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“Mephisto, old buddy, let's do lunch,” Raul Devry wrote on a business card. Carefully, he lit the sperm whale oil in his lamp and fed the note into the flame. Raul had stolen the oil from a man whose livelihood depended on his reputation for being able to get any contraband, and even more so, hold it until the purchaser paid for it. Raul felt those things should get the demon's interest. Perhaps the lunch would even be that day.

Raul doused the lamp, reconnected the smoke alarm and office sprinkler system, and put his appointment calender, open, on the top left corner of his dark walnut desk. A truly lovely office was one of the many perks of his job. Pale cream wallpaper with the company logo as a motif and a window with a view of the narrow garden between the office and the no uglier than most urban sidewalk had, when he began, made him feel like a CEO. His salary covered a lovely penthouse a half-block from the office and a service to clean it. He had plenty left over for a large IRA.

And he enjoyed every day at the office, truly. He liked dressing in the Brooks Brothers shirts and crisp white shirts his personal shopper provided. He did not mind wing tip shoes and staid ties as long as the leather and silk lived up the their price tags. Women with skin the color of his desk and wrinkles around their eyes, graying black or chestnut hair covered in nets, kept the place immaculate, the coffee fresh, and a steady stream of scrumptious and wholesome snacks available. They would even pick up dry cleaning and items from the lobby drug store for him and the other partners.

From ten in the morning until six or seven in the evening he had the perfect job. It was the night

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shift that got to him. His penthouse had come with a kitchenette, two bedrooms, a bath and powder room, and a large combined living and dining room. He supposed they were all still there. He was too tired when he stumbled in at four or five in the morning to turn on any lights except in the bathroom. He wondered if he'd notice if the cleaning service didn't keep up with it. Probably not.

Raul wanted to keep half his job. Mephisto had gotten him the job in the first place. Maybe the demon could explain how to keep it under control.

“I take it you need a favor again,” said a soft, rich bass voice from somewhere behind the wallpaper, or maybe under the carpet.

“I do. But lunch with you, Sir, is always an experience worthwhile in and of itself. And of course, I'm paying.”

“I accept your summons.”

Raul glanced at his calendar. Neat block print letters, amazingly like the handwriting of Terri, the secretary Raul shared with Karen and Pete, flowed across the square for that day, darkening to a dull brown as Raul watched.

“High noon, sales pitch with Meph, at A Little Place in the Park,” Raul read. Well, he had the expense account to cover it. Given how little time he had to spend his own money, he could even

pay for the lunches himself.

“Don't even think of using your card or cash,” the voice purred. This time it definitely came from under the carpet.

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The “Little” in “A Little Place in the Park” did not mean cramped, but exclusive. Raul's suit, being neither silk nor one of a kind, put him solidly in the restaurant's business class. About half the lunch patrons were like him, the men in pinstripes, the women in colorful, daytime variants of the little black dress or conservative skirt suits and pumps. They occupied the small metal tables and outdoor chairs. While waiting for food and to talk business, they admired the reproduction paintings of famous parks on the walls.

Mephisto had claimed one of the tables for two, each with its own convincing artificial arbor of grapes or roses, and supplied with deep, padded wing chairs in which a philanderer or high-end criminal could disappear without interrupting lunch or the business being conducted over it.

Like most in the first class of A Little Place in the Park, Mephisto followed the dress code to the letter and did developmental work on its spirit. The demon wore black raw silk trousers and shirt with a jacket of red leather trimmed with sable fur. His tie was a gold and ruby bolo, and the ruby's little brother shone from his earlobe. He smoked at the table while he waited for Raul, flicking ashes toward any from the business class tables who dared glare at him.

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It was almost the same outfit Mephisto had worn the first time Raul had taken the demon to lunch, except back then the demon had worn a white buckskin and blonde mink vest with matching boots, and his bolo and earring had been diamond. That time, Raul had foolishly accepted Mephisto's condition that Raul's girlfriend join them. Teeka had been uncomplimentary.

“Blood diamonds, Bambi skins, and boiled worms. Held together with sweatshop labor,” she'd said.

Raul had cringed, waiting for the offended demon to reduce the tiny, tactless blonde to a pile of herbal-lotion scented ash.

