

## Perdition

I sit up shrieking. My all too small scrubs, blanket, pillow, and mattress are soaked with a cold sweat and boiling fresh tears. Everything remotely made of fabric clings to my gooseflesh. The flimsy blanket piles at my feet. Stuffing leaks out of the pillow, gashes-product of my remaining fingernails ripping in a blind panic. Blood trickles from my face where the stitches rubbed open throughout the night. The muscles in my back are taut and exhausted. I can't control my breath; it comes too fast, too wet.

I don't remember what nightmares tread on my eyes, but the fear courses through me like an electric shock. Looking out the windows reveals a pitch-black sky, though smoke shrouded both the moon and sun these past few days. With no easily accessible clock, there are at best two or three hours before they come to wake me up for bland bacon and medication. The nurses don't bother to visit to my room anymore until breakfast. Every morning comes with terror and screams.

A Coke would be divine. My raw throat begs for it.

I lay back down in bed, pulling the sheets back over my trembling nerves. I have to curl into a fetal ball just to get my body to fit under the thin blanket and fully on top of the sunken mattress. The white noise of air conditioning and nauseating smell of nicotine and toilet bowl cleaner are seared into my brain. After several years of living at Vista Del Mar, I had hoped to be immune to that horrendous smell.

I breathe slowly, purposefully. One. Two. Three. Four.

When the nurses wake me up, I stumble groggily into the hallway that is waxed and shined to a perpetually ugly sheen. The other bedrooms line up one after the other with their

massive steel doors sentinels to our lives. The high windows do not let in much daylight, everything bathed in a sickly fluorescent glow.

“Hi, Thomas! How are you doing today?”

I mumble an affirmation. Jose is one of the kinder nurses, and one of the few in the unit who can physically restrain me when Tuesday comes around. All the nurses know me by face and name. They all smile sweetly and say, “Thomas, so good to see you! So terrible you’re here.” The other patients just nod their heads slowly. There are no healthy smiles here. Not anymore.

Jose scans my wristband. “Name and date of birth?” He passes me a sacrament cup full of my colorful morning regiment, officially starting my day.

My breakfast consists of spongy pancakes made with too much flour and not enough sugar. Instead of my daily requested Coke, I drink my apple juice concentrate as I watch the monstrosities suck up every drop of water and syrup from the plate. The man sitting across from me cuts his meal into exact little squares. Two of the other patients watch the local news, this month’s forest fire tearing through the county. I can smell it through the spotty static screen.

After my supposed meal, I sit on the concrete foam chair in the corner with my knees up to my chin and watch the clock, counting down the infinite seconds before my meeting with The Devil. Some of the others play card games. Joanne draws with her customary crayons. I desperately want a Coke. Even with my anxiety, it is difficult to pick at my skin with only three fingers on my left hand. I avoid looking at my reflection in the windows. There lies the monster.

“The forest fire has been raging for a week now. We’re not sure what caused it in particular, but with the drought lasting two hundred days without rainfall, it is no surprise that

the flames have spread this quickly. Hundreds of neighborhoods in Ventura are being evacuated. Firefighters are struggling to fight it and Thomas, are you there? Are you listening to me?"

The flickering bleeding skeleton by the television points to my right. The new nurse waits for me in the hall. Ten in the morning. It is my time. As I unfurl myself from the protective ball and stretch to my full height, the nurse pales a little. I duck pretty heavily through the doorway, trying not to get my gangly arms caught on the rugged jamb.

I smile awkwardly. "Is it the scars?"

The greenhorn shakes her head. "Dr. Richards is ready to see you, Thomas."

I hum acknowledgment and take the few dreadful steps to the pit.

The Devil waits for me. He always does. He sits in his comfortable chair, his long, wrinkled fingers steepled on his desk. As the new nurse leaves me to the work, the Devil smiles. His immortal smile is the most unnerving part. The corners of his pink mouth rise as if fishhooks lodged in his lips pull it up in an unnatural arc. The smile tries to trick me into thinking he cares, but the apathy in his gray eyes says much otherwise.

"Thomas, how are we this fine morning?"

I sit down in the low narrow chair. I try not to look at the Devil, an impossible task with all of the taunting mirrors in the room. The Devil is evil, but my head is worse.

"I'm still bad, Dr. Richards. Could use a Coke, though."

The fishhooks rise. "You know we don't have caffeine on the unit. Describe bad for me, Thomas."

My eyes flicker from mocking surface to mocking surface. The ghosts of my bitten fingers flare as my hands fumble uselessly in my lap. "Well, if you were to put a loaded gun in front of me, I would not..."

“...hesitate to use it. Yes, you’ve been saying as much for the past several days. Thomas, I don’t know what to tell you. You have been in and out of this facility for a decade now. Outside, there are challenges. It’s scary, I know. But hiding in this hole is not a way to live.”

The mirrors crack. My body slowly tenses up, a spring loaded with the weight of my horrendous life.

The Devil leans forward, his ancient hands not moving from his desk. “Seeing the ocean from our outdoor area can’t be the same as walking the beach, can it? Don’t you want to see your friends and family more than two at a time for an hour? You are a bright man, what about going to school, or pursuing a job? You need to get back to the real world.”

The jagged edge of my fingernails cut into my palm. “Real world? I don’t know what the real world is.”

