

## Son of God

I was an old dog at a young age. I believed, it seemed, that I was driven on by a demon, not possessed but urged on by a shadow of my future and by my past that followed every step of every path I took. However, I spoke with it on not one but two occasions. I was an intelligent young lad but was drunk in my ignorance, intoxicated with suspicion, as I sought out solitude. Wandering through the forest in this solitude, I found within it an asceticism, and I chose to fast from food and sleep. I felt satisfied with this ascetic discipline; my mind was clear and simple. I was 30 years old. I shall begin here.

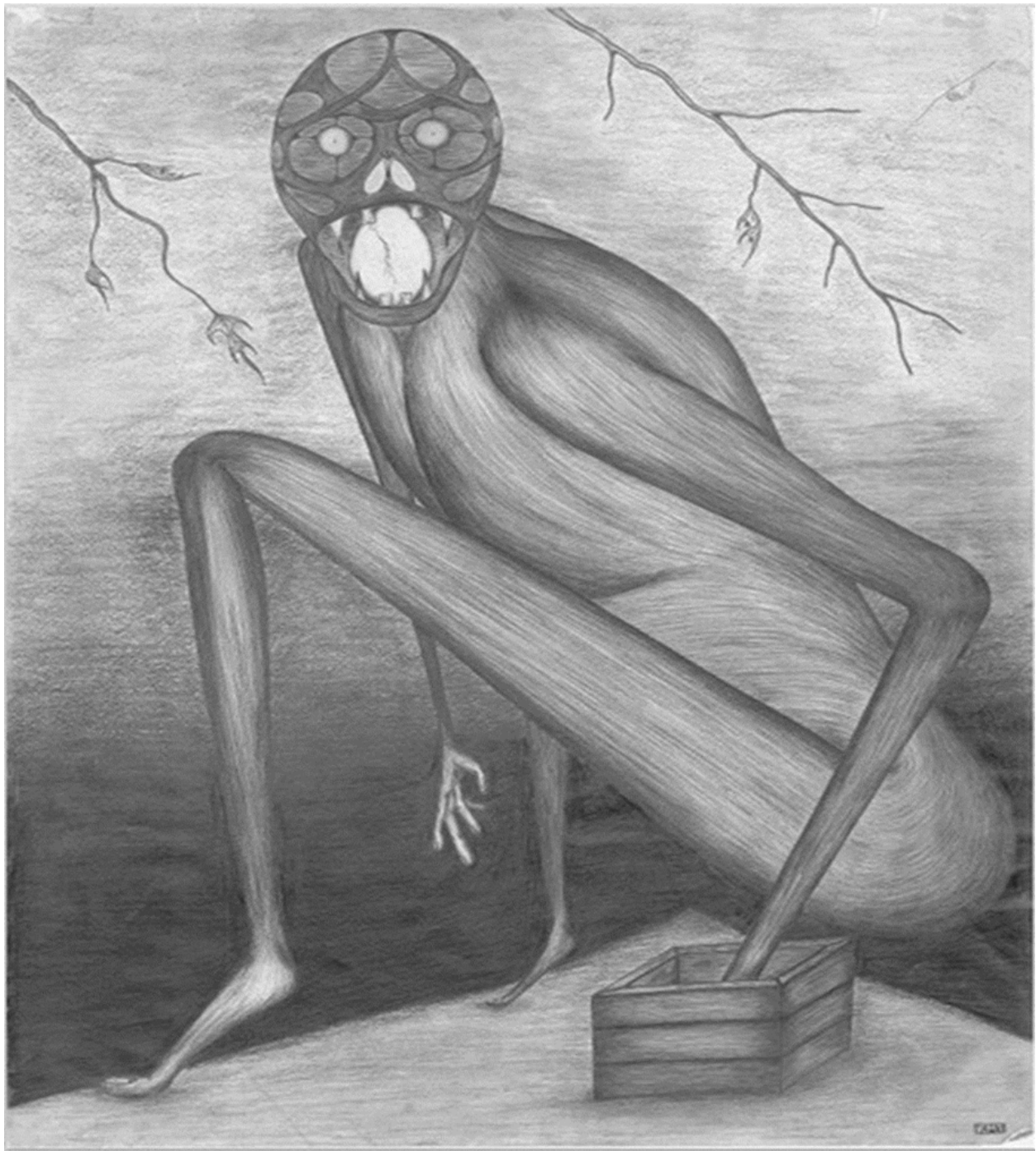
There was one thing I was concerned with and shall come to in a moment. I was in touch with these parallel worlds that exist above and below us. All the apparitions of my past swarmed beneath me, which could reach up and drag me down; the visions of my future multiplied above me, and all the present was but Shadow. And a question remained: What was this Shadow within me? I was to undergo a spiritual metamorphosis that would take a conversion of several years to complete. I was attracted to a philosophy of self-denial and doubt, but I needed a firm middle ground to plant my spiritual feet –and this foundation I sought was the root of my faith and my atheism.

