



DEVIL'S DRINK

CON MURRAY

*Prose Contest - Finalist
Martone Grant Recipient*

Lucifer sipped his whiskey before waving a hand at Isaiah, the bartender, as he took up his rag and pints again. “No, no. I’m not going to drink alone,” the Devil said, patting the stool next to him. “Come and drink, come on.”

Isaiah shook his head. “I can’t drink while I’m on the job.”

The Hell lord held his glass up to his eye, the golden liquid glinting with the smoldering light of the Devil’s ember orange eyes. The black sclera in his eyes, where the whites should have been, seemed to magnify the fiery look. “Aren’t you the owner and sole employee here? You’re your own boss, my friend, with your own story,” said Lucifer, a sour look taking over his face. “Go on, make yourself a drink. I can wait. I’m good at that.”

The bartender cast a glance at the ghoul in the back, still unconscious from too many drinks and pieces of carrion. Honestly, Isaiah would need to remind his patrons that there was no outside food or drink in his bar, especially when it came to those that ate the dead. With no one else in the bar, mostly thanks to Lucifer walking in and the rest calmly rushing out, Isaiah knew he would not be called out for drinking on the job. Of course, if he clocked out early, he would not be on the job anymore.

“Look, you’re burning moonlight, Isaiah. Sun’ll be up soon and then it’ll be your bedtime, right? How about a drink before bed, huh?” Lucifer suggested.

Isaiah might have gotten into the routine of sleeping during the day, as most vampires did, but he could keep the shutters closed on his windows and stay awake through the daytime, too. Vampires were undead and did not need sleep, only food, and the smell of brimstone rolling off of Lucifer had made Isaiah's throat run a little dry so he shrugged and set the rag and pint aside. A Bloody Mary was thrown together, tomato juice subbed for a cup of blood from the cooler under the bar. Isaiah could always restock from the local blood bank.

Coming around the bar, Isaiah sat beside the Devil, the vampire in a plain t-shirt and jeans with trendy sneakers, the Prince of Lies wearing a red-and-black flannel and white cargo shorts with sandals, despite the chill outside. Vampires and demons were not ones to catch colds, after all. Isaiah, though, did sit with his back to the bar because of the mirror he had placed behind the glass shelves stocked with liquor bottles. He could see any bar fights about to happen, but looking into a mirror and not seeing himself still unnerved him, even if his nerves were all dead.

"Cheers," the Devil announced.

Their glasses touched, drinks were taken, and Isaiah asked, "So what brings you here?"

Lucifer swirled the whiskey around his cup. "I wanted a drink."

"Everyone that comes here wants a drink," Isaiah answered. He wanted to act like this was one of his regulars, to be as friendly with the Devil as he would be with a pipe bomb full of silver shrapnel. That is to say, he knew how to handle People™, but some might be hiding danger just under the surface and could go off if moved the wrong way. Isaiah was thankful vampires could not sweat.

The Devil grunted and took another drink. "My girlfriend dumped me."

Isaiah choked on his Bloody Mary for a minute. It was the shock that caused it. Choking on a drink was a human reflex, one that he had still not gotten rid of, even after half a century. He gave a mighty cough and took an unnecessary deep breath. With his composure regained, Isaiah wondered if that display had offended Lucifer, but the Devil was patiently sipping on his whiskey, waiting for the vampire to respond.

“Well, I...” No, he was never “sorry” when other customers complained about this problem.

“That’s rough, buddy.... What happened?”

Lucifer took that as an invitation to throw his hands into the air and run them through his black-brown curly hair. “Fucking Dionysus happened! Lilith comes to me and says, *‘Hey, babe, you’ve been a little dry recently. D, though—’* she called him ‘D’ like they were already together!—*‘D knows how to throw a party!’*”

“She actually said that?” Isaiah asked.

He wanted to give this Lilith credit for the innuendo with “dry,” and there was something to be said about her wanting “the D,” but maybe not out loud, because Isaiah liked his skin not burned from his body. Although, if any of Dionysus’s Maenads—those women that came into his bar to either *a)* sleep with his patrons, *b)* tear them limb from limb, or *c)* both—were any indication, Isaiah wondered if Lilith knew what she was getting into with dating the wine god.