Mephisto had risen from the table to bow and said, “A discerning eye you have! You missed only that the sewing was all done by sick children under the age of ten. I had to go to an adult for the designs, but no worries – the calorie restrictions necessary to her professional credibility have already weakened her heart.”

That weekend, while Raul prepared for the interview Mephisto had arranged at his present company, Teeka had hung out at the pool bar, drinking. Perhaps that was why she had stayed in the water when the storm swept in. Either way, she landed in the hospital after a lightening strike. Raul could not visit on account of the interview. He came home to a voice message in which Teeka asked him, as a special favor to aid her recovery, to disappear from her life.

The head waiter escorted Raul to the booth and asked Mephisto if the gentlemen were ready to

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look at the menu.

Raul nodded and asked Mephisto if he would be kind enough to choose lunch for the table.

“Excellent idea. There's such symbolism about eating together.”

Mephisto opened the menu and his lips moved as he read silently. After a full five minutes, which Raul timed by counting his rapid heartbeats, Mephisto looked up and closed the menu.

“I believe we'll start with the lamb salad,” Mephisto said. “There's a special sweetness to a life taken early, and the the labor involved in harvesting the greens! Mmm.” Mephisto purred with anticipation. “Not a single fair labor practice was followed in the production of that lettuce! All illegal immigrant labor, you see, and a considerable threat of exposure and arrest if they did complain.”

“A bit risky, but it does keep costs down,” Raul said. He wanted Mephisto to realize he was a man of business, one willing to step over the ethical lines to close a deal.

“As for the salad itself, the kitchen here gets free prep labor from cooking schools by implying there might be a slight preference in hiring after graduation.” Mephisto blew a concealing cloud of rich tobacco-scented smoke and leaned across the table. “Of course, there is none. There's not even job security for the chefs!”

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Raul told himself he had paid his dues through a series of underpaid internships during his college years. He was entitled to enjoy greens watered with desperate Mexicans' sweat and washed by the tears of aspiring chefs.

“For the second course, veal – or no, I think the poached tuna. That leaves us going from meat to fish, but two dolphins died in the net with this fish. The dolphins were twin calves and their mother beached herself to end her grief. What's more, the company lied and sold the fish as dolphin-safe, which adds a lovely sparkle of deceit to the finished dish.”

“My sister dragged us all through Sea World when we went to Florida,” Raul said. “I wanted the rides at Disney but no, we had to go get splashed by Shamu and then after that we actually went out on a boat to see the little cousins. Murdered baby dolphin will be fine.”

“Good. There's another amusing twist to the dish – it's listed on the menu as gluten-free, but there's wheat flour in the sauce on the potatoes and carrots that come with it.”

“Sounds delicious.”

“I'm torn on the dessert course,” Mephisto confessed. “The chocolate cake, of course, but maybe the angel food cake?”

“Angel food is almost as innocent as the name suggests,” said Raul. “Sugar, yes, but protein and

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hardly any fat.”

Mephisto blinked. “I do enjoy the aftertaste of environmental degradation you get in most sugars,” he said. “And the charred bones used to refine it add a certain something, especially when people claim it's vegetarian. But the real dilemma for me is do we want child labor or a larger portion animal abuse? And of course there's such delightful gluttony in the angel food.”

“I thought the chocolate would be more gluttonous?”

Mephisto shook his head. “Ah, no. The gluttony is that the restaurant only needs so many yolks, so they throw out most of the ones they don't use in the cake. And a laying hen's life reminds me of home, if you know what I mean.”

“May I ask a maybe rude question?”

“Of course. I consider it a sign you're progressing.”

The demon blew a cloud of smoke in the eyes of the young woman in the next booth. She barely seemed old enough for her glass of house white wine and her dress, while elegant, clung tighter and concealed less than many bathing suits. Her companion was no threat to Raul and Mephisto's privacy. He had eyes only for the lady's cleavage and ears only for the waitress who had just offered to refresh his cognac.

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“Would the angel food taste any different to you if the restaurant fed the yolks to homeless cats?”

The demon made a face. “Does strawberry syrup in club soda make a Daiquiri?”

