

The Devil's Backbone
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About a year ago, I acquired the Devil's backbone. I was not given the vertebrae. And no, I did not trade him my soul for it either. I, myself, lowered into the depths of Hell and took it on my own, for my own. It was both my desire and my trophy. And he cannot have it back.

It was a simple task. There's not very good security in Hell, I may as well have walked through the front door. But instead, I entered from the ceiling. I noticed steam rising from the storm drain one day on the way back from work between Lafayette and Nostrand. Steam rising from a drain in the middle of Brooklyn isn't unusual, but the terrifyingly deep laugh that crawled out with the steam was curious. I crouched down onto the icy street to take a look. The pavement was frozen but the metal burning hot. I waited for some of the smoke to subside and peeked in. It looked dark, but a closer look and I saw some little red figures bouncing around. Abruptly, a single eye eclipsed the hole I was looking through. The eye squawked, "*Watch yourself, Blondie!*" And hissed until I walked away.

Weird things happen in New York all the time, but I kept seeing that little red eye staring at me in my dreams and my soup and my laptop camera and my cat's face when he pops out from under my bed. There was no way that was some lurking homeless man in the sewer or some horribly evolved creature of the New York underground—neither of those things could have been so well spoken. What could that have possibly been? I couldn't stand it. So, one night I made my way back to Nostrand, pried open the manhole, and lowered myself down the ladder toward the indistinct laughter.

The ladder went on forever. After what felt like the first mile, it began to twist and turn further down. At one point I even thought I had started going back up. The only thing that told me I was going in the right direction were the walls, which dissolved from a deep black into a harsh red. When the eternal ladder finally ended, I plopped onto a squishy floor. There were hundreds of people around me. Well, not people...partially deteriorated persons. Some were complete skeletons while others had only a tibia or a scapula exposed. The walls were veiny—membrane-y—sticky and breathing short with impatience. It was one of four stomachs of a gigantic cow that had swallowed us all whole and was digesting us slowly. And it was so hot. So hot that my skin began to burn red immediately and I quickly realized how these bone-people may have lost their original casings. The smell of rotting flesh floated through the air in heaving clouds so thick I could feel the particles when I inhaled.

The worst part about this place was the blasting of deep house music that echoed throughout the cavity. The skeletons didn't seem to mind the music. Most even danced along to it, but those were the skeletons that were complete skeleton and not at all human. They seemed to like the bass that crept up their bones and vibrated their skulls. This was the music of choice in Hell, the hottest underground club in all of New York City.

A great hoof suddenly dropped onto my shoulder in a thud. I jumped and turned around to face the Devil himself. "Um...you're not on the list." He said with his chops puckered to show off their purple tint.

"Sorry," I looked up at him, my head only reached to his hairy and exposed belly button (he had an outty).

"Well," He looked down at me scratching his brown beard with his claw—the left was a hoof, the right a claw, "Do you need to be escorted out?" Our eyes met and held. His were red,

maybe the one that told me to scram just the other day. They were disgusting. One was much larger than the other and both bulged out of his shapeless head, held back to his skull by visible thick veins. He stared at mine—brown, round, both the same size, sitting comfortably in their sockets. “I like your eyes.” He broke the silence, “Most people...err...Dead don’t have those things anymore down here.”

“Thanks,” I smiled to show him my very normal teeth. He smiled to show his fangs, “I’ve never met anyone with a hoof before. That’s pretty cool.”

“Oh, this old thing?” He poked at his hoof with his claw. It made a hollow noise like knocking on a wood door. “Would you like to...get a drink or something?”

“I don’t think I’m on *‘the list’*.” I looked up at him flirtatiously.

“Well, this is kind of my place...don’t worry about it.” The Devil turned around to lead me further into Hell. I paused to look at his back. *Bewildering!* His backbone was on the outside of his skin. The bones were already yellowed and now browning. It almost looked like the vertebrae were crawling up and down his back—like thousands of creatures inhabited his body. He was a little ant farm of his own, a microcosm, a habitat that created and cared for it’s own organism. I reached out to touch it, but before I could make contact, he turned back to face me. He reached out his hoof and guided me into the crowd of the dancing dead.

