

Maybe I should paint. It's really stagnant in this room. Shit - no time for that. Gotta get these hooks up. Gotta get the hooks up gotta get the hooks up. I figure I've got a little while before they show up at my place. It depends on how quickly they work - I know they'll find the slug, and it won't take long to match it to the gun. Should've filed the serial numbers down. Won't do any good now. Gotta get the hooks up gotta get the hooks up.

See, the way it works is this - the fishing hooks are hanging from low test fishing line - you can't see the wire if you're in the dark or even in a room with natural light. Hang'em all about six feet off the ground - average male is what - 6 feet tall? - he walks too quickly into a room and the hooks catch his eyes and rip 'em out of their sockets. Got the idea from a special on the Learning Channel about cults. There were these serious Santeria fanatics out in Tucson who booby-trapped their whole compound, and when the cops showed up because the neighbors were complaining about all these weird goings-on, three of them had their faces yanked off by fishhooks. I know it isn't gonna keep them from taking me to jail or shooting at me or gassing me or whatever, but I figure it'll be good for effect. They're gonna label me insane anyway so why not go the full nine yards and give them something else to bitch about? Gotta get the hooks up gotta get the hooks up.

It's not like I was planning on things turning out like they did. I was in the process of doing us all a huge favor. You try to kill the devil and look at the shit you get into. . .

I was away for a week - I worked for a brokerage firm, and all the old seats - the ones that had been filled for 20 years or more - were bought out. I had been there for 21 years, so my time was up. They flew us out to Boyne Highlands in the U.P. of Michigan, took us skiing. I suppose they thought that made it all better. I didn't really bother to fight them on it too much - I had a lot in the bank and the severance package was generous enough. What worried me was finding something to do with my time. I didn't really want to go back to work for anyone else, but I didn't want to sit around my house all day and feel myself getting older, either. I was pretty spooked.

I got home a few days later and the lot down the street from mine had been bought. It's the biggest one on the block - at least two acres larger than mine. Couple that with the fact that the smallest lot starts at around \$200,000 - it was obviously a good-sized investment. I stopped by to say hello to the kid who was building on it one afternoon that week. He seemed nice enough - Roger Hudlin III. He worked for a big publishing firm upstate - I don't remember which. We said 'hi' a few times when we were both outside, talked about business or our yards - you know - typical neighbor bullshit.

I didn't think much of it after he first moved in, but for whatever reason the kid really made me nervous. I don't know why, but I started keeping tabs on him - you know when he went to work, how late he was out on the weekends - that type of thing.

About two months later, I began having trouble sleeping, so I started chewing these valerian root tablets - they're supposed to help slow down all your body processes and relax you. They helped a little and I started getting a few more hours sleep at night so I was happy, until I had the dream.

It was like this - I was in my front yard mowing the lawn - shit, I mean that's weird enough right there. The last time I mowed a lawn was to help pay for my ticket to go on the class trip to Coney Island in the 5th grade. Anyway, I was in my front yard and I looked down at Hudlin's house, and the whole place was on fire. I dropped the mower and ran down the street to tell him, but when I got there the house was gone - Hudlin was standing where it used to be and was just staring straight ahead.

I asked him what was going on, and he wouldn't answer.

I asked him again and again, but he wouldn't say shit.

I glanced down and suddenly there was a Titlest 9-iron in my hand.

I asked him again and he wouldn't answer, so I hit him.

I asked him again - nothing again - so I hit him again, harder.

He wouldn't open his mouth and he wouldn't budge.

So I started beating the hell out of him. I threw everything I had at him, and he didn't move. I hit him in the face so hard it pushed his jawbone through his cheek, the skin just dangling down. I cracked him in the side of the head so many times I lost count. There wasn't a spot on his body that wasn't covered in blood, and I didn't stop. I kept hitting him and hitting him, asking him again and again and again and he just stood there, taking everything I gave him. When I was too tired to go on, I stepped back to look at him - he wasn't even a person. Just a statue - standing there bleeding to death. You ever see someone when they get a deep, deep cut? There's so much blood it starts to look black - like tar. That's what Hudlin was like - a great big tar statue. I dropped the club and started to turn around to go home, but then something

happened - Hudlin raised his hand and pointed out toward what should've been his driveway. It wasn't there, but his mailbox was, and the address said "666".