Thus, an invisible hand pushed me further toward the Enemy as if fate itself. My absolute concern was the matter of what I believed was the torture of children. I had an obsessive interest in whether you could "beat the devil out of them." I thought that punishment affected people's belief in God, for fear and religion, I deduced, were inseparable.

Then, one day, I saw the Shadow.

"Who's there?" I was startled by a voice that seemed to come from above.

I looked around, and on a small boulder sat an apparition. I assumed it was a spirit, a basic demon, a shadow. What natives called the shilombish. The first thing that struck me was its mouth and teeth. It had two sets, lower and upper, of what appeared to be canines at first glance. But after further examination of its upper teeth, I noticed a poison that dripped from serpent-like fangs. Its skull was hollow, with beady little pupils in its eyes that seemed to hover in their hollow sockets. Its skull was layered with flesh. Its hands were quite human, though, as was its androgynous figure. And as it lowered itself from the boulder it was perched, it defied gravity as it moved in secret to the middle of the trail where it stood, squatted down, and rested comfortably on its tiptoes like a cat. And in one hand, the Shadow clutched a white egg.



Shadow

The trail was dark, as was all the forest. It was sprinkling rain and spring. Much of what I saw is questionable, that is, the exact features of the spectral demon, but it must have been of low rank. It would have been much more elusive if it had been of a much higher rank, for it seemed that I had slipped up on it undetected as it fed on a cache of eggs. The trail was still like wandering footsteps hushed upon the wet leaves of early dawn. I watched the illusory creature as it descended from a perch. It bore its fangs lactating with venom. But indifferent to my presence, it put the egg in its mouth and clutched it there, cracking the egg as some of the yolks seeped.

Then it turned away from me, and in turn, it morphed back into Shadow as it drifted away down the darkened trail. I perceived the Shadow to split in two as it went away from me. I was standing there, motionless, a statue of fear and curiosity, with my hands in my pockets and my head lowered, for this lowering of the head was the only movement I could muster during the first moment of the encounter. Being an atheist, though, I knew there must be some logical justice for what beget this spectral Shadow. Then the two shadows transformed to flesh and came walking toward. And out of the shadows, it came to me in the form of twin children. However, the androgyny of their figures and what followed with their voices made it unable to discern them as male or female. Shadow loomed around their bodies, which transformed into a black robe over their pale, almost completely white faces. Little beady, black pupils were in their eyes, and thin, pink lips partly covered their teeth, which appeared almost to be those of the Shadow... "Hello." They said simultaneously.

And such a strange sound was their voice, rasping almost, but very articulate.

And I stood there, head still bowed and silent for what seemed a long time, but it was more like a minute, a moment. These incidents seem much longer, these perpetual pauses that elapse in certain situations, especially in one this intense. I tried to step back and away as they approached but could not. They stood there, only six feet in front of me, and I looked with my eyes at one and then at the other. And I must state for convenience that they spoke almost always, simultaneously, as if they were of one body and one mind, and when they did not do so, one of the two took up the thought where the other had left off.

"What do you want with me!?" I demanded.

"What do you want with me!?" They repeated simultaneously.

"That is what I asked you," I said. "Who should so ever receive me?" I provoked them.

"Whosoever should receive me?" They both added corrections.

"What is thy name?" I again provoked them.

"My name is Legion..." one said, "for we are many." The other concluded.

"I see," I said.

"Now tell us, who are you?" They demanded. "I am Roman."

"I see." They said.

"And why are you here? Perhaps you're here to trick me, devils!" I lashed out.

"But it was you who crept up on us." They pointed out.

