a tongue of broken glass
Seth Cable

“But, that’s all because we worship the Goblin Prince,” he told his friend one afternoon in his bedroom.

“Wait, what?”

“It’s because we worship the Goblin Prince. That’s our religion. My family’s religion.”

A pause. “What’s your religion? Goblins?”

“The Goblin Prince,” a special emphasis placed on ‘Prince’. “We have a shrine to him downstairs in the freezer room.”

“Do you mean that picture of Jesus next to the hooks? That’s just a picture of Jesus.”

“No, that’s only a ruse. It’s meant to look like Jesus, so that nobody suspects. But, it’s actually the Goblin Prince. We say prayers to him there in the middle of the night.”


“We do. My dad wakes me and my sisters up around 11:55. We all eat one oyster in the kitchen, and then we move downstairs to the freezer room to pray.”

“Really? So, how do you pray to the ‘Goblin King’? What do you pray for?”

“It’s the Goblin Prince,” a special inflection placed on ‘Prince’. “And we pray for the same kinds of things everybody prays for, I guess. Your soul, so that your soul isn’t eaten when you die. You pray for your health and safety. You pray for your ignorance and normalcy. For riches beyond imagining.”

“Uh huh? Well, what does one of these prayers sound like? Show me a prayer!”

“I can’t do that! You can’t just recite a prayer outside of worship. It’s blasphemy.”

“Fine. Then, do it in worship. Let’s go downstairs to your Goblin Prince,” a special intonation placed on ‘Prince’, “and you go and pray to him the way that you do every night.”

A hesitation. “I’m not sure we’re supposed to pray to him in the middle of the day.”

“What does that matter? If he’s really God, he doesn’t care if it’s the middle of the day or not. You can pray to God whenever. It’s God,” a special burden placed upon ‘God’, “he’s beyond night and day.”

“But the Goblin Prince isn’t God. It’s just who we worship.”
“What do — But if he’s not God — Why don’t you just guys just worship God?”

“I don’t know! Why don’t you worship the Goblin Prince!”

“I don’t worship the Goblin Prince because he isn’t real! This is just some bullcrap you are making up again.”

A glare, in tacit rejection of the presupposition. “You think I’m lying about this. Fine. Fine, I will show you.”

In the kitchen, he slung open the door to the refrigerator, and took out a small white bucket with an orange lid. Holding up the bucket to his friend’s face, he removed the lid with dramatic flare, revealing a number of raw oysters resting on ice cubes.

“See? We keep some for every night.”

“Okay. Go ahead and — ”

Without letting his friend finish—and without ever breaking eye contact—he reached in, snatched out an oyster, and consumed it in one hurried slurp.

“Follow me downstairs then.” In the freezer room, before the wall of hooks, beneath the picture of Jesus the Goblin Prince, he crouched. His friend stood behind him, anger softening into curiosity. He began that afternoon just as they all began together every midnight:

-Eyes made from paper,

-A tongue of blown glass,

-Lips cut from styrofoam,

-Teeth of polished brass,

-Kept within a closet, until the light outside had died,

-All the world’s afire now. Nothing left to hide.

Above the two boys, an image formed that immediately drained all hope and joy from life, rendering any continued existence a torture beyond imagining. A voice emanated from this image, equal in its horror and depredation.

-“UHM, YES? CAN I HELP YOU TWO?”

Ceaseless screaming had rendered his friend functionally mute, but he had by this point become inured enough to such visions to respond.

-“I’m very sorry if we’ve disturbed you. I know that we’re only supposed to pray at midnight.”
Over the wet and breaking howls of his friend, he could hear — driven directly into his cochlea — these pulsating words, each falling like a brick into sand:

"OH, NO. THAT'S FINE. NOW IS JUST FINE. WHENEVER YOU WANT IS FINE. PLEASE THOUGH MAKE YOUR FRIEND STOP OR I WILL REDUCE HIM."

After a few seconds of inefficient jostling, "I don't think I can. He seems to be stuck like this now."

"HUH. OKAY THEN."

And in that instant, the one friendship that had formed in five years of elementary school dissolved into a pile of brown ash. Being now well beyond either shock or horror, he simply remarked, "You destroyed my friend."

"WELL, AS YOU SAID, THERE WAS NO OTHER POSSIBLE SOLUTION."

"I didn't s— Won't his parents come looking for him?"

"THEY WILL NOT. I'VE REDUCED HIS PARENTS AS WELL, AND THEIR PARENTS, AND ALL THEIR BROTHERS AND SISTERS AND WIVES AND FRIENDS. GOING BACK THIRTEEN GENERATIONS. NO ONE WILL BE LOOKING FOR HIM."

"He was my only friend. I don't have any remaining."

