

LORD OF THE PIES

It's Thanksgiving night at the asylum where I work. Yes, it's Thanksgiving night everywhere - at least in the United States - but I'm at the asylum, and you know that's what I meant. We staff who work the dark hours have a traditional dinner to mirror the one served during the day shift. I'm a huge American history buff, and this holiday is one of my favorites. If I'm not obliged to be with a patient, I'm where the people are, and they're usually where the food is.

"Did you know," I tell a nurse carrying a good-sized casserole dish covered in foil, "that George Washington declared the first Thanksgiving celebration in 1789, only two years after the Constitution was ratified?"

"No, Dr. Pierce," she says, putting her dish down beside a dozen others on the kitchen's dark granite countertop. Yes, the asylum has a kitchen, and it's rather ostentatious, since this place was once a mansion.

"I thought the Constitution was written in 1776," says a musclebound orderly behind me. He's laden with a pan in which sits an enormous browned turkey, wallowing in gravy and with stuffing falling out of its various orifices. He places it in the center of the antique table. This is Jorge Paniagua, a man who has worked for me for a decade at least - long enough that I'm beginning to worry about him noticing that I don't show any signs of aging. Ah, well. When the time comes, I'll find him a job that pays him twice as much, even if I have to supplement from my own deep pockets. I've considered enthralling him or turning him, but he has a wife, children, and a close extended family, and he doesn't need the drama.

"That's because you're ignorant of this country's history, not to mention probably here illegally." The Paniaguas have actually been here for five generations. I tease Jorge about his occasional lapse in historical knowledge, and he makes fun of my skinny arms. "Really, that's a common misconception. We declared our independence in 1776, but the United States as we know it didn't come about until eleven years later."

Jorge nods. "Uh-huh. Uh-huh. Very interesting, Dr. Pierce. You know, if you exercised your body half as much as you do your brain, your arms might not look like two toothpicks attached to a slightly bigger toothpick."

I take a bite of pumpkin pie. "I'll work on bulking up tonight, believe me." Jorge grins and goes off to his duties.

"Wait a second, pal," you're saying. "If I remember right, you're not the type to eat normal food. The type you *are* is, shall we say, 'undead creature of the night,' and you require human blood for sustenance."

First: I didn't spend four years in medical school and another four in residency to be called "pal." It's "Doctor Pierce," until I'm obliged to restaff this place and come up with another assumed name. Second: while it's true that normal human food won't sustain me, I can still enjoy its consumption. Do you chew gum? Smoke a pipe? Drink diet soda? None of those contribute a single substantial thing to your body's function, yet entire industries are built around them. I eat the rest of the pie.

I make my rounds quickly. The census is small, and the patients seem calm. Naturally, I head back to the kitchen. It's empty - everyone is hurrying to finish their work behind me - but I await the flow of people and conversations at the table, in the same chair at which I used to sit as a boy. I survey tonight's spread, inspecting the

egregiously-large turkey last of all. I furrow my brow. How dare somebody...oh. Bollocks, and possibly *merde* as well.

Jorge comes in behind me and catches me staring.

"Nice, doc, but it's not Halloween." He sees what I see: what looks like two puncture marks in the turkey, near the right wing, with cranberry sauce dripping down and doing a fair impression of human blood. None of the other employees of the asylum know what I am; at least, I didn't think so. Right now, I tell Jorge the truth.

"I didn't do that."

"No. I did, Dr. Franklin." A long-haired man in inmate's garb is sitting in the breakfast nook, and I wonder that I didn't notice him, my senses being sharpened as they are. He clutches a two-tined fork in his hand. He licks the cranberry sauce off it, and his tongue is longer than it ought to be.

Jorge starts toward him. "His name is Dr. Pierce, friend. It's time to get back to your room, 'kay?" Jorge has a silver tongue and iron limbs, making him as perfect for his job as one can be.

"Pierce, hmm? Oh, is that his name? You're sure?"

"He's insane," I tell Jorge, but I'm not at all convinced that's the case.