“Pretty much,” Lucifer gargled, half-drinking as he spoke. He set his glass down, then added, “But that’s how it goes, huh? Guys like you and me have been getting the short end of the stick for centuries, millennia, even.”

“Guys like...?” Isaiah looked at his skin, which was ironically the brown of healthy tree bark, then at the coffee-colored skin on Lucifer. “Wait, you can’t mean—”

“Oh, but I do!” said the Devil, nodding. “We’re both victims, Isaiah. The Big Man has been trying to keep us down forever! Neither of us asked to be thrust into our situations, did we?”

Isaiah’s grip on his glass tightened.

“I did not ask to be a vampire, no.”

Lucifer barked out a laugh. “You know what I mean! Both of us, Isaiah, are in a system that was designed to keep us at or near the bottom! We’re both under the boot heel of the people at the top.”

“I ... think you’re mistaken.” Isaiah had no idea how to tell Lucifer that he was wrong without the Devil impaling Isaiah on his pitchfork, but maybe that was why the demon was prodding Isaiah.

"It's the truth!" said the Prince of Lies.

Isaiah had not put enough vodka into his Bloody Mary for this, but he shot the rest of the drink back. Flicking residue from his upper lip, he put on a pained smile and gently set the glass on the countertop. "I'm listening ..."

Lucifer looked thrilled, which could not have boded well. "Good, good. Alright, see, you know this society of yours is built around the abuse of people of color because way back, the Europeans decided to mess everything up for everyone. Colonial America pops up with their slavery, and they like to say it's abolished, right? But no, it just evolved and became ingrained in the culture."

"That's a bit of a generalization," Isaiah told him through clenched teeth.

"Maybe it is, but you know," Lucifer said, even giving Isaiah a friendly nudge with the elbow. "One day, this city block might be bought up by some contractor who wants to build shiny new apartments, and then all the former tenants are kicked out of their homes in favor of the white people that can afford the new rents. The renovations are supposed to improve the neighborhood, right? Lower the crime rate? And if the people complain and resist and refuse to leave their homes, they send in the police because it's illegal to take a stand all of the sudden."

"You're saying you've experienced gentrification before?" the vampire asked. Lucifer actually nodded, and Isaiah had to admit, his frustration got a splash of curiosity.

"The Big Man Upstairs is a real ass." The Devil shook his head, skipping a refill and drinking straight from the whiskey bottle. *"Hey everyone, here's my son, he's the greatest thing I have ever made. By the way, he's also Me! So fuck the rest of you!"*

Isaiah narrowed his gaze, gripping the edge of the bar in his hands. "So you were jealous because God liked Jesus more than you and you think that equates to—"

"No, no! Let me finish! I don't have daddy issues," Lucifer spat.

"Didn't say you did," Isaiah answered.

The Devil held the bottle tightly enough that his knuckles went to a lighter tone. “Just ... just look. I was Lucifer Morningstar, an angel, and I disagreed with God once and he decided to chuck me into Hell!”

Isaiah crossed his arms accusingly.

“Didn’t you start a war in Heaven before he exiled you?”

The lights flickered, Lucifer’s eyes seeming a little brighter then. “Nothing wrong with a little revolution in the name of freedom, right? That’s what I was doing. I wanted the right to disagree with God! Without consequences.”

“What?” Isaiah chewed on his tongue to keep any more words from tumbling out of his mouth. Breaking a bottle over the Devil’s head would, obviously, have consequences, though Isaiah was considering doing it anyway. Not having consequences was a ridiculous idea. He had learned that the hard way when he was turned.

“You can disagree with someone without the violence!”

“You started a war,” Isaiah reasoned.

Lucifer snorted dismissively. “Then I became the scapegoat for all evil!” He took a long swig from the bottle, though the amount of whiskey within did not seem to be going down. “Guess God forgot to be all-forgiving, huh?”

Isaiah hopped down from the stool. “I’m still not seeing how you can say we’re similar.”

The Devil watched him move around the bar, where Isaiah made himself another Bloody Mary, this time with more vodka. The ghoul in the booth at the back—Isaiah had forgotten he was there—let out a deep sigh in his sleep. Lucifer’s attention went to the ghoul for a moment, his face expressionless and unreadable. The vampire came back around the bar, facing away from the mirror again.