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Drinking in Hell is kind of like drowning yourself in fire, but who could say no to tossing a few back with The Devil? My skin was already burning and flaking off my body but I couldn’t help but to add fuel to the fire (pun intended). I started to really enjoy the feeling of burning. It was like eating a Warhead—a painful sour but I salivated for it. My hair twisted into nests sticking out of my head and my eyes dilated like a predator. The bar we sat at was off to the side

of the dance floor and the fist-pumping skeletons. It was made out of bone, muscle, and some semi-alive beings who made small talk with the lonely, damned souls who just wanted to drink and tell someone a story from their past lives. I noticed The Devil staring at me; he must have realized my appearance had gone wild; maybe he even liked what he saw?

I wasn't dressed well: a frumpy sweater and leggings, which I regretted wearing to Hell terribly. But, for some reason, I had become The Devil's innate object of desire. His eyes were glued to my thigh, wrapped in a thick black ace-bandage material leaving absolutely everything up to the imagination. Maybe he didn't care about a girl's looks. Maybe he was better than that.

He stared at me like he wanted to tear the wrapper open and let my white flesh seep out onto his lap like yogurt. He wanted to feel the foreign object of unharmed skin. The touch of a woman, curvy and voluptuous with juicy muscle. Not one of his army of skeletons that wasted away in the heat.

When he noticed my gawk at his gaze, he retreated his eyes. "You still haven't shown much bone," The Devil picked up my red hand in his claw, "Most of The Dead would have almost melted completely by now. But you're still perfectly intact." I smiled, couldn't he realize I was still alive, just a party crasher in his most private club? Maybe he didn't want to know.

"Just a little wild looking, though." I laughed and he chuckled and looked down towards my feet dangling off my bar stool next to his talons, firmly planted on the ground. "I guess I'm just not like the other Dead." He smiled at me. I tried to peer over his back to see his crawling spine. He shifted to face me more head on.

"I guess not," He dropped my hand and took another drink.

"What are you drinking?" I swirled my martini, but he drank a mysterious drink from his special skull-goblet the demon bartender had for the club owner.

“Oh, it’s whiskey.”

“Whiskey?”

“Fireball.” He laughed at himself and it sounded like someone threw hundreds of pots and pans down a flight of cement stairs.

“Why would you subject yourself to that?”

“To keep up appearances.” He said flatly, “And, you know, Hell’s supposed to be about pain...and the joy we all, undeniably, find in pain.” He looked to the dance floor again. The skeleton’s loved the beat that rang up their spines and shook their empty skulls. Then he looked at me with his vascular eyes, “What do you find joy in?” I felt a little on edge when The Devil wanted to know what I took pleasure in. I could feel his backbone creeping up him, listening to me, waiting for an answer. “Joy?” I finished my drink.

“You know, like what do you like?”

I laughed nervously, “I don’t know...in gin, maybe?” He roared another monstrous laugh that drowned out the music.

“That’s why you ended up in Hell.”

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When he was sufficiently drunk enough, I left him at the bar and snuck back up my private Ladder of Babel to Brooklyn. The streets were now covered in snow, it was dark, and my body steamed when I emerged from the gutter. No one noticed me flop onto the black ice pancake-style. No one notices anything in New York. I walked back home alone in my dirtied clothing and steaming skin.

I laid down on my bed with ice packs lining my body. I sizzled. I hated living in New York. It was crowded. Everyone came to the city to search for a spotlight that everyone else was

already looking for. I missed the dancing skeletons—with only their one primal act to *shake it* when they hear the beat drop and to take a few breaks to drink with the musing-muscle bar. I thought about The Devil, so monstrous and overpowering, laughing at his bopping, burning skeletons. And then his backbone, staring at me...what would it feel like to wear? Would it hurt? Weigh me down? Would it be callous? Slimy?

The next day I called in sick to work. I wore my parka and almost nothing else out to Lafayette and Nostrand and dropped it to my ankles. In just my skimpiest tank top and shorts, I began my new routine of descending into Hell.

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“You know I looked you up in the directory and I didn’t find you.” I had met The Devil for drinks again at the same bar, possibly the only one they had in Hell as far as I knew.

