

Past Mistakes

An Emily Voss short story

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Thank you.

I don't often get called in for exorcisms any more. Those with a need tend to believe the clergy are the right group to go to for that sort of thing.

Sometimes they're lucky and a priest shows up who actually knows what he's doing. More often, they get someone less specialized, who doesn't understand the connection between his actions and the thing he's trying to exorcise, assuming he could call to some higher power and that's all there is to it.

Faith without knowledge is like a kid with a match. You can make the fire come, but you can't control it when it's there.

All that was irrelevant in the situation I found myself in. There was no demon present in the building that I could detect and a priest trained in exorcism would have waved his trinkets and spoken his words to no effect.

There was something, though. I couldn't put my finger on what.

My boots left smudges on the faded carpet of the hotel corridor. The owner didn't seem to care.

"You come highly recommended, Miss Voss. Ah..."

"You were expecting someone different. I know. I get that a lot."

"Well, perhaps not so much different as, ah, older."

I get that a lot too, although I had assumed it was the piercing, hairstyle, shredded jeans and leather jacket that had put off the conservative and homely owner of this decrepit hotel.

Mr. Etram was dressed in clothes that looked like all the colors had faded, but I suspected he bought them that way. He wore a tie, the knot too tight and off to one side of the collar, a dyed-in food stain near the bottom.

While my own standards aren't particularly high, I've spent plenty of time in hotels of varying quality levels, and this one ranked near the bottom in terms of décor and maintenance. The wallpaper was peeling, the carpet felt sticky, as though dirt had penetrated it to the point where nothing would ever wash it out. The lights didn't really flicker, but the glow wasn't constant, as though the cabling in the walls had trouble carrying the electricity around.

The entire place deserved a refit.

He noticed the slight sneer I had failed to hide and his lips tightened in disapproval.

"You find my hotel in poor condition."

It wasn't a question, but it's best to at least try to stay on a client's good side.

"I'm not here to judge."

"It used to be quite the establishment, not so very long ago."

"I'm sure, but the recession, right?"

He looked intently at my face for a few moments, perhaps judging the stud through my eyebrow in the same way I had judged the state of his hotel, as the result of poor choices.

“Let me ask you Miss Voss, do you really, truly know what you are doing?”

I have no problem taking money from the gullible rich, but taking money from this business would be too cruel for me, so I figured I’d let him down easy.

“I do. I’m a professional in my little, disrespected field. So you can believe me when I tell you that there’s nothing here.”

It wasn’t strictly true, but he had asked me to come perform an exorcism and there was certainly nothing here to exorcise. Just a malaise hanging around the place like a bad smell after a kitchen accident.

He looked surprised.

“I’ve seen what happens when something comes through. It leaves a taint, like a smell, and there’s none of that here. I can’t feel the presence of anything crossing over in the recent past. I’d happily take your money and say I’d removed something. I can wave some incense around and say a few words in Latin if it makes you feel better, but there’s nothing here to banish or capture.”

“I’m afraid you must be mistaken, Miss Voss.”

This was a first. A client trying to convince me that there was some demonic presence when I was trying to convince them of the opposite.

“What makes you think that?”

“Come with me.”

He walked past the elevator, not even pressing the call button, so we walked down the stairs.

He waved his hand at the doors spaced equally apart down the corridor. “We’ve put all the current guests in the East wing, since that is the area least affected. These rooms are all empty.”

We reached the ground floor and kept going to the basement.

I have what I consider to be a perfectly rational, near-overwhelming fear and loathing of basements and enclosed spaces. I wasn’t going to let my potential client know that, so I followed him down the stairs anyway.

“We haven’t had an incident as such, but it’s not difficult to see that something very odd is happening.”

In the poorly-lit hallway, he unlocked a door with a key on a heavy keychain and led me into a small, windowless office. There was only enough room for a desk and two chairs, and the desk was taken up with a computer and a screen, with a little room left over for some papers. The hotel’s accounts and guest register were spread out on the wooden surface.