“I see your point. By the way, please do order wine and cocktails. I’m buying.”

“We’ll start with mint juleps, I think, to go with the lamb. Then, yes, pinot grigio with the fish, and then Champagne. Since you don’t pick up the subtleties I do, I’m thinking you’d prefer the angel food with Champagne?”

Raul nodded. He suspected his taste buds would be numb before the dessert course anyway.

“Call over the waiter, and then tell me what’s on your mind,” said Mephisto.

The waiter approved their selections and brought Mephisto an ashtray. He also put a small fan on the nearby serving table, angling it so the smoke took a more direct route to an open window.

“I love my job,” Raul began. “Teeka left me because of it, but it’s a lot more fun than she was. So first, please, let me tell you again how grateful I am for that interview and your references.”

“An intelligent young woman, but no taste or wisdom,” Mephisto said. He put out his cigarette as the waiter served their lamb salads and juleps. “To see everything as clearly as she does, but not be able to appreciate it properly.” The demon bowed his head so long in regret for Teeka’s

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moral streak he might almost have been saying grace over the shortened life and abusive labor practices on his daisy-rimmed salad plate.

Raul noticed the present tense and took courage from it. Mephisto had not, in Raul's experience, ever been unreasonable on pricing. “The thing is, if I can't have some time away from the office I'll never find a replacement for Teeka. I rented a nice place, but I don't even have the time to invite friends over for drinks.” He hoped Friday night martinis were edgy enough to satisfy Mephisto. He could have mentioned harder or illegal drugs, but they were not his thing the he suspected Mephisto knew it.

“Moderation,” said Mephisto, opening his eyes after savoring the last leaf of lettuce. “It's a bit of a virtue, but it has its place. I think I can help.”

Raul swallowed the last of his julep. Before he could ask what Mephisto had in mind, the tuna arrived. Even had he not wanted to stay on Mephisto's good side, he was not yet an evil enough man to interrupt a being so obviously enjoying his food. Raul himself appreciated the dish and even more the wine with it.

The dessert course followed quickly. Raul nodded his approval of the Champagne, pretending to still be sober enough to tell it from lemon-lime soda. Mephisto dropped two hard objects on the table next to Raul's dessert plate.

Raul ignored them until the waiter left, although doing so required him to pretend an unseemly

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interest in the legs of the lady dining in business class. Well, between her short, side-slit skirt, five-inch heels, and very sheer silk stockings, she probably wanted people to look. Better to be a cad than draw attention to the demon's offering.

Casually as he could after doing justice to the liquid portion of his lunch, Raul picked up the objects.

“Opal cufflinks?”

“Yes. You'll find a garment bag on your coat rack in the office. At six o'clock sharp, change. Wear these cufflinks. Then hurry home and put on your own clothes unless you want to be caught in the nude when I take your dry cleaning at seven.”

“But what about my boss?”

“If I, as a demon, recognize that evening clothes may not be worn in an office or during the day, surely your boss will take the hint.”

“And what do I owe you?” Raul placed his expense account American Express card on the waiter's little silver tray and signed the bill with the matching Cross pen without even looking at it. He figured forty dollars should cover the tip. He was fairly sure it had been a good quality Champagne, and he had certainly enjoyed the Italian pinot grigio.

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“I consider the pleasure of sharing this little luncheon with you sufficient.” The demon reached out and pocketed the tip.

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Raul worked hard that afternoon despite his inebriation. He cleared his in box of emails which required little or no judgment to answer. He brainstormed ideas on paper and his voice recorder, but carefully refrained from sharing even the ones he liked best. After the lunch beverages had two hours to get through his system, he returned phone calls from his less valuable contacts and clients. The clock on his computer said one minute after six. His cell phone said six o'clock precisely. Raul lowered the blinds, closed the door to his office, and stood where he could hold it shut if someone tried to come in without waiting to for permission after knocking. His boss and Terri both had that habit.

The garment bag contained silk boxers and a silk undershirt, black silk socks, a white silk shirt with French cuffs, a white bow tie, white waistcoat, a matte black swallowtail coat, and matching pants with a glossy stripe down the outside of each leg. A box under the garment bag contained a top hat. Fortunately, the suit matched Raul's shoes. Quickly, Raul changed, bundled his work clothes into a spare bag from the dry cleaner, and slipped the opals through the holes in his cuffs.

