

Speak No Evil

(Part II)

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#

Christmas morning: 5:16 a.m.

I awoke with my throat bone-dry, since there was nothing considered an orifice to zip lock moisture in, and I couldn't feel the lower region of my face. A dull pain in my lower ears throbbed. I was too disoriented to be sick this time, but my stomach tried to comply anyway. After it was done with its shimmy routine, I stuttered to my feet. My balance was off, and I teetered over into the dog food, knocking several bags of Pedigree to the floor. The ringing was getting worse, like a hand grenade had just exploded next to my head.

There was a slight bit of diluted light filtering through the storefront, and I could see several inches of fine white powder coozied up against the front door. On the storefront was a yellow ticket, taped to the glass. It fluttered in the breeze, the winter wind threatening to rip it away. It was freezing inside the store and I realized that the storm must have knocked the power out.

I walked to the front door and bent down to pull the metal gate up, only to remember that I was locked in. I reached up to scratch my ear, trying to remember what had happened to me and why I had locked the security gate. Something about the sound of keys... a black, greasy... evil-something.

When I pulled my hand back from my ear, a sticky velvet-like thread of mucus clung to my nails. The ringing inside my head grew stronger and I hurried to the restroom in the back.

Even though the storm had knocked the power out, I could see the outline of my head. The proportions were wrong. I brought both hands to my head this time, again trying to verify what I already knew. Both of my ears were missing.

A quick stomach shimmy; nothing came out as I knelt to the toilet.

Everything around me started spinning and I lost my balance, like I'd had a heavy night of drinking. Back-and-forth the room rocked like a roller coaster. Everything was drowned out, like I was underwater. I slowly inserted my pinkie finger into my ear, wincing from the pain. I probed softly, waiting for the tip of it to encounter the soft membrane of my eardrum. It continued deeper, and still nothing. My pinkie was up to the second knuckle when I finally accepted the fact that I was deaf.

I could hear mottled sounds like they were ten miles away, echoing through a blanket-clad tunnel. But there was also a ringing that sounded different than the one in my head. I recognized it as the phone and scrambled into my office to answer it.

When I picked it up, there was the faintest hint of someone talking on the other end. But what they were saying, I couldn't understand.

"'ello, 'lease, 'ell, ee." My throat was so dry that I imagined it sounded like a croak more than a plea.

I stepped around the corner and realized that the fluttering notice on the front door was from the police. This was a return call from them.

But apparently the lady on the other end was finally tired of the pranks and hung up. The sound of a dial tone was barely audible over the ringing in my ears. That was that.

I threw the phone down and watched it crack violently on the desk.

But one thing that I did still possess was my sense of smell. And the putrid smell of tar and vegetable oil had returned.

"It's not that bad, is it?"

"'hat's not bad?" I hissed. "'eing 'tuck 'ere 'ith a 'atass rat?"

The jingle of keys in the background seemed strangely louder in my head, trying to tease me out of my office.

"You want these, don't you? But why? To go back to that sorry excuse you call a life?"

Pop was more than just a fat rat. I had known that from the beginning. But I was starting to question *what*, when it read my thoughts again.

"I'm what you can't be; what you never could be. I'm the primal part that itches to get out, to take care of business."

"'hat's 'hat 'upposed 'oo 'ean?"

The door to my office opened and Pop walked in.

I slumped down at my desk, feeling defeated shock raise the hairs on the back of my neck. Pop was standing on his hind legs, twittering his whiskers up at me. His lips and nose were caked with my blood and a chunk of my earlobe hung from one whisker. He clicked his teeth, which flashed like a pair of large Chiclets in the dim fluorescent light. He was smiling like a Cheshire cat, but only momentarily.

"'ave a seat," I clucked, struggling to pronounce the 's'. I kicked the other chair out to him and watched it roll smoothly across the floor. Inside, I was struggling not to piss myself.

Pop--or Evil--hopped up onto it. *"Let me ask you something. Do you really believe that I'm here, right now?"*

I felt at my shredded lips and riddled ear lobe, then shrugged. I had no idea what the hell to think.

"Do you honestly believe that you are having a conversation with a twenty-six pound guinea pig that just ate your tongue and ears?" Pop continued.

"I 'ust admit 'hat 'ounds a bit unbe'ieable."

"Oh, Peter, you're just the same. I guess I never really had that much of an impression on you after all."

"'ardon?" Something in that caught me slightly off guard. Pins-and-needles crawled up my flesh.

"So, you found my little black book," Pop said, kicking back in the cheap leather chair.

I started shaking my head in disbelief.

"That black book you took was more than it appears, and I need it back. Give me the book and I won't go through with my plan."

"I 'on't 'et it--"

"You read the book, and you know."

"Know 'hat?"

"More than you should." Pop wasn't making any sense now, but the names I'd read... What the hell was going on?

"I can't wait here any longer. Just return the book."

“What are you planning to do?” I asked, starting to feel nauseous again. My teeth were chattering and my breath was fogging the air uncontrollably, since I had no lips to keep the moisture in.

