



# Sympathy for the Devil

Ally  
Deen

In what distant deeps or skies,  
 Burnt the fire of thine eyes?  
 On what wings dare he aspire?  
 What the hand, dare seize the fire?  
 -William Blake



The phone rang, startling me. I shifted my homework aside and walked to the wall to pick up the clunky rotary handle.  
 "Hello?"  
 First I only heard sobs, then small sounds, a deep breath.  
 "Hello? Who is this?"  
 The voice cracked and broke, "Ally—I need—I need help."  
 "Cee Cee?"  
 "It's bad this time. Can you come?"  
 "Oh, God. Cee, how bad? Should I . . . ?" My voice dropped away, knowing the answer but needing to ask.  
 "No, Jesus, no; she'd kill me. Even if she thought the neighbors did it," another breath, bigger, "no. Besides, she's already out. I took the cigarette out of her hand and drank the rest of her damn bourbon."  
 "Okay, but . . . yeah, okay. Nevermind. I'll be there as fast as I can. I'm leaving now."

I dropped the phone into its cradle, closed my biology textbook, and looked at the clock, then out the dark window. Anxiety dragged icy claws down my spine, but I stood, shrugged into my jacket, and stepped out the door. I headed north one block, then seven blocks west. The first few streets were always the worst, walking through deep slums past hookers and crackheads, dealers and junkies. A few months earlier, a kid at school told me, "You get used to stuff like that. You just learn to ignore it."

I had thought he was crazy. Now I passed them by, head down, noticing as little as possible. I made it to Penn, turned, and walked another twenty-two blocks north. The trip was completely forgettable. Forty-five minutes and I let myself in the side door.

Cee Cee's attic loft sat at the top of narrow stairs in the rear of the house. I knocked lightly and went in. She was perched in the window seat, folded around herself like a wounded bird. She turned as I entered, and even in the dim light I could tell that it was much, much worse than the last time. The right side of her face looked like a lumpy, rotten potato with puffy, slit eyes. Blood dried in her nostrils and the cracks of her distended lips, which trembled as tears streaked her face.

"Oh, God," I whispered.

Her busted mouth fumbled the words and her voice shook like a woman of eighty-four rather than fourteen. "It hurts. It hurts inside, outside, everywhere. It hurts more than I can hold." Her voice cracked and the words dissolved into tears. I reached toward her but pulled back, then just opened my arms. She curled into my lap and I stroked her hair, the only spot not bruised or broken. Her shoulders shook against my thigh.

"Shhh, shhhhhh. Close your eyes. We're in the woods and we're safe. Feel the wind in your hair?" I glided my fingers through her long, silky, black hair, all the way to the tips, then let it fall. "Now look in the clearing. There's a well. Can you see it?"

Cee Cee nodded against my leg.

"Good. Now gather up all the hurt you can reach, wad it up tight, and throw it away. Throw it in and watch it sink."

There were no words after that, only a melody of tears as we wrapped ourselves together in pain and comfort. Cee Cee fell asleep just before ten. I pulled a soft blanket across her thin, battered shoulders, marveling at the steel beneath taut skin, then rushed outside and down the sidewalk. Mom would be home from her shift at the hospital by 11:30 at the latest, and she might call to ask if I wanted anything before she left. I could pretend I'd been in the shower or asleep when she called, maybe, but I *had* to beat her home.

I rushed down Penn with an awkward, panicky gait, not wanting to draw

attention by running but desperate to make good time. I had tunnel vision and didn't notice a truck turning at the eight-lane intersection. I stepped halfway off the curb directly into its path. My breath caught as the driver honked and I yanked my foot back, stumbling. Hands on my knees, I took deep breaths, looked again, and crossed. I heard several older, clearly drunk boys cat-calling from the gas station parking lot. One started my way but his voice faded when I didn't slow down. A few blocks later, a rottweiler hurled into a chain-link fence right beside me, barking and growling and setting the metal links ringing. My reaction was extreme. Already frightened, out of time, panicking, and lost in anxious thought, I screamed and began to run, my heart climbing into my throat.

I never saw what tripped me, but I felt the muscles rip as my right foot stopped while my body flew forward. I dropped, gasping, but jolted up and took off running again, away from the dog and the boys and the cars and the dark and the fear. I made it maybe half a block before white-hot pain finally spiked through the adrenaline, shooting up my ankle and along my entire leg. Spots of silvery dust floated across my sight. I dropped to my hands and knees, scraping them bloody, but crawled to a lamppost and pulled myself up. I hobbled on, cruising from object to object like a toddler, gritting my teeth in the long, anchorless stretches between rests. I made it to 10th Street, the longest stretch behind me but still eight blocks from home.