He picked up a manila folder and handed it to me, then carefully took a seat. He seemed to do everything carefully.

I took the other seat and looked inside the folder to find a collection of photographs of the hotel in better days.

I recognized the corridor we had just been in, with cream carpets and fresh wallpaper. The rooms were in much better condition, with clean windows allowing sunlight to bathe the spaces in bright colors.

"It must have been quite the place when it was younger, your hotel."

"Take a look at the back of the photographs."

I turned a couple over and found each was stamped with a logo and the words, "Estaminet Photography, 4221 West 76th Street." Beneath each stamp, the date the photo had been taken was written in pencil. They were all three weeks old.

"Are you trying to tell me that this was the condition of the hotel less than a month ago?"

"Yes, Miss Voss, that's the problem."

"But there's nothing here. I would have felt it."

"This is your department, not mine. Perhaps it has left, and will return later?"

I reached out with my senses, letting that innate vulnerability I had learned as a child allow the aura exuded by all things to penetrate my consciousness. There was nothing here except the decrepitude of the building and its furnishings, and that odd sense of not belonging that had nothing demonic about it at all.

"It doesn't work that way, and even if it did, I'd feel something, some lingering residue of its passage into our world. I'm getting nothing demonic at all."

"Nothing at all?"

"Nothing demonic," I repeated, "I sense the residue of demonic activity, not the demons themselves. If they breach the barrier between worlds, or create fire, or perform rites, then it leaves a taint, or a feeling, that I'm sensitive to."

"So, something perhaps not demonic?" He asked.

I pulled off a leather glove and put my hand to the nearest wall, to one side of the door, closing my eyes and letting down my guard as much as I was able.

Damp, mildew, bricks. I breathed out and let my awareness drift further.

Pipework, cabling, girders, a few rats. Always that sense of otherness.

"I'm not getting..."

There. Something omnipresent, more than the pipes and the girders, something immobile and empty, so big I'd failed to notice it. Something I had no word for. I reached for it, was suddenly elsewhere, lost beyond my ability to understand how. Falling and burning and breathless and being watched.

I pulled my hand away from the wall as though scalded. There was an awful moment when I thought I was either dead or worse, unaware of my surroundings, then I lurched to his desk, grabbed the garbage pail and threw up the burrito I'd had for lunch.

When my stomach was empty, I retched a few more times for good measure, then collapsed to the floor, my back against the old wood desk, keeping well away from the walls and all too aware that I was deep in the building and beneath ground.

It took an effort of will to climb the stairs and get outside the property. I was sitting on the hood of my car holding a cigarette in fingers that wouldn't stop shaking, and wondering at how sweet the air was, and how everything suddenly seemed to have color once more. I hadn't noticed at the time, but the inside of the hotel felt like the life had been sucked out of it until it was nothing more than a grey, rotten, ashen husk of itself.

"So," said the manager, shading his eyes against the sun, "something after all?"

The bastard looked relieved, as though I had an answer for him.

"I'm going to have to double my fee," I started.

"But you've done nothing but observe and vomit in my office," he replied, offended, "I expect results if I'm to pay you at all!"

"That's fair, payment on success. But the extra's not for me, I'm going to have to bring in some help."

#

I have two pricing structures. I can cost very little, because I'm ripping you off, waving a North American or Indonesian or Chinese charm in the air, chanting a few words stolen from Latin, Hindi and Arabic and dirtying your carpet with salt bought at the local supermarket. For the privilege of this service you will pay anywhere between fifty and five hundred dollars. Canadian, US, I don't really care, since in reality you're paying for nothing and the only cost to me is the three kilos of salt and the guilt I'll carry around for the next few days.

I can also cost a great deal. As much as several thousand dollars (US, please, in some cases payable in advance). This is because you have a real, not hallucinated, honest-to-goodness demonic infestation on your hands and I'm one of the few people who can deal with it without getting myself killed, or worse. Unfortunately, there's no guarantee I won't die or have my soul displaced and my body used as a marionette until it dies of shock. I've come pretty close a couple of times, hence the price tag. As my banker father liked to tell me, when we were still on speaking terms, there ought to be a relationship between risk and reward.