“What do you think I mean? Just look at yourself. You’re a wreck, and it’s not going to get any better. If you can hear no evil, speak no evil, or see no evil, that’s a good start. I’ll just keep going, part-by-part, until there is no evidence left.”

I had a vision in my mind then. Hear no evil, speak no evil, *see no evil*. This thing meant to take my eye sight next. I could envision myself lying in the middle of my store with no ears, tongue, lips or eyes. No limbs, no extremities... a vegetable. Was that what this creature was here for? I had taken Isabel’s black book as evidence against her for the alimony charges, but apparently it was more than that.

“Mostly correct, Peter. You always were quick to the punch line. I am Isabel, or at least that is one of my names. This is the form I am forced to take at night, one that I abhor.”

“And all of those names in ‘he ‘ook?”

“Old acquaintances. They’re no longer around.”

“So, for ‘he ‘ast ten years you ‘ere out at night... killing?”

“Most of the time. One has to feed.” Pop leaned back again, crossing his hind legs; it was the oddest thing I’d ever seen. *“Oh, I’m sorry, but I couldn’t let you know about it.”*

I could hardly believe it. This wasn’t real! But the fog of my breath continued in quicker puffs, and I could even see frost beginning to form on Pop’s whiskers now.

“Oh, it’s real. Think of me as the black widow of guinea pigs.”

Why the guinea pig? I thought. I was starting to feel lethargic from the cold. I realized hypothermia was possibly beginning to set in.

“It was the closest form, so I took it. It’s unassuming and most people think I’m cute. But I long for my original form, and I’ll have it soon. Then the real fiesta begins.”

“What are you?” I asked, trying to straighten my legs. I was going to have to make a run for it, but Pop still had the keys, even though I couldn’t see them.

“I’ve been around for longer than I care to remember. I came over during the gold rush, preying on willing men. Shape-shifters, some call us. Demons, others say. Does it really matter?”

“Why me?” I couldn’t feel my fingers--fingers that Pop was about to gnaw off.

“The pet shop, of course. This place is special, and that makes the owner special, too. You had no idea that you were protected when you bought this place. So I had to get involved with you.”

I didn’t feel too ‘protected’ at that moment. My lips and ears were already missing. So where was this protection that Pop spoke of?

“I know what you’re thinking, Peter. Remember, we were married for nearly ten years--ten long years. Christmas day is the only time you are vulnerable, and it only happens once every decade.”

“You ‘ant to ‘ill me?”

“I want this place gone,” Pop said. *“This location is the source of my pain and suffering, and until it is gone I will suffer in this goddamned obese creature’s body. With*

this place destroyed, I am free to roam the night in my own form once again. Unfortunately, this means that the owner of the property must also go."

Pop had had all night to kill me. Why had it waited? I paused. I was still alive because of the book! But if I gave up its location, I was a dead man.

"*Then I will make you tell me!*" Pop hopped off of the chair and moved towards me on its hind legs. The massive guinea pig looked almost human. So this was its plan. Pop smiled. This was how I was going to die, cold and alone, murdered by an animal.

It was about to hop into my lap when a white blur shot past me and crashed into Pop. Snowball had come from the doorway and with lightning fast reflexes, plowed into the guinea pig. All of the cat's weight was behind it. Pop was equally surprised as it rolled girth-wise across the floor and into the far wall.

With fresh adrenaline, I stood, feeling the weight of my legs creak all the way down to my ankle joints, and bolted out of the office. Snowball followed quick on my heels.

I slammed the door shut, pushing my full weight against it. Pop slammed into it like a twenty-six pound sledgehammer. I felt my feet slip.

"*Hold fast,*" a sultry voice said. I turned to look down at Snowball, who was calmly wrapped around my ankles, purring.

"hat?" I asked.

"*I will return in a minute.*" Snowball looked up at me with those bottle green eyes and ran off.

"ait!" I yelled. My shoulder was aching from the pounding door and my feet continued to slide on the smooth vinyl floor.

Within seconds, Snowball was back. In her mouth was a set of keys. She dropped them at my feet and sat down on her haunches. She winked at me calmly, as if nothing was happening.

The thudding at the door grew louder as Pop clawed and bit its way through. Chunks of wood were starting to come off of it.

"hat now?"

"*That decision is yours.*"

"Why is this 'appening 'oo 'ee!"

"*This is not your fight.*"

I struggled to maintain my footing, but I longed to simply grab the keys and vacate the store.

"*Isabel and I have unfinished business here. This place is where we were born and we return to it now. Every ten years for a very long time.*"

"But, wouldn't you also go back to normal if I die?"

"Yes."

"Do you 'ike 'eing a cat?"

"No."

"hen 'hy do you care if I live?"

"*There are two sides to everything. My sister's insatiable lust for death and violence must have a counterpoint. I am here for that reason.*"

The door thudded again and I fell to my knees. “And ‘hat will ‘appen if you ‘on’t stop her?”

“The same as always; I will return, but in a different form.”

“And I won’t be ‘round ‘oo see that?”

“Probably not.”

The cheap wooden door was simply starting to fall apart now. It had splintered in half at the bottom, and I knew there was only a few seconds left to decide what to do. Pop’s bloody whiskers and nose were poking through, its teeth chipping away at the wood like a rabid beaver. With one last thud, I stepped aside and the hammering stopped.