"Well..." I had done this. "This may be true, but I did not seek you out. I merely came upon you on this path; furthermore, I've never been this way through the forest, for it is vast, and there are many paths with many forks. I may have taken the wrong fork of many on the path."

"Yes, perhaps you took the wrong fork on the path, but you chose this forked path. And we have always been here; for eons, we have been here." They spoke softly with their androgynous voices.

"So, tell me, devils, what do you know of death?" I assumed devils and death went hand in hand.

"Death? It is never, for we will abide in this forest forever."

"But how is that possible? This forest cannot possibly exist forever? It might be burned, and most importantly, if you want to be absurd about it: The Earth will be consumed by the fire of the Sun, someday, in the very distant future." Someday, I thought.

"We are not of this Earth; neither this forest nor these paths are of this Earth. Can you hear death, Roman? Listen, the wind, it whispers eternity."

"I hear nothing."

"You hear what you want to hear." They mocked.

"Ah! Quite clever little devils, you are indeed! Perhaps you can answer some of my questions, for I have gone everywhere, to all types of men: to the monks, to the philosophers, even to the laymen, and they are with insight but without answers, which left me without the knowledge I sought." "Very well, ask your questions." They invited.

"Is it true that you, if you are devils -is it true that you possess children? And can you be beaten out of them as people say?"

"If we are devils, then this is untrue... we have no use for children." "But do you corrupt the heart of Man?" I insisted.

"No, we do not. Why should we be concerned with the heart of Mankind?" "Better yet, I have a story; perhaps you can answer the question from it all."

"Very well," they conceded, "tell us the story."

"I read an article from a scrap of newspaper not too long ago." I began. "There was a family: a mother, a father, and two young children. The father was, though, a misanthrope in a way particular to his suspicious behavior. He was a paranoid and delusional man in many respects. This suspicion seemed typical compared to an average man of his age and status. The father insisted that he bar the windows and the doors to protect them from criminals. Now, this idea of being trespassed upon is popular in the minds of our ordinary people. Yet, this family must have been well off monetarily, or otherwise, they would not have been able to afford these bars on the windows and doors of the house. They lived in a relatively safe neighborhood compared to most of our population."

Regardless, this family, this father, put these bars on all the windows and doors of the house. The bars on the doors opened, while the bars on the windows didn't, so as not to allow any unwanted trespass via murderers and thieves the father was suspicious of. Then, one day, there was a fire on a Sunday afternoon, not long after the family had returned from Church. It was winter and cold, and the house had a fireplace in the living room. This was where the fire started, as quoted by officials in the newspaper.

All this aside, the family, it was reported by the officials, could not escape and was consumed by fire." I said.

"Now, in the paper, the subtitle with the photo of the family's burned house, or perhaps the article's title, read: 'Bars that protected family home from burglars kept them from fleeing a deadly fire.' And this was what caught my attention: this description. There are many tragedies such as murders, robberies, torture, and all other sorts of trespasses against one another, but the irony the bars created –the story pointed out an evident truth about man's conception of his neighbor and himself. He does not 'love thy neighbor' anymore. No. His philosophy is 'fear thy neighbor.' Though this is not entirely the case, I think it sounds clever. The truth is that the father's fear of criminals in the story led to his family's demise... his fear and paranoia, these delusions of his neighbor. Wouldn't you agree?" I asked. "What is your question?" They asked for the point.

"Yes. I need to clarify my point or my question about the criminal. Who's to say that these bars even kept out criminals or 'burglars,' as this story put it? My question is this: What do men fear if not devils in their hearts or minds?"

"They fear themselves, it seems, from what you have told us." They insisted.

"Yes! That's why I tell people: You can't beat the Devil out of children." By this time, I could move; the paralysis that had consumed my body had subsided. All this time, as I told my story, my arms and hands had become very animated, but this didn't seem to bother the twin devils, for they listened intently.

"So, your question is, why is it that men fear devils?" They asked. "Yes," I replied, "but it was a rhetorical question." "You asked us, did you not?" They persisted.

"Perhaps." I thought. "Ah! Yes, what clever little devils you are!" I exclaimed. "What do men fear, if not that they are the very devils they fear!?"

"It is death they fear." The two answered in agreement.

"How so?" I was intrigued.