If I could make it to Ricky's house four blocks away, we could probably convince our mothers that I'd hurt myself on the way there, and no one would need to know I'd been halfway across town, alone, at night.

If I could make it that far.

I stood, panting, death-grip on a street light and cold sweat breaking out across my forehead. Across the street, I noticed movement and glanced up. A man in a long robe crossed the parking lot of the Nazarene church. I stared at him while I fought to catch my breath, wondering what Nazarenes believed and if they had priests or if their preachers or pastors just wore robes. I looked down and willed my foot to stop hurting, just long enough to get us to a familiar place, preferably before I went crazy, or Mom beat me home and went crazier.

I resumed inching along just as a tan SUV pulled beside me and slowed.

I did not stop. My heart did, though, the beat stumbling worse than my clumsy feet.

I hobbled on, tears leaking from my eyes, praying hard for the vehicle to pass. I prayed for my ankle to stop exploding with every touch of my toes to the ground; I prayed that my mother wouldn't kill me; I prayed that nothing else would go wrong with this awful night; I prayed for that car to go away; I prayed for God to please,

please help me out of this mess; I prayed *hard*.

The window rolled down with a hum and a squeak, and I noticed a man inside as the car crept along beside me. "Are you alright, child?"

My head snapped up in surprise. The voice was gentle—kind and melodious. I blinked at him for a moment, then realized he was the priest I'd just seen. An argument began in my head.

*Will he offer me a ride? Is it okay to take a ride from him? He's a man, and a stranger, but he's a priest. That makes it okay, right? He appeared, literally, while I prayed for help. Surely it's safer with him than alone and hurt. I can't even run for help if I have to.*

Fear kept my tongue glued to the roof of my mouth.

"May I help you? You look hurt. Do you need to go to the hospital?"

The word hospital reminded me that Mom would be home any minute, if she wasn't already. "N-no hospital. I just need to go home."

"Do you want to come across the street and call your parents? Or do you live far? Would you like me to take you?"

I hesitated, a deep-rooted instinct screaming at me to be cautious.

His voice reassured and persuaded me, though later I couldn't recall his exact words. I trembled with an unshakeable fear, followed by deep shame—shame that my nasty, soiled childhood left me suspicious of all men to the point that I was terrified even of a priest.

"Can you get in? Do you need help?" His door cracked open and I scrambled around the hood.

"I-I'm okay; I can get in." I didn't want him to touch me. Waves of hot, gritty mortification blew across my mind: I *should* be ashamed of myself for thinking that a priest might hurt me. The thought seemed so hateful that it must be a sin, and I would surely be judged for it someday. I pulled myself slowly into the SUV's high seat, fumbling with the door. The car smelled like leather and pine, which made me think of horseback riding with Nanna. Surrounded by that scent, the pressure off of my foot, I began to relax.

He put the car into drive and pulled away from the curb. The door locks snapped forward with a pop and I jumped.

He laughed at me softly, under his breath, like he didn't want to embarrass me but couldn't hold it in. "The doors lock automatically when the car starts moving. It's to prevent carjacking." He smiled, a condescending twist to his lips. I felt dumb and unsophisticated.

"Where do you live?" he asked.

"Ninth and Brauer," I replied, instinctively giving the intersection next to my

own. I felt more hot shame rise up my neck to my face. I had no idea why I'd lied, but it was done and I was going to hell. He turned off the multi-lane and into the ghetto. Away from the larger street lights, his soft voice seemed to float to me from nowhere, asking question after question.

"What's your name?"

"Do you attend church?"

"Where do you go to school?"

"What grade are you in?"

"How old are you? Really, just fourteen?"

As he spoke, his voice lost its gentle quality.

"Have you lived here long? You have an adorable accent. Where are you from?"

"What's your shirt say?" His eyes cutting toward my chest.

"Do you have a big family? Who's waiting for you at home?"

I looked over and noticed a fine sheen of sweat on his forehead.

"Do you have a boyfriend?"

He didn't seem like a priest any longer, the mask of kindness melting down his sweaty face. My heart, barely settled from earlier, began to pound against my ribs.

