

Virgin Curse

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There is a lot of irony in damning yourself at the same moment that you accept the existence of God. I was a 12 year-old orphan. I had every right to be confused and insecure, especially considering my environment. A lot of people will tell you they found their faith at some point, but then lost it due to an unacceptable tragedy or life-changing revelation. I took a slightly different path. I found my faith, but in doing so, lost any chance at salvation.

I was raised in a Catholic orphanage, but that never helped me subscribe to Catholic beliefs. Sure, I learned how to pretend and go through the motions, but it was never real. How was I supposed to believe in God when his spokesmen, the priests and nuns who controlled my life with such tyranny, seemed so utterly devoid of passion for the things they preached?

I could see the lies on their faces. Sincerity is obvious on the face of someone who is actually sincere. Its absence is equally obvious. The priests and nuns who preached at me day in and day out never seemed to possess such warmth in their eyes – the warmth that would have indicated that they actually believed in the things they were saying.

My curiosity began to get the best of me. I could not help but desire confirmation for my growing suspicions. I knew they were up to no good whenever they thought the children were not looking, and I meant to see for myself.

I had no idea just how much I *would* see. I was not prepared for the images that would assault my young eyes when I began sneaking around the lonely halls at night.

I was reprimanded any time I so much as winked at a girl. “Impure thoughts make an impure heart,” they would tell me in their usual cold tone. There was so much contempt in their voices. Looking back, it was coming from guilt more so than conviction.

Conviction. What an inhuman word. I learned that this was an empty term used by empty souls. Those same priests and nuns who stared at me with dead eyes as they scorned me for flirting with girls had an army of rotting skeletons in their holier-than-thou closets.

Father Trawick and Sister Helen were two of my usual tormentors when it came to the sins of flirting with girls in my class. As I learned while sneaking around through the sleeping church, they themselves had gone beyond flirting long ago.

Saying that I caught them making love would be an understatement. What I saw was more like two animals attempting to consume one another as they reeled and bucked in a sort of passion that they never illustrated in their “Godly” duties. I was angered by the hypocrisy that I witnessed in Father Trawick’s sleeping chamber, but I was also excited.

My excitement turned to horror when I discovered the fruits of their labor.

Finding no sexual intrigue for my voyeuristic tendencies on one particular Saturday night, I walked down to the basement. It was a labyrinth of winding hallways that would surely hide some juicy secrets waiting to be uncovered.

When I walked by the furnace, I felt an odd desire to open the hatch and look inside. I picked up the metal poker leaning on the nearby wall and began prodding through the ash. I discovered a lot of things that night. One of which was that human bones would not completely burn down in the heat offered by the furnace – not even the bones of what appeared to be babies.

I dropped the poker on the stone floor and began running back toward the basement entrance. My mind was racing in an incomprehensible way, but I somehow came to a conclusion. Several of the nuns must have become pregnant during their escapades, and the results had been cast away where they felt no one would ever discover the dark secret. It was clear that the babies had been aborted, as giving birth to a child would have been hard to cover up. I held back vomit as I raced up the steps and back into the shadowy halls of the church.

I went to bed a broken child that night.

Everything started to really fall apart when I was in the sixth grade. I was going through puberty and still being told that any sexual thought would send me straight to hell.

Yeah, I know – there are kids in Africa who are starving to death in war-torn countries - so what did I have to complain about, right? The sort of oppression that I had to deal with was minor compared to the things experienced by other poor saps in this world. Well, that all sounds good, but try telling it to a kid who is being taught to hate himself with a vengeance.

The nun who taught my history class that year asked me a question concerning the material she had been talking about in her monotone voice, and I could not give her an answer. My mind had been drifting again, and I was completely oblivious to anything involving academics.

“God doesn’t love useless little boys who aren’t willing to pay attention,” she told me in front of the entire class.

There was nothing I could say. I just sat there, shattered, while the rest of the kids looked over their shoulders at me and laughed. My self-esteem was already nearing the breaking point, so her stab was all it took to finish the job. I hated myself, but I hated God more. If He did not love me, then I definitely was not going to love Him. Hell, I wasn’t even convinced that He existed at all. I knew at that moment, however, that if He *did* exist, we would never be on speaking terms.

That day ushered in a new era of self-hate and absolute contempt for anything religious. If the things I had already discovered were not enough to push me over the edge, that day was the proverbial straw.

I snuck around the church with a renewed vengeance, spying on the priests and nuns who shrugged off their convictions like a cape when they thought they were alone. Watching them act like mad heathens still disgusted me on one level, but invigorated me on another. I got a lot of enjoyment out of spying on them and seeing the true nature of my self-righteous tormentors. It gave me hope.

How could witnessing the detestable secrets of clergymen and nuns give me hope? Well, if these people were supposed to be the moral icons of our age, then I was a saint. I was free to enjoy anything my flesh desired without having to worry about consequences. God, if He existed, was obviously not watching.

My grades slipped further and further toward rock bottom as the year crept along, and I ended up failing the sixth grade. My attitude did not help, either. The nuns did not appreciate being told that they needed a good smack on the ass whenever they got their panties in a wad. They especially did not care to hear how I could help relieve a little of their stress with a private session in the confessional. To say that I became well-acquainted with disciplinary measures would be quite an understatement. I don’t suppose any of it did any good, though. Each stroke of the paddle only served to temper my hate.

I began escaping into my own mind whenever I felt too oppressed. While in class, or in Father McClellon’s office paying the price for my latest rebellious act, I

would slip into the shadows of my thoughts. On one occasion, I even forgot where I was during a math class and began masturbating in front of everyone. I was thinking about the night before, when I watched with delight as two of the nuns did things to each other that nuns probably should not do. That “display of disrespect for the house of God”, as they put it, won me another appointment with the paddle and a threat that I would be sent to a mental institution if I did not straighten up.

Fortunately, I was able to get a grip and start controlling myself a little more. I knew I would end up being sent away if I went too far. Little Joshua Bloodsworth became a quiet boy again.

My grades did not improve very much, but enough so that I passed the sixth grade on the second attempt. My peers were a year ahead of me in school now, but it's not like I had many good friends anyway. The disciplinary actions came less frequently as well. Sometimes I think that actually saddened Father McClennon, since he no longer smiled as much whenever he saw me in the hallways.

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The next two years went by quickly enough while I pretended to play their games. I still snuck around the church, getting off on the things I witnessed, but I kept it to myself. I no longer acted out in front of other people, and even managed to regain some of my standing as a normal child. To be honest, that part bothered me a little. I had started to enjoy being considered a frightening outcast, but I knew that such a reputation would only make life more difficult. Besides, dark secrets were more fun than blatant rebellion.