You might wonder what career path leads to exorcist. In my case, it came as a by-product of spending too much of my early twenties pretending, and half-believing, that I was a witch. I'd go to conventions with my "coven". We would also occasionally meet in the woods, after dark, wearing clothing and performing rites so embarrassing that I cringe to think back on it.

Convinced we were authentic, we would seek out genuine-looking books (grimoires, if you please), from shops that took advantage of our gullibility. We would occasionally nick our thumbs and put a few drops of blood in a copper pan or spend money we didn't have on strange herbs that stank when they burned and made our hair smell for days. We wore our hair long and tended to dye it black or red. Being a witch was more about style than substance. We sat around in circles a lot. I've spent more time as an adult holding hands with girls than with boys, which, since I don't swing that way, is kind of sad.

The danger with not knowing the difference between something authentic and something fabricated is that one day you come into possession of a book that isn't make-believe. Given our practice to date, we managed to translate enough of it to carry out a poor semblance of the ritual it contained. Then our innocent, eccentric and embarrassing hobby turned into a tragic story of minds lost and enmities created. Of the thirteen of us that considered ourselves a coven at the time, four are dead, seven are incarcerated either in mental institutions or in prison, one is a housewife in Oregon and I'm still fighting my demons. Literally as well as figuratively, since Ahazu is still out there somewhere.

We never got to the part where we sent him back.

None of us talk to each other anymore, nor do we dress up and read Latin aloud while sitting in circles in the basements of abandoned houses.

I didn't know how much to charge Mr. Etram, the gentle, musty, careful and prematurely aged hotel owner, for my services, since I had no idea what I was dealing with. I did know I'd need to double it because, no matter how unsavory the prospect, I couldn't do this without Raymond, and he doesn't work for free.

So I went to see Raymond.

Approaching Raymond is like defusing a bomb. He's touchy, especially about his body. He's quick to anger and insufferably arrogant. I'm not without an ego myself and dealing with him is always trying on my patience.

"The little witch has come to visit me in my humble home, what an honor. I wonder what she might need."

I looked around the grubby garage with the broken 1971 Dodge Charger on stilts and held back the obvious retort.

"I'd like your advice on something."

"Bitten off more than you can chew, Emily?"

Raymond's not a small man. When he takes a train somewhere, they make him buy a second ticket, which is unfair, but then so is having to sit next to him in a standard width seat. It was a mistake to confuse his considerable girth with laziness, clumsiness or lack of physical strength, however. He was faster than his physical size suggested, and under the fat was plenty of muscle, even if he looked pale and unhealthy on the outside.

"Not exactly. It's not what you might call a typical job though."

"Are you going to get to the point soon, or just keep teasing?"

“I’d love to tell you what it is, but I don’t know. It’s no demon, no spirit, nothing like that. It felt like something both vast and without identity. I couldn’t pin it down, almost couldn’t detect it at all, and when I finally saw it... I don’t know. It was so much bigger than anything I’d ever seen.”

“Huge but undetectable?”

“Undetectable because it had no purpose. No consciousness. Not even the remnants of one.”

“You’re so poetic when you’re confused, little Emily.”

“I’m trying to give you an idea of what it was like, stop being an ass.”

“So you want me to do this for you, because it’s beyond your abilities.”

“I think, Raymond, that we’re going to have to do this one together if we’re going to stand a chance.”

The big man sneered at her. “I take eighty percent of the fee, that’s how it works if it’s beyond you and you need my help.”

I’d forgotten how much I loathed dealing with Raymond, but I knew him well enough to manage him.

“Never mind Raymond, I know others who are up for a challenge and I’m not sure you’re up to this. Also, this is an on-site job, and I hadn’t realized you no longer fit through your own front door.”

It was nasty, unfair and unpleasant to goad him like this, but I needed his help and I don’t share his love of long-winded confrontational negotiations, this was the shortcut to the endgame.