"WHAT ABOUT THE FRIENDS I HAVE CONSTRUCTED FOR YOU IN THE UTILITY BASEMENT?"

"They aren't my friends. They bite and scratch me."

"I CAN REMOVE THEIR TEETH FOR YOU, AND THEIR FINGERS, IF YOU WISH..."

"You know, he raised some interesting questions. About you."

"OH? SUCH AS?"

"Why does my family worship you?"

"LIKE WITH ALL MY DOWN LINE DISTRIBUTORS, I FACILITATE THE INVENTORY NEEDS YOUR FAMILY ACCRUES AS IT EXPANDS ITS OWN DISTRIBUTION LINES, GROWING ITS MANY SUCCESSES AS YOU BUILD TOWARDS A FUTURE OF FINANCIAL INDEPENDENCE AND SECURITY, THROUGH DIRECT PERSON-TO-PERSON SALES OF SOY-BASED DIETARY SUPPLEMENTS AND HEALTH PRODUCTS."

"I don't understand."

"THAT'S WHAT'S BRILLIANT ABOUT ALL THIS! YOU DON'T HAVE TO. YOU SIMPLY HAVE TO BE A PART OF THE NETWORK."

"
"If you're —"

"Like how right now, at this very moment, this very second, there is eight hundred miles away from you a fetus developing inside of a woman you've never met, and this fetus will eventually grow into a human boy, a human boy who twenty years from now will experience such deep emotional estrangement from his mother — the only parent he's ever known — that he will pass a key personal tipping point, and begin exploring through various on-line fora the conspiratorial mythologies of ultra-right-wing white supremacist ideologues, these mythologies in turn inspiring years later the development of an intricate plan to detonate a dirty bomb inside of Chicago, a plot that will eventually be discovered, leading to a violent confrontation with federal law enforcement that culminates in the accidental detonation of said dirty bomb within the rural regions of Illinois that he resides in, that denotation resulting in the complete annihilation of most of the nation's supply of soy beans, creating a world-historic demand for non-perishable soy-based products.

You don't need to understand all the wherefores and why's of all that in order to benefit from it. You simply have to be 'downstream' when it happens!"

A moment of beatific consternation. "Are you God? You're not, are you? Why don't we just worship God?"

"Look, worship whoever you want, but you're only ever going to get a resupply of soy-based dietary supplements and health products from one guy..."

"Will we —"

"I realize you can't see this, but I'm pointing to myself with all my extremities."

"Will we ever —" His question was cut short by the iterated purr of his family's front door signal.

"You'd better go get that."

After one second's pause, he spun on his heels and ran from the hooked walls of the freezer room, though the undulating carpets of the apology space, past the descending stairs to the utility basement, and up the ascending stairs to the public level. Then, cautiously, he peeled back the front door, and found beaming down upon him the placidly smiling face of his father. Drawing in a deep breath, his father dropped to his knees and held out both arms in a welcoming embrace. From this more level vantage point, he could now see that on the top right of his father's forehead there had formed a deep, rectangular bruise, streaked with dried brown-red rivulets emanating from a cluster of tiny gashes. In a moment of shocked confusion, he glanced over his father's shoulder, and realized that his family's minivan was parked half in the driveway and half on the front lawn. Like his father, it now sported a sizeable crumple on its front right, centered upon a shattered headlight. Through the windshield, his mother was visible, slumped sideways in the front passenger seat, mouth open and eyes closed.
His father pulled him in close with surprisingly wet hands, and hugged him tightly, burying his sharp nose deeply and painfully into his neck. Turning his face just a few inches, he gently rested his mouth upon his son’s ear and carefully whispered:

“You were about to ask me a question, before all of this interrupted us. So, please let me take a moment to answer it – No. No, you will never have to choose between being righteous and being comfortable. Because, I truly am both omnibenevolent and omnipotent. At least, where it matters, I guess. And what kind of creature with such faculties would do otherwise?

Look, all anyone ever asks of anyone else is to do their own little part in their own little corner and be open to the consequences. Stay in network and help keep the network going. The greatest monuments to Man and God were built on nothing more or less. That’s all anyone asks, and it’s all I’m asking. At any rate, being in your legally dependent state, you don’t really have much control over what you’re ethically made a part of through the choices of your parents.

So, for as long as you can, just rest secure in the knowledge that life will continue well for you and your family, in a completely normal and predictable fashion.

And, Jesus the Goblin Prince – whose real name was Randall – was right. Life did continue well for the MacPhearsons, in a completely normal and predictable fashion. All of this happened in the summer of 1992, when the captivating harmonies of Boys II Men could be heard coursing below the fizzing and fuzzing of static radio channels from as far away as Khartoum – where Osama Bin Laden endured his banishment – to as nearby as New York – where Rudy Giuliani began organizing his ultimately successful mayoral campaign.

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