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The Devil's Payment

Jordan Tripper

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and if that idea didn't sound so bad
 and if most ideas don't sound so bad
 and if ideas are combinations of words
 and if words are more fun than calculus
 then X equals 7.

—Chris Vola

The Devil's Payment

Marcy Dime took her keys out of the ignition and placed them neatly inside her purse. She stepped out of her 2007 Beemer and casually straightened her blouse and bangles. She ran her manicured fingers through the halo of curls around her head, closed the car door, and began walking toward the portico of her spacious three-bedroom condo with the large backyard (she had specifically demanded it—for her extra-large Jacuzzi and matching patio furniture).

But Marcy took her time, playing with a stray sprig of ivy leaning over the stone pathway as she passed. She made a mental note to cut that later. She even took time for the sweet, sultry—sometimes putrid—smell of the golden honeysuckle she grew by the front stairs but had rarely noticed since her early attempts at gardening resulted in something more than dark brown dirt. She was in no hurry. Marcy stopped at the bottom of the front stairs and looked up at the windows. They were clear, clean in fact, and expensive. They had cost close to twenty thousand dollars. That was a bargain compared to their *real* price, of course—the price neither she nor her husband ever mentioned out loud. There was a presence behind them warding off visitors like a dead body on a doorstep. No one came near their property. The postman's heartbeat rose dangerously close to heart attack level every time he opened the mailbox, and settled only when he was around the street corner and out of sight. Neighbors refused to visit and always made excuses with sweat beads beginning to form on their anxious brows. Some were even brave enough to say that the windows bothered them—they were always either too shiny or too shadowy.

Marcy admired her choice in glass and wood frame, but she, too, felt chills run up her spine when she caught sight of them at just the wrong angle. Now, from the bottom of the stairs, they seemed almost normal, ordinary. She didn't feel the chills. Instead she watched them darken a moment; the trees swayed uneasily, and Marcy felt her stomach turn. It took everything in her not to rotate her head and spill her four-star breakfast all over the lawn orna-

ments shaped like cherubic angels.

Marcy took the distance from bottom step to top so slowly that a group of neighborhood children making their way home from the local middle school had come and gone. Ms. Season from four doors down, who always jogged from street sign to street sign, was making her third lap in front of the Dime residence before Marcy turned the key in the lock and pushed the door open. Ms. Season wouldn't admit until later—when she was safe within her lover's embrace, and halfway through making passionate love—that she'd had a massive nosebleed when Mrs. Dime opened her front door; that she'd felt her heart flutter as it did when she saw blood or gross crime scene reenactments on television; that she'd smelled moth balls and her mother's old sweater and pesticide so strongly she hadn't been able to taste anything at dinner that night. She had felt real fear for the first time in twenty years. Ms. Season remembered that moment from long ago, when she was eight and her house had caught on fire and she panicked that her mother, who had run in to save her brother, wouldn't make it out in time. She also felt blissful relief for the first time in all those years (since her mother had burst out of the house with her brother in her arms) when she stepped inside her kitchen after the jog, wiped the blood from her face, and called her therapist.

Marcy lifted her nose slightly and breathed in deeply. The smell that saturated her nose, her clothes, the hardwood floors and windows was very familiar—the utterly seducing aroma of buttery grilled cheese sandwiches and tomato soup. That was always the meal she made her daughter when she had a rough day. They were comfort foods for a soul made uncomfortable by the day's exploitations and reserved specifically for the unraveled spirit.

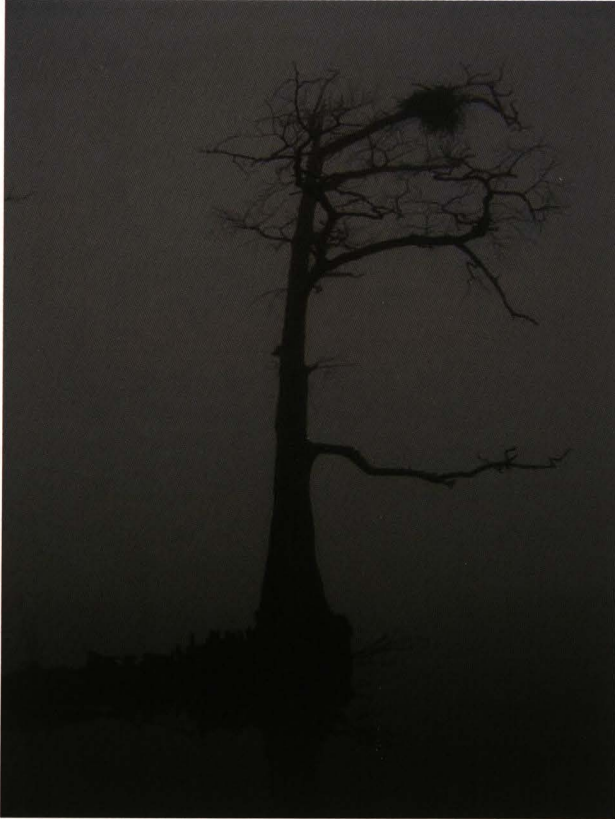
A second wave of odor hit her then, and it was much less seductive. It was downright repulsive—a burned smell, dirty and thick. Almost like melted pennies in a sauna—moist, thick, earthy. *He smelled like that*, Marcy thought, as she walked farther into the foyer. He had actually smelled about twenty times worse. She could remember being in his presence and feeling utterly nauseated by the scent. She had felt the heat emanating from his skin even from across the room and breathed twice as deeply to suck air through her constricted windpipe.

