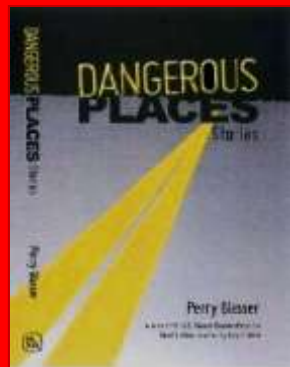


Satan Takes 12 Steps

short fiction by Perry Glasser



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Satan Takes 12 Steps

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Satan comes to our Thursday night meeting. He sits in the back, close to the door. We all know what that's like. We have all been there. First-timer jitters. You sit. You smoke. You listen. Maybe you come back. Most don't.

But this is Satan. You have to wonder.

Two weeks go by. We figure we are okay. But then Satan shows up again. Don't ask me why Thursday. Don't ask me why our meeting. No one gets turned away, right? But Satan says nothing. Just sits in the last fold-up seat in the fourth row from the back, the one closest to the wall. He smokes.

I let myself stare. It is a funny thing, but whenever Satan takes another cigarette from the pack he has on the seat beside his, the cigarette is a brand different from the last. You can tell by the color of the filters. It's not a cigarette case, just a pack like any other. But somehow, Satan's cigarettes are pre-packed variable. I figure, he has his pack special ordered.

After the meeting, we break down the chairs, and then

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Marge and me go for coffee. Two blocks from the Hall, under the el they serve the coffee in a small, steel pot. Real china. The cups are sometimes chipped, but they use saucers. It's a nice place.

Marge says, "What do you think, Louis?" She stirs three sugars, no milk, no cream, and hunkers way down in the booth. The rain outside seems greasy on the window.

I tell her I don't know. I am willing to wait and see.

Marge and I know each other what? five years? and we have been through some things. I have no secrets from Marge. She knows it all. I am pretty sure she has none from me, but if she did it would not bother me. If she wants a little bit private, that's her business. We are friends from the meetings. Three years ago, we fooled around a little, but that stopped. I think we both needed a friend more than we needed to fool around.

"I worry," she says. "Why is Satan at the meeting?"

I remind her that everyone has a reason, but no one needs to give one. When he is ready, the Devil will tell us why he attends the Thursday night 12-step meeting for degenerate gamblers.

She nods. "Eight to five he is up to no good."

"Could be," I say. "It is the Devil."

"That's right," Marge says. "He is the Devil."

We are not talking about some Charlie Manson look-alike. This is not Al Pacino as a lawyer. Make no mistake. Satan is near nine-foot. He wears a blue sweatsuit, but the guy's complexion is redder than the reddest Indian. He wears Nikes, cheap ones. His hands are big and, yeah, there is an aroma I never smell before but now it has been in my nose twice I know is brimstone. Rotten eggs.

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It's the sulfur. The guy at our meeting is Satan, all right. The Prince of Darkness. The Master of Lies is in an aisle seat at the VFW Hall on Thursdays at 7:00.

I ask, "You think we should ask him for coffee next time? Make him feel welcome? It might help him along."

"Get real."

* * *

The next week, Satan steps up. Third speaker, right after Jeannie the computer expert tells us she is working on her personal inventory. It's hard, Jeannie says. We all nod. It *is* hard.

Satan is too tall for the lectern, but he hunches down a little. His hands grip the wooden lip. We are a small group. We tried a microphone once, but nobody liked it.

"My name is Lucifer and I am . . ." He stops. We lean forward a little. You want to help. But he has to say the words. "My name is Lucifer and I have lost control of my life."

Close enough. We all say, "Hi, Lucifer."

People make fun of the name thing. It's easy to make fun of. But the first time you hear a group welcome you, it's something. After a while, you count on it.

"I don't know what to say," Satan says.

"Say what's in your heart," a guy named Earl says. Earl has been here a long time. A lot of us owe a lot to Earl. Anyone falls, you need a guy like Earl to make the catch. So it's good that Earl speaks. Me, I am wondering how many names Satan has and if we invite him for coffee, what will he want us to call him?