"We agreed only to answer your question, that is all... death is the absolute unknown, you see?" "Ah, now I see." I grinned, and I looked down at them with this grin. "You are putting ideas in my mind. But that's insignificant. But please tell me: surely you must play with the child's naïve mind. I mean they are such cruel creatures. Why then do their older masters flog them, and beat them, and whip them -why do these adults torture them?" I laughed. "Ah! they think they can 'beat the devil out of them,' but I say this: they beat the Devil into them. Is this not so? Certainly, devils cannot resist such a chance to possess a child?" I paused. "So, how's it that devils possess a child?" I asked anxiously.

But they had now disappeared as I looked up to where I had first seen the Shadow, and I was thinking that some shadow played with me now, as if I were a child. Nevertheless, this was the time I had a conversation with the Enemy. It was not the only encounter but the most lucid recollection of when I saw it. This created a significant change in my beliefs, as I was later to discover, for one can imagine what impact this proof of devils must have had on a devout atheist.

Yes. It was a great contradiction to what I believed. Though, there was no conflict in my mind from the experience. It was as if I simultaneously believed and disbelieved in the two devils as I spoke to them. Furthermore, if I so desired, I could just surmise that the whole incident was a delirium or a psychosis due to the fasting and sleep deprivation I was subjecting myself to. I turned to leave the forest that day, and though I had walked for many hours, it seemed only a few minutes until I reached the forest's edge. And as I walked into an open field, the cold rain fell lightly. I was lost deep in thought over my conversation with the Shadow.

Ultimately, I thought a man could not rid himself of this Shadow: it stalked him. Man is part truth and part lie. In his essence, a man says this: "I tell you the truth is this: all I say is a lie." But now I am just trying to sound clever again. I am more clever than wise. I find myself riddled with paradoxes. I was so consumed in mystery that I was a mystery to myself until that day I had crossed paths with the Shadow, these little child devils. It was all an experience that pushed me further toward my fate as if by an invisible hand.

After this conversation with the Enemy, I must admit, I was in great despair. I contacted Monk. An ascetic of the "spiritual" sort. He agreed to my request to meet in the forest under the Angel Oak. It was a two-thousand-year-old tree. I sat out that day with no hesitation but almost with the assumption that I would get nothing from this meeting.

Doubt shadows the devout atheist with this sort of pessimism, but I sat out on my pilgrimage, as it seemed fit to call it. Monk was already there when I arrived late that afternoon. He wore a black robe and pulled back his hood as he walked out from the shadows of the looming oak to greet me.

"Brother Roman, how may I help you? Monk asked.

"Well, Monk, I had a mystical experience, it might be called... in these woods, I encountered two little devils, and they were but children to my eyes..."

I went on to tell him of the whole encounter and conversation, my story I had presented to them, my other inquiries, and my deep concern with the Devil being beaten out of children. Monk was a good listener and reassured me of this with his humble gestures: a nod here and there and changes in his expressions when I must have expounded something of interest. It reflected some awareness he already had of these matters.

"Roman, as you call them, these devils are not out to deceive you. No, Brother Roman, you have let yourself be deceived. There are many ways one can become involved in such affairs, but I've read two basic ways to be exposed to such self-deception: One is to disbelieve that devils exist; the other is to have an excessive interest in them. And it seems to be both to be your case." \*

"Yes. I will agree with you on that. Since it has never been brought to my awareness by my own devices, I led myself unknowingly but purposely down that fork in the path. But what do you make of the coincidence of my gaining knowledge of the story of the man and his family who were consumed by fire in their own home and my crossing paths, so to speak, with these devils?" "It is no coincidence. Our future is determined by our own free will, but this is only to the extent of our choices considering the circumstances surrounding our fate."

"Really... and what fate might that be?"

"In the end... Death comes for us all. But in everyday experience -and correct me if I'm wrong- In everyday life experience, being the atheist, you say you are, I would think that you might think everything is a result of the choices we make, and this is true to some degree. But we make these choices, for we encounter them just as you did this fork in the path -you chose to take the path and consequently met what was your fate, these devils. Yet this path was there before you ever chose to walk it, just as life is here before we are born, waiting, and when we arrive; only then do we begin to choose in which direction we will step on paths if we choose to take the path at all."