"Get back in your room," says Jorge, reaching a hand out. Like a striking cobra, the man grabs his arm and, still seated, tosses him like he weighs nothing. He hits his head hard on the corner of the counter.

"Jorge!" I check his pulse at his neck, then wrist. They're both strong, but he's unconscious.

Definitely *merde*.

"What do you want?" I hiss.

He smiles. "Best me in a feat of strength and I'll tell you." He props his elbow up on the nook's small table and nods to the seat opposite. He isn't kidding. Really?

I sigh.

I do have skinny arms, but I possess the physical strength of a dozen or so humans regardless. I have weaknesses enough to make up for my various enhancements, but they can be exploited only if one knows what they are; none involve any aspect of "arm-wrestling."

I sit across from him, clasp his hand, and tighten my grip.

"On three." He licks his lower lip and, disgustingly yet impressively, his chin. "One..."

He bears down on "two," to no avail. I budge a fraction of a centimeter, then force his hand to the table, gently, so as not to damage the finish.

This man was admitted as an inpatient earlier today. He came with no identification, although he called himself "Beelzebub," which was attributed to psychosis by my colleague. He chuckles. "As strong as advertised," he says. "Next time I'll bring a few of my friends along."

"What," I say, "do you *want*?"

He leans back, tilting the chair, with his hands behind his head. "Oh, just to chat with you, really. You're not...how to say it?...playing very hard for our team, you know?"

"I'm certainly happy to 'chat' with you, but let's do it in your quarters, shall we?"

Nurses and attendants will arrive any second now, and I want this maniac isolated. I also need to be free to tend to Jorge. "If you'll give me just two minutes, I'll meet you there alone."

He leans forward. "Do you swear?"

I nod in what I hope is trustworthy fashion. "Yes, I swear."

"Excellent!" He pushes himself up from the table. "But if you break your oath, I'm going to start killing people. Ta!"

As soon as he's gone, I run to the kitchen entrance. I meet a nurse, first to festivities, and bring her to Jorge. He's awake, groaning.

"Call an ambulance," I tell the nurse. "I think he's only concussed, but I'm not going to be surprised by some intracerebral hemorrhage." The nurse makes the call, and I'm where I promised to be with half-a-minute to spare.

Have I seen demon possession before? Maybe. Mental disease isn't a quantifiable entity like a broken bone or hypertension. Possession has certainly never been in my differential diagnosis. With today's modern antipsychotic medication, though, I suppose it's like emptying the gas tank of your psychic automobile: whether someone stole it outright, or you just forgot how to drive, that mind-car isn't going anywhere in a hurry.

This is different - malignant, maleficent. I hate to admit to myself that I don't have the tools to handle this, but I'm leaning that way. I need a back-up.

The man shuts the door behind me and locks it. "Here are the rules, Franklin." He knows my real name. "No phones, no yelling for help."

"Telephones aren't allowed in rooms, and the walls are soundproofed," I tell him, trying not to explicitly agree to his conditions, but I can tell he sees this.

"Swear to abide."

"Fine, fine, I swear."

There's no escaping it: I need an exorcism. I've never seen one, certainly never done one, and have absolutely no idea how one might go about acquiring the means and personnel to perform one, so I start mentally organizing the little I know on the subject.

I can't use Catholic priests. They'll bring a dozen different crucifixes, and they always make everything so complicated, too. For the life (un-life, rather) of me, I never understood why Dracula - by far the most well-documented and notable member of my kind - wanted so badly to emigrate to England. These days, the country is as pleasant as can be, with churches closing by the score to be replaced by corner stores and movie theaters, but back then? No, thank you, Church of England (motto: "Basically Catholic, except we'll let Henry the Eighth annul his marriage"). And you see how well it worked for the Count. The demographic trends are encouraging, though - Islam is the fastest-growing religion in Europe (no problems for me with that particular bunch), and more British believe in extraterrestrials than a God. If I didn't love my country 'tis of thee so much, largely by virtue of my feelings that I developed when I was alive, I'd move to Scandinavia in a second. Over the last decade, many of us have.

Speaking of: just wait until Norway is entirely secularized. Talk about a troll problem. Those smelly giants will come down from the mountains like bears to a campsite barbecue.

