

Scratch

In Sunday school they showed pictures of the devil from a book, and said watch out! They said God's in everything and knows my heart inside, but the devil works on my heart trying to attack it. I better never lie or sin. If I do I'd better tell the truth about it quick. Keeping only goodness in your heart is how you don't get attacked. My uncle Carson got a heart attack last Christmas. I guess he wasn't watching out.

The devil's name is Satan. Folks he goes after who don't hope on Jesus get damned and delivered to his porch in Hell. He has forever to torment you with his fork. You can't run once he has you. The skin on your feet gets peeled back til raw meat shows and your bowels bust out like Judas. You'll stand in filth forever, crying for mercy instead of singing at Heaven's Throne. I don't like singing but I'd rather do it than stand in filth getting poked like a sausage.

In the picture Satan Devil stood on his goat hooves all hairy and sunburnt red. The thing he held was longer than a hay fork, with fish-hook barbs. Later in another book I saw it's called a Trident. The sea king carried one back in Greek times. I don't worry much what they say in Sunday school. Their book even has the wrong pictures. My Sunday school teacher is Miss Garvez. I don't like her much. She has this wrinkly turkey neck. When she coughs, powder flies off her like eraser chalk. She's okay in Sunday school, the way teachers are supposed to be. What I don't like is she works at Dr. Stanley's office too. When Mom takes me and Lexie for checkups, there's Miss Garvez like a buzzard behind the desk. She looks around the waiting room, waiting for kids to act up. I don't bother anyone at the doctor's. I mind my business and hope I don't need shots. Miss Garvez calls my name just like in Sunday school, like I was whispering or swiping communion juice while other kids shut their eyes to pray. She always thinks I need lessons on being good.

One time Dr. Stanley made me take something called a yarn test. You pee in a cup and they check it for stuff. Sugar, maybe. I went to the bathroom and filled the little cup. Dr. Stanley calls it a

speciment, like I'm a bug or a flower. I screwed the lid on so it wouldn't spill but nobody said where to leave it. I carried it out to Miss Garvez. Mom pays her for the doctor so I thought that made sense. When I pushed it across the desk to her, her face twisted up. She looked like you would if somebody handed you a warn glass of pee. Dr. Stanley came out and when he saw Miss Garvez's face, he laughed so hard I thought he would make his own speciment. Mom looked up from a magazine. She figured it out and started laughing too. Lexie joined in, not understanding but cause she saw grownups laughing. Miss Garvez did not laugh. Me neither. She looked at me like I did something bad on purpose, or was too stupid to know better. My ears burned pink and I wished to Jesus I never had to go to Sunday school again.

I was happy thinking Miss Garvez was wrong about sin and the devil with her dumb book. She thinks I'll never be smarter than her. Now I know more than she knows and I wish I didn't. Sunday school has things confused, but a lot of it's true. The devil is real and walks the earth. His skin is hairy and scalded red. He wears heavy black boots with muddy toes and a John Deere tractor cap to hide his horns. He carries a spindly pitchfork with the points ate up by rust. That's from sinner's blood. He keeps his fork leaning against the porch, warning people to stay away. I wish we'd stayed away.

We've lived in Alvin since I was a baby and Lexie wasn't all the way born. It's a pretty big town, not like Houston but almost. Dad says there's twenty thousand people and that's plenty. Mom grew up here and Daddy comes from a town way far away called Arcola, almost fifteen miles. From our house it's an hour drive to Galveston. We don't go much. I can ride my bike to school. My school is named after Mark Twang who's a writer and wrote books like Tom Sawyer. Dad and I read that one together. I liked it a lot but it makes me wish I had rivers and caves to play in. We have a big park with a soccer field and some ducks but that's about all. Dad could walk to work at his welding shop except he needs a truck for hauling crap around. That's what he says. Mom hollers if I say it and I don't think that's fair. Dad tells me and Lexie that a big part of being grownup is hauling crap around, so turn off the TV and take out the damn garbage like your mom said. That shuts Mom up.

Mom and Dad think I watch too much TV but I like being outside when it's not hot out. It's hot out a lot. My bike was my cousin's. The right handlebar is bent from when he rode off a ramp into the lake and busted his shoulder. Dad says it has character and road miles and that's cool. It's also painted to look like rattlesnake skin. That's really cool. Dad makes me help him wash his truck, even though I told him once it would have more character with the mud left on it. He laughed and called me a wise apple, said I needed character more than the truck did so get scrubbing. He tossed a soapy sponge like a football. I caught it easy but it went SPLAT and got suds all on my shirt.