It worked. He blushed a violent red and lunged at me with unexpected speed. I only just got out of the way in time, taking several steps backwards and to one side. A meaty palm grabbed at my hair and missed by inches.

“You know better,” he growled.

“And you know better than to try to rip me off you pretentious asshole. Show me some respect. I’ve brought you six jobs so far, all of them well paid, and you still treat me as though I can’t do the work when you know perfectly well I’m competent.”

“But not sensitive.”

I looked down at my feet, the guilt coming hard.

“No, not sensitive enough for this.”

It was Ray’s greatest strength and his ultimate weakness. When it came to the other side, he was the most sensitive practitioner in the business. He’d been feeling the spirit world rubbing through to our plane of existence since childhood. Early reactions to a near-permanent awareness of the supernatural were misdiagnosed as autism and then as obsessive-compulsive disorder and finally as a form of mental breakdown. It had broken him as a child, resulting in a number of disorders and his obesity was a direct result. Every time he did a job, it cost him

more than anyone should have to sacrifice. He made his living looking directly at the very thing that had ruined his life.

“So, you need me.”

I forced myself to meet his eyes.

“Yes, I need you, but you’re still only getting half. We both have to eat and I take my share of the risk. I always have.”

I could hear his teeth grinding from across the room.

“Ok. When?”

We sorted the details of the next day’s meeting and I left his garage to drown my guilt at being a manipulative bitch in a glass of whisky.

#

“Who’s your friend, Miss Voss?”

“Why,” gasped Raymond, “Doesn’t the bloody. Elevator. Work?” He desperately hyperventilated in an effort to recover his breath.

“It does work,” replied Etram, looking upset at the accusation.

“She said it didn’t!” He almost shouted, pointing in my direction with a hand the size of a dinner plate.

“My mistake,” I said, “I didn’t realize, since Mr. Etram doesn’t use it.”

“I don’t like putting myself at the mercy of whatever is affecting the building,” said the little man, who was wearing a completely different suit that was precisely as faded as the last one.

“How very melodramatic of you,” said Raymond, wiping some greasy hair out of his eyes and giving a narrow chair a baleful look as he realized he wouldn’t fit between the armrests. “Now where’s this malevolent presence?”

I held my arms out to either side. “Mr. Etram, this is Raymond. He is the most sensitive awakened soul that I know, and we were lucky he happens to live in the city. Raymond, it’s everywhere, but I found it through the walls.”

“Should I have hired him instead of you, Miss Voss?”

“He’s more sensitive than I am, but I’m better at kicking spirit ass. You’re likely going to need the both of us.”

“You’re not better,” said Raymond, reaching out to touch the wall with the tips of his huge fingers, “you’re reckless, and you’ve never been able to tell the difference.”

I sat my skinny ass down on the edge of Etram’s grubby little desk and waited for Raymond to do his thing. I hated being here, and it had taken every ounce of strength I had to force myself down into the basement again. Now that I was aware of it, I could imagine the empty thing coiling through the walls of the building, even though all I could see were dirty floors and peeling wallpaper.

Raymond's eyes were closed and his head bent forward, which did ugly things to the flesh of his neck. His aggressiveness disappeared when he listened for the other side, as though a gentle boy emerged from beneath the layered complexes and miseries of his daily life.

It's the same for most of us. It takes innocence and vulnerability to sense the things that hide in plain sight, and we all cultivate that part of ourselves to continue to be able to do our jobs, even if we bury it under layers of attitude and gallows humor.

Raymond's lunch involved something quite garlicky, and he didn't make it to the pail. Also, he climbed the stairs at a dead sprint and made it out of the building in under twenty seconds.

"You could have fucking warned me," he said, testing the suspension of my car by sitting on the front of the hood and staring at me as though I'd personally attacked him.

"I did, and you mocked me." I felt smug but I was very happy to be back out of the building, "And if Mr. Etram over there is going to pay us, we're going to have to figure out how to remove it's effect from the building."