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Marge is across the room. She looks at me. I shrug. Her arms cross on her chest.

“I never had control of my life.” His Satanic Majesty goes on in this way, telling us stuff. He’s dodging, of course. Everyone had control of their lives, once. But no one catches him up on it. It’s his first time. We listen. It’s hard enough to get it right. You listen to help, not to judge. Everyone starts out with some control. No one is a victim from birth. Lucifer wants to say his life is not like that? Okay. You listen.

But later I say to Marge, “I think he may have a point.”

“What point?”

“Maybe the guy never had control. He does what he does because he is supposed to.”

Marge isn’t buying. “He’s going to have a hell of a time with turning his will and life over to a Higher Power,” she says.

I see what she means.

“You don’t get it, do you?” she says. She is waiting for her coffee to cool off.

I tell her I get it.

“No you don’t. The joke. ‘Hell of a time?’”

She is right. I did not get it. “I got it,” I say, and to keep my eyes from hers I signal the waitress. The girl brings me a cruller.

“Everyone chooses,” Marge says. “You lose control, you lose control. No shame in it if you know it and takes the steps.”

I say that’s why he is here. I say you have to give the Devil

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the benefit of the doubt.

“You mean ‘Give the Devil his due.’” Marge says.

Marge can really piss a person off.

* * *

Just one meeting more and Satan—Lucifer, Nick, Scratch, whatever—is telling us he has always acknowledged that God could restore him to sanity and that he has personally asked God to remove his defects of character and his shortcomings. A person could take six months, a year, a lifetime, easy, to accomplish all twelve steps, but Satan is moving along every week. “God will not restore my sanity,” Satan says. “I asked. He refused.”

That has to be tough. We murmur in sympathy. Some of us nod. Even Marge nods a little. One of the things you learn in Group is that when you don’t know what to do, you nod. Affirmation is a good thing.

I steal a look at old Earl. Earl is chewing his lip. Earl once explained to me that the line on football and sports is not about what someone thinks is the quality of the teams, but is about dividing the betting public—that is you and me—into two equal crowds. This is how bookmakers make money. They do not handicap teams; they gauge bettors. So Earl is one smart guy, and though I know for a fact Earl goes to church every Sunday, I am also sure it does Earl little good to think God turns down requests for help.

But you have to admit, Satan is in a unique situation. Every degenerate gambler knows that temptation is everywhere, but it is something to have before you Satan who put it there. I knew a guy

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once took a week's receipts out of his boss's unlocked cash box to bet on a sure thing in the 4th race at Hollywood Park. He liked the jockey. I figure, unless the jockey can put the horse on his shoulders and run, there is no sure thing at the ponies. This is why I like the puppies myself, the greyhounds. You can handicap animals when there is no human element.

Satan says, "So if it comes to a higher power, I need to look to the group."

Comes to the 12-step program, Satan is on Step 13. This is what I say to Marge after the meeting. He's got us going and coming. He's way past where we are.

She lights her cigarette with the burning end of mine. "He skipped the inventory," she says. "That's Step Four. 'Make a searching and fearless inventory of ourselves.'" Marge is one for getting everything right.

"I don't know," I say. "You name it, Satan takes the blame. His inventory, that's public record."

Marge squints at me.

"Wars, pestilence..." As I tick things off on my fingers, I start to see Satan's problem. No wonder he is at the meeting. "Look," I say. "Anything bad ever happened, Satan takes the rap. You start with Eve. Satan really is out of control."

"That's why he was cast from Heaven."

"You've been reading up," I say.

Marge shrugs. She went to college and then some, I remember. She could have been a teacher. In fact, she was once. "Eve could have said, 'No.'"

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“So that’s Satan’s fault?”

“What?”

“That Eve bit the apple.”

“You figure it out. I can’t.” Marge adds an extra sugar to her coffee. “He’s either out of control or over-controlled. But what worries me is he wants us to be his higher power.”

“That’s a problem?”

“Geez, Louis. Sometimes you have to deal with the elephant in the living room.”

“I don’t see it.”

“You want to be Satan’s higher power?”

“If that’s what the guy needs.”