Then I woke up.

I know, I know - "666" on the mail box - oooohhh, scary. Like something out of one of those bad Exorcist rip-offs. But it still freaked the hell out of me. The whole next day I was sort of in a daze. I had never dreamt anything like that before. That black bloodied statue pointing toward the numbers . . . I couldn't get it out of my head. I was a little nervous to go back to bed that night, but I was so tired from bumming around the house all day I fell asleep the earliest I had in months.

And it happened again.

Only this time it wasn't a golf club, but a crow bar.

All of a sudden I went from an insomniac to a narcoleptic. I'd be watching TV and the clock would say 2:30 p.m., and when I'd look at it again it would read 11 p.m. I'd fall in and out of sleep constantly. And every time I'd fall asleep I'd have the dream.

Over
and
over
and
over.

Each time I'd have something different to beat the shit out of Hudlin with - a baseball bat, a mallet - and it got weirder and weirder each time. One night I'd pound him with a three-hole punch, the next a blender or a Cuisinart. One time I remember smacking him around with a huge black vibrator.

I started taking Vivarin and No-Doze to keep myself from falling asleep, but it didn't do anything but put me more on edge. I was a mess.

I finally talked to a friend of mine who used to be a shrink and the best he could come up with was that I was probably nervous about having some young kid down the block from me. He said that it had something to do with my not working anymore, and feeling jealous of Hudlin because he was out and about every day.

I didn't know what to think, but I knew I wasn't satisfied with what he had to say. I asked him about the mailbox, too, and he did get back to me with something interesting. He said that often times in dreams people will see important numbers or letters upside and/or backward. It has something to do with unconscious perception of things. I wasn't sure why, but I latched on to that.

The night after he told me that I was on my way out the door to have dinner with some friends who were in town when for whatever reason - I honestly don't know why because we were in the middle of a hurricane and I was trying to stay dry - I stopped to look at my mailbox. My address was 996. Hudlin lives three houses down from me - which made him 999. Flip it over . . . 666. I remember feeling like I couldn't move, but . . .

Next thing I know I'm in my bed with seven people standing over me. Mark and Janie - the couple I was supposed to meet for dinner - came by after waiting for about an hour of waiting at the restaurant and found me lying in the driveway with a concussion. They said I must have slipped on the wet pavement and hit my head. Four doctors were there plus a nurse. It was surreal.

Everyone left at about 10:30 after they had seen I was all right, and I headed downstairs to watch some TV. My head was killing me, so I popped a few more of the painkillers the doctor had left me. I started flipping around to see what was on right as the storm kicked into high gear. The wind was so strong a few gusts shook the house. I was nodding off just as the TV went to static. I went outside to see what had happened, and sure enough the winds had knocked the satellite off the roof.

I took a few Vivarin to keep myself on my toes, and went about trying to fix it. It was too windy, though. I couldn't even get the ladder to lean against the house for a few seconds without it being blown over, so I headed back inside.

Now I was wide awake and didn't have anything else to do, so I turned the satellite tuner off and started flipping through the basic channels. I don't know if it was because of the storm or what, but nothing wanted to come in. Not even the networks. I wasn't that surprised though, because last time we had a hurricane the satellite went out and I couldn't get anything in. Problem was I was wide-awake and needed something to occupy my time.

I made my way into the cellar and dug up an old set of rabbit ears. I don't even remember why I had them. I tried for about twenty minutes to hook them up to the TV but my hands were shaking too much from the Vivarin. I took another painkiller to try to counter that, and after about 10 more minutes I felt OK.

I got them hooked up and flipped around again, but the only things that would come in were a public access station and one of those religious channels. I wasn't too keen on the public access, so I stuck with the church channel.