I suppose the chaos in my head was beginning to take its toll, though. The amusement and sense of freedom started turning back into hatred for the monster living in my head. I had managed to ignore anything involving God for some time, but I found myself cursing His name under my breath again. It felt like He was always breathing down my neck, even though I still did not really believe in Him. The sense of guilt this caused started breeding a lot of anger. I did not feel like God, whom I did not even worship, had any right to stare me down when His own people were acting like animals under His very nose.

Everything came to a head one Saturday night, shortly after my 15th birthday. I had become more cynical than ever. I hated everyone, especially myself, and was completely detached from most of the people around me. As I crept through the

hallways, carrying out my usual spy routine from the long shadows of the sleeping church, I came across Father McClennon's room. His door was open, and I could see him sitting in a leather chair with a magazine in one hand and a glass of booze in the other. I knew it was liquor by the open bottle that sat on the lamp table beside his chair. I knew the magazine was a porno rag because it was his usual poison. I had witnessed more interesting things during my nightly prowls, so I'm not sure why this particular sight got under my skin in such a way. I guess it sent me over the edge to watch this supposedly holy man, who had paddled me earlier that very day for breaking some asinine rule, drinking like a fish and drooling over naked women.

I could not watch anymore. I felt like I was going insane, and wanted nothing more than to run into his room, break the bottle of whiskey over his head, and slit his self-righteous throat with the jagged glass. I decided to just leave and try to clear my head. As I walked through the lonely hallways, though, my anger continued to swell. When I walked by the chapel - its large, open doors yawning like a hungry beast, beckoning for me to come in and pay homage to the silly icons within - I stopped in my tracks. The longer I stared at the enormous crucifix that hung like a dagger from the wall, the angrier I became. It was mocking me. The statue of Mary, which stood near the crucifix, stared me down with cold, dead eyes. The expression on her face made it obvious - she was looking down on me and enjoying my inner pain.

I had put up with the hypocrisy for long enough, so I marched into the chapel and stopped in front of the pulpit. My hatred was growing like a wildfire as I stared up at the crucifix.

"You've mocked me with your false doctrine and your ridiculous little servants for long enough!" I shouted. "Your so-called church leaders scurry around in the dark, doing exactly the same shit they preach against day after day, and you do nothing! But it's somehow fair that I get punished on a regular basis for not living up to *their* standards?"

I climbed onto the pulpit and stood atop the antique wood like a bird perching on a limb. I stretched out my arms and waited to be struck by lightening for desecrating such a holy place, but nothing happened.

After getting no reaction, I spit at the crucifix.

Still no response.

"Nothing? You have nothing to say to someone who walks into your home and spits at you? I figured as much. You let your minions get away with anything that

pleases their sick little minds, so I shouldn't expect you to stand up for yourself against me either!"

I looked over at the statue of Mary and laughed. "You're his old lady, right? Doesn't it make you sick to see your child cower to a weak little puke like me?"

I looked back at the crucifix with bulging, hate-filled eyes. I felt as though I could explode. I wanted to spontaneously combust and burn the despicable place down with flames from my own body.

"Show yourself and prove you exist, or tell your pathetic, hypocritical priests and nuns to leave me the fuck alone!"

I saw something out of the corner of my eye. I glanced toward the statue of Mary and almost fainted when I realized exactly what I was seeing. A thin stream of blood was pouring from her cold, stone eyes. It flowed down her face, onto her arm, and trickled from one of her fingers onto the floor - where it began forming a red puddle.

My legs buckled and I fell from the podium, crashing face-first onto the hardwood floor. I blinked a few times and looked back up at the statue. The blood was still flowing, and as far as I could tell, it was definitely not a figment of my imagination.

"Go drink it," said a deep, gravely voice from behind.

My heart nearly stopped as I bolted up from the floor and spun around to see who was speaking. A tall, robed figure stood beside the pulpit. His garments were so dark they let off a purple gleam in the flickering candlelight. His head was covered by a hood, and his face was nothing but a shadow. I could only stare. I moved my mouth as though I fully intended to reply, but nothing came out.

"You demanded a sign, and it has been given," he said, standing motionless. "Drink the blood to show that you accept the gift. Or were you just spouting empty words? Perhaps you are not worthy."

"The Bible says Christ bled for us, not Mary," was all I could think to say.

"Ah, so you have decided to trust the words of a God in whom you do not believe. Christ already bled for you, and that apparently wasn't enough. He's not

going to do it a second time just to appease a small boy. The form of Mary now bleeds in his stead. Accept it or turn away and learn to hold your tongue.”

I did not really understand, but for some reason I wanted to believe him. I figured this had to be happening for a reason, so I was clearly expected to show my appreciation. The logic was sound at the time. I turned and walked over to the statue. Kneeling before her, I put my face under her outstretched finger and let the blood flow into my mouth. It tasted real, and felt as though I were drinking cool water after nearly dying of thirst in a hot desert. I kept drinking until the figure at the pulpit told me in a harsh voice that I had drunk enough. Pulling my face away from the flow of red, delicious liquid was difficult. I felt like a heroin addict who was pulling the needle from his arm before squeezing the drug into his vein. I stood up and turned to face the robed figure again.

“Wipe your face, cretin. Drinking blood doesn’t make you an animal. Vampire or not, you’re still expected to show some dignity and self-respect.”

My eyes bulged from their sockets when I heard what he had called me. “Vampire? You said I was accepting salvation, not turning myself into a damned monster!”

“I said you were accepting a gift. Jesus bled for you and you rejected his sacrifice. Now I have offered you a gift of blood, and you have accepted.”

I fell to my knees and began to wretch, but nothing came out. No matter how much I heaved, I could not empty my stomach of the blood. While convulsing, I had the agonizing sensation that something very dear to me was being ripped from my soul. It left me feeling cold and desperate.

I fell on my face and sobbed tears of blood. I somehow knew that what I had felt tearing away from my heart was the presence of God. I had finally managed to shun Him for good, and was truly in the dark for the first time in my life.

The tears of blood washed over my eyes and seemed to create a sort of lens. I blinked several times in an attempt to clear my vision, but to no avail. Everything I saw now appeared as though I were looking through a pale, red window.

“Quite ironic, isn’t it?” Hissed the dark figure, seeming to know what I was thinking. “You never know what you’ve got until it’s gone, they say. This is all very pathetic, actually. You weren’t bright enough to accept the existence of God until you

finally drove him from your heart. You came to believe in His existence and damned yourself for eternity all in a single breath.”

“Who are you?” I asked, still crying on the floor. Through the lens of blood, I could finally see his true face. His skin seemed red and slick, as though bathed in oil, and appeared to have been stretched across a frame that was too large for the amount of skin. Small flames danced across his face, and his eyes were black, bottomless pits.