Lexie got a new bike when she learned how to ride. It's more important for girls to have nice new stuff, I guess. Mom makes me take her along when I ride. I hated that at first, riding behind her slow in case she fell off. She used to a lot. Now she's six and pretty good on her own, doesn't have to do every single thing I do. Mom says she's developing her own interests. But when I'm just riding around and not with my friends I don't mind her coming along. We're only supposed to circle the block, or ride down to the jogging trail if it's early on a Saturday. No stopping to talk or pet dogs, unless it's a friend from school or their folks. We can stop for the ice cream man after lunch, only on our street.

A policeman sits in his car most of the day, watching the park. If we can't see his car we're out of bounds. Mom doesn't want us anywhere strangers could hide and bother us when we go past. There's a kid like that at school, Barney Rove. He's bigger than all of us, real shy and quiet. We're supposed to be nice and not tease him. He gets in trouble a lot, tries to bother girls if they walk by him too close.

A short loop splits off the big trail in the park. It only goes into the trees a little ways and back. There's one spot you can't see from the rest of the park. We both knew Mom would say NO WAY can we go back there but one time I decided to give Lexie a scare. I took off down the side path, speeding for the trees. Lexie stopped her bike at the end of the big trail, yelling "Wyatt, stop! We're not s'poze to!"

I thought in ten seconds I'd make the circle and pop back out, picking up the big trail ahead of where she stopped. I knew she'd tattle on me to Mom but some days you don't care. I laughed, cruising into the woods out of sight. Her little voice hollered from far away.

“W-y-y-y-yutt! Quit i-i-i-it!”

She'd be crying when I got back the trail. That spoiled the fun some. The worst whipping I ever got Dad told me, “Son, I hope it was worth it.” I don't remember what got me in trouble but I sure remember the whipping. That means it wasn't worth it, I guess, and listening to Lexie howl like a baby I could tell this wasn't worth the trouble I'd be in later.

I didn't see what hit my tire. The bike bucked like a horse and I was in the air. I did a slow flip over the handlebars trying to hang on. I had my helmet on that's a Ninja Turtle shell, but instead of landing safe on my head I came down on both knees and slid over gravel. My jeans ripped up one leg, almost to my pocket. I ended up face first in long uncut grass under a big tree.

First thing I noticed was all the burnt-up pieces of cigarettes in the grass under my nose. Lots of people smoked there. It was like out back of our school, where the doors for the lunch kitchen and the teacher lounge are. Students aren't supposed to go there but it's a shortcut home. I was having that thing where you know you're hurt but you can't feel how bad yet. It's when you wait for a little kid to take a big breath and start squalling. I was about to do the same thing so I bit down on my tongue. My skinned-up knees burned but I didn't yell. I let a couple tears run out my eyes and down my face. I thought I was done. Then I tried to get up and it HURT. I sat still again for a minute and I could see how different that place was from the park. It was like ten-thirty in the morning but the trees around me blocked out the sun. A little ways back in there it would be like nighttime. Looking at the woods I thought Mom was right. Someone could sit back here and be invisible. I felt cold spiders on my arm. I wondered if someone had watched me fall but hadn't come to help.

I pushed myself up, ignoring my hurts. That's when I saw the snake bunched up under my bike tire. The crash had killed it, almost broke it in half. It probably wasn't nothing dangerous, a brown

ratsnake maybe, not nasty like a copperhead, but I made sure not to touch it with my foot when I took the bike to try and get on.

After a few tries I swung my bloody knee over the seat. Lexie came on tiptoes around the edge of a tree, walking her bike as slow as she could. Her face was red. She looked like something would jump on her, about as scared as I ever saw her. She saw my knee and my pants torn up, my dirty hair.

“Lexie,” I called, trying not to holler. “I’m okay. I fell over a stick. Let’s go.”

She looked down by my feet and I saw her go stiff. She didn’t scream but she wanted to.

“Lexie,” I said, trying to sound grown-up like Dad, “It’s a piece of branch off a tree. Don’t look at it. Stay there still. I’ll come to you.”

