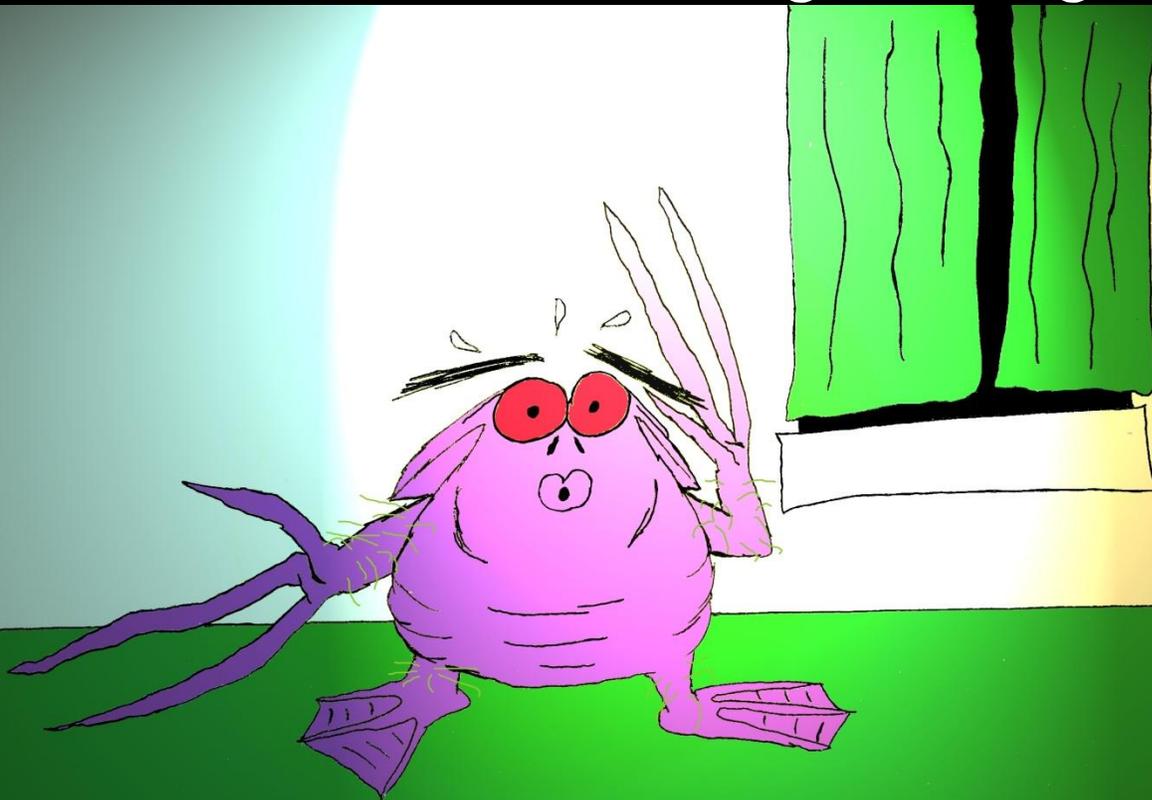


# Night Light II

## The Trial of Ooga Booga



Glenn Slade Clark, Jr.

Night Light II

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## The Trial of Ooga Booga

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Glenn Slade Clark, Jr.

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INK<sup>llc</sup>

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## Night Light II: The Trial of Ooga Booga

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The closet monster smiled, satisfied, laughing at the blood that covered the room. The child's blood. He belched monstrosly and laughed some more in his deep dark bass of a voice, knowing that down the hall, the boy's parents had been awakened by all of the racket—the boy's screams, the monster's laughter—and had convinced themselves that it could wait till morn-

ing, as they usually did. “Just the air conditioner?” The monster chuckled. “Who’s the *real* monster?”

The fiend was struck by a sudden realization. He felt...empty. Hadn’t he just swallowed the child: soul, flesh, and all? Where was that magical feeling of fulfillment in his evil gullet? Where were the echoes of the boy’s screams within his devilish palate? Something else caught his attention then. The world was perfectly still. Not even the air seemed to be in motion. He pulled back a curtain, draped at the little boy’s window, and stared out into the night. A bat was hanging in the air, wings in mid-flap. All the stars appeared suspended in mid-twinkle. Time had stopped. He moved back, noticing that the curtain did not fall back into place as it should have. He moved it back into place with a shiver. Yes, time had definitely stopped. “Crap.”

Brilliant light filled the room then, as he was flanked by the enemy on either side. The monster roared out in agony, trying to suck the great purple mass of his squat, round body into itself, but failing utterly. “I’m allergic!” He covered his bulbous red eyes with long purple fingers to no avail. He was blinded, in pain, and he knew that an angel hovered at either side of him.

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A third angel in front of him spoke. “Ooga Booga. I, Meriael, in my capacity as the guardian angel on duty assigned to Luke Steven Anderson, hereby place you under arrest for the attempted consumption of this child’s soul.”

Through his pain and outrage, Ooga Booga managed to register a thought. *Attempted?* Then he smelled it. The child was in the room, right in front of him, cradled in the angel’s arms. That certainly explained his empty feeling. Meriael had robbed him of his meal. “Don’t be absurd, Meriael! I’ve never eaten a child in my life,” the monster bellowed impetuously. He snickered then, unable to hold back.

“Take him,” Meriael said, and the light vanished from the room, taking Ooga Booga and the other two angels with it.

Meriael rocked Luke’s immortal soul back and forth in his arms, letting the child sleep. “There, there, Luke. It’s going to be all right. That closet monster is finally going to get what’s coming to him. I promise you.”

Luke stirred, groggily looking up to the angel. “Who are you?”

The angel smiled down at him. “I’m your friend. I’m Meriael.”

“I know. I...remember.”

Meriael placed a hand on the boy’s forehead. “Not yet. Don’t remember.”

Confused, Luke found himself sedated by the angel’s words, though he couldn’t really remember what had been said. Something nice. That’s all. Something so nice that Luke couldn’t help feeling very happy to be in this angel’s arms. “Are we going to go somewhere?”

“Yes,” Meriael confirmed. “For a visit. We’ll come back here when we’re through, and your mother and father will have slept through our entire adventure.”

Luke started to cry, overcome by emotion as he hugged the angel in his room. “I’ve always wanted a friend like you.”

The angel wept as well, as he returned the child’s hug. “Precious Luke. You have always had one.”

Together, they vanished into the ether, beginning their journey into a realm in which the child’s fate, and that of the sinister closet monster, would ultimately be decided.

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The old man approached the light in the middle of the cemetery; all the people coming and going from one side of the brilliant gateway to the other. He acknowledged a number of old friends as he urgently made his way to the very entrance and looked until he found him. “Luke!”

The boy was alert in the angel’s arms. He turned his head and saw the old man beaming at him with unbridled joy. “Grandpa Gus!”

The old man seemed taken by surprise. He looked to the angel. “He remembers?”

“Only a little.” The angel smiled.

“I remember you! From before I was born. You’re my Mommy’s daddy!” Luke held out his arms, and Gus took him and hugged him warmly. “I’ve missed you, Grandpa Gus!”

“I’ve missed you too, Luke. But I’ve been watching you. All these years. I’m very proud of you.” The old man delighted in the boy’s loving embrace as if it were

the very sunlight. He met Luke's eyes. "I'm going to stand with you. Our friend Meriael has asked me."

"Stand with me?"

"Yes. You see," he looked to Meriael, who nodded. "Someone tried to do something very bad to you, and our friends here want to make sure that he can't do bad things to anyone else ever again. Do you remember?"

A haunted, terrified look came over the boy's soul then. "He wanted to eat me." The little boy's lips trembled, and he began to cry.

Grandpa Gus held him tightly. "You're very, very safe with me, Luke. You're very loved and very safe."

Luke's tears dried instantly, and he remembered how happy he was to be with Meriael and Grandpa Gus. "I want to help you. I want to stop him from hurting anyone else."

"Thank you, Luke. I'm glad." Gus chuckled warmly.

"What can we do?" Luke asked.

"We are going to put him on trial for his crimes," Meriael answered in his soothing, sing-song voice. "We are going to send him far away, where he can't get anywhere near little children ever again." He smiled.