“I am the one who now fills the void,” he replied in a solemn voice. “My presence offers no relief from that emptiness, however. I am darkness and sorrow - but you may refer to me as Master. Actually, you have no choice in the matter. To accept my gift is to accept my rule. My reign is not at the mercy of my subject’s free will. You have rejected the only one who would have allowed you such a luxury.”

I used all my strength and attempted to stand, but could only make it to my knees. “This is the house of God!” I shouted as forcefully as I could manage. “There’s no way you have any power here. You can’t make the Virgin Mary cry. This is a holy place and these are holy symbols. This is all an illusion!”

The robed figure laughed. It sounded like dry bones being scraped across broken glass. “It is only holy to those who *truly believe* it is holy. As for the statue – what power can dead stone possess? It is a man-made icon. Its power exists only in the hearts of those who regard it as sacred. No, I’m afraid this is no illusion. You indeed belong to me now.”

“Vampires don’t exist,” I replied in a sputtering sob. “That’s just movie bullshit.”

The dark figure hovered closer. His movements were like mist over a still pond. “Once you belong to me, you simple-minded lapdog, I alone govern your reality. You are what I say you are, no matter how ridiculous it may sound to your mortal ears.”

I finally managed to stand up, though my legs were still shaky. “I’m not mortal anymore if I’m a vampire, which means I have nothing to fear from the likes of you.” My words were an attempt at defiance, but I was unable to look directly at the shadowy man while I spoke. He had me scared and he knew it.

He laughed again. “Ah, so now the movies are a reliable source of lore. Perhaps you missed the part where I explained that *I made you!*” His form seemed to blur, and he suddenly appeared inches in front of my face. “The nature of your being is

whatever I deem appropriate. You are no more immortal now than you were before you accepted my gift. Make no mistake – you will most certainly die.”

I fell to my knees again. Knowing that I was helpless, I leaned over and tried to kiss his feet, but my lips only found the floor. He was there, but his presence offered nothing solid that could be touched.

“Please,” I begged through weeping gasps. “Take back your gift. Please, have mercy and let me go!”

“You beg for things that you have already rejected. Are you truly so stupid?” he asked, though he sounded as though he already knew the answer. “Such things were already offered to you long ago. You had more than ample time to accept His gift, but you chose mine instead. Second chances were not a part of my offer.”

His form suddenly became very solid as he grabbed my chin and lifted me off the floor. Empty, black eyes gazed into mine as he spoke. “The cravings have not started yet, but they will. You will be forced to drink human blood in order to survive. Food and water will never again provide you with nourishment. And understand one thing. Your victims must be living when you feed upon them. The blood of the dead will not satisfy your cravings, nor will it keep you alive.”

I had difficulty saying anything while being held up by my chin, but I somehow managed to get the words out. “I won’t do that. I’m not going to kill anyone!”

The figure released his grip and I crumbled to the floor in a heap.

“Oh, you don’t *have* to kill them in order to nourish yourself,” he said as he moved in a circle around me. “But if you leave them alive, they will surely identify their attacker. You’ll have a hard time satisfying your needs from behind bars, and you will die.” He kneeled down and picked my head up from the floor to stare into my eyes again.

“And remember, lapdog – the sooner you die, the sooner you pass through the gates of hell and become living, screaming fuel for my hungry flames.”

He dropped my head back to the floor and began hovering away. Before reaching the edge of the platform, he turned toward me again. “I know you. You’re much too weak to sacrifice yourself and accept eternal damnation just to spare others. Yes, many will suffer as a result of your lust for blood.”

His last words echoed through the chapel as he vanished, leaving a wavering column of shadows. After a moment, all signs of the dark figure were gone.

I stood after a moment and glanced around the room. When I looked at the statue of Mary, her eyes seemed to stare at me with a look of sorrow. All signs of the blood were gone from the statue and the floor, but I could still taste it in my mouth and feel it in my stomach. And I could still see it – everywhere.

I left the chapel and crept back to my bed, hoping to wake up in the morning and laugh at having conjured up such a ridiculous dream.

I was still crying tears of blood when I fell into a restless, nightmare-infested sleep.

3

I ran from him all night. I knew I was dreaming, but I also knew that he was very real.

I was trapped inside what appeared to be a castle, full of endless corridors that would place me back at the beginning whenever I neared the end. Its stone walls were covered with black slime, but were not cold like one would expect. They were warm to the touch and felt alive. The floor was a continuous pool of blood. My footsteps made a sickening, wet thud as I ran around, searching for a way out. I somehow knew, however, that I would find no escape until *he* was ready.

I'm still not sure why I was even running. I already knew I couldn't get away from him, no matter how hard I tried. In fact, he stayed in front of *me* the entire time. As I stumbled along, he hovered in front of me, moving backwards so he could look me in the eyes and tell me things that I'll spend an eternity trying to forget. It was almost as though *I* were chasing *him*. If I stopped, he disappeared. His gravely voice would be replaced by a hissing moan, like that of a corpse expelling stale, rotten air. I was more at ease whenever I could see his shadowy form and hear his voice.

The conversation was one-sided. I ran, panting like an injured dog, as he droned on about what hell was going to be like. Sometimes he would pause his description of my eternity long enough to give a little more insight into what I had become. He said that he had decided to grant me a certain degree of immortality, since it would serve him better in the end anyway. According to the Master, I could

not be killed by any living man or die from illness. Furthermore, I would not age another day. I would forever maintain the appearance of a 15 year-old boy. But I would quickly die without the consumption of human blood.

That was the catch.

My life, and the delaying of an eternity in the lake of fire, depended upon my willingness to feed on the blood of other people. According to him, this would not prove to be a very hard decision, since my cravings would become more insatiable as time went on.

He seemed to get a lot of pleasure out of telling me that no injury I received would ever heal. It would not kill me, and I would not bleed, but it would remain an open wound for the rest of my days. His voice took on an almost orgasmic tone as he explained that I would never bleed because I no longer had any blood in my body. It all belonged to him now, along with all the blood that I would drink from the bodies of my countless victims. It occurred to me that I would not be feeding my own cravings at all – I would be feeding his.

I finally asked a single question. “Will my victims turn into vampires themselves?”

His response was a nightmarish laugh. I had no idea what it meant, but I did not have the courage to ask a second time. I could not stand the idea of provoking that laugh again, so I decided that anything I needed to know would have to be learned through experimentation.

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I didn't laugh when I woke up the next morning. I knew very well that my experience had not been a dream. I could still taste the blood, and my sleepy eyes still viewed everything through a bloody lens.

