

The devil you know is always better than the devil you don't. It's not a question of *if* he's going to accompany you throughout your day, it's *which devil* would be shadowing you today, eager to prove his worth for a chance at full-time employment. Sometimes, if I'm lucky, I can catch him for a split-second - leering at me over a pair of sunglasses, delicately unfurling his limbs and flexing his fingers as he slips into his suit for the day. Today I just stared angrily at myself in the mirror, my eyes too opaque to see who was swimming behind them, who was wearing my skin today, and too tired to care. The sunglasses slip down my nose, greased by a familiar mixture of last night's sweat and smoke residue.

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Believe it or not, I regretted my decision to camp out in the woods. I thought I had outrun the storm but all it had done was lull me into a false sense of security by giving me the time to set up camp before it landed in the dead of night. I had spent hours building, and then staring at the flames, trying to figure out what happened the night before. Alternating between feelings of dread and horror as the hypotheticals flashed across my mind, dipping into self-disgust and guilt, before finally landing on self-pity and sequestration. I sat and burned off each emotion. *Click*. I was good at that now that I knew how to let him in.

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My vision is nothing but undulating folds of black, the ghost of the fire leaping comically into view as it drags behind my wild glances. I blink and rub my eyes, but this lurid reminder remains. A frigid numbness gathers in the small of my back and coils around my spine before gathering in my stomach. It must be getting cold out.

Of course I know the woods are full of animals (*lions, and tigers, and bears, oh my, my mother's voice jumps into my head*) but they, like most people, are afraid of fire. Either that or I had built that fire so large that it had simply drowned out the whining of insects and unsettling noises deeper in the woods of breaking branches.

Now it's radiating around and across my rib cage and digging into my chest. Despite the chill, I can't stop sweating and I'm *terrified*. I wonder if there's a spider on my back. It would have to be the size of the one Sam had killed with *Sting*. I puff my chest up and shout out into the darkness around me "You shall not pass!", laughing and feeling a genuine smile for the first time in a while. I think about Gandalf, facing down the Balroag, and the two of them tumbling into the darkness, locked in an embrace, and I stop smiling as the unease hits me and suddenly, I'm not here.

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I was just happy to leave the waiting room with its scratchy blue chairs behind. I wasn't wild about laying down in one place for hours on end but my legs hurt from kicking them back against the wood bottom and I didn't have anything left to read anyways. Sometimes when I was there I saw sick kids going into doors with long and confusing words like *oncology* and *pediatrics*. I wondered why adults couldn't be direct and suspected they didn't know half as much as they pretended to. The nurse was talking again. Or maybe it was the doctor? It's been so long since they started and I still didn't know what this had to do with anything but I was used to it and more importantly: excited to watch *The Fellowship of the Ring*.

"and it's really important that if you do start to feel tired, you need to tell us right away. Okay?" The nurse had finished and my mom poked me, repeating her instructions. I nodded, mostly because the adults were being dramatic, and looked at my mom as if to say: *it's 2PM, are they stupid?*

I shot up and looked around, sure I had just been shook awake by my mother, and chided myself for hearing voices. I immediately felt guilty for falling asleep while I had a fire going. Well - while I *had* a fire going, to be precise. What happened to it? All I saw was a stinking pile of the ugly, twisted, black pieces left after a furious blaze that threatened to rage and consume everything has been extinguished, overwhelmed and drowned. As in life, the storm I had been hiding from caught up, and now there is no fire to keep the general dampness and chill, at bay, let alone what the deluge brings. Now the fire is just a memory hidden by a thick blanket of soot and the whispering of cinders drenched, hissing, furiously at me, accusatory and reminding me of my failures. I wondered how soon I was going to die and wondered how much of a hassle that would be for everybody to deal with if it happened here. I frown, trying to remember why I'm thinking about *Lord of The Rings*.

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Later in the story

I think back to that night in the woods with the fire. How warm I was that night, how nice it felt to *be warm*, when that fire was the most important thing in the world to me. I thought about the hopelessness and stark realization of what I had done. I didn't have a deep enough breath left inside me, but somebody who loved me did, and while what I saw was no larger or brighter than dying cinders, that ember lit up like a cigarette cherry across the street at 2AM.

Digging through the remnants of all the resources, now refuse, I'd used, choking on dust and staining my skin black, I grabbed pieces that still burned and seared with a pain, a shame, so deep that I almost gave up. But I thought about trying to pick them up and rebuild the fire in their prior iterations, white-hot and blazing, melting and burning, charred black and steaming, boiling and blistering. Fire will always burn and scar, but with time it merely wounds instead of maims. A leftover log will always have a hot, painful, core, but we have the ability to take these reminders, those leftover embers, place them in a hearth, and build a home around it - but only once we're ready to stop seeking refuge from the storm in an inferno.

This is my first attempt at telling a story drawn from personal experiences of drug abuse, mental health issues, and abusive relationship struggles during a coming of age period. The "devil" I know is not just a metaphor for those afflictions, but more appropriately for the core "broken" part of myself that was both the cause of the crumbling, yawning, pit threatening to swallow me whole, and the only bridge across it. The above paragraphs sprung to mind today and I felt compelled to put pen to paper.