She shakes her head. “You figure God won’t mind if you forgive the Devil?”

* * *

The next week, Satan does not show. Neither does Marge.

This is not the first time Marge does not make it, but you can see why I worry a little.

* * *

Marge calls me on the weekend. Like I figured, she was with the Devil. “Just coffee,” she says. “I swear.”

“It’s none of my business.”

“Just coffee, Louis.”

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I listen a long time. I can hear her breathing above the hum. There is always a hum on the telephone. You have to listen to hear it. It never really goes away. You have to not be afraid of silence. I wait long enough and Marge speaks.

“Okay, maybe it was more than coffee. But nothing to be ashamed of. I swear. Satan wanted to know what I thought if he humbly asked the Higher Power to remove his liabilities.” This is Step 7.

“Satan wants to pray?”

“I asked him that. Satan doesn’t pray. He goes straight to the top if he wants to be heard.”

I wait.

“Louis, he said the group is his Higher Power and so he doesn’t have to go to God anymore. That’s allowed, you know. He said he’d ask the group.”

I tell her I am not sure of any of this

“This is why I am talking to you, Louis. I am not sure of any of it either.”

You have to make 12-Step programs okay for atheists. Everyone is welcome, right? It’s not a problem. You make the higher power the group. It works pretty well for most people. But the Devil is no atheist. For Satan, it’s not a matter of belief. “I am not sure,” I say. I reach for my cigarettes. My pack is empty. “You need to talk?” I ask. “Anything else you want to tell me?”

Again, I listen to the hum of the line until Marge says, “No.”

“So you are all right with this?”

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“I did not say that. Louis. What if we forgive the Devil? What happens to us?”

It’s a puzzle, all right. A real mindbender. “Where did you have this conversation?” I ask Marge.

“Don’t ask me that, Louis.”

* * *

The next Thursday, Marge and Satan do show up. They come into the Hall separately. But I do not know what it is, I cannot shake the feeling that they arrived together. Marge looks like she always does. Your jeans. Your scrunchy for her ponytail. No make-up. Bag-eyes. It would be hard to guess that Marge used to be a Casino junkie. Casinos usually call for class. Marge’s game was Keno, which is like Bingo but much, much faster. As far as your chances of winning, you would do better to flush your money down a toilet.

Satan is wearing the usual—blue jumpsuit and the Nikes. I feel the jealousy, and have no idea why I feel jealous.

A lot of people are talking this night. It’s a funny thing. People sometimes speak just to speak, but this night everyone is reporting progress. Irene tells us she has apologized to her daughter, and it is hard not to cry when she tells us that her daughter allowed her to hold the grandkids, Benjamin and Polly. James tells us he has worked hard and long to make a list of the people he has harmed. He has each name on an index card and carries the pack snapped in a rubber band in his pocket. He is working on the will power to make amends. When he looks at the cards, if he thinks of something, he writes it on a card. We all know James is a bookkeeper. He does not know if he will have the

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courage to do the next step, but we all tell him he will find a way and that makes him smile. When he sits down, Marge stands up. This is not that unusual, but it is nice to see. She is making a continual effort to take a personal inventory and tells us she was wrong. She does not say about what, but that is all right with most of us. It's progress. Other people talk. The front of the room looks like the line to OTB on Kentucky Derby Day. Everyone wants a shot at the lectern. People seem to be smoking less. We go through the coffee urn twice.

Satan gets up front.

"Hel-looo, Satan."

Satan wants to improve his conscious contact with the Higher Power, which is us. I am not sure of this plan. But the mood is upbeat. We are all high on caffeine. Everyone says *Sure, Go for it.*

What happens next is hard to describe. It's like we all have a dream on turbo power, but everyone's dream is different. Boom boom boom, stuff is coming in. You don't hear it; you don't see it. You just suddenly know all the things Satan wants you to know about yourself. I look at Earl, and he is laughing. A lot of the group sits perfectly still, palms on their knees, stunned. I am a little staggered myself, and see the moment I realized that effort did not guarantee reward. I was what, 12? No wonder I spent so long not caring. My mother was not a good woman. I like to think she tried her best, but it's time to realize, she was not a good woman. I have wanted to think that everything makes sense—it does not. So what?