Something else made this particular morning different from any other. I craved blood; No, I *needed* blood. I would have stopped breathing, forever depriving myself of air, for one drop of sweet, red life.

But I had never harmed anyone, so how was I going to drink another person's blood? I had no idea how to attack someone and actually win, because I had always been the victim. Nevertheless, I was going to figure it out. I had to.

I realized what I was thinking about and became sick to my stomach. In the course of one night, I had transformed from a harmless little twerp into some sort of predator. Would I have the metal to hold them still as they twitched and struggled, watching them die as I drank their life away? I wasn't sure, but I knew there was only one way to find out. I could tell that I would soon go crazy if I didn't feed my cravings – his cravings - so I was going to get what I wanted.

It dawned on me that my physical appearance may have changed now that I was a so-called vampire. I opened the door to the bathroom and made sure that it was empty. I heard Thomas snoring in the next bedroom, so I crept to his side of the bathroom and closed his door. I slid the lock into place and tip-toed over to the mirror.

I was almost disappointed as I stood in front of the mirror, looking at the same face that had been there the night before. Nothing about me seemed to have changed, except that I may have looked a little more pale than usual. My canines had not even grown any longer. *"So much for the movie bullshit,"* I thought as I walked back into my room.

I stepped into the hallway with one name on my mind - Father McClennon.

It was only five o'clock in the morning, so I knew I was free to move about without being seen. The countless nights that I had spent creeping through the shadows had proven worthwhile. I moved like a wraith down the dark corridors of the church, mixing in with shadows as I worked my way toward the priest's sleeping chambers.

A faint light spilled from Father McClennon's open door. As I neared his room, I could see that he was sitting in his leather chair again. The porno magazine had been replaced with a Bible. The thought of his hypocrisy no longer disgusted me. He was just food now.

"Why can't he sleep like normal people?" I thought as I tried to think of a way to get the upper hand.

I nearly had a heart attack when he spoke. "What are you doing in the hall, child? You should be in your bed."

Having been discovered, I had no choice but walk into his room and speak with him. "I had a really bad dream," I replied.

"Perhaps you have a guilty conscience and need to get something off your chest."

"It may be something like that," I said as I walked into the room.

"Well you should go to confessional. This isn't the appropriate place for confessing one's sins," he said as he sat the Bible in his lap.

"No, I think I'll just stay here with you. Liquor and titties sounds more like the medicine I need," I replied as I closed the door and picked up a small, metal crucifix that was mounted on the wall.

He stood up and looked as though he'd witnessed a murder. "What? I'll have no such talk in this church! And put that back on the wall! You desecrate a symbol of God!"

He began walking toward me, but stopped short as the crucifix slammed into his temple. He slumped to the floor in an unconscious pile.

"I don't think the big guy really gives a shit what I do anymore," I said with a smile to my sleeping victim. This was proving to be much easier than I had imagined. More surprising was the fact that I was truly enjoying myself.

I rolled the priest over on his back and set the crucifix on his chest. I could see the blood pulsating through his jugular vein. I could even smell it. My mouth was watering as I leaned over and tore into his neck with my teeth. I spit a hunk of flesh onto the floor beside his head as blood began gushing from the wound. The smell was maddening. I placed my mouth over the gaping hole and began sucking down the life-blood of Father McClennon.

I knew the moment the priest died. He let out a hissing moan, like the one I had heard in my dream, and his body seemed to relax. I finished drying out his veins and stood to leave, but something occurred to me before I could reach the door. My fingerprints were all over the metal crucifix, and my bite marks could be identified with a thorough investigation of the corpse.

I walked back over, took the priest's handkerchief from his pocket, and wiped down the crucifix. I took out my pocketknife, which I was not even supposed to own, and mangled the skin all around the hole in the priest's neck. I then took the hunk of

skin that I had spit onto the floor and cut it into small pieces so that nothing identifiable remained.

After another inspection, I was satisfied that no useful evidence remained. I went over to Father McClennon's wash basin and cleaned off my face and hands, dried off with his towel, and left the room.

"You had it coming," I whispered as I shut his door and crept into the shadows of the quiet hallway.

Once back in my room, I finally took a much-needed bath and changed my clothes. I inspected my dirty shirt and pants, and found that no blood had gotten onto either. I had taken my first victim with skillful ease. My cravings satisfied, I crawled back into bed and fell into a deep, restful sleep for the first time since I could remember.

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The beating at my door brought my sleep to an abrupt end. I jumped out of bed and ran to see who was knocking. It was Thomas.

"Come quick!" he said between gasps, still trying to catch his breath. "Someone found Father McClennon dead in his room!"

"What?" I asked with a look of shock. Fortunately, I had always been a great actor.

"I'm not kidding. Come on!" he shouted as he turned to run back down the hall. I caught up with him and we ran to the priest's bedroom. There was little to see. The mass of children, priests and nuns gathered outside the dead man's room blocked our view. We joined the crowd and tried to worm our way forward.

The gruesome scene looked exactly as I had left it. Father McClennon's body lay on the floor, mouth gaping open, with a yawning hole in his pale neck. I repeated my 'look of shock' routine. I just stood there, staring, trying to look as though I were in the process of becoming scarred for life.

It must have worked. Sister Agatha looked at me and walked over to the door.

“Get these children out of here!” She said to one of the other nuns. “Seeing this will serve them no purpose.” She shooed us away from the entrance, gave me a comforting look, and closed the door.

“Who would’ve done something like that to a priest?” Thomas asked to no one in particular.

“I don’t know,” I answered. “Whoever they are, they’ve got to be pretty sick.”

Thomas just nodded. The scarred for life routine was not an act with him. He looked like he was in shock.

“Go to the chapel, everyone. Wait inside and someone will come talk to you in a moment,” announced one of the nuns. We all obeyed and began walking down the hall.

Some of the children stared at the floor, seeming to have difficulty dealing with what they’d seen, while others chatted excitedly. I stared at Thomas. He had not said anything since his question in the hall, and was now crying. He was making an attempt to hide it, but to no avail.

“Are you okay?” I asked in a whisper.

“He was really white. His eyes were wide open, but they looked empty. They didn’t even seem human anymore,” replied Thomas.

“I know. I’d never seen a dead person before either,” I said. “He didn’t look real.”

“He had a hole in his neck,” Thomas whispered as he finally looked over at me. “But he wasn’t bleeding. What could’ve happened to him?”

“I don’t know. There wasn’t any blood on the floor, either,” I replied.

Before we could continue with our conversation, one of the younger priests entered the chapel and went up to the pulpit. Everyone stopped talking and faced forward.

“Children, I know you have to be frightened and deeply saddened by what happened here in our quiet church. But please, do not worry. Police officers are arriving now, and will remain until this is all over. Whoever got in here will not do so again.”