So here we are, and I can't leave, use a phone, or "yell." Fortunately, I have a thrall on call. He's a lawyer named Benjamin ben Benjamin: Jewish by heritage, intellectually agnostic, and with a moral compass that perpetually points in the direction of the bank. We're connected by a very specific telepathy - a power in the possession of my kind

long before it began showing up as a result of science experiments - and I use it to give specific instructions. I need to stall for time, and to gain useful information if I can.

“So,” I begin, falling into my psychiatrist persona, professional and slightly withdrawn. “Your name is Beelzebub?”

He bows. “Beelzebub, Prince of Demons, Lord of the High Places, who excites priests to lust and tyrants to destruction. Mentioned by the Son of God by name, don’t you know.”

“Okay. May I call you Beelzebub?”

“Call me ‘Bub’ if you want. I don’t care. Excuse me.”

He opens the door a crack. “Hey! Bring us a pie!” He turns and looks at me. “Tell them to bring us pie. I won’t count it against your oath.”

I need to buy time, and this will work as well as anything. My lawyer is driving here, his mission accomplished. That was quick, but that’s why I enthralled him. He really does get things done, without regard to ethics or morals if necessary.

I call to an attendant, a tall girl with curves hiding beneath her plain uniform. She doesn’t ask questions, as demands her job. She brings back pumpkin, apple, and buttermilk, and I take them from her. I close the door and turn towards “Bub,” who has retreated to the cot in the back of the room. “Why do you want pie?”

“Why not? I might as well use this dirt-body’s senses if I have them.” He curls his mouth into a lascivious smile. “That girl is attractive. Why don’t you call her back in here?” For this, I bare my fangs and hiss.

Bub laughs. “Why not? Let’s go crazy! I know you want to. That smooth, long neck... Tell you what: you take up top, and I’ll take down below, hmm?” He gyrates and somehow takes a huge bite of pie using only his tongue. I control myself for the sake of the human - my actual patient - he’s trapping now. I stand by the door, he finishes his pie, and we wait. He starts to chuckle and doesn’t stop.

“Why are you laughing?” I ask, in my most clinical tone.

“You know what I am, and you can’t cast me out. You can’t say the name.”

“What name is that?”

“Chriiist.” He says it slowly. You know the sound of nails on a chalkboard. Imagine the nails are claws, and the chalkboard is my actual eardrum. That’s how it feels.

He eats the rest of the pie in a manner I might only call obscene. I don’t know how to describe it, and I don’t care to try. I need more time.

“Don’t stop on my account,” I tell him. “I suspect you know that my diet consists of other things.”

By the time he finishes the other two pies, I sense my thrall’s presence at the door. Before Benjamin knocks, I unlock it and throw it open, ushering him and the man with him inside.

“What?” Bub screws up his (not “his,” but the one he’s using) face. “What what what no no no no.”

“I swore I wouldn’t use a phone or yell for help,” I say, interposing myself between the possessed man and the two newcomers.

“Then how...” Bub runs his hand in a claw down his face, leaving red streaks just short of bleeding. “Oh, yes. You sorts have telepathy. Stupid, stupid!” He slams his face into the wall.

“Please, stop,” I request. “How about introductions? Gentlemen, this is Beelzebub.”

“Bub tonight!” he growls, sounding like he tore his vocal cords to ribbons.

I silently command my thrall to follow along. The other - a man in his thirties with mildly Asian features - seems calm, which I take as a good sign as far as his possible usefulness to the situation. All I know from reading Benjamin’s thoughts is that he’s a churchman of some sort, he didn’t bring a crucifix, and he was readily available. Oh, and that he’s never seen a demon possession before. Wonderful.

“I’m Benjamin ben Benjamin, family and criminal law,” says my thrall, eager to please me. Out of habit, he holds out a card to the churchman, then toward the possessed man, but replaces it at my mental urging. “You can call me Benny Junior. Or you can call me BJ.” He’s babbling a bit. Benjamin is not a brave man, and my will is the only thing keeping him in the room.