"So, I understand it was my fate that I was born. And though it is possible that I can agree that I had no choice being born into this world, it was my fate, let us agree -but how is it that things become my fate once I begin to make choices as to whether and where I shall step and what path to follow?" "Roman, my Brother, let's not make this matter too complex." Monk was a patient man. "Rather, let us keep it simple. You can suspend your disbelief for the time being so I might enlighten you on what I have drawn from experience; that is why you sought me out, is it not?"

Monk was as clever as he was wise, for I had no choice, it seemed, but to humble myself to his rhetorical question, which I had to accept as my fate, even in the uncomfortable intimacy of a conversation of such nature. A conversation Monk presented as an offering, or rather, an invitation in and out of the weather of alienation and isolation that comes from this doubt that shadows the atheist.

"I will agree for now, then, that it was fate and not coincidence that I crossed both the story and the two devils. Indeed, an argument over man's free will and fate is far too obscure a debate, as it would be an endless affair of personal preference in what we choose to believe. But this, a choice to believe, which I am making, must be of enough significance that we should, or rather, Monk –might you briefly 'enlighten' me as to: Is it fate that I came to believe what it is I believe, or is it a choice?" "Again, let us keep it simple..." Monk spoke softly. "But come to think of it, your question might help us. It was fate that you came to believe what you believe. Shall we just say it simply: It was your fate that you became an atheist, yet it is the choices that you made that led you to this man you believe yourself to be, which brings up two important questions: One, is it possible that you only believe you are an atheist, but in truth you are not?" Second, and this follows my first question: Is this not how you believe me or others to be; that we believe in God, but that in truth, God does not exist?"

"Hold on a minute, Monk, let's only get too far into your questions once we are clear on what you said about my fate, and correct me now if I'm wrong in my interpretations of your words. You say it is my fate when there is a fork in my path, and whether I choose to go one way or another, the path will ultimately lead to the same end, for it is at death that all paths shall end?"

"Very good, Brother Roman, you understand that very well. And yes, it is the truth of the nature of choice to become an illusion; it is its nature that it seems to make a difference and change fate... Whether you choose this or that, it seems to make a difference, but as we have both said, all paths lead to death in the end. But this is only a good analogy: it isn't as if every choice you make is a matter of life or death, for, as you now seem aware, it is that there are many paths to take, but fate waits at the end of each of them just as death waits at the end of all ends. So now, would it bother you to consider the two questions I asked? I can repeat them ..."

"No, that is not necessary, thank you, though. You asked if I may believe that I'm an atheist, but in truth, I'm not, and I see with my beliefs that what you believe in is something that isn't true. That is a good question." "So, you have no answer?"

"I think you of all people, Monk, know I have an answer, but it is self-evident, isn't it? And what is just as self-evident is the way you go about asking. You are clever... How old are you, if you don't mind my asking?" "66."

"Well, I'm only 30, and so you're more than twice my age, and I do respect your wisdom and your choice to think deeply as most men are, if not by mere laziness –most men are timorous and take no active part in layman philosophy or religion or things of this nature. And if it pleases you, I'll give you an answer to these two questions. But, first, let me say what I like to say: I was an old dog at a young age. And as for your first question: Yes, it is possible that I only believe myself to be an atheist, but it is possible that what I believe is partly, if not entirely, false. And I'm only deceiving myself in such a belief, for I assume it is self-deception that you're getting at." I said



"As to the second question: No, I do not believe that your belief in God is false because I believe God doesn't exist; rather, it is that I doubt my own belief. Whereas you value faith, I value doubt. But when you see that I should accept the possibility that I'm incorrect -when you do this, it seems that you, Monk, invest some merit in the choice of doubt. Therefore, if you say that it's possible what you believe may not be true, how, then, can you not accept that it's possible that what you believe isn't true and, in doing so, confess doubt in what you believe?" I said.

"That is a good question," Monk said cleverly, as to take the words I spoke earlier and make them his own. "But I don't fall so easily into such a trap of words, Brother Roman. Again, let us keep it simple. After all, and I say this with respect, it was you who asked for my help, and how can I help you to understand if you wish only to meddle in theological trappings, let us say, when we should be investing our energy in the peace of mind you might gain from whatever it may be that I have to offer you as far as my knowledge and experience will allow."