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“And someone very special,” he added with a sparkle in his eyes, “has made it a priority to be our lawyer.”

Ooga Booga sat in his cell, dressed in striped pajamas with a matching cap. He began to write a letter on a little scroll that he pulled out of thin air. “Dear Uncle Screwtape...”

The door to his cell creaked open, and the light from two angels sent the closet monster scurrying underneath his cot. “Mr. Booga, your lawyer is here for a conference.”

When the door closed, and the light was back to minimal, Ooga cautiously peeked out from his hiding place, then plopped the rest of the way out with enthusiasm at the sight of his visitor. “Judas Styx! You old casket worm!” Ooga’s smile outgrew his head, and his yellow teeth nearly touched the walls.

The skeleton before him, held together by evil itself, laughed as it lifted a cigar to its jaws with its left hand and puffed with satisfaction, cackling like the shadowy monster that he was. “Ooga Booga! Tragic to meet

again under such unfortunate circumstances. The Master sends his regards.”

Ooga’s smile returned to its usual place, then vanished into a worried frown. “Bet he’s pretty much ticked.”

The skeleton shrugged. “Well, you know. These things happen. Sometimes we *all* get a little bit too into our work. We all come close to crossing the line. We forget the guidelines. Like the time old Firebrand set that vacant igloo on fire and left it burning for a week. Of course, they nailed him to the wall for that one. Literally. Even I get carried away sometimes. Why, just last week, I had a narcoleptic priest holding a gun to his head, ready to give up, when he up and falls asleep! It was all I could do not to lean over and pull the trigger myself. I had my hand hovering over the gun before I remembered my place and miserably slinked back into the old fool’s closet to wait for another round.”

“Gracious, Styx! How did you do it? I bet you went after him with a vengeance thereafter.”

The skeleton shrugged again. “I tried. The guy prayed like a pro. Which I guess figures. The boys in light showed up and drove me away. But I did get three

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altar boys to blow their brains out later that week.” He cackled loudly and coughed on the smoke from his cigar as he did so. “Not a total loss. Ah, mortals. They’re so much fun to mess with.”

“Indeed! Remember that time we both showed up in the same closet?”

“Oh, right! The twelve-year-old who seduced his gym teacher! What a riot!”

“Not quite too old for me to eat...”

“And just old enough for me to talk into suicide.” The skeleton joined the closet monster in evil laughter, then suddenly stopped, trying to remember something. “Just how did we resolve that one anyway? I don’t recall.”

Ooga Booga slapped his old friend on the back and was rewarded by the eerie rattling of his lawyer’s bones. “I ate you, then you convinced me to shoot myself, and you crawled out through the hole.”

“That’s right! We both felt we’d met our night’s quota after that, and we went back to Hell for drinks.”

Ooga Booga sighed. “Ah, those were the days. Now...this.” He gestured to the walls of his cell.

“Yeah, they’ve really got this place secure. I remember when this place was all there was. Sheol: land of the dead. Now they’ve gone and *compartmentalized* the after-life. If you’re good you go to *Heaven*, if you’re bad you go to *Hell*. And they even changed this place’s name to *Purgatory*. What a stupid name!”

“I still call it Sheol.”

Judas Styx inhaled greedily on his never-extinguishing cigar. “Me too. But we really should get down to business.”

“Of course.” The two villains each took a seat at the little table in Ooga Booga’s cell. “So what do you suggest?”

“Well, first tell me the truth. Did you do it? Did you swallow the soul of Luke Steven Anderson?”

“I sure did! It was exquisite! His screams were like chocolate!” Ooga began to lose himself in the delicious memory, until he was called back to reality by his lawyer’s next question.

“And this was, of course, *after* you convinced him to let you eat him, correct?”

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Sobered, Ooga giggled nervously and answered, “Actually, he never did exactly *consent*. He was too busy praying fervently at the time.”

“That’s hot! You are such an abomination! You’ll be a legend for this.” The skeleton cleared his non-existent throat. “However, I’m afraid it means you’re utterly screwed in the Celestial Court. No hope. No chance of even parole. You’re going to burn for eternity, and then some. And the worst part of it is: no one cares. No one loves you. Everyone who even knows you will delight in the knowledge that you are burning, rather than parading, in Hell.” Judas held a pistol out towards the accused, in his skeletal left hand. “I only see one way out of this one, don’t you, my old friend?”

Ooga Booga took the gun from his lawyer, eyes watering, the sounds of truth ringing in his pointed, purple ears. “It’s true, Judas. No one loves me. I’m going to be a complete joke in Hell after this. I...can’t go on.”

“Do it, Ooga! No one will miss you. Pull the friggin’ trigger and end the pain. Why should you suffer for us? We *hate* you! You’re a pathetic, fat glob of demonic afterbirth!”

“You’re right! You’re right!” Ooga Booga put the gun to his head and shouted out. “I give up!” He pulled the trigger, blasting gore from the inside of his demonic head all over the walls of his cell.

Judas sighed and leaned back in his chair, taking another puff of his cigar. “I just love my job.”

Ooga Booga sat back up and laughed. “Yeah. You have a gift, Judas Styx. Too bad I’m *immortal!*”

The two demons laughed so hard that the walls of the cell literally shook, and the angelic guards had to knock on the door to get them to keep it down, lest the light should be let in while they discussed their strategy.

Meriael led Luke and Gus into a cozy chamber in the Great Court House. The walls were paneled with wood, and a fire burned softly in the fireplace. There were a number of woodcarvings placed about the room, including, Luke noticed, a small wooden statue of what appeared to be his parents holding him and hugging him sitting atop the desk, which appeared to have been carved out of one solid piece of wood. No one was seated in the wooden chair beside the desk,

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and an empty perch was positioned there as well. Luke wondered idly if his lawyer had a parrot.

Several more people, or more accurately *creatures*, entered the room then. Three angels, a lion, a cow, and an eagle. One of the angels, and all three of the animals, held pens in hand, talon, paw, or hoof and stared at the perch expectantly.

Luke looked at the perch too, wondering what they were waiting for. He looked up to his grandfather, who was still holding his hand gently. The old man looked down at Luke with a gleam in his eye. “We have the best lawyer on this case. He often takes different forms, depending on his client. Simply be patient, and have faith in his inevitable return, and he will be with us.”

Grandpa Gus’ words puzzled Luke. He scrunched up his nose and stared back at the perch. He noticed a pile of dirt on the floor at its base, and he remembered a book one of the teachers at his school had read to them during story time about a boy who went to a school to learn magic, and the very special bird that one of the wizards there kept as a pet. He had liked that story, and he found himself far more interested in the pile of dirt than the perch.

The dirt began to spark, and Luke gasped with excitement, as it transfigured itself into the very bird that he had pictured when listening to the story. The bird spread its wings and flew up to the perch. “Hello, Luke,” it said, and its voice felt like love itself. Luke ran up to the bird without another word and embraced it in a hug, as if it had been his oldest and dearest friend. In fact, he thought that it actually was, though his memory was hazy on the matter.

The phoenix, with its golden wings wrapped around Luke, patting him on the back, chuckled softly. “You act as if we’ve been apart, Luke. Surely you know that I am *always* with you.”

“It’s just good to see you...like this,” Luke answered, as his grandfather stepped over and took his hand again. The phoenix flapped over and stood atop the wooden desk.

The beautifully feathered bird spoke again directly to Luke. “You’ve already met Meriael, but these two,” he nodded in the direction of the three new angels who had now taken a position beside Meriael, “are also your guardian angels. Zuriel and Jerusael. They each have two other humans that they watch over as well, and at

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least one of them is always watching over you. Since we've paused Time in order to hold this trial, they are able to all be here together to tell us what they've seen over the past few days."

The phoenix nodded to the other four new arrivals. "These are my special court stenographers who keep a record of everything that is said and reported by witnesses whenever I am involved in a case. They never write exactly the same things, but it's always interesting to note what one may have written that the other three left out. Usually the eagle's report is the most varied from the reports of the other three. The angel, the lion, and the cow are usually in better agreement. Still, the court will need a record of all of their reports."

Luke noticed, as the gloriously colored bird continued, that there were little patches near the ends of both of his wings where no feathers grew. Without explaining what he was concerned over, he simply asked the phoenix, "Does it hurt?"