Bub’s smile curls up to a cartoonish degree. “But can I call you *for* a...” I won’t finish what he says, but I think you can fill in the blank. He then begins gyrating on the bed, repeating, “Suck it, suck it, suck it,” and cackling madly.

As an aside, please don’t think me crude for relating this behavior. In truth, I despise coarse jesting. In my profession, perseveration on sexual themes is not uncommon among patients, but I don’t engage in such talk myself.

“BJ. That’s a good one. Okay. BJ.” Bub finally ceases his profane display and stares at the other man. “Are you the caster, then? You must be. Come on, then. You know who I am. Who are you?”

“I’m Nathan Ha. I’m, um, the youth pastor at Calvary Lutheran Church.”

“Ahhh, Lutheran! Nothing to worry about then.” Bub sighs and relaxes. He tenses and suddenly sits back up. “ELCA?”

“Missouri Synod.”

Obviously I don’t employ a chaplain at the asylum, and I’m not knowledgeable about Protestant denominations, much less sub-denominations, but this information causes a reaction. The possessed man hisses like a cat at the pastor, who closes his eyes and moves his lips silently. After he’s done, he stares at Bub.

“So. You’re Beelzebub.”

Bub repeats his initial introduction in a tone that causes even me to cringe. Only my mental insistence keeps Benjamin there, and I’m expecting Pastor Ha to scramble for the door any moment.

“You’re not really Beelzebub,” says Ha.

Well. I’ll be... (I won’t finish the expression, since conventional wisdom informs me that I already am.) I can tell immediately by Bub’s reaction that the pastor is correct. I’m fascinated now.

“Beelzebub was mentioned by Jesus himself,” Ha continues. “If a demon that powerful were to possess someone, why would he do it in a way that caused him to be locked up in a mental institution? No, I think the real Beelzebub must spend his time in prestigious colleges, or movie studios, or near a head of state with nuclear codes. You’re just a mischievous imp of no consequence, aren’t you?”

At this point, you may be wondering why I’m not bothered by the name “Jesus.” It’s a common enough name, taken from “Joshua,” which is itself taken from “Hoshea,” if I’m not mistaken. Jorge’s older brother is named Jesus. Anyway, I’m struck by Ha’s - well, enormous brass spheres of courage. The demon, however, takes this very poorly.

With a snarl, and before I can stop him, he takes his hand to his mouth and bites off his right small finger, then throws it at Ha.

Now the pastor is at a loss. Fortunately, (ahem), I'm a doctor. I give Benjamin telepathic instructions to take the finger and put it on ice immediately. He snatches it up and darts out the door. I start toward Bub, worried that he'll further mutilate his host, but I stop when he points his bleeding stump at me.

"Stop, stop, stop, I'm done, I'm done," he says. He cocks his head to an angle that can't be healthy and licks the open wound. "Mmm. Hey, doc, do *you* want to come suck it?" Kneeling on the cot, he once again begins thrusting his pelvis and contorting in a bizarre simulacrum of dirty dancing. "Suck it, suck it, suck it." He flings small arcs of red upon the bedclothes and walls.

As disgusted as I am at the demon's behavior, I'm extremely tempted. (Come now, you can hardly condemn me for that.) Part of my successful track record - not perfect, but successful - of not harming humans is my avoidance of situations where my hunger might get the best of me, like in the presence of active bleeding. I'm exceedingly thankful (appropriate to the holiday, and not to anyone or anything in particular) that I trained as a psychiatrist, rather than a surgeon or an emergency room physician. Working in those specialties would be akin to employing an alcoholic in a bar.

I'm also thankful that Pastor Ha takes initiative now. I sense that he wants to finish this. All I can do is try to protect him while he attempts it.

"What's your true name, demon?" he asks.

"Not telling."

"Fine. I don't need your name to cast you out of this man. I only need the name of Jesus Christ."

Ouch. My ears.

"Wait, wait!" says the demon. "I can tell you the future! I can tell you how you die, so you might know and avoid it, but you must let me stay."

"First," Ha says, "I don't trust you. Second, for to me, to live is Christ..."

Ouch.