"This is true, but it is in my nature to answer questions in such a way, defensive as it may seem; suspicion is the motive behind such a way of answering indirectly. It was this way when I spoke with those child devils: I felt that I should not trust them, yet I found nothing dishonest in their speech." I said.

"This is where you are partly deceived by them: they're not 'child devils;' there's no child in them... though they seem young, they're more ancient than the two-thousand-year-old Angel Oak above us. So, you see, in what they say, there is truth, indeed. But as in the form the devils take: they took this mask of innocence, but even you noticed something 'eerie' in them, as you said. These 'child devils' cannot conceal their true faces. And as you say, they were basic demons. -this 'Shadow' you saw, then, was its truest form." Monk said.

"Yes, there are many things I was deceived, as I suspected, in that I was, most importantly, ignorant of such things. But you say that there is truth in what these devils said. How so? Why or how are they honest if, in fact, they're devils? Why go to such measures of deceiving me in their appearance if they weren't liars?" I said.

"Roman, my Brother, it isn't the nature of devils to lie; this is man's sin, and these devils are neither child nor man; rather, by telling you truths you already know, they deceive by removing this doubt you speak. Doubt is the Devil's most powerful weapon to assault you with; doubt is the Shadow you saw, and it's always just behind you, following every step on these paths, every choice you make in life." Monk said.

"Yes, yes. That is what I think. I say that doubt shadows the atheist. But this Shadow was there before me, waiting on the path, as though I had snuck up on it, and even the devils themselves said it was I who took a fork in the path that led to them, that they didn't come to me. And if what you say is true, that lies are not in their nature, I must confess that what they said was true. But why would I, an atheist, consciously seek out devils, something I'm not entirely convinced wasn't just some psychosis?" I said.

"Because Brother Roman... remember what I first told you about devils? One mistake is disbelieving in their existence; the other is having too much interest in them, and you seem to have both.\* You confessed that you simultaneously believed and disbelieved in them as you had this encounter, yet you have this fixation with 'beating the devil out' of a child. But to be skeptical and say that you were maybe just hallucinating and only, in a sense, imagining the whole encounter... it seems you wouldn't have sought the advice of a monk. It seems this would be the last thing you would do if that's truly what you believed." Monk said.

"My being illogical does not change my skepticism. If anything, it only makes me more skeptical since I may be suffering from psychosis, and it is that my doubt might have reached a threshold and crossed over past fear and suspicion into unreality." I said.

"How can you be skeptical if you are unable to reason? Since it takes a great amount, I must admit, It takes a great deal, an almost superfluous amount of logic to be skeptical. The question I would offer that you ask yourself, Brother Roman, is this: Must I believe in God to believe in devils? But not so much as believe in the Devil." Monk said.

"No, I suppose not. Definitely not. Because seeing these devils has not made me question my disbelief in God. But it seems to challenge me; it is threatening, and I'm wise enough to know that such a threat can cause fear, but... Why should I even fear these devils?" I said.

"Roman, I do doubt that you'll believe me when I say that it's not that you should fear these devils, but that you should fear the consequences of your ignorance of them and, more importantly, the significance of the encounter."

\*(From the Preface to the Screwtape Letters, Copyright © 1961, restored 1966 C.S. Lewis Pte. Ltd. Harper-Collins Publishers)

"How so, Monk?"

"I must know first: Have you always been an atheist? Did you not, when you were young, believe in God, even if it was your childlike imagination at work?"

"I not only once believed in God; I spoke with him once here at the Angel Oak. So, I believed at the time and at that age." I said.

"And how old were you, and what led to your disbelief?" Monk asked.

"I was quite young when I had this experience. It was as if the Angel Oak spoke to me, as if it told me of my life's purpose and meaning. You know that this is what they call an angel oak, don't you, Monk?"

"Yes, but referring to it as Angel Oak is symbolic at least... You seem the last person to associate it with a divine Angel."

"Well, you see, at an early age, when it's easy to imagine things -I would say it was a coincidence that led me to believe I had a vision of God. The fact that this tree was referred to as the Angel Oak, I think, was more fuel for my passion at the time, which was to make sense of the experience. It was not until after quite some time had passed that I came to say that I had spoken with God. I had an ineffable and inexplicable experience, so I never spoke of it. My conclusion later in life was that it must have been God 'speaking' to me and telling me about my purpose in life, for the question of my purpose in life was of great importance, which made the experience even more significant to me at the time and later in life. But I had no knowledge of such things at that age. Perhaps I have heard of people saying God spoke to them. I don't know." I said.

