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Bryan Furuness

Portrait of Lucifer as a Young Man

Lucifer's father was a portrait painter for hire. If you mailed him a photograph and a check for four hundred dollars, he would paint your likeness in dark, smoky oils. Not a bad deal for a vintage ego trip and the surest way to make new money look old. It was the nineteen-eighties. His business boomed.

He wasn't the world's greatest portrait painter, truth be told, but his clients didn't complain, and he loved the work. Loved it so much, in fact, that when he was finished with paying jobs for the day, he liked to paint Hoosiers of guttering fame— men like Hoagy Carmichael or Booth Tarkington, men whose names rang a faint bell, but you weren't sure why, though you thought they might have pitched for the Cubs or served in your grandfather's platoon.

The idea behind these unpaid portraits was to revive some of the subjects' former fame, but since no museum or gallery had commissioned them (or would accept them, even as donations), they ended up lining the living room wall in rows, a jury box of befuddled uncles.

Growing up, Lucifer thought portraits were ridiculous, and that his father's clients were shallow and stupid. But around the time of his twelfth birthday, curiosity began to gnaw at him. If his father could make a grain dealer look like a university president, how dignified would Lucifer look in oil?

"Oh, you'll find out soon enough," his father said. "But it won't be from me. You'll be so famous you won't need a shlub like me to boost your image."

This wasn't your standard case of a doting father with high hopes for his boy. Lucifer was lousy with talent, and lousy at hiding it. A lot of people thought he was going to make it big. Some even hoped for it. What was he good at? Everything. By the time he was ten, he could whip his father in the Jeopardy Play-at-Home game. At his fifth-grade graduation ceremony, Lucifer gave such a stirring delivery of Tennyson's "Ulysses" that the entire crowd stood up in the bleachers; no one could say why. In gymnastics, he could whirl his body around the pommel horse so fast that his legs blurred into a propeller, but the real marvel was that none of the other boys in school made fun of him for it. Lucifer was electromagnetic, and fame seemed to be flying toward him.

What he didn't know—what his father didn't know either—was how famous he would become, and for what. But they were about to get a hint.

His father tried to tell him no, but Lucifer wheedled. He cajoled. He reasoned, issued mild and veiled threats, promised rewards, posed leading questions to draw his father into a minefield of rhetorical traps and trip wires

of guilt. The boy did not (ever) beg, but he employed every other form of verbal persuasion known to man, and a few new ones besides. His approach wasn't smooth yet, but he was persistent. Finally, on the third afternoon, when he sensed that his father would agree to anything to stop the noise, he closed the deal.

"Look," said Lucifer, stroking his bare lip. "No moustache."

Moustaches were the bane of his father's work. His portraits were usually decent until he could no longer put off the moustache (there was always a moustache—the kind of man who commissions a portrait is never clean-shaven), and then his subject would look like he'd somehow trapped a caterpillar between lip and nose, and was now waiting, slightly cross-eyed with fear, for animal control to arrive.

"Oh, for Christ's sake, sit down," his father said. "Let's get this over with."

Lucifer arranged himself on a chair while his father set up the easel in the living room. Usually his father whistled *Peter and the Wolf* as he painted, but today his whistle came out thin and shrill, and after a few minutes he fell silent. Now and then he'd make a brushstroke, but mostly he frowned at the canvas and tapped the end of the brush against his chin. "Hold still," he said several times, though he was the only one fidgeting.

After a few agonizing hours, he plucked the canvas off the easel. "Forget it," he said. "If you want a portrait so bad, we'll call Peter Muntz. He does kids."

"Show me what you got," said Lucifer.

His father looked at it again. "Nah, I'm just going to get rid of it."

Lucifer stepped toward him. "Show me."

"I'm not used to working with live models. Too many . . . dimensions."

But when Lucifer took hold of the portrait, his father let go of it with a sigh. The boy was going to get his way eventually, so why fight him?

At first glance, Lucifer didn't see the problem. It looked like him, all right. Maybe he looked a little older than eleven, but that might have been because of the brown suit he'd put on for the painting.

But his face—it *was* a little long. And the way his head tilted down while his eyes looked up expectantly . . . the boy in the painting looked as though he had been amused a moment earlier, but was not any longer. He looked like he was about to say: *Where's the money? Or: I'm waiting.*

Lucifer began to understand why his father had kept squirming. The portrait put the viewer on the spot. Looking at it, you felt like a laugh had sprouted and died in your throat.

Lucifer put it back on the easel, tried a joke. "Put a moustache on it."

His father dabbed his brush in the blackest paint and drew a thin cartoonish moustache, complete with big swirling curls. Lucifer laughed, so his father added a sharp little goatee in four rough lines. "Horns," said Lucifer, and watched a pair of goat horns appear on his forehead.

They took turns then, adding wicked black eyebrows and a weird serpent tail and a forked tongue, each of them forcing out a pattering laugh at every embellishment, so the other would know that this was hilarious, a mere mistake, some fun, not something that scared the hell out of them both.