The preacher on this channel was talking about man and the devil - how they were different. He said that man, man had to work for what he was given in life - and he couldn't have everything he wanted but he should still be happy. Now the devil - the devil, he said, could have anything he wanted anytime anywhere, and not be beholden to anyone for it. I don't remember why that was a bad thing, exactly, but . . . well, it was. Anyway, they showed this same sermon over and over all night - it was worse than HBO.

Again I knew something wasn't right, but I couldn't figure it out... until I asked myself why I was sitting at home in my robe at 2:30 a.m. on a Friday watching religious programming. I remembered I was supposed to have dinner with Mark and Janie . . . and I remembered waking up in my bed with everyone there . . . and then I remembered my mailbox, and then seeing Hudlin's . . .

And then it hit me. All along I knew something wasn't right with Hudlin, and all along I felt like he was there but he really wasn't there . . . I had a revelation.

I could barely sit still. The devil lived down the block from me. I had helped him cut the limbs off a tree that was keeping the sun from his skylights. He was the new treasurer of our fucking neighborhood association!

I was pacing up and down my halls for hours muttering 'Oh man, oh God, oh God, oh man, oh man oh God oh God oh man, ohmanohgodohgodohman.' I kept asking myself if it was really true, over and over ... I knew I couldn't sleep now. I took a few more Vivarin and sat down to think about things. How could I tell if Hudlin really was the devil?

At sunrise the next day I realized what I needed to do to find out if Hudlin really was the devil. It had been right in front of my face since last night - I guess I just needed it spelled out for me again. I went back into the TV room to lay down on the couch, and the sermon from the previous night was being replayed. I was half-dozing off, half paying attention when I heard the preacher talk again about man and the devil . . . he told me exactly what to do. I needed to take away Hudlin's possessions and see if that would irk him or not. If he did care, we were all fine. If not, well, I wasn't sure what 'if not'. but I knew it wasn't going to be good. I started planning everything out that morning . . .

What I decided to do was this - start out small. I figured why try hard to piss him off right away? I mean, if stealing his paper upsets him just as much as blowing up his garage, why bother to go the full nine yards right?

That night at 4:30 a.m., I hopped in my car and cruised down to Hudlin's house in low gear. I wasn't exactly sure what I was planning on doing - I had a baseball bat, three cans of spray paint, 100 feet of piano wire, two gallons of gasoline, a package of road flares, five pounds of ground beef, a nail gun, and a can of Fix-A-Flat. Well, the Fix-A-Flat was in the trunk to begin with.

Anyway, I wasn't really sure what I was going to do - I figured when I got there the moment would play itself out . . . I hadn't felt that alive since they told me that I was getting a seat with the firm. I drove donuts in his yard for 15 minutes straight - then just to make sure it didn't seem like Hudlin was being singled out, I cruised through a few of the other yards in the neighborhood, too. I spun through my lawn real quick, too - I mean, I needed some kind of common ground for us to meet on, otherwise I'd have trouble trying to gauge his reaction.

I ended up at a do-it-yourself car wash on the east side of town at 5:45 in the morning with Cat Stevens' "Here Comes My Baby" turned up on the radio as loud as it could go. My mind was racing - I couldn't wait to talk to Hudlin that afternoon about what had happened. In a way, I was almost hoping he wouldn't care . . .

I could not, for the life of me, register one iota of concern on Hudlin's face when I asked him about his lawn. It was crazy. It seemed like he didn't even notice half his lawn was upside down. Suffice to say I knew what had to be done - I had to step things up.

I spent the whole rest of the evening thinking about what I could do to try and get under Hudlin's skin, and at about 2:15 a.m., I finally came up with something - but it required a trip to a place in Camden called "Popular and Adult Products".

I passed that store on the turnpike on my way to work for 20 some-odd years, and the name always cracked me. "Popular and Adult" - like on one aisle they're selling jeans and television sets, the next blow-up dolls and anal lovebeads. Christ.