“Unless he’s still inside,” I replied aloud. I had not even meant to say anything. I surprised myself and suddenly felt very stupid.

The priest gave me a scornful look. “Whoever did this is already gone,” he assured us. “He would not stay here and risk being caught by the police officers who are searching the grounds this very moment. We are all perfectly safe.”

He left the pulpit and a nun took his place.

“Some of you will no doubt wish to talk about this with someone,” said the nun in a soft voice. “This comes as a shock to us all, and death is never an easy thing to accept – especially for the innocent mind of a child. I, as well as my sisters and the priests, will be available at any time, should you need to speak with someone about what has occurred. There is no shame in needing help when faced with such tragedy.” A single tear ran down her cheek as she left the podium and joined the other nuns who were seated in the front row.

I noticed that the statue of Mary no longer seemed to stare at me with sorrowful eyes. She was ignoring me altogether. Looking at her made me think of the blood that had trickled from her cold, stone face the night before. Thinking of the blood made me want more. I could feel the cravings begin to stir again. They were weak, but I could feel them growing.

“Already?” I thought as I stared at the floor. *“I’m gonna run out of victims pretty soon if this doesn’t slow down.”*

6

That was the story that Joshua told me when we left the chapel and returned to our rooms. My name is Thomas. I’m the only real friend that Joshua ever had.

I still don’t really know why he confided in me, or why he believed he could trust me with such a secret. I didn’t even know *myself* well enough to say that I was willing to deal with such knowledge without revealing him as the killer – but he knew.

He somehow knew me better than I knew myself.

We sat together on his bed as he told me everything about what he had become and what he had done to Father McClennon. I cried and shook my head the entire time, mumbling through sobs that he was lying. But I could not look him in the

eyes while he told his story. I knew it was the truth. I did not want to believe him, but somewhere down deep, I knew.

When he was finished, I ran through the bathroom and into my own room. I locked my door and sank to the ground, weeping.

Joshua sat on the other side of the door, trying to comfort my hysterical mind.

“Please, Thomas,” he begged. “You’re the only friend I have in this world. I’ve lost everything else – I don’t want to lose you.”

I could not reply. I just sat there, crying, trying to come to grips with the fact that I was actually going to keep such a secret. I was going to allow a monster to exist, and to satisfy his morbid lust. I knew I was damning myself, but it somehow did not matter.

After a while, I stopped crying and opened the door and looked into his eyes. When I looked closely enough, I could see a red haze shimmering in his pupils. We embraced, and I assured my friend - my only true friend - that I would never betray him.

7

“When you know yourselves, then you will be known, and you will understand that you are children of the living Father. But if you do not know yourselves, then you live in poverty, and you are the poverty.” – The Gospel of Thomas, verse 3.

This was the answer given to me by Joshua when I asked how he could allow himself to fall into such darkness. I did not understand, so he continued.

“I looked within myself when all was dark, and it was in that darkness that began to find myself. My true nature was only visible in the dark, because I was no more than a shadow. The light washed the shadow away and hid the truth. This place,” Joshua continued as he waved a hand, “showed me that darkness, and created the shadow - when it thought I wasn’t looking. Then, when I decided to embrace the truth they had created for me, I was punished.”

He stood up and paced around the room before continuing.

“I knew that if light punished truth, then I would turn to darkness for acceptance.”

I still did not buy it. “Okay, so how can you justify evil through the failures of other men? It doesn’t matter what position they hold – they’re still just men. If they claim to serve God, but do so through lies, they’ll be judged accordingly. You shouldn’t have discounted the message simply because the messenger fell short of his own preaching.”

Joshua answered me with a hard stare. For several moments, he said nothing. He just looked at me, motionless, while I feared that I had gone too far.

His look finally softened, and he sat back onto the bed with a sigh.

“I’m not trying to justify anything, Thomas,” he said. His voice sounded tired. “I am what I am. The decision was made. I’ll live with that decision until I die, and I’ll continue to live with it even then. I don’t need validation from a God whom I’ll never worship.”

He stood up again and his voice regained some of its vigor. “But just to humor you, let’s look at it like this - I could only know what I was taught, and I was taught that believers, even the greatest among them, only acknowledged God in the presence of other so-called believers. This told me that it wasn’t God they feared at all. It was other men.”

His stare became cold again, and he continued with a look of disgust. “Where was God when his bastard minions were teaching me, through their actions, that God didn’t exist? Where was He when they were proving that what they really feared was me?”

He stepped toward me and leaned down to look me in the eyes. “They taught me that I *was* god!”

I said nothing more. I knew that Joshua had simply come to the conclusion that I had always been too weak to see. I would never again question my friend.

At first, Joshua did not include me in his exploits. My place was not to know when a victim was to be taken, or how – my place was simply to say nothing as the chaos churned our home until it curdled. The priests and nuns lived in constant fear, pretending that all was under control so they did not worry the children.

All was *not* under control, however. They had no idea who was taking the lives, what the motive might have been, or even how the murders had been carried out. They never even suspected any of the children. In fact, it was not long before they stopped reporting the murders to the authorities. Investigators had wormed their way too close to the dark underbelly of the church, threatening to uncover hidden secrets that the clergy wished to keep hidden.

Someone would tell us that a priest or nun had been called to service elsewhere, and they would never be seen again. If I asked Joshua about the person in question, he would simply smile.

It was the smile of a lion after a kill.

At times, Joshua would succumb to my prodding and actually give me an account of what he had done. The disappearance of Sister Elizabeth was one such account.

“I lost my innocence during the consumption of blood,” he told me as we sat on my bed in the dark, “so I decided that I should lose my virginity in the same way.”

He smiled like a jackal as he let it sink in.

I stared at the darkness, trying to make myself tell him to stop – that I did not want to hear about it anymore. But I could not force myself to say the words. Something in me wanted to hear the tale – something morbid that probably lives in us all.

This is the story that Joshua told.

Sister Elizabeth had been cleaning the chapel late one night before turning in for the evening. She was alone, accompanied only by the flickering light of candles.

Joshua watched from the shadows, admiring her form as she bent over to wipe dust from the pews. Even her billowing habit could not hide the luscious, womanly form that moved beneath. Joshua began to crave more than just blood.

He continued to watch until she moved to the confessionals. At first, she dusted the outside of the large, wooden structure. He watched with the patience of an owl as she moved up and down, letting her dust cloth pass over the smooth surface. After a moment, she went inside to dust the bench and inner walls.

Joshua could no longer observe his prey, so he crept to the confessional and stood outside the door for a moment. He listened as she hummed, imagining her slender form. He could smell her blood. He could feel the smoothness of her young skin. It made him insane with lust.