“You don’t see it?” Lucifer asked, looking back at Isaiah earnestly.

“Not really,” Isaiah told him, taking a drink without a toast.

Lucifer scoffed, but Isaiah could not tell if he was actually offended or simply feigning it for dramatic effect.

"It's all about perception, Isaiah. I was cast in a bad light from the start! I don't have a choice in it, because people with more sway than myself decided Yeah, this guy's evil. Period. I get no character development!"

Isaiah imagined wearing flannel and cargo shorts was a development for the Devil, though there was, among many other things, something bothering him. "Isn't your whole deal tempting others? You try to get others to turn away from God, take up sin."

"No, no! See? You sound like everybody else," Lucifer insisted, jabbing a finger at Isaiah. "The writers got the Garden of Eden thing all wrong! I was trying to help, but God wanted there to be a story given to his audience, understand? Tell me that that doesn't sound familiar."

A pressure on Isaiah's chin told him that he was biting down with his fangs, so he cracked his jaw and made to get up. "You're painting with a big brush, in the hopes that I'll identify with you. Elder vampires try to do that, complaining to me about our thirst for fresh human blood, but I don't struggle with it like they do because I just go to the bank after dark," he said, indicating his glass.

Isaiah did not like the wolf's smile that Lucifer put on. The Devil said, "Come on, Isaiah, buddy, we all have a rough start. Vampires, especially. You guys are just so thirsty at the beginning."

The bartender heard the glass cracking in his hand. He looked away from Lucifer, noticed that his hands were shaking. His brain, the only necrotic organ that still functioned despite the necrosis in vampires, wanted to pull him into a string of thoughts, but he refused to follow the rabbit. The ghoulish snorted in its sleep again. Isaiah jumped to his feet, the glass shattering in his hand as his grip became too tight. He swore at the glass shards in his hand, the mess on the floor.

"I think we're done here, Satan," Isaiah hissed at the Devil.

Lucifer made a sound that was somewhere between a laugh and a goat's bleating. "He busts out the S-word! Be careful with that, Isaiah. You might summon the wrong Devil." He patted the stool next to him. "And no, we are not done. Sit. Listen."

"I've heard enough."

The pupils in Lucifer's orange eyes turned to slits.

"No, you haven't. Sit. Listen. I can make it worth your time."

Isaiah reached over the counter and grabbed his rag, kneeling to mop up the spilled drink. The imploding glass had thrown some Bloody Mary onto his shirt and jeans, too. "Shit."

"So you're interested in hearing more?"

"I'm not going to make a deal with the Devil! There's a whole book on not doing that!"

Lucifer spread his arms as if looking for a hug. "Not even if I brought your wife back to life?"

Isaiah stopped, his muscles taut. He couldn't accept anything Lucifer said. He couldn't. There would be some trick. There always was with him. That's what all the stories were saying, so of course Lucifer would say the opposite. He was the Devil. He lied. All lies and temptation. Isaiah's wife was not in Hell, anyway. The Devil couldn't possibly bring the dead down from Heaven.

"What are you thinking, Isaiah? You get your wife back and all you need to do is listen to *my side* of the story," Lucifer told him. "She gets a second chance at life, you get a second chance at a marriage."

Isaiah heard himself ask, "What's the catch?"

"Just told you. Listen to my story and you get your wife. Simple." Lucifer scrunched up his face. "Well, not *that* simple, because I'm bringing her back to life and you might have to sit here for a while more, but ... simple." When Isaiah still hesitated, he added, "What's the last image you want to have of your wife? Her passing peacefully, unless you turn her so you can both live happily forever, or her lying at your feet with her throat tor—"

"Enough!" Isaiah snapped. He stood and tossed the wet rag, wrapped around the glass shards, into the can behind the bar. Then the vampire met the Devil's eyes. "My wife is brought back and all I have to do is *listen*?"

"I can bring your wife back to life, and the cost is you hearing my side of the story. Shake on it," Lucifer said, extending his left hand.

Isaiah shook hands, but his attention was on how the Devil's pupils went back to normal. That did not make the orange-on-black of his eyes any more normal, though. The vampire sat on the stool again and asked, "So what *really* happened in the Garden of Eden, Lucifer?"