"You say a coincidence led you to this significant experience?" Monk asked.

"Exactly. It was not, as you say, fate." I said.

"You believe this?" Monk asked as if this were bizarre.

"Yes." I humbly replied. "But you said before we delved into what I believe: I shouldn't fear these devils, but I should fear the consequences?"

"Yes, yes, let us keep it simple. I said you should fear the consequences of your ignorance of them, that is, the significance of the encounter and the story you told the devils." Monk said. "And what's that?" I asked with detached interest.

"It is an omen," Monk said.

"And what is its prophecy?" I was intrigued.

"That is for you to figure out, Brother Roman. Perhaps your encounter with these devils was a sign to help bring you back to God?"

And I departed with the Monk on this thought. He walked away into the Shadow as it was growing dark. I decided to stay the night under the Angel Oak. I gathered wood to build a fire, for it was a dim, misty evening, and fog hovered all over the forest. The roots of the Angel Oak were trees in themselves as they came up out of the ground for some thirty feet and returned to the Earth from which they came. It was as if below the tree lay some underground world. I had used a pine knot I busted up to build a fire and continued gathering wood when the Shadow appeared in front of me. It stood at the edge of the light of the fire, and it fixed its stare upon me. "What do you want with me!?" I shouted.

But the Shadow only remained silent where it was, crouched down as if it might leap on me at some moment. But instead, it disappeared into the darkness and fog. I decided to build two more fires so that they surrounded the Angel Oak. And the same thing happened with the Shadow each time I built the subsequent fire: it approached the edge of the light and fixed its stare upon me. And I shouted the same thing each time: "What do you want with me!?" But there was no answer each time the specter vanished into the night.

I worked at gathering wood that was entangled all in the Angel Oak. All the dry wood must have been deadfall from the tree itself, for the wood was dry from being under the haven of the mystical tree. I built the three fires until the flames were thirty feet high, just as high as the roots that wove in and out of the ground. Now the Shadow went from one fire to the next, circling me as if the light of the fire were some thresholds it could not cross. The fires danced in the darkness of the pitch-black night, each flame an angel itself. I climbed up one of the roots, ascending into the tree. I was sitting on one of the lower branches and noticed that the fires were spreading, and they spread in a way that after a short period, there was but one fire that surrounded the Angel Oak. I climbed higher and higher into the tree until I reached the highest point accessible. The fire began to spread outward into the thick fog of night, but it spread slowly due to the damp conditions. Still, it grew with ever more force, but it was warm, and I felt safe in my perch that was high in the tree. I could lay back and rest, and then I began to doze off into a dream.

"Hello." A voice said. "Look what you've done."

I looked down as the fire engulfed the forest trees. Then I looked back to where I stood, and all about me was Shadow. There, perched atop a thunderhead, were the ominous two child devils.

"Look what you have done." They said.

"I have done nothing." I retorted. "What have I done?" "Look closely." They answered.

I looked down and saw a black horse running through the forest. It looked as if flames consumed it, but still, it ran fast into the distance. As it ran back and forth, it caught the whole forest afire.

"So, you little devils are up to your tricks again!" I cried out.

"We're not engaged in any 'tricks' as you say." They paused with their black eyes fixed on my wild, wide-open peepers.

"The Fire is your fate alone, Roman." They said.

"But I did not cause this... this hell!" I said.

"What would you know of Hell?" They asked.

"Ah, hah! You, little devils, are just toying with me. Hell is where I am." I said.

"How's that?" Asked one. "How's that?" The other repeated.

"It doesn't matter. I don't believe in Hell. It's mere superstition." I said.

"We were called by you." They spoke softly and thoughtfully.

"Who called for you?" I didn't understand.

"We came to answer your question." They said.

"What question? I asked you devils nothing." I asked.

"When you crept up on us in the forest..." They reminded me. "You asked: 'So how is it that devils possess a child?'"

"Why would you... When did I...?" I stammered. "Return to where you belong, devils!" "But we are in our forest." They said.

I looked down and stood on that forked path. And before me were the two little child devils, both sinister and serpentine twins.