"Yes," the phoenix answered. "Every day. Yet these are old wounds that I hold very dear. I took them on selflessly, and at great expense to myself, which is why Ooga Booga and his kind have no power over me or

those who embrace me.” He winked at Luke. “Do not be afraid, my old friend, for there is nothing at all to fear.”

Luke sat with his grandfather, his lawyer, and his three guardian angels on the right side of the court room, while Ooga Booga, sat in chains on the other side with his lawyer, the suicide demon Judas Styx. Luke noticed that the seats behind the accused were filled with all sorts of terrifying monstrosities. Luke remembered the phoenix telling him that there was nothing at all to fear, and he laughed at how funny they all looked.

Luke looked behind him, and saw that his own side of the court room was filled with friendly, very familiar-looking people who he could tell loved him. He looked to his grandfather. “Where is the judge?”

“Everywhere. But there will be a representation of him at the front, when the Metatron comes in.”

“Megatron?” Luke thought of one of his favorite toys from his father’s display of collectibles in their garage back at home. He found himself wishing his parents were with him.

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Gus laughed, and Luke felt as if his parents *were* there. “*Metatron*. He’s the appointed spokesangel for the judge.”

Just then, the doors opened, and a voice rang out. “All rise.” A pillar of cloud entered the room and stopped at the front, seated between the worshipful-looking wings of two gold-sculpted angels. From out of the cloud, a pyramid appeared at its center and rotated slowly until it revealed a side with one great eye, that was staring out at all of the beings in the room.

An angel had followed the pillar of cloud in, and he now took a standing position beside the awesome being. Luke noticed the stenographers: the angel, the lion, the cow, and the eagle, seated at individual podiums, all putting their pens to paper, as the angel at the front opened his mouth to speak. “I, Metatron, appointed voice of God, now speak as God wills. This court is now called to order. In the case of the Kingdom vs. Ooga Booga, the prosecution is now called to make its opening statement.”

The phoenix flew to the front of the room and addressed the court. “Thank you. Spirits of the court, let the record show that I state plainly that I have never

enjoyed witnessing the work of demons, though I see the necessity for evil in the world of men, and I grudgingly acknowledge, as I have from the very beginning, that for the condition of humanity to serve its purpose, there must be sinister influences in the spirit realm, just as there are angels to bathe them in the light. Ooga Booga, for the past two-hundred-six years, has served the world as such a being. Feeding on the fears of children, bolstering the faith of the survivors by the mere *fact* of their survival. Has he killed before? Yes. Absolutely. He killed in his mortal life. He killed children. When he found himself in Hell, he won the favor of the hierarchy of the damned and rose to the level of a visiting demon. Though he was once a human being himself, he was well versed in the laws that Heaven has set down for demonic activity to follow, long before Hell granted him his new status and he took on the role of a closet monster. The laws for such a creature state quite clearly that he *can* kill children, but he can only kill them in the shadows. He can only kill them with their consent. And he can never, *ever* torture, devour, or otherwise harm their immortal souls. All children whose

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bodies die are taken immediately into the presence of angels by virtue of their perfect innocence.

“It is my sad duty today to prove to the Court that Ooga Booga has violated *two* of the Closet Monster Directives in the past instant in which Time awaits our verdict before pressing on. In the case of Luke Anderson, Ooga Booga not only killed the boy without consent, but *swallowed* his soul, intent on digesting it and taking its energy to further enhance his own demonic form.

“Ooga Booga’s nature and purpose have always been very harsh, and we have watched him closely. It is no secret that I have had no taste for his business, but do not be deceived, for I have always been fair. We seek not to end Ooga Booga’s days of visiting the earth out of personal bias and bigotry, but because he has violated one of the most sacred laws of his kind in his attempt to extinguish the light of a perfect innocent. In the case of The Kingdom vs. Ooga Booga, the prosecution seeks the harshest penalties for the accused and full restoration for the victim, Luke Anderson. Thank you.” The phoenix returned to Luke’s side.

“What happens if you lose?” Luke asked.

The phoenix smiled with a twinkle in his eye.

Grandpa Gus leaned over to Luke. “Don’t worry about it, kiddo. He won’t. When the phoenix takes a case, the trial is just a formality. He’ll win.”

Metatron spoke once again. “The Court will now hear from the defense.”

Judas Styx looked to his client. Ooga winked confidently. Judas lit his cigar and stood, walking clackity-click to the front of the room, where he addressed all present. “Spirits of the Celestial Court,” pointedly, he did not look the judge in the all-seeing eye as he spoke, “my client, Ooga Booga, has been wrongfully arrested and shall enter a plea to the Court of Not Guilty. We shall also prove that it was the boy’s parents, John and Alison Anderson, who, albeit inadvertently, granted their permission for the death of their son. In all actuality, it is *they* who should be on trial here, not Ooga Booga, a closet monster who has spent centuries abiding by the laws of Heaven and Hell in order to do his work, never failing to *convince* his victims of the necessity of their demise before devouring their delicious, nay, I say *choco-liscious* flesh! This is the right of all such creatures as himself after an honest night’s work.

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“This boy, Luke Anderson, hadn’t enough faith to lift a mustard seed. If he had, then surely Ooga Booga could not have touched him in the first place. Is it not my client’s purpose to sift out the weaker elements? Not to mention the fact that he never *had the chance* to commit the second crime for which he is accused. The boy’s soul was taken from him, unannounced, by the presumptuous guardian angel known as Meriael, who now accuses my client of swallowing a soul that sits in this court in plain sight, clearly still in existence and not absorbed into the form of the poor, wrongfully accused closet monster that he has always hated, who had just been doing his job like any other demon on the night in question.

“We request, on the proving of our case, that Ooga Booga be fully reinstated and granted the boy’s soul for a slave in compensation for the unnecessary interruption of his work and for the threatened defamation of his vile, putrid character. To Hell with you all.” As Judas made his way back to his seat, he paused, noting the shocked silence of the room. He shrugged, taking another puff of his rank cigar. “What? Where I come from, that’s a compliment.”

The demonic side of the room broke out in laughter. The other side simply rolled their eyes and shook their heads.

Luke looked to his grandfather fearfully. “Am I going to be his slave?”

Gus laughed gently. “No, no, no.” He handed Luke a peppermint ice cream cone from his jacket pocket. “Here. Don’t be afraid. We’re going to win.”

Luke tasted the ice cream. Peppermint was his favorite flavor. He didn’t even have time to wonder at how it had materialized from his grandfather’s pocket before the magical flavor caused him to forget his fear and think of happier things, like puppies and playgrounds. In fact, he almost forgot where he was completely, save for the warm presence of his grandfather and all of the new friends who were seated around him.

A few moments passed, and the first witness was called to the stand by Metatron to be examined by the prosecutor. Luke exchanged a smile with the witness, who was another little boy with a pony tail and clothes that reminded Luke of a book he’d been read about George Washington. The boy took the stand, was sworn in, and bravely faced the Metatron, who simply

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smiled and instructed the boy, “Tell us who you are, then bear witness as it is relevant to this trial.”

The boy nodded, then looked tensely at Ooga Booga, who winked at him and licked his lips. “My name is Jasper Sorry. I was eleven when it happened. The monster had been visiting me for some time. He would enter my room every night, and he would offer to devour me, to make me a part of him. I was always frightened of him, but his offer appealed to me. To be so wanted by someone. To be embraced in such a permanent way. I would dream about him. I couldn’t stop thinking about his offer to murder me.

“After a few nights of my refusals, Ooga Booga stopped appearing to me. I would stare into my candle, and I would cry every night, wishing I had the strength of will to say yes to him. Wishing I had the courage to leave my family. I knew they didn’t love me. They made me work until my feet bled every day. Father would whip me with the belt, or the Shillelagh if he thought me lazy. I had no time for friends. No time for anything but the work and the fear of what would happen to me next.

“Finally, I snuck out of my window one night, candle in hand. I went into the barn, and I set the candle beside me on a bed of hay, building up my courage. I wept at my cowardice. I pushed myself, as I feared the dawn would come before I got my wish. I called out to him, and he appeared to me, smiling with those wondrous teeth from the shadows. I asked him if he would still like to eat me. He, of course, was very happy to oblige. “Then come,” I said, and I reached over and put out the light, my hand quivering with anticipation.