"I'm so *glad* you asked, Isaiah. God gave Adam and Eve that one rule, and like good little mindless drones, they were going to follow it. I had a problem with that," Lucifer explained, "because God had given them free will, too. They had no awareness of their environment, and that made Adam a big old stiff, which is probably why Lilith left him in the first place." He stalled then, the way people do when they say something they might not have been intending to say, and it surprises them enough to go quiet.

In that silence, Isaiah said, "Adam had a wife before Eve?"

Lucifer nodded. "Yep, but again, he was no fun for Lilith, so she hopped out of there real quick. God made Eve, though, and that meant everything was going to be fine, as long as they didn't touch the Tree of Knowledge. Poor Eve, man. I *never* meant for what came next, I swear. I just wanted her and Adam to remember that they did have free will."

"Really? It sounds like you were setting them up to fail," Isaiah countered. "Are you sure it wasn't to get some revenge on God for booting you from Heaven?"

"You sound like Milton. No, I wasn't trying to ruin God's newest creations because He decided I wasn't good enough for Him!" He coughed, then acted like his throat was dry by taking a gulp from the bottle. "And again, God forgot about his whole deal of being all-forgiving! Adam and Eve apologized, and that prick Adam blamed *Eve*, too! If I'm responsible for a major fuck-up, at least give me some *credit*, damn."

Isaiah scowled, thinking the story was not sounding so different so far. "So you're proud of getting them kicked out of Eden?"

"No, but I'm *flawed*, Isaiah. I can shoulder blame, and I wanted to," Lucifer assured him. "Problem was that God swooped in and says, '*Yeah, Adam and Eve, I totally forgive you, but you're not allowed in the Garden anymore, so leave and never come back. Also, Eve, childbirth is going to be immensely painful now, bye!*'" The Devil shook his head, baring his impeccably white teeth in a snarl. "What an asshole."

There was the flicker of a moment where Isaiah wanted to think that he could feel for the one speaking, except the one speaking was the fucking Devil. Sure, it *sounded* like Lucifer just wanted to be *seen* by others, including God no matter the number of times there was a denial of daddy issues. Isaiah could have gotten behind wanting to be seen. He could never check his own reflection, group photos with his regulars were pointless, and that was not even touching on how he had not felt night, he stuck to the shadows, because it wasn't always the pale eyes

and elongated canines that scared normal people off. But again, Isaiah was not going to consider any sympathy for the Devil if the Devil was asking for it. He just wanted his wife back.

“Is that it?” Isaiah asked.

Lucifer rolled his eyes derisively. “If you want to go back to gen-trification, I could complain about how the Underworld is getting pretty crowded. Dante thought he was helping organize Hell, but I got even less turf now thanks to him. The cold might be nice for Hel and her dead Vikings, but I am all about that fire and brimstone, you know?” Isaiah did not. “I think you have a lot of problems, Lucifer, and Lilith had little to do with them.”

“Yeah, but she went to *Dionysus* and just ... what does that Greek have that I don’t?” He drained the bottle, dispelling whatever hoodoo had been making it bottomless in the first place. “Anyway, let’s get to it, with your wife and stuff.”

The Devil whipped the bottle at middle of the floor. As the glass exploded, it erupted into a pillar of flames that licked the ceiling. The flare forced his eyes shut. Isaiah felt the heat and reacted instinctively by throwing a hand up to shield his face. It was gone as soon as it had happened, the temperature in the room dropping back to lukewarm. Isaiah blinked, staring at the woman that had appeared in the middle of the room.

He recognized the earthy tone of her skin, and her face, the slight tilt of her head that always made her look as if she were angry at him, and that offset by the impish smile on her lips. Her chestnut hair fell to the left side of her head. She was shocked, and the smile was replaced by a small “o” in shape. Her eyes were wrong. They had been hazel before, with the littlest bit of green around the iris. Now those same eyes were pale, grey, and bloodshot, as if diseased. Isaiah pulled his gaze back, taking in the black dress she wore, the same one she had been buried in, only dirtier now. Dirt caked her fingernails.

Her head tilted to the other side, revealing the gaping neck wound.

Isaiah’s stomach churned. The Bloody Mary wanted to come back up. He rounded on the Devil, jumping from the stool into a predatory half-crouch, baring his fangs. “What did you do to my wife?!”