He sighs. “I know...”

My fleeting gaze hardens on the Devil. “Know? Don’t pretend you know. All those years of schooling and career, and you don’t have an inkling of an understanding. If you had any idiotic idea of what it is to live in my real world, you’d never let me leave.”

The Devil’s smile falters. “Thomas, if you were more open to the idea of adding supplementary medication, then maybe your reality would...”

My sudden rise comes with such force to push the desk away. “I said no!” I bellow. “You will not take what’s left of my mind away from me!”

The two behemoths on staff burst in. They pick me up by the arms and drag me out of the office. My last view of the Devil for the day is him adjusting his gaudy tie, straightening his white shirt, and pushing his desk back into position. I get to view the emotion in his eyes. It

comforts me that the Devil does feel something about his patients other than as a means to a paycheck.

As the nurses take me to my sequestered quiet room, Jose chides me. “Come on, Thomas. The old man is just trying to help you.”

I can only laugh at his statement, the others in the hall scattering out of my way. The Devil’s eyes follow me. “Can I get my Coke, now?”

Chuck scoffs. “Like hell you get a Coke after that.”

As I kick my bare feet, I watch the chains drag behind me, echoing in the quiet. I look out one of the windows and see that the smoke is getting thicker. The sun is no longer blinding, instead a constant great red eye over the world.

In my quiet room behind the nurse’s station, I sing along to the Baby Beethoven album playing on repeat over the speaker. My energy fades and I slump onto the dusty mattress. My gaze travels to the ceiling. I don’t need to count the stars in the false night sky, but I number them to the beat anyway. One. Two. Three. Four. I imagine holding an ice-cold glass bottle filled to the brim with Coke. The droplets of moisture run down the fibrous wounds that make up my arm. Voices laugh. Twelve repeats of the CD pass before I fall into a fitful state of slumber.

When something jostles me awake, there comes a smell of burning wood is strong enough to make my eyes water and my throat choke. I come to the world slowly as the magic still courses in my system. Jose lifts me up and starts to carry me out of the quiet room.

“Thomas, we need to leave! The fire is almost here. We have to go.”

I blink lamely. “What?”

A crowd fills the hallway. The patients are scared. A few of them are crying. Some have their arms full of belongings they let us keep, books and blankets and such. The nurses direct everyone towards the steel doors that lead to the world. For the first time in my life, I see both doors to my home propped open into the night.

Instead of the expected cool breeze, smoke and heat make their way to my lungs. As Jose pushes me forward towards the world, I look out the high windows. Through their thick glass, there are not stars but a storm of low black clouds lit up by flickering orange and yellow.

“I think I need my meds.”

He does not stop but offers me some comfort. “Thomas, this is real. This forest fire is moving faster than the news said it would. We are evacuating the hospital now.”

I grin dumbly. Real, he says.

The nurses’ plan is falling apart. The other intakes run around in a mess, some breaking for the doors. I look into the bedrooms and see patients crouched in corners screaming at the approaching blaze. Chuck hollers with a harsh throat at the other techs to gather everyone up. “We are not leaving a head behind!”

Jose and I pass through the forever shut gate. From the fluorescent lights and calm air conditioning inside to the towers of flame and smoke and heat outside proves such a drastic change that I stumble, bringing Jose down with me. Pain flares as gravel rips open my palms. His grip on me is lost. Standing up in the warm night air, I watch chaos rip the place apart. Four yellow school buses line up in the parking lot, people being loaded into them as soon as they exit the hospital. The flames surround Vista Del Mar in every direction, reaching high into the black ink of night. The wind is strong, blowing ash and sparks around me in a dance of light and destruction.

This is it. This is my chance.

I know where a vending machine is.

I turn away from the parking lot and run out of the bedlam into the quiet of the trees.

Inlaid with the terror and screams, people yell my name. My legs don't listen to the desperate recalls of the nurses. There is nothing that can stop me.

The water laps at the shore with grace. The cold front of the ocean clashes with the heat of the flames. The sky is a singularity of ash and air thrashing below the stars. The fire is a towering leviathan, orange and white arms lashing out at the battlements of both human and natural construction. Small glows float erratically in the air, hovering around the beast. The screams of people litter the night.

I sit with my back to the waves. The seawater soaks my scrubs all the way up to the chest. My heart beats at a lethargic tempo. One. Two. Three. Four. It smells like a candle my mom would have, salt and smoke. I'm holding the can of Coke in my right hand, my left fist a mangled mess from smashing the vending machine. Victory tastes so sweet, so real, as I watch my personal hell burn into nothing.

The whole complex is a bonfire. The embers float on the wind all the way to me, landing on my face. The heat is powerful enough to redden my skin. I can hear the wood creak and groan. Every few seconds, a window sends countless shards away from the heat, tearing into wood and soil alike. The buildings burn for a time before crumpling like wet paper into their corrupted foundations. Millions upon millions of fireflies leap into the air, fairies released to celebrate my freedom.

### **Author Bio**

Alex Everett is a bioinformatics student at Utah Tech. He was the runner-up for the Annie Atkin Tanner Memorial Poetry Scholarship for his poem “Scotch and Soda” and two of his plays (*A Night at the Pharmacy*; *The Door is Shut*) were produced by the Utah Tech Theatre Department.