Etram was closing the door to the hotel, carefully, before coming to see what we had concluded. He was still a few yards away when Raymond leaned over to me, a huge hand grabbing my shoulder.

"Between you and me, if we don't deal with this, getting paid will be the least of our worries. I got a strong sense that it noticed me noticing it."

"Mr. Raymond, any further insights into what is devouring my hotel?" Said Mr. Etram.

"A few ideas," he muttered, "none of them good. I need to discuss it with Emily and we'll get back to you tomorrow."

#

The reason we couldn't identify a demonic possession was because it wasn't a possession as such. That should have been obvious, since the demonic can only possess living beings and the hotel didn't qualify.

Despite doing something others can't understand, the awakened, as we like to call ourselves, don't do more than scratch the surface of demonic knowledge. We're almost totally ignorant of our area of expertise, fumbling in the dark with talents we don't comprehend. What little we do know comes more from instinct than any real knowledge. There's no school or apprenticeship that teaches how to summon, banish or otherwise fight a demon. Ancient texts are generally obscure, misleading and wrong. A few are plain dangerous. Recent knowledge is better, since the modern world is better at recordkeeping, but even here there's almost nothing of value. The consequences of being awakened tend to make us introverts, loners and generally antisocial so we share very little with each other. There are no reliable texts, few firsthand accounts and we tend to die young. Everything we think we know is at best a metaphor for what's really going on.

Despite being considered among the best in the business, neither Raymond nor I had any experience dealing with anything other than your typical garden-variety

demonic possession. This generally involved kicking a demon out of someone's mind and body, then holding it in place and outside a body long enough for it to go back to wherever it came from, since demons need the anchor of a physical body to stick around in our world.

Where they go, we don't know. Where they come from, we don't know either. What can suck the life out of a building, crawl through its very foundations and stare back at us from an abyss we didn't know existed until we looked into it?

Not a clue.

We were relying entirely on instinct. Fortunately, Raymond has good instincts.

"I don't know what to call it. A thinning perhaps, or a tunnel, or a shortcut. Perhaps a fold."

"Between where they are and where we are?"

"I guess." Raymond looked unhappy with the results of his analysis.

"Ok," I said, "but why would it happen? Is it natural, something about the hotel itself?"

"Yes and no."

"That's not helpful."

Raymond swiveled his chair to look at me, his weight swinging forward as he rested his elbows on his thighs.

"Listen. It's deliberate, it has purpose, design. Something's digging through to us, here in our world, on our plane of existence, whatever you want to call it. The hotel's important, it's like a tethering point, there's something about it that makes it possible for the thinning to exist there. What we feel at first is the space between worlds, which is what feels so vast and frightening, but that's separate from the thing trying to cross it, which is what I felt looking back at me, across that gap."

"Ok. So a demon's causing it?"

"Something that wants to come through, and something on this side, facilitating it, making the hotel a suitable anchor. Probably both acting together to make this possible."

"If it's powerful enough to do this, it's powerful enough to possess anyone in the hotel when they're unconscious. No lack of potential hosts there. Why go to all this trouble?"

"I think it wants to come through on its own terms. In its own form."

I sat down on the desk hard enough to put symmetrical bruises in my ass. This was bad news. Demons are supposed to be almost immortal in their plane of existence. If they came through without the need to possess someone, would that mean they were as powerful here as they were over there?

"That's not possible."

"I think it is. I think it's almost done, that it could push through at any time now."

#

“Miss Voss, this is unexpected. I thought you would be calling tomorrow.”

Etram’s voice over the phone sounded as faded and musty as he appeared in person.

“Yeah, we figured it was better to deal with this now before it gets any worse.”

“Ah. Yes, well the sooner the better, obviously, from my point of view.”

“Good. How do you feel about a fire drill?”

#

The hotel guests were gathered in the street and Raymond and I were in a hotel room on the second floor where we both felt that the Thinning, as we had come to call it, was the strongest.