"Now you're using your devilry against me." I felt that the mist had ceased. "You didn't bring me here just to answer some question...."

"It was you who came to us." The devils reminded me.

"Perhaps I came to you before, but how do you say that I came to you now? Besides, aren't I only dreaming?" I asked.

"Dreaming?" They looked confused, and I remained suspicious. "How, then, can you say that I came to you and sought you out?" I asked.

"It was you who climbed the tree. And the fire, it was built by you, and it was built by you alone." They said.

"Nonsense!" I retorted. "I built a fire to ward off this Shadow of you as you circled me, for if it were not for the light of the fire, you would have pounced on me to devour me." The truth was out in the open. There was only silence after I said this, and the devils stood there with their thin lips revealing their serpent-like fangs.

"Your suspicions are wrong, Roman. You will die here tonight, for like the misanthropic man in the newspaper story who died by the fire, so too shall you?" The twin devils said.

And I woke up. The fire swallowed up the forest around the Angel Oak and soon swallowed up the Angel Oak and me. And I did what I would have never thought capable of: I prayed for rain. And it began to rain, and moments later, it began to pour down rain. As the fire died down to where I felt it could no longer harm me, soaked but exhausted, I dozed back off, this time into a dreamless sleep until dawn woke me. I shivered. I climbed back down the Angel Oak and waited at its trunk, which was Monk.

"Good morning, Brother Roman."

"What brings you here at first light, Monk?"

"I saw the fire glowing from this direction last night." He paused and looked around. "But it appears it must not have been as big as it seemed, for the forest looked afire."

I looked around, and there was only a ring of dead ash around the base of the Angel Oak. And I told Monk what had happened, my dream with the little devils in it, and what they told me, how I woke and broke down and prayed for rain, which put out the fire.

"It seems God has performed a miracle for you, Brother Roman," Monk said.

"Perhaps. Or perhaps it's just a coincidence. Or, I may have just dreamed the whole thing of the fire in the forest." I said.

"This is quite possible, but tell me: Do you truly believe this?" Monk asked.

"No, not entirely, for it seemed so real. Even so, if this 'omen' took place, why would God use fear to get me to break down and pray? Why not show me he exists in some other manner?" I asked. "I'm not one to say how and in what way God chooses to work His ways, but this is what I believe: It was a miracle and answer to your prayer. And as I told you yesterday, there is no such thing as coincidence: what has happened here is your fate, but why you were spared, and it is for you to decide what step you will take next." Monk said.

"I believe differently, Monk. The Shadow is not some supernatural entity, yet it is some strange force of nature at work. It is the Angel Oak that protected me last night, not God. It seems natural for a man to break down and pray as I did, as a last resort and out of fear. Fear will drive a man to do and believe things that are not true, as I demonstrated with my story of the man and how his fear of his neighbor led to his and his family's death."

"But don't you believe this Shadow is also these Devils and that you did encounter them before here in this forest?" Monk asked. "Furthermore, the devils referred to themselves as 'Legion,' and this comes only from the scriptures, the Word of God," Monk argued.

"I've still yet to decide on that matter, and this only complicates the matter far more than before," I said.

"There's also the fact that you spoke to the devils in your dream. That they manifested in your mind supports what I believe: It was an omen being fulfilled when the fire was about to consume you, and your submission through prayer saved you. God spared your life, for the fact that you broke down to humble yourself through prayer seems to confess that you're not an atheist as you believe yourself to be." Monk said.

"But there is something that's being left out here, Monk, and that is my concern with devils being beaten out of children. I say that it is rather the Devil's beat into them, fear is beaten into the child through punishment, and a belief in God is merely a fear of punishment. Fear, then, is the poison of religion. So perhaps it was fate that I crossed paths with these devils, these shadows of my past, and the omen that came from the story I told of the man and his family burned to death in the fire. As for the fact that I chose to pray for rain... I'm not sure if it's a confession that I believe in God. But to believe is a choice, and I'm left with a choice. I'm a freethinker, which means I'm free to not be an atheist, but whether I cease to be an atheist will require further reflection on my part. And I will remember to keep it simple, Monk." I said.

And on this thought, the Monk and I exchanged a few warm words and then parted ways: the Monk took one path, and I took the other... I shall end here.