Nothing happened. Raul opened his office door and his boss nearly hit him in the face as the door he'd meant to knock on moved.

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“So sorry, did I get you?” Mr. Schillingford said.

“No, I'm fine. What can I do for you?” Raul wondered when Mephisto's opals would get to work. He could practically smell the last-minute request on Mr. Schillingford's breath.

“I just wanted to say goodnight,” Mr. Schillingford said. “I know you have a major project coming up next week; you should rest up while you can.”

“You mean, go home early?” Raul did not want to push his luck but he had to be sure.

“Or out, since you seem to be dressed for the opera. But don't stay out too late, okay?”

“I won't,” Raul promised. In fact, once he'd changed he fully intended to spend the evening in the company of Captain Crunch and Tom Cruise.

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Raul loved his new life. Every day just after six he put on an elegant tuxedo or white tie ensemble and his cufflinks. If his boss did not come to his office by six-twenty, Raul would pick up some copying or other random papers and roam the corridors until he met Mr. Schillingford, who would forget whatever he'd meant to say and send Raul home. Raul did not even feel guilty, since Karen, Pete, and Terri, even Mr. Schillingford's personal secretary, Bridgine, usually slipped out with him.

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Twice a week he hosted Captain Crunch for a sports watching or movie night. Monday, Wednesday, and Sunday afternoon he played squash or swam at the health club where he had finally spent enough time to find squash partners and recognize the staff. Friday and Saturday he dated. No one serious, yet, but Raul had discovered he enjoyed both black and white tie events. When he dressed for them in his own clothes and bought an extra ticket he could always find a well-turned out and pleasant companion to join him.

June nineteenth, Raul had planned an intimate movie night with a lady who might just be worth dating exclusively. She reminded him a bit of Teeka, but without the moral scruples. Jen enjoyed the jewelry he bought her, the pricier and shinier the better. She used cosmetics well and dressed in alpaca all winter, silk in the spring, and cool linen in the summer. She didn't mind him enjoying the texture of the clothes and makeup artistry. She seemed to like it even better when he did justice to her lab animal-tested skin care regimen and lean-meat nourished muscles beneath. But she could not come until her own overly dedicated boss released her. So Raul had given his own work an extra half-hour and now he had to hurry. He knew too many of the neighbors to risk losing his clothes to Mephisto's curfew.

Raul had only one street crossing between him and his lobby. His phone beeped a frenetic alarm, the highly appropriate Minute Waltz. He darted into traffic, straight-arming an overburdened bicyclist crossing in a bike lane at a green light. He had more urgent things on his mind than right of way. He did not look back, or stop for the shoe which slipped off his foot as he nearly tripped on the opposite curb.

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Just as his apartment door clicked shut behind him, Raul felt a sudden chill as the air conditioning blew against his naked skin. He kicked off his remaining shoe, locked the door, and went straight for the bathroom and then a hot shower.

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A year later, Jen begged off their usual movie night. Their wedding was that weekend and she and her maid of honor needed one final fitting on their dresses. Raul didn't mind too much. Next week he and Jen would be alone together on their honeymoon cruise. Let her have some girl time. He'd have a quiet bachelor party with Captain Morgan, watching a film which, while not exactly x-rated, was quite definitely a red-blooded male's version of a chick flick. But first he and the Lucky Charms leprechaun would check his email and Face book feed.

Raul scrolled past a rant about the current President, another about people not respecting that same public figure, the announcement of a new job, and a pretty funny story about his sister's three-year-old twins. He'd finally met the boys that winter, since Mephisto's magic cuff links also came in handy when he wanted a long weekend.

He was about to scroll past a feel-good repost. Then he recognized the street he crossed every day on his way home. An earnest young man with a microphone stood with a woman his own age, an elderly man, and a child with shoulder length straight hair who could have been a boy or a girl. The child held a small brown and white spaniel. The old man held a man's black dress

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shoe, much too large for his feet. It looked familiar.