Salt circles surrounded each of us, with a larger circle around both. You can never be too careful.

Raymond made the first move by calling for otherworldly forces to reveal themselves. He did it in passably fluent Latin, but aside from a minor tremble in the underlying wrongness of the place, it had little effect.

I tried a confrontation, which usually brings out any demonic presence. It wasn’t very original but sometimes the simple things just work. They didn’t this time. Nothing rose to my challenge.

Raymond and I looked at each other. We had anticipated these tactics would fail but it didn’t hurt to try. The alternative was less pleasant, but there’s never anything pleasant about doing what we do, so we shut our eyes and got on with it.

I let down my guard, opened my awareness and let the wrongness of the place slither into my mind. Raymond would be doing the same. To confront something, you have to be in its presence, and in our world, that means opening yourself to the reality that it exists before you can defeat it.

It was quicker this time, partly because I knew what I was looking for, and partly because the Thinning was that much stronger now. I became aware of the awful void between us and whatever place lay beyond. The nothingness of it was unpleasant but not threatening. On the other side, however, and pushing its influence through the void, infecting everything, was something truly malevolent. Its presence was the emotional equivalent of a stench, something rotten that you could only sense with your soul.

I could feel now what Raymond had described – a sense that whatever was there was pushing through, applying pressure to the boundary between worlds and deliberately narrowing the distance between our side of reality and theirs.

We were against something far more powerful, far more knowledgeable than us. Something able to bridge worlds. This was clearly a fight we weren’t equipped to handle, so I turned to Raymond to call off our experiment when I saw Etram at the door to the room, a half-smile on his lips.

I barely had time to open my mouth and cry out when he threw a pail of greasy liquid directly across the outer circle and Raymond's inner circle, breaking both. Whatever he had thrown had its own powers, because with an imperceptible flash of blue static, Raymond's protective wards blinked out of existence.

Etram's voice still had that annoying nasal characteristic that I associate with manipulative weasels, but for some reason it sounded much more threatening now.

"When I looked at you, Miss Voss, and found that you were unsuitable for my purposes, I didn't know that you'd then bring me someone with such wonderful potential."

Raymond looked in horror at his broken circle as we both felt something ancient and malevolent push through, a dark presence that came from everywhere at once.

Within moments, it didn't take any particular gift to notice something unnatural was going on. The remaining wallpaper darkened and shriveled and the carpet blackened, starting where they met the walls of the room and spreading inward rapidly, stopping around my protection circle but covering the ground under Raymond's feet in an instant.

It had never occurred to us that Mr. Etram himself might be possessed, that our own client was the source of the problems with his hotel. Demons weren't supposed to be wily like that. Our oversight that was about to cost Raymond dearly. The diminutive hotel manager's facial features were now visibly twisted by whatever had taken control.

"So many people I had to sacrifice in these walls to bring our worlds together, over so many months, always without drawing attention. We are not patient creatures Mr. Raymond, can you imagine the dedication it has taken to reach this point?"

Raymond was muttering under his breath, no doubt casting every protection spell he could think of, but we both knew that without the circle, whatever was coming would blow through his wards as though they were made of paper. If he crossed into my circle now, he would remove my protection, and I could do nothing for him without leaving my own sanctuary.

Etram pulled a nasty-looking curved knife from under his jacket. Rusted where the hilt met the blade, it bore a number of runes I didn't recognize. Those few that were familiar to me I knew from the forbidden ritual I had participated in so many years ago. They could only relate to the summoning of a greater demon, and I knew from bitter experience how that ended for all concerned.

Something began to appear between Raymond and the wall nearest to him. The sort of thing you can only see if you're not looking directly at it, as though it were not entirely here yet.

"I'm afraid Mr. Raymond that your life is the required payment for passage." Etram still spoke in his dry, matter-of-fact way. "I promise it will be an important death, one that will go down in history as the beginning of a new age."