He swung the door open and leapt inside, putting his hand over her quivering mouth. Her eyes were wide with fear, and her stifled screams were like those a fawn being devoured by wolves.

Joshua heard the door close behind him and smiled. "You're all alone with the wolf now, little lamb," he whispered in her ear as he moved his hand up her leg.

She struggled to free herself from his grasp, but he proved too strong. His grip was like quicksand.

With his hand still over her mouth, he moved her head to the side and tore into the pink flesh of her neck. He did not spit it out, though – he had learned to consume the flesh along with the blood. It was revolting, but it left a cleaner scene.

While he drank the blood of his flailing victim, he lifted her garments and desecrated her virginity – the one thing she was never supposed to lose. "We're going to lose our virginity together," he whispered. She had fallen unconscious from shock, however, and did not hear his words.

Joshua reached climax at the same moment that his prey found death. On an impulse, he stopped drinking her blood and placed his mouth over hers. He breathed in the hissing moan of her final breath. Both predator and prey convulsed in unison - one from ecstasy, the other from death.

"Forgive me Father, for I have sinned," he whispered with a smile as he looked down upon the body of his prize.

Something inside me broke when I realized how much I had enjoyed hearing Joshua's story. I was no longer innocent, no longer clean - but I loved the sensation of filth washing over my shivering mind.

Nevertheless, I cried.

Joshua laughed.

9

Sister Elizabeth had been called to serve at the Vatican. She had been asked to leave immediately, so she'd had no time to offer a farewell to the students before leaving very early in the morning, according to one of our so-called protectors.

Another member of the clergy was gone. Sister Elizabeth had been Joshua's sixth victim, but certainly not his last.

Joshua was beginning to get paranoid, however, and decided that our church leaders would soon be forced to involve the authorities again.

He began sneaking out of the church when it was time to feed. We were 17 years old now, so he decided that he would no longer seem too out of place walking through the dark, lonely streets at night. He knew he could claim his victims with impunity when he had an entire city at his disposal.

With his new hunting ground, he fed more often than ever before. Victim after victim, police investigators drove themselves mad searching for a killer who left no clues - a killer who claimed his prize in ways that did not seem human.

I had not asked to hear about Joshua's killings since the taking of Sister Elizabeth. Part of me was still curious - still needed to hear about the nightmarish deaths of his victims - but I had enough of a conscience remaining to find it unsavory.

- Until Father Crowley went too far.

I loved Shannon Anderson. The feeling was not entirely mutual, but she did like me enough to offer first or second base now and then. I could tell that she wanted me, but could never understand why she always seemed so distant - so unwilling to

go any farther. Her eyes would become vacant, and she would back away, telling me that she was sorry. For the longest, I tried to figure out what I had done wrong – what I had done to hurt the one I loved.

Then I found my answer lying on top of Shannon as she squirmed and whimpered in the dark.

I could not sleep that night. I tossed and turned, unable to think of anything but the girl I loved. No longer able to withstand the torment, I got up and walked to her room. I did not know how she would feel about me showing up at her door in the middle of the night, but I was going to find out. I had to see her.

When I heard the faint noises of distress coming from her room, I opened the door enough to peer inside. A single candle burned in her room, so everything danced in patches of orange light and long shadows. The light was dim, but there could be no mistake. Father Crowley lay on top of Shannon, covering her whimpering mouth as he violated her innocence.

I wanted to remove his head with my bare hands and rape the bleeding stump that was once his neck.

But I was too weak. I could only stare in shock as Shannon was assaulted by a man whom I had admired since childhood.

When I saw that he had satisfied his lust and was getting up to leave his weeping victim, I closed the door and walked back to my room. I hated both myself and Father Crowley more with each silent step.

I had never given Joshua a command of any kind. I was supportive, and offered advice whenever he asked – but not without solicitation. So he seemed to take me very seriously when I woke him from his sleep and informed him that he was to take a new victim from the confines of the church.

“You will kill Father Crowley tomorrow night,” I said in a flat voice, devoid of emotion.

Joshua said nothing as I stood and walked back to my own room. I could see in his eyes that my command would not be questioned. I knew that Father Crowley had but one day remaining on this earth as I cried myself to sleep.

The sun was just starting to peek through my window when I woke up and found Joshua standing beside my bed. I blinked a few times, trying to clear the sleepy haze.

“I’ll do what you’ve asked, but first you’re going to do something for me,” he said as he sat down on my bed.

I sat up and rubbed my eyes. “okay, what do you need me to do?”

“Something I should’ve had you do a long time ago.” He produced a small file from his shirt pocket and placed it in my hand.

“What am I supposed to do with this?” I asked as I twirled the small tool in the palm of my hand.

“You’re supposed to file my canines with it,” he replied with a forced smile.

“You’ve lost your mind!” I said as I dropped the file onto the bed.

“Well yes, clearly – a long time ago. But that’s not the point,” he replied. “I’m sick of being forced to swallow flesh every time I feed. I’m not a starving dog. It makes me feel sick, and I won’t do it any more.”

“Okay, so use your knife to poke some holes in them. You don’t have to turn yourself into a mangled freak just to keep from having to swallow flesh.” My stomach was beginning to churn. I knew what Joshua was and what he did – but talking about it as though we were discussing a football game made my skin crawl.

“A pocket knife is cumbersome. Slashing or stabbing them in exactly the right place would be nearly impossible if they were thrashing around – which they tend to do.”

“But if you use your teeth, they may be able to identify you through dental records. You’d be a lot safer with the knife,” I argued.

“Good point,” he replied while looking at the file and rubbing his chin. After a moment, he looked back up with a smile. “You’re going to have to file my other front teeth and the teeth directly behind my canines.”

“Okay, I don’t care how long ago you lost your mind. You’ve officially lost it more,” I said with a look of disgust.

“Look,” he said as he picked up the file and placed it back in my hand. “You’re going to do this for me whether it makes sense to you or not. You’ve asked me to do you a favor – a very large favor – and I’m simply asking that you reciprocate. Filing all the teeth around my canines will do two important things: it’ll alter the markings of my bite, making it impossible to identify me through dental records, and it’ll shorten the other teeth, exposing my canines a little more. Since I can’t lengthen my canines, I need to shorten the teeth around them. Otherwise, I won’t be able to sink my teeth deeply enough into a person’s flesh to puncture the vein.

“You’re sick,” was all I could think to say.

“We’ve already been over that,” he replied with a grin.

I was not ready to give in. “Okay, so forget about the dental records. When people see two puncture wounds in a dead person’s neck, and then happen to notice the shape of your mangled teeth, I think they’re gonna put two and two together.”