"...and to die is gain. I already know my future." He steps closer to Bub - closer than I feel comfortable with. "You can see the future? Then you know that *your side loses*. Your entire existence must be filled with crippling self-doubt."

Bub hisses. "We can be like Him. You've been drinking the Patmos Kool-aid." Ha takes another step. "Get back!" screams the demon. "I'll kill you!"

"You can't touch me," says Ha, and it's hard to believe he's never done this before. Bub raises his hand to his open mouth to bite off another finger, but this time I'm ready. I speed to him and lock his arms behind his head, interspacing a pillow between my grip on his body. I'm strong enough to crush human bone, and if Ha is successful, this possessed man won't have the demoniac strength that lets him now resist me. Before the pastor can wonder how I'm so fast, I yell at him.

"Now, Ha, now!"

"In the name of Jesus the Christ, I compel you to come out of this man!" He says it three times, and between his invocation and the demon's screams, my eardrums feel like they've been passed through a meatgrinder. I almost can't believe it. Ha is winning.

"Wait, wait!" sobs Bub. "Cast me into something! Anything!"

Ha hesitates.

“Like what?” I ask.

“Umm...do you have any pigs?”

No, no pigs, but I have another idea. I send a mental command to Benjamin.

Half an hour later, the asylum is once again drama-free. The staff has eaten its fill of the Thanksgiving feast, Jorge has a clean bill of health, and the patient formerly known as “Bub” is stable in surgery. Pastor Ha, Benjamin, and I are eating leftover pie (what else?) in the kitchen.

“Really, call me Nathan,” says the pastor. He’s picking on his slice of pie, but I suspect it’s out of politeness. He seemed like he lost his appetite when the demon departed; when it did so, the man it was possessing vomited a truly enormous amount of barely-digested pie right in front of us.

“It’s funny,” Nathan says. “Besides ‘Lord of the High Places,’ another translation of ‘Beelzebub’ is ‘Lord of the Flies.’”

Benjamin chuckles and takes a big bite of pecan pie.

“Mr. Benjamin, I still don’t understand why you had a fly trap,” says Nathan.

Benjamin looks at him and chews.

“In your car.”

Benjamin stares in silence.

“Full of live flies.”

Benjamin swallows. “I didn’t hear a question in there.”

“Why was there a fly trap full of live flies in your car?”

“Well now. They have to be *live*, don’t they?” says Benjamin. “To be able to crawl into the trap. They can’t do that if they’re dead.”

Nathan shakes his head. “I just can’t wait to tell my youth group guys that I cast out an actual demon into a big jar of flies.”

“Oooh, I’m afraid I’m going to insist you don’t do that,” says Benjamin, patting his jacket pocket. “If you’ll recall...”

A quick perusal of Benjamin’s mind: he had Nathan sign a non-disclosure agreement on the drive to the asylum. He really is a useful fellow.

Nathan is quiet for a second. “Listen, I don’t exactly know what’s going on with either of you, but...”

I look at him impassively.

“...I’m going to pray for you, okay?”

“Thank you,” I say. “And thank you for everything you’ve done tonight.”

At my prompting, Benjamin asks, “Time to go?” I walk them to Benjamin’s car. The fly trap, its lid sealed to prevent egress, is secured in the car’s trunk. Its insect inhabitants buzz a bit more fiercely than before, when we loaded it in, but none of them are going anywhere.

Nathan turns to me. “This has certainly been...an experience, Dr. Pierce.”

I shake his hand with my ice-cold grip.

“Feel free to visit our church any time,” Nathan says. “Maybe this Sunday?”

I smile at him. “Thank you, but I don’t think I’ll be able to make it.”

He smiles back, sadly. “No, I don’t suppose you will.”

I wave goodbye as they drive through the asylum’s open iron gates. I decide I’ll instruct Benjamin to write a sizable check to Calvary Lutheran Church. When I touch his mind, he’s thinking hungry thoughts, all centered around his trunk’s cargo. I ask him

what he plans on doing with several dozen demon-possessed flies, and he sends me an image of himself in the kitchen.

He's baking a pie.

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