*What do I do? Am I imagining this? If I act scared, will I offend him? What if I'm mistaking the situation? Maybe he's just awkward speaking to young girls . . .*

My mind raced, desperate to rationalize the situation and make everything go back to normal, back to safety. I could see my house, but I lied again.

"It's that one." I pointed to the only house with a porch light on this late, one street and four houses from mine.

He eased to the curb and stopped, though we were almost a block away from the house I'd pointed out. This spot was dark, no street light, no car in the driveway. He put the car in neutral instead of park and the doors stayed locked.

His hand reached toward me and I froze. He brushed a strand of hair from my face, tucked it behind my ear. I shivered, and that made him smile. I began to shake, sure I would vomit any second.

"You're pretty." That hand, still right in my face. His knuckles grazed down my cheek. My stomach clenched, rolled.

"Do you like boys? I bet they like you."

My breath hitched, then stuck in my chest so hard I gasped. His knuckles lowered to my throat, stroking my neck, dragging his fingertip down to rest on my collarbone. I stopped breathing.

"Do you like to kiss boys? Do they like to kiss you?" His fingers curled around

a chunk of hair and tugged, gently first, then harder.

"Look at me." His voice ground out, hard now, like loose gravel under tires.

"Do you like to suck on things?"

My held breath escaped on a small, keening sound.

"You like lollipops?" He swiped his finger back and forth across my lips.

"I bet you like fat, juicy pickles. Do you like it when they squirt in your mouth?"

He gripped my chin hard and pulled it toward him.

I looked at him, no words coming out, and he frowned again. His eyes, like his voice, had gone flat and hard. "You know what I mean, right?"

"Please, just let me go home," I begged. My voice sounded strange, high and babyish.

His smile came back, brighter than ever.

"Sure, honey, in just a little while you can go home, if you're a good girl. You are a good girl, aren't you?" He licked his lips. "You're a virgin, aren't you?" He was breathing faster now.

I closed my eyes. I would not say that for him.

"Please, just let me go home," I whispered it like a prayer, not sure who I was talking to.

"In a minute. Right now I have a big, fat popsicle for you to wrap those virgin lips around." He reached for my hand as he said this. I yanked back automatically, whimpering, and his face contorted, morphed into something inhuman. The bones seemed to shift, and he growled at me.

I squeezed my eyes shut and bent my head, but terror gripped me too strongly for any sort of rational thought. He grabbed my hand again, hard enough that I felt the knuckles grind against each other. I thought he might break them, but then he just rubbed my hand with the pad of his thumb.

"Raise your shirt."

I cried quietly now, trying not to upset him, but the tears slipped from my clenched eyes and down my cheeks. I thought I might pee myself, if I didn't puke first.

I felt him shift and my eyes flew open. He'd sat back, and now he stared at me, his thumb still tracing slow circles across my palm. His head swiveled. He stared at my lower-middle class neighborhood for a moment. He sighed, deeply and sadly, as though resigning himself to something distasteful.

"I'll give you forty dollars to let me suck your titties."

My stomach heaved and bile rose, sharp and acrid, in my throat. I squeezed my eyes closed once more and leaned forward, curled in on myself just like Cee Cee had been when I found her earlier.

I wondered if anyone would ever find me, and what I might look like if they did.

"Come put your head in my lap, baby." The hand was back in my hair, snaking around my neck, pressing sweaty fingers against my skin.

"I'll give you a hundred dollars if you'll suck it." His voice was whiny now, almost pleading. I shook my head violently.

Fear seemed tangible, a squatting monster crushing my chest, ready to eat me alive. I couldn't breathe.

My mind iced over like a winter pond as reality sank in.

*I'll die soon.*

*He won't let me go after he hurts me. After he hurts me, he can't let me go. He'll kill me after, and he'll make me wish he'd killed me first.*

Regrets flashed through my mind like fireflies.

*Does Nanna know how much I love her? I've never . . . there's so much I've never—*

"I know you can use the money," he said, his voice soft again, almost disinterested. This business talk was deflating him. "It'll be okay, and no one will ever know. Come on, sweetie," he coaxed, reaching over and trailing one finger lightly up my leg, pushing it roughly between the apex of my thighs. That brought the hard back to his voice.

"I'll give you \$75 to let me tickle that sweet little pussy. And you'll like it, baby. I promise."

He reached up and rubbed his thumb across my tiny breast, groaning and squeezing my leg when the nipple automatically tightened. I began to sob, coarse, racking gulps tossing my shoulders. He squeezed harder and I squealed in that high, not-me voice.