There was a dramatic pause as the electricity kicked back on with a silent flicker, soft fluorescent light seeped through the gnawed opening. The door hung from the top hinge momentarily, and then it fell to the floor in a cloud of dust. When it cleared, the massive form of Pop stood on its hind legs, silhouetted in the doorway like an old western saloon; one that I was about to vacate.

“Hello, sis.”

Snowball sat calmly, curled up in her typical tight ball, purring. But beneath her thick coat, I sensed the large cat’s muscles tensing expectantly.

“You should leave now, Peter,” Snowball said in a calm, sultry purr that made me wonder what she would look like in her female form.

I took the keys and stepped behind Snowball, waiting, but not leaving yet. Pop stalled momentarily, as if considering.

I moved further back down aisle two, keeping the front door in sight. But I was too drawn by the standoff to leave. After all, I had invested a lot (my ears and tongue) to witness what was about to happen; I deserved that much.

Pop had gone back to all fours, and Snowball circled deftly, ears drawn back and eyes narrowed. The animals were going nuts in their cages and I had the humor to think of myself as a spectator in a zoo arena, watching two gladiators about to duel. I was in the minority here, and probably playing witness to something few men had ever seen. The fish were plastered against the glass; the ferret’s stood on hind legs, even the cockatoos seemed overzealous.

Pop struck first, its teeth gnashing in a wide arc. But Snowball was too quick, and slapped the top of Pop’s head with claws extended. Three gashes opened immediately across the guinea pig’s ear and cheek. Blood spilled across the wall and floor in a thick sounding spray. With a roar, Pop raised on hind legs and leapt forward. But Snowball wasn’t finished. She pounced using her rear claws in a gutting motion. Pop shrieked in pain, and tried to use its weight as leverage. I saw then that Snowball had made a mistake; her underside was exposed. Pop moved quickly and its teeth ripped at the area. White fur seemed to come off like a divot from a golf fairway. I saw pink, wiry tendons exposed instantly from under Snowball’s arm. It happened so quick that there wasn’t even any blood.

At this point, nearly every animal in the store was howling, banging on their cage or hopping up and down. But Pop and Snowball were oblivious, rolling and gnashing at each other with centuries of built up sibling hatred. But there was more than that at stake.

I felt my back bump into the steel security grate. The sun was starting to come up, and the snow had ceased. I looked along the horizon and saw the pink shades of dawn approaching.

A shriek ripped through the store and I turned to see Pop, lying limp like a deflated balloon, its gelatinous gut quivering in a death throw. Snowball was nowhere to be seen. Every animal in the store had gone silent.

I slumped against the steel grate, buried my head in my hands and began to cry.

After several minutes I stood, warbled on my numb feet and caught myself on the bars of the gate. Once steady, I walked into my office (no need to open the door) and slid the top drawer of my desk open. Inside was a worn, black leather book. I sat down and opened it. There were the names I had read before, but never bothered to pay attention to. Now I noticed how odd some of them sounded. There were no Earnest's, Wilford's, or Ethel's these days. This book was an ancient list of murdered victims, centuries old.

I took the book, slipped it inside my coat and left the light on in the office.

In the far aisle, lying in a pool of blood, was Snowball. Her white fur coat was stained red. I lifted the cat gently, cradling her as I had for the last ten years, and walked up and down the aisles. Each animal gazed at me curiously, but meaningfully, as if they knew something that I didn't. I had dedicated my life to animals, and one had now returned the favor. Snowball would get a deserving burial, even if I was the only one there.

The first rays of sunlight spilled through the front door, casting vertical shadows across the floor like a prison cell. Just as I reached for the keys, Kendall pounded on the door. He cupped his hands around his eyes to peer in. He was wearing the same sleeveless leather jacket.

I unlocked the steel security gate, lifted it and opened the front door. He strolled inside, pretending not to be cold, but I imagined that his scrotum was shriveled like a prune.

"Holy shit, dude!" he said, and then gagged like he was about to puke. "What the hell happened to you?"

I tried to grin, but probably came across like a human jack-o-lantern. "One of 'he animals 'ot 'oose," I mouthed, and handed him his \$200 dollars. "'our... I 'ean, Evil, didn't 'ake it." I wiped the drool from my chin.

Kendall looked at me in disbelief. Then he saw the animal lying on the floor in the pool of blood. He looked at the dead cat in my arms. "That one did it?"

I nodded. "I 'on't know 'hat to 'ay." Then I handed him the keys to my store. But I kept the black book tucked in my coat. He took the keys and looked at me confused.

"It's yours, all of it." I stepped outside into the blustery wind with Snowball cradled to my chest. I held her close, wondering what was next. I was leaving this place, that much was certain. Beyond that, only God knew.

Kendall anxiously locked the door. The plan had worked! The store was theirs now, just like Isabel said it would be. He put the keys in his pocket and hurried down each aisle, looking into every cage or aquarium. "Honey?" he whispered. "Are you here?"

When he got to the python cage, he stopped. The black snake inside looked up and hissed. He could have sworn that it smiled at him.