Anyway, I got to the store at 2:45 - shit, that's something else that always irked me about that place. It's a pornography store, and it stays open 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Banks don't even have those

kind of hours. Ask yourself - Which is more important to a healthy, functioning society? - round-the-clock ability to access your savings or pornography?

I got there at 2:45 and was out the door and on the road by 3:25 . . . with a trunk full of dildos.

At 4:00 I was at Hudlin's; at 4:25 I had managed to dig up all the plants in his front yard; and at 4:55, his \$200-an-hour landscaped lawn had been transformed into a garden of multi-colored 10-inch erect penises pointing straight toward the front door. It looked like a picture from an S&M homebuyer's guide. I headed home, popped about 5 painkillers, and didn't see anything but the insides of my eyelids until 2:30 that afternoon.

Maybe it was because it was the second night in a row someone had vandalized his yard. Maybe it was because he was pissed his month-old-landscaping was ruined. Maybe it was because he really wasn't the devil. For whatever reason, the next day the police were in front of Hudlin's house, probably trying to figure out whether or not someone fertilized his lawn with Viagra.

I watched from the den for about 10 minutes when there was a knock at my front door. It was Jack Perkins - from the house in between mine and Hudlin's. He had a grin on his face that would've put the Cheshire Cat to shame. According to Jack, Hudlin had taken sick and wasn't going in to work, so he didn't even know what had happened until the guys who mow his lawn showed up. They were the ones who called the police, and when Hudlin saw the front yard, he just laughed and told them to clean it up. He even tried to cancel the police order, but it was too late - they had already been dispatched.

Obviously, something else had to be done . . .

This time it was a little tougher, though. I didn't really know how to go about deciding what to do - so far everything I had done was more or less just vandalism, and frankly it wasn't doing the trick. I was still giving Hudlin the benefit of the doubt, and I didn't want to stop until I knew for certain if things were one way or the other. I was awake from that afternoon until 11 o'clock the next night trying to amp up my little litmus test to no avail. That's when the storms started to kick back up.

The cheapest black slacks I owned were an \$1,100 pair of Dolce-Gabanas, so I had to run down to Caldor to pick up a cheap pair. That set me back about 30 minutes, but it was OK because Hudlin had saved me time and left his Jag out for some reason - that meant I didn't have to sneak into the garage. I made it home by 2:10, and was out the door and headed to his house by 2:25. It wasn't raining yet, but it had been thundering for a good three hours and the winds were picking up steadily. I knew we were in for a big one.

The lightning rod ran down the east side of his house, which meant once I had it unhooked from the ground I didn't have far to move it because his driveway was right around the corner. There were two clamps on the side of the house keeping the wire in place, and both were at ground level, so I didn't even need the ladder. I had it unhooked and was coming down so fast it was hard to see where I was heading. I made it to the corner of the garage and sprinted toward the car. Within 30 seconds I had the ground wire attached to the hood ornament of Hudlin's Jag and was on my way home when lightning struck.

I turned around just in time to see it - it was beautiful. It was like it happened in slow motion - I literally saw the energy pulse down the wire into the car. When it hit the windshields exploded, the seats caught fire - the car hopped a good foot off the ground and came crashing back down. The tires melted to the driveway. My ears were probably bleeding it was so loud.

As soon as the lights inside the house came on I snapped out of it and headed back toward my place. In five minutes I had on my robe and was running back toward Hudlin's house. He was already out in the driveway circling the car. I could see from the road that the ground wire had been blown off and was swaying gently back and forth by the side of the house. It'd probably be at least a week before he even bothered to look over there. He saw me coming and I waved and proceeded to lay it on nice and thick . . .

"Jesus, Roger - what happened?"

"Lightning - the car must have been struck by lightning . . ."

"I had gotten up to get a drink of water and it sounded like your house exploded . . . are you OK?"

You weren't anywhere near it, were you?"

"No . . . no. You didn't have to come all the way over here - it's pouring."