She stayed put but her body shook like a danderline flower. She kept her eyes on the snake til I kicked it into the weeds. I was scared it would wrap around my foot and I’d have to pick it up, but thanks Jesus it bounced one time and disappeared into green shade. That broke the spell on Lexie, but when I walked my bike over to her I could see we had another problem.

“Aww, Lex,” I said.

“Wyatt, I don’t like here.” She said it real pouty, which bothered me usually but I could see she’d wet her pants. I made myself put a hand on her shoulder.

“I know. I’m sorry. It was dumb.” She nodded, still looked at the ground and her shoulders jerked up and down like hickups.

“Don’t cry, Lex,” I whispered but that made it worse. It was pretty awful, so I thought of something to make her feel better. The soccer field had big sprinklers running, almost as tall as Lexie. I made her ride through it a few times until she was good and soaked. I worried the cold water would upset her again but she grinned and even laughed a little. I chased her through to wash myself off. We rode by the police car on the way back, thinking maybe we got seen and we’d be in trouble. The policeman looked asleep.

We came home dripping wet, me with a bloody knee and my jeans ruined. Mom pitched a fit,

yanked us inside almost before we were off our bikes. I was ready to tell on myself and take a whipping and learn that NO, riding off the trail wasn't worth it. When Mom sat us down and asked WHAT ON EARTH happened, Lexie spoke up first. She said she was chasing too close behind me on the trail and tipped her bike by accident, and she fell on me so I took the whole crash on my knees and she was so, so sorry. She even acted ready to cry, or maybe that part was real. It worked on Mom anyway. We got off easy since it wasn't my fault. I did say it was my idea riding through the sprinkler to make us feel better. I think Mom had forgot we were soaking wet. She gave me one of her looks and said well fine, but maybe it wasn't the most RESPONSIBLE idea with a big open cut. She made us change clothes and bandaged my knee and that was it. I couldn't believe Lexie lied for me after what I put her through. But I had fixed her up so Mom never knew about her pissypants. Right before bedtime she walked into my room. She didn't ask and I didn't tell her to get lost. She came over where I sat on the bed with my X-Men comic and kissed my forehead. Then she turned around quick and left.

That is how come I like having Lexie around. The Sunday after that, Miss Garvez got on our case about the devil and it got sorta mixed up in my head. I had bad dreams about the woods. I was lost and somebody was there who I couldn't see. I woke up Mom and Dad saying things in my sleep, about snakes or fishing hooks or I don't know what. Maybe they worried but by next Saturday I was pretty okay again and they forgot about it.

I watched out, not cause Miss Garvez said to but cause the world was more dangerous after my crash. Traps could be anywhere, not just in the woods but anyplace people couldn't see me or help me. It wouldn't help having Lexie around if something real bad happened, if I got knocked out or caught. She was too little. I didn't like thinking about it. It could happen lots of places. I remembered from my dream feeling somebody close by, watching but not helping. Someone wanted to see me hurt, maybe for sins I did.

I asked Mom a bunch of questions about strangers, wouldn't tell her why. I didn't want her to know I was scared of a dream. She never knew we went in the woods that day. She thought a stranger

was bothering me in the neighborhood. I told her no, I was just asking, but she told Dad and after dinner he asked me what was up. He didn't act all worried like Mom, just sat with me on the couch and said the most important thing is to be careful and safe. "Because you just don't know, man," he said, and asked if I understood. I said yes even though I wasn't sure. Now I guess I understand. I wondered if I saw the devil, would I recognize him? Hooves and horns can be hid when you meet somebody the first time.

Mom and Dad didn't want us to bring our bikes when we visited Aunt Rowena and Uncle Fred. They lived in the country, with nowhere to ride but little dirt roads or the highway. I asked what was wrong with dirt roads. Dad said it might rain and there'd be nothing but mud. That sounded great to me but I knew Mom wouldn't go for it. She'd say Lexie was too little to ride through mud even though we both know she can ride almost as good as me. I asked a bunch of times PLEASE could we put the bikes in Dad's truck and we'd only ride them if it was dry. Mom said she didn't know, we were supposed to be visiting family, but Dad said maybe they should let us get some fresh air early. If it did rain we'd all be stuck inside for the weekend and he didn't want us getting sick with a cabin fever. I never had that before but if it's like chicken pocks, no thanks. Mom said fine, don't get our hopes up.

