, there are only two beings in the entire universe that can ordain something, and I know I didn’t order him to make that oath.”

“Correct,” the father responded to the unasked question.

“He was your best friend. You loved him. You still love him.”

“Correct,” the man said again.

“Oh,” the boy said, and the bigger picture was finally clear to him.

“Correct,” the father said for the third time.

“Oh,” the boy said one more time, and left the room.

“Boy,” the man said to his son’s back.

“Son,” the man said again, a touch of pleading in his voice.

“Jesus,” the man tried one more time. He knew it was too late. His son had left.