“You don’t even know my name.” I looked away from him. I hadn’t expected him to confront me so quickly.

“It’s Lilith,” He moved his head closer to mine.

“How do you know?”

“The bar told me,” He turned back towards the talking bar and patted the counter, “Anyway, you weren’t on the list.”

“Must have been some processing error,” I sipped a glass of Fireball nervously, “I don’t know how paperwork is done down here. Can you do paperwork down here? Does paper just burn up immediately?” He chuckled, it rang in a symphony of the screams of orphans.

“I don’t even know how the paperwork works down here!” And with that, we continued to drink.

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When The Devil brought me back to his place it wasn't what I had expected. There were no big wrought iron gates. No cave of doom with fang-like stalactites. No people chained to the walls screaming in horror. It was just a nice studio built into the side of the stomach-Netherworld. To be fair—everything was black and red and the lights were torches (all electricity in Hell went to the DJ). But it was quite modern and modest for the Lord of the Underworld.

“It's not what you expected is it?” He asked me after he led me into the one-room loft.

“Honestly, no.” I looked at the sleek black cabinets and red floor tiles. The floor was surprisingly cold on my bare feet (my shoes melted and stuck to the floor on our walk from the bar). “No screams, no severed limbs.” He smirked and poured us some Fireball, his in his skull goblet and mine in a crystal glass. “But what's most unexpected is the lack of blood boiling heat.” I looked at him confused.

“Sometimes you just have to get away from it all. You know? Separate work from your private life.” He rubbed his neck, unbothered by his animated spine, “How are you still perfectly intact?” He grabbed me by my waist with his claw. But it wasn't violent or sexual, just curious, like a child. He turned me around and inspected my backside, rubbing his hoof against my spine. He groaned—did he not like how static my bones were? He turned me back around and propped my face on the tip of his hoof, caressing my cheek bones with his claw, “Who are you?” I didn't have an answer so instead I kissed him.

The Devil is a solid two and a half feet taller than me (I'm an average 5'6"). To kiss him I went on my tiptoes to reach his neck. I struggled to hook my arms around him like a child and simultaneously pulled him down while pulling myself up. When my thin pink lips met his

massive purple jaws, I felt his body expand and contract like a pulsing heart swooning at our sadomasochistic rom-com coming to a head.

He took me to his bed—black with red bedding—and laid me next to him. He turned to look at me, “Look, it’s been awhile.” I didn’t want to talk to him anymore so I rolled myself on top of him. He began pulsing again, rapidly. His hoof and claw shrunk into hands, talons soften into toes. His horns melted away into his skull, which rounded out around the edges into an oval. I moved back to look at a very average looking man. His face was perfectly symmetrical, roundish even. He wasn’t extraordinarily handsome, or even particularly ugly. Just kind of...cute. Normal. “What?” The Devil stood naked in front of me, “Everyone’s got to get undressed. And it’s not like you could have sex with the pitchfork-penis of Lucifer.” He laughed, still his usual uproarious mammoth laugh, but it didn’t match his new form. I laughed at him. I had seen The Devil in his most naked state, and he could not take that away from me.

After a night of making fairly average love to The Devil, he fell asleep in my arms and gradually turned back into his evil-self throughout the night. I slipped him out of my grip and stood over his sleeping form. I rolled him onto his stomach and began gently tearing at his spine until the vertebrae hung from my hand like a candy necklace.

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I waited until I got back home to Brooklyn to try on my new look. The spine was large on me—it strung from the top of my head to the bottom of my ankles when I first laid it across my back. But it soon shrunk to fit my small form. I twisted around the mirror to look at myself—my skin so white against the brown bone that now crawled along my skin. It felt warm, and the heat radiated through my body. I was beautiful.

The next day, I took the subway into Manhattan to show off my new spine and quit my job. My new job, my spine had convinced me of, was to become the world's greatest she-devil. I couldn't fit a normal shirt over my spine and it felt too raw to cover. I cut holes down the zipper of a hoodie, put it on backwards, and laced a ribbon through the holes over my exo-spine. The pink ribbon was a nice touch against the bone. A true she-devil indeed!