*Sweet meat and greed the devil finds
Your heart as pure as my mind
Cross lines now and change your fate
May God protect you at the devil's gate.*

His song nuzzled its way into Marcy's mind, filling voids, creating gaps, bending and shattering glass, filling her heart with lust and her soul with light. Her pupils dilated momentarily and she smiled like a small child staring into a

jar full of helpless fireflies she doesn't know she's suffocating. Then he smiled a greasy, oily grin of sharp teeth and sharper tongue. The smile slipped from her face, but the vapid, hollow expression remained fixed. She noticed that his gums were black and he wasn't wearing shoes—they were the only things that could keep her distant mind where it was and away from the entirety of his face riddled with jagged edges and invisibly flaking skin (burning, maybe?).

Ask and ye shall receive, my child.



—Jordan Wade

She was struck with the sudden urge to run away from the house, just take the car and drive to a temple, a mosque, a cathedral—the closest door to God she could find on such short notice. She would take her vows right then and there—let the courts grant her a divorce on their own schedule and let her earn back (maybe buy back) her soul at her own anxiety-ridden pace. Instead, Marcy gulped, hard, and crushed the foreboding feeling rising up into her throat, as thick and painful as a broken light bulb.

The kitchen was alive with activity. There were fresh cookies on the counter. The stovetop was inhabited by a quartet of pots and pans alive with recent use. There were place settings for three and a pitcher of fresh lemonade. And, except for the sizzle of the food left to its ruin on the stove, silence reigned supreme.

It was an uncomfortable sound—Silence. It wandered in the small places, the

grand places. It crossed paths with the light- and dark-hearted alike and rustled the dried husks of dead memories. Marcy's Silence was not broken by the smile and greeting of a beloved daughter. It wasn't broken by telephone ring or oven buzzer. The Silence remained unbroken until Marcy turned the corner and closed her eyes—they weren't necessary anymore anyway.

*Sweet Annabel, with hair so fair
Be silent now, you're no worse for wear
Smile upon his face without despair
When the devil comes to visit.*

Annabel, Sweet Annabel. Her lifeless eyes looked up with such horror in them, such pain and fear and confusion. Her blonde hair was splattered with purpleish blood. Her hands were extended in the direction of the front door, reaching for safety.

I want to be rich. I want things! I want things! Marcy remembered shouting these words and hearing the devil's response,

Ask and ye shall receive, my child,

echo inside her head. How empty her words were now, how unconscionable they seemed. But they were the truth and even in her then-dire circumstances, she knew enough to know that the man (if he really was a man) across from her could see into her heart.

She left his office in a fog and couldn't remember returning to her trashy apartment again that night. When she woke up in the park, three days later, all she had was a massive nosebleed (dried by now) and the sticky smell of melting pennies irreversibly embedded in her cheap blue jean jacket decorated with cigarette burns and knife cuts. She walked down to the corner store, bought a lottery ticket (she couldn't remember why she wanted one, she never won), and went home. Within the next few days she cashed in her ticket, burned her jacket for good (she could still smell the pennies), and exchanged her life for the posh, if superficial, existence she now inhabited. Eighteen months later, she had met her husband and twelve months after their fateful meeting, Annabel had entered the world, angry and unraveled by the day's activities.

Eighteen years later, little Annie was stretched out on the floor, spread-eagle, her stomach cut open, her eyes bulging out in the direction of her mother, her hands reaching for something, anything. Her body was full of noise, if inaudible, and unimaginable pain was forever engraved onto her face.

Marcy inhaled deeply, turned away from her daughter's probing expression, and picked up the phone. As she dialed 9-1-1, her hands shook uncontrollably. But she collected herself long enough to sound deeply affected and terrified to the operator. She set down the phone on the hook and moved around to her daughter's legs, shutting off the stove knobs as she moved. She breathed quietly, taking her time and trying not to step on any blood as she went—these were nine thousand dollar shoes

after all.

It wasn't until Marcy bent down toward her daughter that she noticed how carved out Annie looked, how empty. Her intestines were entirely removed—so was her stomach and liver—but it looked like there were small teeth marks on some of the edges of her opened skin. Then she saw it, small and legibly written between her daughter's legs. It was the writing of a disinterested party, but there was a smile embedded in the words.

A debt repaid. How delicious.

Marcy stood up, feeling the chills run up her spine again, and reached for the phone one last time. The whole unclean thing was over and it was time to call her husband home, to tell him it was all done. *Who knows? Maybe we could try again,* the inner Marcy consoled. Yet when Marcy tried to press down the buttons, they stuck in their place. She noticed almost offhandedly that there was oil oozing out of the receiver and that it smelled faintly of pennies. She put the phone down again and made a mental note to buy another after the coroner had come. She also needed time to eat the food surrounding her. It all smelled so *good*. She grabbed a plate and an only slightly burned grilled cheese sandwich and poured herself some fresh lemonade.

How delicious.

—Jordan Trippier



Emily Hunt