He was on me the instant the dark had enveloped me, lifting me from the hay where I had awaited him all night, sliding me into his mouth. I felt his teeth, a great pressure at my waist, and suddenly I went dizzy. It was ecstasy, as I knew he’d bitten me in half. I was a dead boy now. The top of me slid down into his gullet, and I begged him with my dying thoughts, ‘Swallow my soul. Don’t ever let me go. Don’t ever show me the light again.’

“And within the same instant, I was in the arms of an angel, being carried off to Heaven.” Jasper looked to Metatron. “What else would you have me say?”

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“Thank you, Jasper. You have done well.” Metatron looked to the phoenix. “Would the prosecution care to question the witness?”

“I would.” The phoenix flew to the front of the room and perched before Jasper. “Jasper, how did you feel about what you had done, when you reached the angel’s arms?”

Jasper looked down. “Sad. Suddenly I was seeing clearly. I’d been very confused in my brief mortal existence. I was abused. I wanted to escape. Love and pain were synonymous. I thought the monster must have loved me more than anyone.”

“So, would you say that Ooga Booga manipulated you into letting him eat you?”

The skeleton rose from his seat and yanked the cigar from his jaws. “Objection!”

“On what grounds,” Metatron asked.

“On the grounds that it’s a damned good point, and I’d rather it not be made. It could hurt my case.”

“Overruled! Sit down, Judas Styx!” Metatron returned his attention to the witness. “Answer the question, Jasper.”

“Yes,” Jasper answered shortly. “He did. He took advantage of a little boy’s confusion to convince him that he wanted something evil.”

“Thank you, Jasper.” The phoenix smiled. “No further questions at this time.”

As the phoenix flew back to sit with Luke, Metatron invited Ooga Booga’s lawyer to question the witness. Judas Styx clacked up to the front and blew smoke right in the boy’s face. “Jasper, Jasper, Jasper. I remember talking to my client the night of your demise. It had stirred something in him. You were one of his most delectable conquests. I remember wishing I had found you first. You would have been easy, in your state, to talk into a hanging. Perhaps you *were* taken advantage of to some degree. Perhaps. But then again, perhaps you were the one taking advantage. You were the one who made all the arrangements, laying yourself out on a bed of straw like some eager, prepubescent whore, inviting the monster into a new setting, putting out the lights. Did you feel you’d been cheated, at the moment of your death? Or was it the angel who *made* you feel that way?”

“I...well...”

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“How did you feel when Ooga Booga took you into his maw, bit you in half, put out your proverbial lights for good?”

Jasper closed his eyes and answered breathily, “Wonderful.”

“And when your guardian angel took you?”

Jasper met the skeleton’s eyes. “Sad. But I’ve been in counseling here. I’m happy now.”

“Sad! That was your initial feeling, before centuries of brainwashing in Heaven’s light. A light that you, at the time of your dark contentment, had wanted nothing to do with.” The skeleton turned his attention to all who were listening. “This boy was in no torment, until the angel arrived and ruined his desired experience! No further questions.”

“But,” Jasper went on, “I was a lost child! I have another chance coming up, and I...”

“No further questions!” the skeleton repeated sharply.

Metatron met Jasper’s stunned gaze. “You may step down, Jasper. Thank you.”

As Jasper took a seat, Metatron called another witness to the stand. This time, the child who answered

the summons appeared much younger than Jasper. He was giggling, and he stopped on his way to the front to stare right at Ooga Booga. The closet monster noticed him and gasped with fear. “What’s *he* doing here?”

“Relax.” Judas patted him on the head. “He’s my pick, just like the last one.”

“Why him? He’s...you *know* what he is!”

“Miss me, Panty Man?” The boy grinned, as he licked his lips. “I want you...in my stomach.”

“Get it away!!!” Ooga Booga pushed himself backwards as far as his squishy body would go.

“The witness *will* take the stand immediately,” Metatron commanded.

The little boy laughed and trotted up to the stand.

Judas Styx leaned over to the closet monster. “Trust me. He’s giving us exactly what we need.”

Metatron invited the new witness to introduce himself and offer his testimony upon being sworn in. The child stared at Ooga Booga, his innocent-looking eyes turning red, as he grinned with sheer iniquitous delight. “My name is Arthur Diceman. I was five years old when it happened.” He giggled as any child would at the sight of a humorous cartoon. “Panty Man...” He

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paused and whispered to Metatron, “(He’s the same color as my mom’s panties.)” Turing his attention again to the court room, the little boy began again. “Panty Man showed up in my brother’s room. My newborn brother Tony. I was burning the baby with a match on his arm when Panty Man showed up in the darkness. Tony had just woken up and started to scream. I looked at the monster and asked him what he wanted. He was a silly looking sight for a devil, I thought. He told me he was a closet monster and was there to eat me. I laughed at him, took my matches, and went to my room. My mother woke up, and she found the burn marks on Tony’s arm. I was in bed, with the night light on, pretending to be asleep. She decided the burns were kisses from the devil. How happy she was!

“The next night, the monster slinked uncertainly out of my closet. He tried to frighten me, but he reminded me of Wile E. Coyote. I laughed at him. He saw I’d been cutting my legs that night. I explained how I was trying to cut deeper each night. Trying to see my own bones. That made him smile. He offered to show them to me himself. To bite me open and eat me. To swallow my soul and grant me endless torment. He could

tell I wanted to suffer. It was my bliss to be in pain. I *needed* to hurt!

“I beckoned him closer to me, but that’s when he revealed his allergy. I promised to put out the light and let him tear my flesh from my bones. When the darkness came, and he approached, I lit a match and stuck it in his eye!” The witness broke into uncontrolled giggling for a solid minute at this point, and Ooga Booga cringed.

As for Luke, he was presently lost in the flavor of his peppermint ice cream.

Arthur went on. “As he recovered, I lit a flashlight and shined it on him. He cried out in agony. He ran away. I left the night light out. I called to him. He wouldn’t come back. He was scared of me. A big baby. A panty sissy. I thought he was stupid, but he’d been fun.

“When he didn’t come back, after several nights, I had Mommy draw up a circle and summon him for me. I told her he was a demon who refused to obey me. I didn’t tell her his agenda. I didn’t tell her about our games. I didn’t tell her what *I* really wanted. *Nobody* knew that.

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“You see, I had seen a demon in my brother’s room...a real one, not just a little panty thing...a week or so before. It had picked the baby up and made him dance on his feet in his crib. Mommy had come in and sent it away, putting Tony back to bed. I wanted to play like that. I wanted to do more.

“When the monster had been conjured, I told Mommy to leave us alone to play. She did, and I told Panty Man that he could eat me, if he could beat me. I threw a match to the floor and set the carpet on fire. I threw the flashlight into the shadows, switched off the night light, and leapt into the darkness. Panty Man grabbed me, and I punched him, laughing, as he bit off my arm, pulled the bones out of his mouth and showed me what they looked like. I was ecstatic! I told him to finish me off, and he tossed me into his mouth like a piece of candy. I died, and I felt a pull, but I fought against it. I began to eat the Panty Man from inside of his mouth. He cried out and spat me out. I saw him and my guardian angel. The guardian was beckoning me, but I had other plans. I fled into my brother’s room, and I picked him up, making him dance the way the demon had. He was sleeping hard, so I danced him

right out of his crib and down the hall, into my room. I danced him right into the fire, and he woke up screaming and burning! It was the funniest thing I had ever seen...and then the angel yanked me away. Mommy came in and pulled Tony from the fire.” He paused to laugh hysterically. “He caught completely on fire before Mommy saved him, and Panty Man was just standing there, staring at the whole scene as the fire grew, backing into the shadows as if he’d peed his pants! My angel was sort of freaked out too.” He giggled.

“Thank you, Arthur.” Metatron said. “You’ve done very well.” He turned his attention to the phoenix. “Would the prosecution care to question this witness?”

The phoenix flew to the front. “Of course. Hello, Arthur.”

“Hello, godling.”

“I have but one thing I’d like you to verify for the court.”

“Certainly, old friend.”

“When Ooga Booga first approached you, you told us he claimed that he would swallow your soul and give you endless torment. Is this correct?”