Aunt Rowena is Dad's aunt. She was sisters with my Gramma. She's nice and makes really good cookies and pie. She's got arthritis and doesn't go outside, but since her bones hurt she lets us open cans for her and scoop out cups of sugar. Uncle Fred doesn't talk much. He whittles things from sticks and spits brown tobacco all over everything. A half hour before dinner we go to the garden and help him pull up carrots and tomatoes and potatoes. It's fun except there are ants in the dirt.

When it's not time to make dinner or pick up vegibles, Aunt Rowena and Uncle Fred don't do much. They make big pots of coffee, YUCK, and sit in the living room asking Mom and Dad about people I don't know. Uncle Carson used to go with us but his heart got attacked and now he's dead. They have a TV but it only picks up football games. The picture's so fuzzy you can't tell what color the little guys are. Uncle Fred plays it with the sound on MUTE. I don't know who'd want a crummy TV

like that. My weird old family, I guess. It's hard to sit still for all that, which is why I got the idea about bikes.

I looked at the map while Dad drove us up there, and I saw we were supposed to drive into a big green blob called Davy Crockett National Forest. I thought that was awesome and wanted to stop there. Dad said we were in the middle of it but all I saw was plain old trees. A family of big fat people was camping close to the bathrooms. Nobody had bearskins or raccoon hats on. We played the alphabet game with road signs. I almost won. Mom and Lexie played on a team together since Lexie needed help. It wasn't fair.

Mom and Dad made us come inside when we first got there. Aunt Rowena made cookies and Uncle Fred showed us how to carve a duck out of a stick. Since it was early and not rainy or even cloudy, they said we could go play on our bikes. Dad showed me how to set a timer for one hour on the waterproof watch I got for my birthday. Mom said be careful and look after Lexie OR ELSE. Stay on the roads and don't go on ANYONE's property, no driveways or anywhere close to a house or car. No distraction derbies either, she said, which means don't crash into each other. Watch out for snakes in the road, I was thinking too.

There aren't any big farms where Aunt Rowena and Uncle Fred live, just little houses with big yards where people have some horses or a cow. Lots of dogs run around loose, and if Mom had thought of that she wouldn't let us go. She got bit by a dog when she was little and she's still scared of them. The little dirt roads go in and out of the trees but it feels more wide open than the place by the park. Not somewhere dangerous place where somebody bad could hide. Miss Garvez calls being outside enJOYing God's creations. It's one thing she says that I do like. That's how we felt. It was a real adventure. We got into some game about being explorers. There were birds and squirrels but we have those at home. Lexie wanted to discover some chickens so we rode around looking for those. We found buzzards eating a dead skunk. Lexie wouldn't go up close with me to see. I decided I wanted my own camera for Christmas.

There were little houses painted all different colors. We didn't find any chickens, but Lexie's favorite was a house the color of butter with two red horses, a horse with spots, and a donkey in the yard. We waved and hollered from the fence but they wouldn't come to us. I got tired of horses and cows. I hoped some dogs or an armadillo would walk by. It was getting close to the hour but we weren't ready to go back. We found a road that split two ways. One way was nice houses and grass like we'd seen already. The other way the houses looked older. The roofs were mostly metal. There were knocked out windows in some, tires and broken toys in the yards. One had a busted commode sitting right in front. There weren't birds singing or squirrels running around those yards. I was about to take Lexie the other way when we saw the pigs.

Three houses down the bad-looking road was a fence with a pigpen built against it. It was crooked, made from broken wood and bobwire, not like at the nice farm my school class went to last year. In lots of places the bobwire twisted around two big hunks of wood to hold them together. Even far away we could see the pigs pretty good. They weren't eating or playing, just sitting hunched up together in the mud. We forgot about the scary houses, even though the one with the pigs had black trash bags taped up for windows and sharp cans and pieces of car motor spread out everywhere. We left our bikes on the road and I made Lexie go as quiet as we could over to the pen.

The pigs were sleeping. There was one great big fat one, the mama. She was laying so her rudders poked up towards the sky.

"That's how she feeds her babies," I said but I don't think Lexie understood. And there were no babies. The other pigs were littler than the mama but once we got close they were all REAL big. Bigger than me and Lexie both. It was neat to be close and see their big snouts and hair. Pigs are all bristly and furry, even growing out of their spots and that's not so cute. The smell wasn't cute either, all mud and pig poop they just kind of lived in, and in the mud I could see old bread and corncobs and rotted fruit skins. Somewhere under all those regular bad smells I thought I could smell something else, like toast got burnt or paper on fire. Not a barbecue fire but bad things burning.