Lucifer held his hands up innocently. “Hey, don’t look at me. You said to bring your wife back to life.” He gestured to the body of Isaiah’s wife. “There she is.”

“She’s not speaking! You lied! She is not alive!” Isaiah wanted to dig his nails, which were growing into talons, into the Devil’s eyes.

“First of all, you never really specified what kind of second life you wanted me to bestow on her;” Lucifer corrected, leaning away from the vampire. “Being a zombie is undead, so she was brought back to life.” He stepped down from the stool as Isaiah advanced towards him. “Second, you tore out her vocal cords, so—”

He did not get a chance to finish the sentence, because Isaiah slashed at him, cutting the sleeve of the Devil’s flannel, drawing black blood from shallow cuts on the arm. Isaiah decided he hated flannel now, because of Lucifer and his liar’s grin. “Fix her!”

Lucifer scoffed. “I have done as you ask, sir.”

“That’s not my wife!”

“Hey, it’s not necrophilia if you’re both ...” Lucifer trailed off, his eyes going past Isaiah. “Oh, whoops. Forgot about that guy.”

“What are you—”-a snarl and a crash turned Isaiah back around as he watched the ghoul from the back booth, now awake and *hungry*, tackling the zombified shell of his wife to the ground. Her head made a noise Isaiah did not want to describe as it collided with the floor. “No, *no!* Get off of her!”

Isaiah made to pounce on the ghoul, but a fireball whistled past him and struck the ghoul first. Its rags went up moments before its body burst into flames, too. It shrieked and fell on top his wife’s body. The little inferno engulfed both of them. Isaiah closed the gap between him and the fire. His hand burned as he reached for his wife. The heat might have made him sweat, had he still been able. He could see her face through the fire. It was the same one she had made half a century ago, light fading from the betrayed look in her eyes as she stared up at him, her neck open because he could not save her from his own mistake.

The flames whipped up for a brief moment before dispersing, the two bodies collapsing into an ashy pile. Isaiah could not tell where his wife’s ashes ended and the ghoul’s began. He pressed his burned hand into them anyway, as if he would find her whole underneath the pile, feel a heartbeat from her again. There was nothing but ash.

“That hellfire,” Lucifer said nonchalantly, drawing Isaiah’s glare to him, “works quick. Sorry your wife was too close, Isaiah. To have her back and then ...” His cheeks deflated as he blew air from puffed lips, the sound like a fire catching. “That’s rough, buddy.”

Isaiah was across the room in a heartbeat, ramming his forearm into the Devil’s throat. Lucifer half-laughed, half-choked as he was pushed back against the bar. Isaiah was taller than him, but this was the Devil. Isaiah’s hand reared back, talons poised to strike. The wings of a giant vulture sprouted from Lucifer’s back. The vampire hesitated. The wings beat once and tossed him back, into the pile on the floor.

The ash flew into the air in a cloud. Some of it stuck to the wet spots on his clothes, to the burned flesh of his hand, his hair. Isaiah held out his hands, letting some of it land in his palms, even if he could not tell which of the two he was holding.

“Oh, look, you’re crying, ha!” the Devil told him, covering his smile with a hand. That did not stop the joy from reaching his smoldering eyes. Isaiah wiped at his face, brushing ash across his cheeks on accident, but the Devil was right, he was crying. The tears were bloody, of course, because there were few other bodily fluids in him aside from blood. “Go to ...” He stopped, knowing telling the Devil to go to Hell would probably make Lucifer laugh again. “Just fuck off.”

“You seem upset.”

The vampire hissed and stared into those burning charcoal eyes.

“I wanted my wife back!”

Lucifer shrugged. “And you got her. For about ten seconds, but you also never said how long you wanted her to come back to life.”

“That was not a life,” Isaiah snarled, his hands shaking. “I wanted to be with her again!”

The smile on the Devil’s face broadened. “Well, why didn’t you say that the first time, Isaiah?”

Then he snapped his fingers towards the front of the room. Isaiah watched as the front door and the shutters on the windows popped open.

Morning sunlight flooded the bar.

Isaiah felt the sun on his skin for the first time in half a century.

And it burned.