Joshua stopped smiling. “Thomas, how long do you think I can stay here anyway? I’ve already overstayed my welcome. Keeping myself bottled up in this school for much longer will get me caught no matter what I do or don’t do. I won’t be around for them to notice my teeth.”

I was speechless for a moment. “You can’t leave me,” I begged. I always knew that we would eventually leave the school, but I never really carried the thought to conclusion. I could not accept the idea of losing my friend so soon, regardless of my misgivings concerning his activities.

Joshua put his hand on my shoulder. “Thomas, you knew this day would come sooner or later. You knew that we would eventually be separated, and that I would probably be forced to settle elsewhere.

“But not so soon,” I replied in a sputter.

“It has to be this way, and you know it. The people here aren’t going to put up with the strange deaths for much longer. Hell, I’m surprised they’ve swept it under a rug for *this* long.”

“You have to take me with you then,” I cried.

“That would never work and you know it,” he replied in a gentle voice. “I’ll probably end up having to bounce around all over the place so that no one picks up my trail. You’d never be able to hold down a job long enough to keep yourself fed.”

I looked at him in speechless disbelief.

“And another thing,” he said, looking away. “I can’t afford to have anyone knowing my whereabouts – not even my best friend.”

My world crumbled around me. I would have rather been made another one of his victims than hear those words come out of his mouth.

He looked back at me, realizing how badly I was hurt. “I’m sorry, Thomas. I wish it didn’t have to be that way – but it does, whether we like it or not. This decision isn’t any easier for me than it is for you. I love you like a brother.”

“But you love yourself more,” I said, unable to look him in the eyes.

“That’s not fair, Thomas. Put yourself in my shoes.”

“I wish I could,” I replied to the floor.

“No, Thomas. You don’t.”

11

It was the most difficult thing I had ever done. I questioned my sanity with each stroke of the file. Not vomiting was at first quite a chore, but I managed to keep my stomach under control long enough to get used to the whole idea – as though someone *could* get used to the act of filing down his best friend’s teeth.

Joshua squirmed and cried at first, but forced me to continue despite his obvious pain. He fell unconscious soon thereafter, but I continued. I knew it was what he would want me to do.

I was actually relieved when he passed out. Before losing consciousness, he bit down on my hands several times and drew blood. He could not stop himself from licking the fresh blood from my fingers as his jaws trembled in pain. It was awkward, but I knew he had no control over such things. I tolerated it, and half-wished that

him drinking my blood without killing me would somehow convert me into a vampire myself. This was obviously not to be, however, as I felt no different than before.

It took a little over two hours to finish the procedure. I shortened his front teeth, as well as those directly behind his canines, so that he had two well-exposed fangs. I also dulled his bottom front teeth so they would act as an anchor when he pressed his fangs into a victim. His teeth now looked like something that would be found in the mouth of an animal.

When all was finished, I held my head back away from his face to admire my handy-work.

I vomited.

It finally sunk in, what I had been doing for over two hours, and it was more than my nerves could handle. I barely made it to the toilet in time.

After cleaning myself up and regaining my composure, I went over and stirred Joshua from his sleep.

He woke up screaming. He rocked back and forth at the edge of the bed with his head in his hands. He was drooling and crying, obviously experiencing a sort of pain far beyond anything I had ever endured.

Somehow, despite the agony, he remained conscious. He stopped crying after several minutes, but continued to rock back and forth like someone who was in the process of losing their mind - again.

It was nearly an hour before he finally spoke. It was difficult to understand his slurred speech.

“I wasn’t thinking about the pain I’d still have *after* the grinding,” he mumbled with his eyes closed.

“I’m sorry,” I replied. “I’d give you some aspirin or something, but I don’t have any. Do you want me to go to the nurse and tell her I have a headache? She’d give me some painkiller without asking any questions.”

“No. I asked for this, so I’ll live with it. I just hope the pain lessens a little before tonight. Feeding won’t be very pleasurable if I pass out from pain in the middle of it.”

I laughed, but was alone in doing so. Joshua only smiled, and even that seemed to nearly kill him.

“You don’t have to take a victim tonight, do you?” I asked. “Can’t you wait a day and let the pain subside a little?”

He looked up at me, still clutching his face. “I promised you a victim tonight.”

I had practically forgotten about my demands. “I don’t remember you promising me anything – and especially nothing with a strict schedule,” I replied.

He smiled again, but seemed to regret doing so. “You’re a good man, Thomas. Thanks, but by asking you to do this... operation for me, I implied that you would get your victim tonight – just as you wished.”

“It doesn’t have to be tonight, Joshua. You can take Father Crowley whenever you’dlike. I’m happy as long as he doesn’t live long enough to die of natural causes.”

Joshua gave me a pained look. “Yes, it does have to be tonight. I’m leaving here tomorrow.”

“So soon?” I asked, staring at the floor.

“I’m sorry, but it can’t wait. Every minute I spend here is like an eternity,” he replied.

Nothing was said for several minutes. Joshua stared at the floor while holding his head, and I lay back on my bed to think.

“Am I supposed to just go on like nothing ever happened? Do you expect me to live a normal life after knowing you?” I finally asked.

“I expect you to try,” he replied. “There’s no alternative, Thomas. I’m sorry about getting you involved in my situation only to one day abandon you, but it’s the only way for me to protect myself.”

I sat up and looked at him. “I could try to become like you. I could go to the chapel late tonight and curse God until your master shows up. He did it for you, so why wouldn’t he do the same for me?”

Joshua seemed to forget his pain. He jerked his head around and glared at me in a way that that made me want to crawl under the bed. “He didn’t do anything *for* me! He did it *to* me! And believe me, Thomas – you *do not* want to share my fate.”

“I’ve helped you enough that I’m basically damned anyway,” I replied, returning his glare.

He looked away, bringing his hands up to his head again. “Being damned and being the devil’s lapdog are two different things. You don’t want his attention,” he said to the floor.

The rest of the afternoon was spent in silence. As the hours crept along, I began to hate the only friend I had in this world. I hated him for allowing me to damn myself through our relationship, only to be cast aside in the name of self-preservation.

I no longer cared to become the vile creature that he had turned into over the last few years. I did not know what I was going to do without him, but I certainly knew that I did not want to become him.

12

At around midnight, Joshua stood up and looked at me. He said nothing as he nodded and walked out of the room.

I did not have to wonder where he was going. It was time for Father Crowley to pay for his sins. I continued to sit on my bed, staring at the walls, for what seemed an eternity. I suddenly laughed when I realized that it would be a creature of hell, not God, who brought judgment upon the sinner.

“Yes, it’s quite funny, isn’t it?” said a deep voice from the corner of my room. No one had been there a few seconds earlier, but a robed figure now stood – or rather hovered – in the shadows.