I heard a little roll of thunder too, so far away and soft I bet Lexie didn't hear. She was watching the pigs with her mouth in a big O and I couldn't tell was she happy or scared. The thunder wasn't like for a real storm, but like when Mom says we gotta quit swimming even when there's sunshine out, or Dad says it must be raining away off and heading our way soon.

The mama sow-pig squirmed, even though we didn't holler nothing or throw any rocks at them. Something told her we were there, and right then I wasn't sure I liked pigs much at all. The whole bunch of them were stuck together, all crowded and fat in the pen so they couldn't hardly twist around. When one moved all the skin and fat wobbled. Seeing them slop around in the mud started making me feel sick. I reckoned they were fixing to snort and snuffle, but the sound that came from them made Lexie grab my hand and dig her little fingers in til I almost yelled. The pigs weren't squealing. They were screaming. The sound was like something getting the skin peeled off it.

That was when the devil came. A screen door banged on the house porch up in the yard. It was the littlest house on the road, kind of a light pink with the paint cracked and the sides leaning in like the roof was soft. It looked like a man on the porch, shaggy all over with red hair and suburnt every other place. His boots were heavy with dry muck. His cap sat high on his head like something kept him from pushing it down all the way. He grabbed the hay fork I'd seen leaning by the door but hadn't thought about til just then. I saw in his hateful black eyes what he wanted it for.

"Quit them hogs," roared the devil and he waved the fork at us. "Let 'em alone!"

He called up a roll of thunder behind his voice. The storm was closer. My knees wobbled. I wanted to pee myself. I wanted to say we didn't hurt the pigs or even touch them, but they kept screaming like they wanted him to come and deal with us. He didn't say nothing else as he stepped off the porch. I swear his boots made the ground rumble. Lexie shook the way she does when she's bawling scared over something, but no sound came from her. I backed away dragging her along. The devil kept walking down the yard. I prayed please Jesus, please, make the pigs be quiet at least. That was the worst thing.

I jerked Lexie's arm like a fishing pole. Her feet moved. We ran and the sound of black boots chasing us made a clap of thunder. Then the rain came, not a shower turning on slow but a bucket poured over us. I never looked back but I felt the devil man behind us. If I'd looked back it might've been better. My mind could make him bigger and closer and madder with my back turned. We looked for the right road but the storm was melting them to mud. I didn't know if the scream in my ear was Lexie or the pigs he'd turned loose to chase us. I kept on fast cause I heard the devil calling me.

"Wyatt!" he hollered, "Wyatt! Wyatt!"

I knew that even if found home and hid away safe, nobody would believe what we saw. Mom would tell me it was my imaginations, the man who wasn't the devil was yelling, "Quiet, quiet!" at the pigs. How could a stranger know my name, she'd ask. She wouldn't know cause she wasn't there. In lots of Bible stories God or the devil or the angel shows himself to people, but when the person tells the message nobody believes him and they throw rocks and cast him out to live with desert snakes. I never meant to cross the devil or upset his pigs. When Miss Garvez said he walks the earth I never thought he'd live so close to my aunt and uncle. I thought he lived in Arizona or Mexico.

I don't know how far we ran before my body shook so bad I had to stop. I remember falling to my knees in mud and Lexie's hand slipping loose. I don't know if she ran on to the house or stayed with me. All I could do was wonder how I'd let the devil learn my name. Now I was in his book, and he could watch me like Santa Claus and Jesus did. Miss Garvez says we are soldiers in Heaven's Army, but with so many things fighting for my soul I felt more like a battlefield than a soldier. I laid there with my face in the mud, barely breathing, hoping the soft ground would swaller me up before I felt a hot fork stab me.

I don't know how long it was before I crawled up the steps to Aunt Rowena's house, before strong hands picked me up and wrapped me in blankets Either I came in with Lexie or she was there already. I know she was next to me when Dad came back a long time later with our two muddy bikes in his truck. Remembering makes my head hurt, and Lexie will never talk about it even if she remembers.

All we can do is walk straight and keep to the road no matter what, keeping the black boot sounds behind us.

I haven't seen the devil again. Whenever I smell him over my shoulder I don't look back. I don't have to look because now I know what I will see. As long as I watch my step and never get curious enough to look again, I think I'll be okay.