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“Oh, yes, absolutely!” The child’s red eyes narrowed. “Of course...I’ve boldly lied to you before. Do you recall? ‘Not I, Lord! Not I...’”

“I remind you again, old friend, you are bound to tell the truth here.”

“And I remind *you*...there are some sins so terrible that no amount of rebirth can cleanse a soul from their taint, no new name or family can save a man who commits the Unthinkable Sin.”

“I remind *you* that I love you. I forgive you. We’ll keep trying to help you forgive *yourself*. No further questions.”

The child’s head took on the qualities of a jack-o-lantern then, and he lunged at Ooga Booga by stretching his neck in the closet monster’s direction. “I will have you inside of me, Panty Man! You will be my supper!”

Ooga Booga squealed like a little girl, as the jagged, pointy teeth of the little boy’s pumpkin head snapped at him violently.

“*Order!*” Metatron called out. The child’s head returned to its normal position, but he chose to keep the

jack-o-lantern teeth. “Would the defense care to question this witness?”

Judas Styx stood up, nervously. “Uh...sure...” He walked up to the front, clattering just a little bit more than usual. “Arthur...”

“Ah! Sweet bones! How I long to feed on you, as you fed on me in that fateful moment at the cliff side tree.” The boy lunged, clamping his ferocious jaws down on Judas Styx’s arm.

Judas pulled a gun out of thin air and shot the boy’s pumpkin teeth right off of his face with a horrified scream, backing away, as the nightmarish visage was replaced by the innocent-looking features of five-year-old Arthur Diceman. “Metatron, seriously! This thing even creeps out the lords of Hell! Can’t you do something about him?”

Metatron smiled thinly, and simply asked, “Do you, or do you not have any questions for this witness, Judas Styx?”

“Erg...I do. I do.” He straightened, gathering his composure. “Arthur Diceman, you numerous times reincarnated and numerous times damned, but inex-

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plicably forgiven waste of ectoplasm, would you say that you have many friends here in Sheol?”

“You mean Heaven?”

“Ack! I mean...whatever! Yeah...Heaven. That makes a point in itself. You died a child. That means no matter what, you go to Heaven, not Hell, if we must live in a segregated afterlife after all. But when you’ve died other times, like the first time, when we met at the Cliffside, you’ve done time in Hell or Purgatory. You committed the Unthinkable Sin. You tried to murder God. You are by far the most detestable soul in all of Creation. Would you say this is true?”

The child only giggled merrily.

Judas Styx sighed in exasperation. He looked to Metatron. “My point here is that *this thing* has an adverse effect on even the demons of Hell. In his last life, his mother, the Satanic witch, had been a Catholic nun before his unexpected birth. She’d fallen in love, left the convent, become a missionary. Then when this guy was born it was all ‘Hail Satan! I’m going to murder my husband and use demons to cover up the evidence!’ What I’m saying is that Arthur’s refusal to let go of his guilt for committing the Unthinkable Sin tends to cor-

rupt and warp the people around him. Just look at the affect his presence has had on my client during the present instant! When my client approached this ‘child’ twenty-nine years ago, he had no idea who it was in that little body. He didn’t know that this child had the power to twist even the thoughts of a demon. That this child had the power to corrupt him into plotting to swallow his soul! And, as with the present situation, Ooga Booga didn’t do it. As Arthur sits here before us, Ooga Booga was guilty only of a thought that may or may not have come from his own devious mind.”

“Oh, it was his idea all right!” Arthur chimed in gleefully.

“Says Creation’s most treacherous abomination!” Judas Styx angrily pointed his cigar at the child. Arthur breathed heavily on the cigar, and it turned black, crumbling into dust. Judas Styx stared for a moment, then pulled another cigar out of the ether, stuck it in his jaws, and walked away. “I have nothing further to say to this witness.”

Arthur considered. “Of course, my brother Tony wasn’t twisted. Physically perhaps, scarred by the flames, but he grew up to be a light in the world for

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God, and he remains so to this day, in spite of my mother, in spite of the demons, and in spite of me.”

“Shut up!” Judas looked to the stenographers. “Strike that from the record. I was finished questioning him. We know there are exceptions to every rule. His little brother, bathed in God’s light all his life after that point, was it. Not my detestable, vile, rank, and malevolent client Ooga Booga. Satan himself is unnerved at the mention of that murderous little brat at the witness stand. And as for me, I am finished with him.”

Metatron nodded to the boy at the witness stand. “Thank you, Arthur. You may go.”

The little boy giggled merrily and leapt over the witness stand. He then skipped right up to Ooga Booga and stared at him. “What?” Ooga Booga looked to his lawyer. “Make it go away,” he pleaded. “Do *something!*”

With that, Arthur Diceman leaned over and bit into Ooga Booga’s fat cheek, snarling and laughing simultaneously. Ooga screamed like Fay Wray and started batting at the child with his long fingers and kicking his webbed feet in the air like a dying cockroach.

“Your honor!” Judas exclaimed.

Three angels swooped in at just that moment and scooped little Arthur up, flying him out of the room. The voice of the vile little child could be heard merrily shouting in the distance, “See you soon, Panty Man!” followed by much giggling.

The courtroom sat in stunned silence.

Luke looked up, as though the silence itself had been a noise. He licked the last of the peppermint ice cream cone from his fingers and saw Jasper Sorry sitting in one of the rows. Their eyes met, and Jasper waved and smiled. Luke waved back, thinking he’d found someone he could play with when this was all over. His attention was given to the front of the room then, as Metatron spoke for God. “I now call the angelic guardian triad of Meriael, Zuriel, and Jerusael to the witness stand.”

Luke watched as his three guardian angels gently glided to the front of the room. They took their place at the witness stand. Luke marveled at the stand itself, which seemed to have grown so that the three could sit together comfortably, where only one person had fit so snugly before. Metatron then spoke to the angels. “Please, tell us in your words about Luke’s encounters with Ooga Booga.”

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The first angel began. “My name is Jerusael. I and these other two are Luke’s guardian angels. I was watching over Luke on the night that Ooga Booga first appeared to him. I was of course very nervous. Luke could sense the evil in the room with him, but, as is so often the case, his parents weren’t taking the matter seriously, dismissing it as a child’s wild imagination. The monster taunted Luke vocally before leaving the closet. He then very politely asked Luke to turn out the light, explaining his allergy, and that he would like to eat Luke. To make a long story short, permission was denied, and the closet monster left, promising to return the next night and devour Luke.

“I explained the situation to Zuriel and Meriael. We were horrified at this development. We consulted with the other six guardians of the household as well. The guardians of Luke’s parents agreed to do all within their power to express the urgency of this situation to their charges. As you know, it didn’t work out. People only hear what they want to hear so much of the time.” Jerusael began to weep, and he put a hand on Zuriel’s shoulder, urging the other angel to take over.

Zuriel spoke then. “I am Zuriel, and before I tell you about the next night, I must say what Jerusael was unable to say before emotion overtook him. Jerusael told us that the monster had seemed more sinister than normal. He made statements that implied a disregard for the rules. While none of us had witnessed such a thing, Ooga Booga claimed to have eaten infants right out of their cribs. He also promised Luke that there was nothing to fear in death, because oblivion would await him, once the monster had swallowed his soul. Therefore, we feared a premeditated violation of the rules from the start.

“On that second night, I was watching over Luke. The other two angels in the house at that time, the guardians of Luke’s parents, had failed to win them over through sympathy or protectiveness. John and Ali had their own agenda for the evening, and Luke was not a part of it. They wanted him to sleep quietly far more than they wanted to hear the urgings of their guardian angels. Thus was I left alone in the room, occupying a higher dimension beyond their sight of course, with Luke and Ooga Booga.

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“The closet monster had decided to make a night of pure terror for Luke. He used gore, as well as psychological terror and bad singing to...”

“I object!” Ooga Booga shouted as he stood. “My singing is sumptuous and near di...” he noticed the all-seeing eye on the pyramid turning on him, unblinking, staring at him, into him, and through him, causing a chill to course through the monster the likes of which he’d never known, “...vine.” Ooga Booga, pale with fear, sat down and slumped in his chair, averting his eyes from the unyielding stare of the Great Judge, until the eye began to glance over the room once again, and Ooga was released from its terrible power.