Etram was walking towards Raymond's broken circle when some part of my brain made a decision I wasn't entirely on board with. I didn't realize what I had done

until I was standing between Etram and Raymond, clutching in my right hand the amulet that always hung from my belt, the only thing of real power that had ever come into my possession and which had saved me once before.

“Two for the price of one,” smirked the annoying little man, “a pleasure doing business with you Miss Voss,” and he lunged at me faster than any human could have.

The knife curved up, aiming for my breastbone and my heart, but I'd been dealing with unnaturally fast predators for a few years now, and I was ready for him. I twisted my body to the left as I threw myself to the right and let the knife sail wide, flashing up past my face, those runes passing too close to my eyes for comfort.

The knife flipped over in his hand as he reversed his grip and brought it back down again towards my side. I let my momentum carry me around in a spin and brought my booted foot up to his knee, bending it entirely the wrong way with the sickening sound of tendons and bones snapping and breaking.

Etram wasn't down on one knee for long. His leg straightened of its own accord and the knee snapped back into place. He cocked his head to one side and looked at me from a few feet away, the knife held loosely by his side.

“You did say you were better at, how did you put it? Kicking demon ass? I'm impressed Miss Voss.”

His hand came up, palm held out towards me as some guttural sound came from his throat and I was picked up and thrown backwards into the wall, hard enough to shift the brickwork, before collapsing on my hands and knees on the floor. It took a lot of effort to get back up. Casts like that typically cost demons dearly, and he wouldn't be able to rely on them to win the fight if I could withstand one or two, but I had never felt raw power like that before.

He was still smiling as he turned his hand palm down, still held out towards me.

Most demons fight you physically. It's the easiest way to beat an opponent and a demon can heal its host fast enough that they can afford to be reckless and violent. When they use their powers on the mind, it's a different experience altogether.

The act of possession involves dispossessing you of your body, imprisoning you in a small part of your own mind and taking over the rest. That's difficult, even for them, and takes effort. It's also something that we instinctively know how to resist, since it's a battle always fought with a home field advantage.

Initially it feels as though you're having a hard time thinking, formulating words, controlling your limbs. Everything becomes sluggish. Willpower is the primary defense, which is why they prefer to possess people who are sick of mind, depressed or weakened and preferably asleep at the time. They can do it to you when you're conscious though, if they're strong enough, if you're weak enough.

I'm not weak, but I had never felt anything like this.

The pressure on my thoughts was overwhelming and only long practice brought a potentially helpful incantation to mind. Getting my tongue around the

words was almost more than I could manage but finally, one painful syllable at a time, I managed "*Angelus ex animi, animo defenderet.*"

It wasn't entirely right, but it was close enough. The pressure lessened slightly as at least one layer of defense snapped into place. It wouldn't last long but this fight would be over before it mattered.

Nevertheless, my body wasn't responding to my instructions and I couldn't find the strength or the balance to get off the ground.

We stared at each other, him pushing into my mind, me holding him back, for what felt like an eternity.

Finally, Etram pursed his lips in frustration.

"This is unexpected, I had hoped to spare you death."

If the choice was death or possession, it was an easy one to make.

The knife rose in the air as he approached me, preparing to bring it down onto my neck point first. Under his mental onslaught, I couldn't move fast enough to avoid the blow and I knew it. Raymond was somewhere behind me fighting his own battle with whatever was manifesting in the air in front of him.

Etram smiled as the knife began its downward arc, and my awareness slowed at the point of death. Who knew what would happen when I was killed by a blade such as this? I doubted it would be a natural end.

I was as surprised as anyone when the blade bounced off my shoulder, a bright halo appearing around its tip as it reacted to something. It clattered to the floor and Etram staggered backwards, holding his forearm with a look of shocked agony in his eyes.

I'd never seen a demon show physical pain before.

Something stirred deep inside me, coiling around the very fabric of my body and mind like a long-acquainted symbiote. Something almost a part of me and yet utterly alien. I didn't have the strength to identify it, or to hold it back, exhausted from the fight with the demon in front of me.

The voice that came from my mouth was not my own.

"You dare?"