"Stop that!" He dug his fingers into my thigh and shook me.

I stopped.

He pulled his hand back across the car, reaching down for something beside his seat. My mind, paralyzed with fear for what felt like hours, thawed in some primal instinct. I slammed my body into the door, flung back the lock, and yanked as hard as I could on the handle. The door swung open and I hurtled out in one motion. I hit the ground right foot first and a scream died in my lungs as my ankle crumpled. Pain seared through muscle and bone and fear. Only a whisper of a scream escaped my lips as I scrambled across the dark lawn on my hands and one leg.

Behind me, he yelled, "Come back! I'll take you home, just get in the car! COME BACK HERE!"

I finally sucked down enough breath to scream, but I was crying so hard it

was more of a squawk. Then I heard shoes on pavement. *He was coming after me.*

My voice appeared like magic, welling up from so deep inside that people likely heard me five blocks over. I howled again and again, bringing my mother and several neighbors to their windows. Hop-hobbling, I crawled up the slope of our lawn like a lame animal, hair flying wild around me. I must have looked like some strange, overgrown crab-monster.

Once I cleared the rise, I hit our front door so hard that I rebounded backward several feet and nearly knocked myself out. Mom flew out the door yelling, and for the first time in my life I was happy to hear the sound.

I couldn't speak, could hardly breathe. One of the elderly ladies next door held a scrap of paper. "I think I got most of the license number. I'm going to call the police. What should I tell them, honey?"

Panic gripped me at the thought of having to explain, to relive the nightmare. To have to possibly face him again. I saw that face from when I had jerked my hand back, that monstrous twisting of features. I felt the brush of his sweaty fingers against my skin. Mom saved me the trouble of forming an excuse.

"Give that here," she said. "I'll deal with this." She took the paper and shoved it into the pocket of her scrubs, then gripped my arm and helped me sit on the steps. Her thick red waves fell forward as she bent and gently probed my ankle. The flesh had puffed out around my sandal like rising bread dough. Mom tried unbuckling the strap, and I sucked in a breath. I reached forward, a reflexive response to the pain. As I did, I realized that my right hand tingled and the fingers felt funny, almost numb.

I flexed them and they all seemed to work just fine, but when I tried to rotate my wrist, a pinching jolt warned me not to try again. Mom had gotten the sandal strap undone and was tugging upward to slip the shoe off. Biting down on my lip, I barely managed to swallow a scream. Mom pulled her hands back, eyeing me.

"I think we should have this x-rayed. It might be fractured."



Hours later, lying in bed, I stared out my window searching for stars I couldn't see in the city sky. My mind refused to stop spinning, bobbing like a cork on the Percocet River.

The drive to the ER, a seat belt buckle digging into my hip where I stretched across the backseat. Mother's smokey voice mixed with the smell of burning weed. "You tripped on the stairs, okay?" A tap to the brakes that rocked me forward. "Okay?"

"Yeah. Okay."

Her cold, beautiful profile in the rearview mirror, flickers of street light sparking her bright hair in strobes, a curl of smoke caressing her temple.

"The police." Clearing her throat. "Those fuckers would care more about why you were out so late than anything else. And you know what they'd do if they found any pot in the house. I'd end up like your daddy, and then where would you be? They'd put you in foster care."

A flare as she hit the joint smoldering in her hand. A long stretch of silence where I thought she'd said her piece. Then, softly, "Just pray for him, Ash. Pray that God heals his sickness. That's the best thing you can do."

My mattress rolling beneath me like a waterbed. My heartbeat, echoing a THUMP-thump-THUMP-thump from my chest to the Ace bandage on my wrist to the cast around my heel and ankle.

Pray for him.

*God? Who am I? What am I? Do You hate me?*

My hands, deathly pale in the moonlight-street-light-night-light of my window, exact replicas of my mother's hands.

*Am I trash? Is that all I'll ever be? Am I going to end up like her?*

*Please don't let me end up like her.*

Pray for him. Not for me. Pray for him.

*Are monsters everywhere? Did You make them?*

*Can You heal a monster?*

Pray for him.

Pray that he gets what he deserves.

My breath hitched.

*Did he pray for me? Did he pray for a stupid little piece of trash to prey on?*

*God?? Are You there??*

*Were you ever there?*

Tears slid down my cheeks.

*I hate you.*

I had no idea if I was talking to the priest, or God, or myself. Or all of us.

His face, that horrible, shifting face.

I took a breath and conjured the Well.