Metatron urged the angel to continue with his testimony. Judas Styx murmured to his client, “Let *me* do the objecting.”

“No problem,” Ooga Booga said in a much smaller voice. “That was...a little taste of Hell. And not the Hell I run freely through, either. It was something worse.” Ooga shuddered, and the angel continued his testimony.

“As I was saying,” Zuriel went on, “the monster terrorized Luke, but not without revealing his back-up

plan should Luke not consent to being eaten that night. The monster had a plan to use the boy's father to get at Luke. He told Luke that, the next night, his father would serve Luke to him on a silver platter. See, Ooga Booga had taken note of Luke's father's distaste for the night light. He knew that Luke's father was looking for any reason at all to get rid of it. Luke prayed fervently, and through God's presence I was able to give him strength through that energy, to channel it into Luke's own will to send the monster away for another night.

"I conferred with the other angels once again, and we realized Ooga Booga was planning to strike, with or without Luke's cooperation. Unfortunately, we couldn't do anything based solely on the monster's plans. It was only action where we could claim fault him with. We had to wait and hope for the best, redoubling our efforts with the parents." Tears began to stream from Zuriel's eyes. "Of course, you know how it all ended." He nodded to Meriael.

"I am Meriael, and I was watching over Luke on the night that Ooga Booga struck. I wanted more than anything to break the rules myself, to swoop down into the Third Dimension and hold the monster at bay, but

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nothing had been done to justify such an act legally. I had done all that I *could* do. According to the rules, if Luke sent the monster away, he would *have* to leave. God knows the boy had the faith to do it; he started into fervent prayer the instant his father had left the room. It was then up to Ooga Booga to follow the rules of closet monsters, as I was following the rules of a guardian angel.

“Ooga set his plan in motion immediately, terrifying Luke with a horrific and gory display, causing the boy to scream. He then threw Luke’s action figures onto the bed, in order to prove that Luke was up playing in the light of the night light, as his father had suspected. Luke’s father came in, physically punished Luke, removed the night light, and closed the door, unknowingly leaving his son at the mercy of the monster in the darkness.

“I watched. I stayed by Luke as he shivered in fear. The closet monster was under his bed, waiting for Luke’s parents to fall asleep. When the time came, the monster grabbed Luke and forced him screaming into his mouth, biting him in half and swallowing him. It was at that point, the instant of Luke’s physical death,

that I was able to reach down into the Third Dimension and save his spirit from being absorbed by the monster. I calmed Luke down in my presence, then I entered the Third Dimension completely, freezing Time, and I placed Ooga Booga under arrest.”

“Thank you,” Metatron said. “You will now submit to questioning by the Prosecution.”

The phoenix flew to the front of the room then and greeted the angels. “Hello, my friends. Thank you for your testimony. It was much easier to listen to than the one that preceded you. Arthur pointed out to me and to the Court that he had lied to me before. That can be troublesome in a case like this. So tell us, if you will, how likely it is that you could be lying about what you heard Ooga Booga saying to Luke, or what you saw transpiring in the Third Dimension as you watched over Luke.”

The angels, manically emotional as ever, turned from tears to giggles instantaneously. “Not possible,” Meriael said.

“No,” added Zuriel. “Guardian angels are unable to lie. It’s beyond our ability.”

“What if you tried?” asked the phoenix.

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Jerusael giggled. “We would not be able to speak, if an untruth were trying to pass our lips. An attempt to lie, so I’ve been told, would render an angel silent.”

“Anticipating my adversary’s take on that statement,” said the phoenix, “would you lie to the court right now, as a demonstration?”

The angels all looked at each other, puzzled, then turned to the phoenix in unison and said, “No.”

“Don’t answer the question, please. Just do it. Lie.”

“But,” Zuriel said, “what shall we say?”

“Tell me that you hate humanity.”

Silence.

Tears of frustration.

The angels looked at each other, then to the phoenix. Meriael spoke up miserably, “We’re sorry, Master! We can’t do as you ask! We tried, and it was as we’d always been told. We were rendered mute. Please forgive us! We wanted to obey you!”

The phoenix laughed. “You have done exactly as I wanted, my friends. Thank you.”

Relief washed over the angels then, and they were all smiles.

“Now that your unequivocal honesty has been established, I would like to review some of the finer points of your testimony. You said that Ooga Booga claimed to have eaten children right out of their cribs, that he told Luke he would eat him *and* swallow his soul.”

“Yes,” Jerusael answered. “He made it quite plain.”

The phoenix nodded. “You also said that Ooga Booga came to Luke with a plan to use Luke’s father to deliver him to the monster. A premeditated plan to murder Luke, an innocent child, without consent.”

“Oh, yes,” Zuriel said. “He said it the night before the deed was done. He had a plan. He wasn’t waiting on Luke’s consent. He promised it would happen on the very next night.”

“Yes,” added Meriael, “and it did.”

“My adversary has pointed out that Luke’s soul was not actually consumed by Ooga Booga, since Meriael rescued him before that could happen. How could a guardian angel possibly manage to present such a false case against a supposedly innocent closet monster? Did you break the rules to rescue Luke preemptively?”

“I was well within my parameters,” Meriael said. “I am able to intervene under certain conditions, depend-

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ing on the sort of demon and the sort of human interaction it has sought out. In the case of a closet monster, once such a creature takes a child without the child's consent, I can step in and rescue the child's soul. We brought him here for *attempting* to swallow the soul, in addition to the already committed crime of unlawful demonic murder. I give you my word, had I not grabbed Luke's soul at the instant that I did, it would have been absorbed into the being of Ooga Booga."

Luke took all of this in stoically, trying not to feel hurt. He tried to be serious and stay strong for his grandfather. He felt a tap on his shoulder and turned to find the little boy who'd waved at him now sitting behind him. The little boy offered his hand. "I'm Jasper."

"Luke," he said as he shook Jasper's hand.

"Wanna see my spinning top? Saint Nicholas made it for me."

"Sure!"

Jasper pulled an object out of his jacket pocket and set it on the back of Luke's seat. He pumped it several times, then let it go. The little top spun back and forth across the back of the bench. Luke forgot about the trial once again and became far more interested in his

new friend's toy. Luke's grandfather smiled and returned his own attention to the proceedings.

“So in your opinion, is Ooga Booga dangerous beyond his mandate?” the phoenix asked.

“Yes,” they said simultaneously.

“Should Ooga Booga be allowed to resume his work as a lethal closet monster?”

“No,” again, they answered in unison.

“Thank you. No further questions.” The phoenix flew back and took a seat beside Luke. He noticed the spinning top and laughed gently. “Ah,” he said with approval, “Saint Nicholas.” He patted Luke on the head and winked a very friendly wink at Jasper Sorry.

“Your witness, Mister Styx,” Metatron said expectantly.

Ooga Booga looked miserable. “Get me out of this, Styx; or I'll make you into a snack! I'll use your femurs as toothpicks!”

Judas cackled, as he stood and lifted his cigar to his fleshless jaw. “Oh, go jump in the lake with a cement Floatie.”

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Abruptly, the two villains began laughing heartily, and the Hell-spawned defense lawyer clicked and clacked his way to the front of the courtroom.

“So let me get this straight. You can’t lie.”

The three angels shook their heads mutually and said, “No.”

“Then let me ask you this, Meriael: How do you know what would have happened, had you not intervened when you did?”

“The boy’s soul was in the monster’s throat. Ooga Booga was physically poised to swallow him.”

“But how do you *know* that my client wasn’t on the verge of realizing his misstep? How do you *know* that he wouldn’t have foreseen this outcome and simply spat the boy’s soul right back out?”

“Oh, well...”

“Well?”

“I...don’t.”

The skeleton blew smoke from his cigar into the angel’s face. “I see.” He began pacing as he spoke. “You referenced watching things unfold from a higher dimensional plain. Couldn’t you see all possible outcomes from your vantage point?”

“Of course! That’s how we knew which path was the ‘hottest.’ The one most likely to be followed.”

“*Most? Likely?* So are you saying that there was a possible outcome in which Ooga Booga did *not* swallow Luke Steven Anderson’s soul?”

“Well, certainly, but...”

“Next question: Can angels commit suicide?”

“Objection!” said the phoenix.

“Sustained,” answered Metatron.