I sat up in my bed, not knowing whether to run or face the creature. I decided to sit still and not provoke him any more than necessary.

“I know who you are,” I said with as much courage as I could muster.

“Congratulations,” he replied with a hiss. “You will be pleased to hear that Father Crowley no longer draws breath.”

“Is that why you’re here?” I asked.

“Do you believe I would come to this wretched place simply to deliver a message about a wayward priest? Perhaps you are as inept as your brother,” he replied.

“I don’t have a brother,” I replied.

The hissing laugh that this statement provoked was enough to drive one mad.

“You acquired one just moments ago. You now share blood, or rather a lack thereof, with Joshua. Your wish has been granted.”

I bolted out of bed. “That can’t be true! I didn’t drink any blood!”

“You harbored my creature. You took care of him and kept his secret. You then went so far as to demand that he take a life in your name.”

I dropped my head and looked at the floor. “I didn’t know it would....”

“Silence!” he screamed. His screeching voice made me feel as though my soul had been shattered into a million pieces.

“It doesn’t matter what you knew or knew not. What matters is that you made a choice. You offered me a sacrifice, and I have accepted. You sacrificed your own blood when you offered that of the priest.”

I heard the faint patter of droplets hitting the floor and realized I was crying. When I looked down, I saw that I was crying blood.

I felt nothing as my body hit the floor. The world turned black.

I awoke on my bed. Joshua sat in front of me, staring, with several bloody paper towels in his hand. I rolled my head over to look for the pool of blood that I had made, but it was gone.

“What have you done?” Joshua asked. His voice cracked, as though he were about to cry.

“I belong to him now,” I said through thick, red tears. “It would seem that I offered him myself when I used his lapdog for my own purposes.”

“I didn’t know this would happen,” Joshua said through weeping sobs.

“It’s not your fault. I should’ve known I couldn’t murder someone vicariously through you without becoming like you. I was stupid,” I replied.

He hugged me and continued to cry, staining my pillow with his red tears. “What are we going to do?” he asked.

I had never seen Joshua in such a state of weakness. For the first time, he seemed almost human. He finally let go and we sat up, both wiping blood from our faces.

“We have to get out of here,” I said. “I know of a place where we can hide – where no one could possibly find us.”

He only nodded and stared at the floor.

“Go pack your things, and I’ll do the same. Make sure you bring a flash light. It’s dark where we’re going,” I told him as we both stood.

Joshua nodded again and left my room.

“You’re not going to win this one,” I whispered to the dark figure in the shadows.

Joshua and I crawled from my window into the moonless night. We both had packed lightly, bringing only a flashlight each and a few changes of clothes.

There was no food in either bag. It was no longer a necessity.

We crept through the darkness of the school's playground, across the nearby parking lot, and into what was once a city park. It was now an overgrown forest with years of undergrowth and thick mold on what used to pass for benches and fountains.

The dilapidated park seemed to fit our moods as we walked in silence down the neglected paths. Joshua never asked where we were going. He simply followed. Since discovering what had happened to me upon the death of Father Crowley, he seemed to have undergone a change. He had stopped acting like a fearless conqueror, and now seemed more like a timid follower.

"Welcome to your new home," I said as we stopped beside one of the old fountains.

"A water fountain?" he asked, cocking an eyebrow.

"Not quite." I brushed some leaves aside with my foot and exposed a round, metal hatch. It looked much like a manhole cover, but had an odd-looking knob and keyhole in the center.

"Not exactly the Taj Mahal," he said as I bent down and turned the rusty knob.

I opened the hatch and looked back up. "No, it's definitely not – but it's safe. Almost no one knows about this place, and we need our privacy if we plan to stay out of prison."

Joshua turned on his flashlight and scanned the chamber below. It was concrete top to bottom, including the ceiling. It was about ten feet to the bottom, with a metal ladder mounted on the wall next to the hatch. The concrete walls were bare, save for a few gauges and valves used to control the fountain. The chamber measured roughly ten feet in all directions.

"Okay, so how exactly did you find out about this place?" he asked.

“I used to sneak out with some of the older students when I was a kid. They’ve since moved on, so you and I are the only ones left that know of this place,” I replied.

Joshua said nothing for several seconds as he continued to peer inside the tomb-like space below.

“It’s definitely cramped,” he finally said. “But I guess we can’t do much better than this for the time being. We have to look for something a little more pleasant soon, though.”

“We won’t have to put up with this for very long,” I assured him.

Joshua was the first to go down the ladder. I followed, closing the hatch as I entered the chamber.

When I got to the bottom, Joshua was shining his flashlight up at the hatch with a look of horror on his face.

“Thomas, I heard a clicking sound when you closed that hatch,” he said, still staring upward.

“Yeah, that thing locks automatically when you close it,” I replied.

“Okay,” he said with a wavering voice. “And do you know, by chance, whether or not the knob on this side of the hatch actually works?”

“Yes,” I replied.

“Yes it works, or yes you know whether or not it works?” He asked, more urgent than before.

“Yes, I know whether or not it works,” I replied.

He lowered his flashlight and pointed it into my eyes. “Thomas, does the damned thing work or not?”

“The older boys broke the inside latch when I was a kid and locked me in here for the better part of a day before finally setting me free. I nearly wore my fingers to the bone trying to make it work – but it was impossible,” I replied in a flat voice.

I saw Joshua’s flashlight swing toward my head before falling unconscious.

I woke up to the sounds of whimpering. My flashlight was lying beside me, still shining, so I picked it up and pointed it in the direction of the sound.

Joshua was sitting on the floor, rocking back and forth. He was mumbling and, acting as though he had completely lost his sanity.

Looking at his fingers, I could tell that he had spent a considerable amount of time trying to force his way through the hatch. His skin was torn to shreds and most his fingernails were missing. No blood came from the wounds, however.

He had apparently tried to use parts of his flashlight to fix the broken latch, as pieces of it were scattered about the floor.

I called out his name, but got no answer. My friend no longer seemed to occupy the familiar body. All that remained was a scared child, whimpering and rocking himself to sleep – or rather, to death.

I can already feel the lust for blood welling up in my soul. I'm so thirsty I could almost tear through these concrete walls for a single drop.

I know that I'll never be given the opportunity to claim a victim, however. The dark figure keeps appearing from time to time, but even he is powerless to open the hatch. He cannot undo my decision to kill myself and my friend any more than I could undo my decision to become the monster that is now taking over my soul.

I have damned myself, and I have allowed numerous people to die by keeping Joshua's secret – but there will be no more victims.

My flashlight is beginning to die out, so I will end here. If ever our bodies are found and this journal is read – I am truly sorry.

God's will be done.