Etram fell to his knees.

"I did not know!"

What came from me next was pure power, not at all under my control, but I recognized its intent. It blew the demon out of the hotel owner's body like a storm blowing through a pile of leaves. The real Mr. Etram fell to the floor, throwing up, crying helplessly and showing all the signs of the recently exorcised. The demon, instead of returning to its own plane of existence, was torn apart in ours, shredded to pieces like confetti, leaving a dark and foul stain on the wall behind the retching and wretched Mr. Etram.

As the horrible influence dissipated, I regained control of myself and the presence inside receded almost immediately, but not before I heard its voice clearly in my head, like a double-bass being dragged through gravel.

“Now that you know I am here, we shall have to get acquainted.”

The dark presence in the room vanished as the barrier between worlds was restored, and the last thing I saw before passing out was Raymond, staring at me with a look of utter horror.

#

I awoke inside a pentagram, with Raymond chanting all sorts of incantations in my direction, several of which I happen to know don't actually do anything.

“Funny way to thank me for saving your life,” I said, trying to remember if I'd brought any painkillers for my headache.

He gave me a baleful look and finished his current chant.

“I don't get it,” he said, “I don't think you're actually possessed. I've tried everything and I can't get it to manifest.”

“The demon inside me?” I asked.

He just nodded.

“Trust me Raymond, I had no idea he was in there all this time, but I know who he is.”

“Oh?” His eyebrows rose so high they almost disappeared under his hairline.

“You're not going to like it.”

Raymond looked like he was going to explode. “It's a named demon? Like you know it's actual fucking name?”

I got up and crossed the threshold of the pentagram and the circle he'd drawn around it. His face became even paler, if that's possible, as I walked past the wards he'd set up.

I sat on the bed and held my head in my hands, exhausted. The paper was still peeling from the walls and the smell of mold hadn't disappeared.

“I see the damage to the hotel was real, and that getting rid of the Thinning didn't restore it to its former glory.”

“Mr. Etram is sufficiently grateful for his spiritual freedom, and sufficiently traumatized by what appears to be over a year of possession, that the state of the hotel seems to be the last thing on his mind.”

I allowed hope to blossom for a brief moment, “Is he going to pay us?”

Raymond snorted, “Of course not. Besides, he has other concerns. He's guilty of at least a dozen murders within these walls, and 'I was possessed' isn't a functioning defense strategy in a court of law. That said, insanity's looking good for him based on what's coming out of his mouth.”

“Great, we risk our lives in possibly the most dangerous demonic confrontation I’ve ever been a part of and we don’t have a shilling to show for it.”

Raymond tapped his foot and crossed his arms.

“Get on with it, Emily, which demon is it?”

I looked down at my feet.

“Ahazu.”

Something stirred in my bones and in my mind when I said his name.

“Fuck me.”

I looked at him, pleading, “Raymond, if it would undo what I did to put him there, I’d take my own life in an instant. If I knew of any way, no matter the cost, I would do it.”

“You put him there?”

“A group of us, many years ago, made a mistake. Summoned Ahazu without knowing what we were doing. There were consequences. Really bad consequences. It’s why I do this.” I waved at the rotting remains of the hotel.

“I’ve been looking for a way to complete the ritual ever since, because it’s the only way I know to send him back. I was looking for him, always hoping my next confrontation would be him. I’ve carried what I need to banish him every day for four years. I only found out now that he was with me all along.”

“He’s dormant?”

A low chuckle resonated in my consciousness.

“No. He was just keeping a low profile. Hiding from me.”

“And now?”

“Now?”

There was nothing I could do to block out the deep baritone that echoed in my mind.

I pulled my head out of my hands to look Raymond in the eye.

“Now he wants to talk.”

About the Author

Nick Lavitz fits writing into the gaps left after work, family and travel. He enjoys living in his imagination perhaps a little too much. He starting putting his imagination to paper in 2001. Those words started finding their way into the world in 2018.

You can find his work at <http://www.salocin.com>

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