"I wanted to make sure you knew what happened - I mean -"

"No, no - I appreciate it. You want to come in and dry off?"

"No, I need to get home and get my rest . . . You don't seem too upset."

"Upset?"

"Well, yeah - that was an awfully nice car and, well - look at it!"

"What are you gonna do? Act of God, I suppose. Maybe he's got it out for me for some reason, eh?"

"Yeah . . . yeah. Well, look, if you're all right, I'm gonna head for home and get some shut-eye."

"Thanks for stopping by - I appreciate it."

"No problem - you call if you need anything." "Will do. Take care."

"You too, Rog."

I went home and closed my eyes and tried to visualize what was going to happen . . . I was going to kill the devil. I had to - there was no other choice. I finished a bottle of Vivarin right before I realized I needed my rest, so I took a counter measure of painkillers and stalked around the house half-dead, trying to figure out exactly what it was I was going to do. By this time it was almost sunrise, so I figured there was no use for sleeping. I headed up to my bedroom - it had been so long since I had actually been up there - and pulled the gun out from the empty Florsheim box in my closet. I sat in the den and watched Hudlin's house until I saw the taxi pull up to take him to work, and then I made my way over to his place.

It wasn't very hard to get in - I had noticed he tended to leave one of the downstairs windows cracked on the side of the place that faced mine, and today was no exception. I made my way and had a good look around. The place was a palace - just stores of the most expensive shit you could imagine. His entire stereo system was all Linn Audio and Krell components - with Thiel electro-stat speakers that sat at least six feet off the ground. The carpet made you feel like you were walking on air. Paintings on the wall that had to be original - big names, too - Jasper Johns, Jackson Pollack . . . That living room was worth at least \$1,000,000 by itself. And then the bar - oy vey. Four or five bottles of the MacCallen, three fifths of Grey Goose, Bombay Sapphire, French Indonesian Cointreau - you name it, it was there. I wandered around the place for a good 25 minutes before I decided to sit down and go over everything in my head again.

My mind was racing, but I felt pretty good about the plan, so I decided to have a drink and relax - Hudlin wouldn't be home for a few more hours.

After two - well, maybe six - Singapore Slings, I heard the lock turn on the front door. It didn't seem right - it felt like there should still be some time before he came home.

I must have stood up, because all of a sudden, I saw him rush at me. I started waving the gun and yelling and he stopped - then darted toward my left - er, his left - eh - he darted. Before I knew it we were on the floor wrestling, and all of a sudden I heard a shot . . . and he slumped off. I didn't realize I had even pulled the trigger . . .

More importantly, I didn't realize it wasn't Hudlin. I got up and looked at the body and I didn't know who the hell it was. Some guy in a cheap suit. I dug around in his pockets and found a business card:

Thomas Kendall

Allen, Watts, & Kendall

Insurance Adjusters

I'm assuming they'll just become "Allen & Watts." I killed an insurance adjuster. He was there to look at the car, and Hudlin must have left him the key to get some paper work or information inside the house . . . Anti-climactic, I know, I know. Just hold on.

I got out of there pretty quick and now I'm here, waiting. Well, alternating Vivarin and painkillers and waiting. Waiting for the cops to take the bullet out of the body.

Waiting for them to match the serial numbers slammed into the back of it with the ones from the hammer of the gun sitting in my coat pocket.

Waiting for them to come knocking on my door, telling me I'm under arrest.

Waiting for me not to answer so they'll burst through the door and get a few faces full of fishhooks.

Waiting to try out this remote detonator. Sure it isn't pretty, but it'll do the trick.

It's amazing what you can do with a trip to Radioshack.

It's amazing what you can do with a bag of crumbled cat litter dissolved into gasoline and ground beef.

It's amazing what you can do when you pack your homemade napalm into a coffee can filled with broken glass and stick it under the bed frame of the devil with a tiny little transmitter that emits a tiny little spark right in the middle of the mix.

Absolutely amazing.

-Collin Armstrong