“My bad,” Judas Styx offered with a shrug. “Professional curiosity.”

“So now we have established that my client *might* have done something else?”

“No,” Meriael answered.

“No?” The skeleton was outraged. “Are you *lying* to me, Meriael? Because you have now said two things that cannot both exist as truth in the same universe! Was my client *surely* about to swallow Luke Steven Anderson’s soul; or, was there another possible Fourth Dimensional timeline in which my client remembered himself and did *not* swallow the child’s succulent little soul? Answer the question! You *are* lying! Angels *can* lie! How hard is it to conjure silence when *asked* to lie?”

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“I’m not lying! I can’t lie. Both of the things I’ve said are the truth.”

“Impossible!”

“Ooga Booga had already chosen the path that lead to swallowing when I intervened. The path was red hot. I *knew* it was happening. It was in the process of happening when I stepped in.”

The skeleton tapped his chin and considered. “But...the action didn’t go through to conclusion. Did it?”

Meriael shook his head. “No.”

“Why not?”

Mariel shrugged. “Because...I stopped it.”

“And *why*, Meriael, did you stop it?”

“Because it fell within my mandate, as a guardian angel, to do so.”

“You are *all* well-versed in demonic law. Yes?” Judas Styx turned to Ooga Booga slightly, the red light in one of his eyes winking out and back again in a gesture of confidence towards his client as he awaited the angels’ answers.

The angels looked at each other, then nodded their heads and said, “Yes.”

And of course, you realize then how intricately woven demon law is with angel law. Just as you are so knowledgeable about our ways, we are also knowledgeable about yours.”

“Yes,” they said.

“Then doesn’t it stand to *reason* that my client—horrid, blubbery cesspit of an entity that he is—would *know*, well beforehand, that the child’s soul would be rescued by his guardian angel on duty?”

The angels began to murmur their confused acceptance of that line of reasoning, but the skeleton cut them off. “My adversary has made a point to remind the court how absolutely pre-meditated my client’s plan was. Ooga Booga had the plan lined out in his head the night before. Doesn’t it stand to reason that, since we have established this was not an act committed in the heat of the moment, since we have established that a great deal of thought went into this deed many hours, in fact a full global cycle, before the act was committed, that in the process of meticulously plotting out the following night’s villainy, Ooga Booga, a closet monster of more than a century’s experience by his own modest account, and more than *two* centuries experience ac-

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ording the Celestial Records presented here today, also took into account that it was *impossible* to actually swallow a child's soul in the presence of his *ever* present team of guardian angels?"

"It is sensible to make that assumption," Meriael answered. "But..."

"One last question. And this is the big one. *Did* my client swallow the soul of Luke Steven Anderson?"

The angels answered in unison, "No."

"Thank you. No further questions." Judas Styx cackled to himself contentedly as he made his way back to a devilishly smug-looking Ooga Booga.

Metatron spoke then. "We will now recess and allow both parties to prepare their closing statements."

All spirits present began to murmur, as they dispersed, leaving the Celestial Courtroom empty, save for the all-seeing eye and Metatron, who simply awaited their return.

"You're brilliant, Styx!" Ooga Booga bellowed. "It's a wonder you're ever met with resistance by the mortals you approach."

“True, true. If I get you off, against that *phoenix* of all beings, I’ll be a legend in Hell for all time.”

Ooga Booga laughed out loud. “Yes, Hell! I was thinking...for a time it looked as though I was sure to lose, and what would they do with me? Send me to Hell? Torture me?” The monster grew a pair of rabbit ears then and affected a faux frightened pose. “Oh, please, Br’er Fox! Please don’t throw me in that briar patch!” He and his compatriot laughed and laughed, and Ooga resumed his usual form.

“There is one thing, though,” Styx offered.

“What’s that?”

The skeleton took a puff from his cigar. “You’re completely screwed.”

“Oh...that.” Ooga shrugged jovially.

“No, I’m not just being myself. You really *are* screwed. No one beats the phoenix in court. Granted, he’s usually arguing for the defense, but either way, he wins. It’s sort of *his* ball. Right? This whole thing is just a formality. And you *did* murder the boy. There’s no arguing that, you twisted bastard.” He patted Ooga on the back with camaraderie. “You’re a legend already, no matter how this thing winds up. But a screwed legend.”

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“Crap, crap, crap! Now I wish I *could* kill myself.”

“Yeah, even when I’m not even trying.” Judas Styx cackled to himself. “But look, much as I hate to say it, there *is* hope here.” The skeleton began to cough violently.

Ooga Booga patted his lawyer on the back and waited for him to regain control. “There now. You said it. No need to backtrack, you slimy sleaze bag. Go on.”

“Thanks. See, the charges were unlawful demonic murder and attempted soul swallowing. I think we can get them to sentence you based on the murder alone. And it can be undone. We can get you out of here with a slap on the wrist. They can’t get you on the soul swallowing. You didn’t do it, and that’s the bottom line. The phoenix may not make mistakes, but angels, honest as they are, can make an *honest* mistake. We could win that point.”

“So how does it end for me?”

“That’s the genius of my plan. I’m going to ask the kid to decide your fate.”

“What?!?! That’s insane! Do you realize how sadistic children are?”

Judas Styx shrugged. “Not this one. Haven’t you been watching him? He’s easily won over by peppermint ice cream and ol’ Santy’s spinning tops. I imagine his sentence for you will be creative, but not brutal.”

“Brutality is relative. What if he turns me into a Tickle-Me-Elmo.”

“That would be...disappointing. I bet he’ll do something weirder.”

“Oh, thanks. Well, Hell. I guess we’ll give it a go. Better than letting God sever me from all existence or something.”

Judas shrugged and exhaled smoke that drifted in all directions as the two arch villains considered their next step carefully.

In the phoenix’s office, Luke asked his grandfather, “What happens now?”

“Now, we win.” His grandfather smiled.

“Do I get to talk?”

“Only if you want to. You’ve helped by letting this whole thing go forward. Your angels’ word is infallible,

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so their testimony made it so you don't have to give one."

"Oh. I'm good then. As long as he doesn't get to hurt anyone anymore."

"Oh, he won't," said the phoenix. "Not if you don't want him to."

"I don't," Luke said.

"I don't either," said Jasper Sorry, who had followed them into the room. "It's taken me a long time to get better from what he did to me."

Luke put his arm around Jasper. "Don't worry, Jasper. We'll get through this and he'll be finished as a monster. Grandpa Gus told me so."

"Yes," said the phoenix. "It's good you have each other now. A very good thing indeed. I'm ready when you are, Luke."

"I'm ready."

"Good!" Gus said as he picked Luke up. "Then let's go."

Together, they followed the phoenix back into the court room.

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When all had gathered, Metatron called the phoenix to make his closing statement, and the phoenix flew to the front of the room without hesitation.

“Spirits of the Celestial Court, you have heard many things today. Many disturbing things. It has been established that this closet monster, Ooga Booga, murdered the body of Luke Steven Anderson without the consent required of closet monsters. It has been established that he planned to do this, premeditating the crime in great detail long before its execution, and that he did, in fact, regardless of his knowledge of angelic law, and regardless of how he may or may not have chosen to behave or expected the angels to act after the fact, attempt to swallow the soul of this child. While this monster’s motives and the myriad Fourth Dimensional aftermaths that never came to be can be endlessly debated here, the crimes themselves can *not*.

“I am, therefore, taking into account the creature’s remorselessness and the fact that he broke the laws that regulate evil in the cosmos, asking for the ultimate pu-

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nishment of banishment from existence. Ooga Booga will exist outside of everything, unable to feel pleasure or pain, unable to cause fear or interact with any being, until such time as he feels true remorse for his actions, which will not include remorse for his punishment. This is a monster among monsters. There is no room for him in any corner of our Creation. The Prosecution rests. Thank you.”

Metatron spoke. “We will now hear the closing statement of the Defense.”