Raul pushed away the last of his cereal, his stomach lurching as if the milk, which was perfectly fresh, had spoiled. He put on the sound.

The old man said, “I was getting too old to be doing deliveries, but I wasn't ready to quit. It wasn't the money. I never married and I didn't go out. I had no one to go with. I had money saved, but I needed someone to help me spend it. I needed someone who needed me.”

The interviewer said, “A year ago today, Gene got his wish. His guardian angel pushed him into the path of Cheryl's sports car. Gene survived with minor injuries. But he saved this puppy.” The camera panned to a close shot of the child and spaniel.

The woman said, “I had just started up at the green light. I couldn't stop in time. When I got out of the car to see what I did, there was Gene, in the road, with this skinny, filthy little puppy licking his face.

“I called the paramedics and they took Gene to the hospital. But all he could talk about was the puppy. He said since he saved its life he didn't want to leave it. So I said I'd keep her until he got better.”

Gene said, “Cheryl brought Angel – we call the puppy Angel – to see me every day. Even after I came home, Cheryl, Angel, and Leslie would come see me. First they brought me food, then they

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helped me make dinner, and we talked about dogs.”

The interviewer said, “And now Gene has someone to help him spend his savings. Many someones.” The picture changed to a suburban house with large fenced yard full of dogs. Gene, Cheryl, and Leslie stood on the front steps of the house.

“Cheryl's husband died two years ago, leaving her and Leslie well provided for but with broken hearts. Now Gene has joined them as an honorary father and grandfather, and they have pooled their money to make this shelter for stray dogs like Angel. But Angel will stay right where he is.”

The final clips was Angel, clean, sleek, and looking considerably more spaniel than mongrel, washing Leslie's face.

“And like Cinderella, all the stranger who enchanted their lives left was a shoe.”

Raul did not scroll on. He deliberately cleared his throat, uncrossed his arms and legs, and waited. He wished he could hide the sweat running down his face.

A shadow under the window rose like smoke. When the dark mist cleared, Mephisto appeared in a silk-embroidered sweatshop denim vest and tight black leather pants and boots, a medallion of mixed gems hanging from a chain around his neck and a large gem-studded hoop in one ear. The demon held out a black dress shoe to Raul. “Yours?”

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“Oh, Mephisto, I am so sorry.”

“Then grovel already,” the demon roared. A wind smelling like skunk and rotten eggs whipped through the penthouse. Furniture tipped over. Delicate art glass fell from shelves and shattered.

Raul crouched on the carpet, covering his head. He needed no acting skill to cringe and wail in terror.

The smell vanished. The gale died down.

“Eh, it happens,” Mephisto said. “All the time. Good has this way of winning. But I had to at least salvage some wrath from the situation.”

“You've left a pretty bad mess for the maid,” Raul said.

“And you're not to touch it,” Mephisto said. “The embarrassment is a better lesson than merely getting your hands dirty.”

Raul would have to hide the mess from Jen for a day or two until the maid came. He supposed it served him right for letting altruism toward puppies and the formation of a new and loving family loose on the world.

“I was going to watch a bachelor movie and have some rum,” Raul said. “Can I get you a drink?”

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“Please. And would you mind terribly tonight if we did serious porn? The kind where the actors suffer?”

Raul supposed when things went wrong a demon had to take comfort where he could. And he did not want to risk another display of wrath. “Whatever you need to do, buddy. Listen, there's some foie gras in the fridge. I understand those geese have a rough life.”

Mephisto unleashed a small sulfurous wind and cleared off the leather sofa. He sank down on one corner of it and put his head in his hands. “Thanks. I think I took out your shot glasses. We'll have to drink the rum out of coffee cups.”

Raul went into his bedroom and quickly pulled out a small toy box from his childhood. He pulled out two shot glasses from his alma mater. He returned to the living room, righted the coffee table, and put the rum, shot glasses, and a silver serving dish of crackers and foie gras on it. “Please,” he said. “I may not be much as a force of evil, but I do have standards.”

Raul filled the shot glasses with rum and handed the slightly larger one to Mephisto.

“Sickness,” said the demon, and they clinked glasses before draining them.