I shake off the feeling. I see Marge is the only person crying.

"He is the Master of Lies," she says out loud, but no one

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pays attention to her.

Marge and Satan leave together. He has his arm around her shoulder.

* * *

I skip the meetings for three weeks. Who needs this? I ask myself. I know I have a problem. Deal with it, I say. When did it become right to think a guy what has problems is more admirable for admitting he is not equal to them?

But after a month, I am looking in the sports section of the newspaper at the results. This is harmless, right? I read the results four days in a row, and so I know it is not my imagination. The payoffs at the dog races are such you think maybe it is Christmas. Not a winner is paying under \$12.00. Never mind your quinellas and perfectas. These are straight win bets. Anyone with a half brain can make a living at this. Long shots are running box-to-wire as regular as Amtrak. Trifecta's are all Uncle Sam payoffs—meaning they are so large they have to withhold taxes from the winnings. The seven post comes in four times one matinee, which means big, big dollars because your outside lanes are tough, very tough scores. If you don't know the pups, let me tell you that four outside-lane winners on a single card is about as likely as the animals catching the electric bunny and inviting it to dine on steak and ice-cream.

I buy a program and a cigar for the Wednesday night card, and I spend a long day staring at the sheet. A man with the courage of his convictions can make a lot of money very easily.

But I don't go. I remind myself: I am a degenerate gambler. For me, it is not about money. It is not about winning. It is not

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about fun.

It is about losing.

I figure I am overdue for a meeting.

* * *

Things have changed.

The VFW Hall on Thursday night has music. There are colored lights and a disco mirrored ball hanging from the ceiling. Laser lights slice the smoke. There is a band. There are some chairs set up, all right, but they are against one wall. There are streamers drooping on the light fixtures.

The place is elbow-to-elbow with people smoking and blabbing. A few dance. I can't find Satan, but I do find Marge. She is wearing a black dress and showing a lot of shoulder. Simple black pumps, but heels high enough her posture has that come-hither look you have to love. I think she has lost weight. Fact is she looks cuter than the bee's knees.

"Louis," she says. "Good to see you." She kisses my cheek and her breast touches my arm near my elbow.

"What happened?" I have to shout. When Marge leans close to hear me, I smell her perfume. Opium, I think. Something like that. It's heavy and musky.

She takes my hand to lead me outside where the music is muffled and we can talk. She offers me a cigarette, and out of the pack comes a Marlboro Light—my brand—but next to it I see an unfiltered Lucky Green. That's a brand from World War II, for crying out loud. You can't buy them. No one sells them. But there one is in Marge's cigarette package, a 50-year old coffin nail

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looking fresh as tomorrow's butter. As I take the Marlboro, it starts to burn. No match. No lighter. Marge has learned a few tricks.

"I forgave myself, Louis. I've never felt so unburdened."

"I mean what happened to the meetings?"

Marge's tongue wets her his lips and she looks past me over my shoulder out to the darkness. "If you don't want to gamble, Louis, don't. Anything you do to excess, take control. It's simple."

"Marge, you know that isn't how it works."

She takes a cigarette of her own.

"Satan taught you that."

Marge laughs. "Satan? Don't go fundamentalist on me, Louis." Her lipstick smears the end of her cigarette.

The music inside is Disco Inferno. I know, that's too ridiculous, but I am telling you just how it happened. So I say to Marge, "Satan. He was coming to the meetings."

"The tall guy? I remember. Well, he stopped."

"He stopped."

"The same day you did. We haven't seen him since you've been gone. He left when you did."

* * *

Saturday night I bet Aldo Star in the 4th. That sweet hound comes around the last turn in second, swings wide, and passes the leader to win by a head and pay \$28.40. I've got ten dollars on him, so we are talking about a \$140 score. There is no way to figure

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such a dog. I just know he is due.

But do I go home?

There are more races on the card. I can see where I am going. It is not about winning. But what it is is sweet. I am responsible. I am out of control, but I am running my race. Mine. Like the puppies. There are worse things, no? This is me.

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