Unsurprisingly, I was banished to my own side of the train cart. Everyone else huddled into the opposite corner and stared. Mothers hugged their children close; an old woman turned off the subway immediately, someone even screamed at me. But I didn't mind. I matched their glares. I even screamed back at the person who had screamed at me. I had seduced the devil and I had stolen his backbone. I could do anything. Who needs positivity from everyday train-goers? After the second stop, a homeless man came and sat next to me. He didn't seem to mind my crawling spine contained only by a flimsy pink ribbon.

The homeless man turned to me, "What's that you got on your back?"

"The Devil's backbone." I said proudly.

"Does it hurt?" He shoved a candy bar into his mouth through his beard.

"No."

"Is it like a medical condition?"

"No, it's more like being possessed." I did feel possessed. Something greater than me was now controlling my actions and it felt good. I didn't over think anything I did. I didn't care that no one wanted to sit near me on the subway, I didn't move out of people's way to give them more walking room, I didn't let people budge me in the Nuts-4-Nuts line on the street anymore. I had serious power.

I got off the train and went to quit my job at the shitty food magazine I worked at. We mostly printed fake nutrition facts that sold to bored house moms. I slammed open the door with the sign that read, “Nutrition is Just *Fiction!*!” I grabbed the sign and tore it in half before storming into my boss’s box-sized office.

“Well you look healthy for a girl on a sick day, or should I say week?” Paul was a passive aggressive middle-aged man with the world’s longest comb over and I hated him. He wore a Hawaiian shirt and kakis every single day. Paul most definitely would not make it on the list into Hell.

“I quit.” I said deadpan.

“Why is your sweatshirt on backwards?” Paul always pushed things, “Are you feeling alright, Lilith?”

“I feel better than ever, Paul,” I smirked and began unlacing my makeshift cloak, “Better than ever!” Paul grew uncomfortable and stood up to meet my eyes. I dropped my sweatshirt to my feet and showed him my uncovered body—my skin jaundice and veiny from my transplant, I turned to show him my animated-demon spine. He stumbled back towards the wall and gripped the collar of his Hawaiian shirt, “Lilith! You need medical attention, what happened to you?” I tried to reply, but when I did a deep cryptic voice answered. Paul began to cry. God, I hated to see him cry. Such a sad man wears Hawaiian shirts and kakis. But I couldn’t help myself, it just kept coming.

Paul, curled up on the ground now, began shrinking in my vision, implying to me that I was growing. I felt the room temperature increase and the heat gave me power. I lifted my hands—the left a hoof, the right a claw. I grabbed the clock off the wall with my newfangled claw and looked at my reflection: red eyes held in by thick veins, big purple lips, and horns to

top me off. I crushed the clock with my claw and threw it down. I laughed. I laughed and it sounded like the screams of orphaned children. I laughed and it sounded like the New York City tumbling to the ground one tower at a time. I laughed and it sounded like the center of the world had opened up and inhaled, sucking land back into itself. Like a candle, my laugh fed on itself to keep living and I laughed and laughed and laughed.

Until I found myself back in hell, unclothed and in front of the Devil. There were no dancing skeletons around us. No bar. Just me and the Devil in a fleshy bubble. “Have you had enough of your fun?” He asked me as he popped the last of his vertebrae back into place. When he was finished he folded his hoof and claw in front of him.

“How the *Hell* did I get back here?” I was still laughing to myself.

“You’re dead.” The Devil was not laughing.

“What do you mean dead?”

“I mean,” He unfolded his arms and stepped closer to me, his horns casting shadow over me, “You couldn’t possible think you could harness the power of the Devil and win.” I had stopped laughing and backed up. My skin began to burn, the invisible flams crawling from my toes to my legs, my knees gave out and I crumbled to the ground in screams. “You couldn’t *possibly* think you could play the *Devil* and win?” I burned from the inside out, my skin began to slip away and fall off my bone, fat boiling and muscles withering. His backbone expanded and stretched him to be more than three times my size. He grabbed me in his claw and stared at me as the final flakes of skin on my face melted off. The last thing I saw before my eyes popped out was his wicked smile. He whispered, “I know who you are.”