Judas Styx made his way to the front, puffing on his cigar, while Ooga Booga smiled broadly. “Spirits of the Celestial Court, this ‘monster among monsters,’ as Ooga Booga has been called for his alleged line-crossing crimes, is a victim, robbed of the opportunity even to fully *commit* the crime he is accused of before being arrested and brought in to this court for sentencing. And that’s exactly what has happened! We all know the trial is a mere formality when the phoenix is involved. It’s all been a show trial to keep the denizens of Hell thinking they have some sort of a voice as long as they follow the rules. I cannot argue that my client is evil. It’s his nature. It is his very role in the cosmos to spread

fear, pain; to lure children into the shadows and take their light from the world. I cannot deny that he broke the rules when he killed Luke Steven Anderson without the boy's consent. In fact, my client has prepared a statement answering for that violation of trust."

Judas Styx pulled a sheet of paper out of thin air, along with some reading glasses that he put on over his eye sockets. He cleared his non-existent throat and read the statement aloud. "Spirits of the Celestial Court: Oops! My bad. Sincerely, Ooga Booga"

He put the paper away and removed his glasses, sending them back into the ether from which they'd been pulled. "You see? My client is not unaware of his wrongdoing. But if you will, consider his nature. He was *made* to kill children when it comes down to it. And what did he do? He killed a child! This we cannot deny, but who is really to blame for a creation that does what it is driven to do but its *creator*? Considering this is my client's first true offense, we should be commending him for his restraint over the years.

"Now that I've reviewed for you what we cannot deny, let us move on to what the opposition cannot *prove*. They cannot prove that my client would have

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swallowed a soul, and even if they *could*, they could not prove that he would have made the action permanent. My client *knew* that the angels would take Luke Steven Anderson's soul the *instant* the boy died. How could he not, after two-hundred-six years of experience. If he planned to go through the motions of swallowing a child's soul, he knew it could be just that: going through the motions. Of the actual crime, my client is undeniably innocent.

“However, pleading guilty to the crime of unlawful demonic murder, which is by no means an unnatural act, we ask only that the sentence be determined not by the high and mighty Judge of Eternity, who would have us punish a killer that He himself programmed to kill, but by the one person who actually has a right to be miffed: Luke Anderson himself. It is the feeling, both of my client and of me, that this will be a fair way to answer for his crime. Considering his nature, and the fact that this is his first real offense, banishment from Creation seems severe, even for someone as vomitously evil as murderous, bloodthirsty, astonishingly terrifying Ooga Booga: a closet monster who is here for having done what a closet monster is designed to do. The De-

fense rests. So to speak.” The skeleton cackled and returned to his seat.

The Celestial Court awaited the decision only for a perceived instant, before Metatron spoke. “It has been decided. Of the crime of killing Luke Steven Anderson without consent, Ooga Booga is guilty as charged. Of the crime of swallowing the soul of Luke Steven Anderson, Ooga Booga is innocent of action, but guilty of heart. However, it is the decision of this court that the recommendation of the Defense be acted upon. Ooga Booga is hereby and immediately sentenced to the whims of Luke Steven Anderson.”

The courtroom broke into shouts, both cheers and jeers, and the spirits present continued to discuss the verdict. “Order!” called Metatron, and everyone went silent. “Luke,” he said gently. “Approach me.”

Luke looked to his grandfather, who nodded. The phoenix and Jasper Sorry did the same. Luke smiled and walked up to the front of the room.

Metatron asked, “Luke, this is *your* monster now. What would you have us do?”

Luke thought of his favorite book, the one his mother had thrown away, the one where the hero, Max, took

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control of the monsters on the island who wanted to eat him and became their king. He smiled mischievously, a twinkle in his eye. Metatron looked deeply into the boy's eyes then, and he smiled.

“It has been decided,” Metatron announced. “Ooga Booga, come forward and sit at the witness stand to await your fate.”

Ooga Booga looked to Judas Styx nervously. “My *fate?*”

“Relax. It's a kid. It can't be *that* bad.”

Ooga Booga took the stand and waited.

Metatron spoke. “Now, Luke.” The boy went to stand directly in front of Ooga Booga, whose nerves were decidedly shot. “Stare into his big, red eyes, without blinking once.” Luke did.

“Stop it! I can't say why, but that's terrifying!” Ooga Booga protested. Luke leaned forward, still unblinking. “Really!” Ooga Booga's once very deep voice began to shrink. “What's happening to me?” he squeaked. “I sound like a freakin' chipmunk!” Luke continued to stare, and Ooga Booga began to shrink. His green hair fell out, and purple fur began to grow all over his body. He shrank, and he shrank. His eyes became white, with

big, endearing black dots in the middle, an antenna sprouted from the top of his head with a smiley-faced yellow star at the top. Ooga Booga's teeth disappeared, and his throat became smaller and smaller. "No!" he wailed in a squeaky little voice. "This can't be it! Stop looking at me! I'll eat you up!"

And Luke started to laugh. The more Ooga Booga protested in his cute and squeaky voice, the more spirits in the room began to laugh out loud.

"No!" the former monster protested. "I'm cute! I'm *cute!*"

Luke laughed and laughed. Jasper Sorry ran up to hug him, and the two of them began urging the thing that had once been a closet monster to threaten them.

"I'll swallow you both! I'll...I'll...*stop laughing at me!*" Ooga Booga began to cry, and realized that his cute, fuzzy, and enormous smile would not leave his face. "Aw, shucks!"

The laughter continued, and then Metatron called, "Order!" The room went quiet, but Luke and Jasper still stood before their killer, smiling as brightly as they ever had. "The full sentence, as determined by young Luke, is that Ooga Booga shall remain in this form for

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twelve long years, forced to be the laughing stock of Hell. At the end of this time, of torment, he may resume something of his old form, but his teeth will be as soft as pillows, it will tickle when he bites, and his throat will be too small to swallow even an acorn. The Celestial Court is now adjourned. Thank you.”

Everyone stood to leave. The laughter resumed. Ooga Booga bounced cutely over to his lawyer. “You failed me, Judas! Look at me! This is all your fault!”

Judas snickered. “Stop it! I hate merry laughter, and I can’t help it whenever you speak...or when I look at you.” He laughed out loud. “You’re pathetic.” He rushed to leave the room. “Stay away from me!”

Ooga Booga screeched loudly as he bounced after his lawyer. “Styx! Styx! You can’t let them leave me like this! Styx!”

When the villains had left the room, and quiet had returned, Luke’s guardian angels stood around him, and Grandpa Gus kneeled down to speak to him. “Luke, you did very well here. I’m going to miss you.”

“Miss me?”

“You’re going home.”

The phoenix approached then and further explained. “It isn’t your time yet, Luke. That was the violation the closet monster made when he took you. Your parents are having dreams tonight, about this. They’ll keep a better eye on you from now on. They are dreaming of losing you. You have to go back to them.”

“I understand. Will I remember?”

“Not everything. Not right away. You’ll remember some of it as a dream. You’ll know the monster isn’t able to hurt you anymore, but you won’t remember the horror of what he did to you; not until the day your time really comes to join us again. But we’ll be with you throughout your life, and you will be changed. You will see things. You will be able to help people who see things and are frightened by them.”

“But who will help me?” Luke asked, overwhelmed.

Meriael spoke next, and Luke met his eyes. “We all will, but especially Jasper. He’ll be going back too, to help you. He’ll see all that you do. And you’ll help him with the decisions he makes.”

“How?”

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“We get to be brothers!” Jasper said. “I’ll be brought home to your house in July! My parents just told me! I get another chance!”

“Really?” Luke asked with a thrill in his voice.

“Yes,” Meriael answered happily.

Jasper beamed. “I can’t wait!”

“Me neither!” Luke said, as he hugged Jasper tightly. “I’ve always wanted a brother!”

Grandpa Gus picked Luke up then. “It’s time to go, Luke.”

Luke turned in his arms and waved to his friends. “See you later! Thanks for all your help!”

Grandpa Gus carried Luke out of the court room and set him down in his bed. No sign remained that anything horrible had happened in Luke’s room. As Luke was tucked in, his body was restored, back to perfect health. Gus smiled, as he watched his grandson sleep.

A little while later, Gus’ daughter walked in, looking very afraid. “Luke?”

Luke woke up, slowly, to the sound of his mother’s voice. “I’m okay, Mommy. Tell Dad I’m okay.”

She went and sat on the bed, scooping him up in a ferocious hug. “I love you, Luke. Did you hear us? We both had a bad dream. We dreamt...” she shook her head. “It doesn’t matter. I’m just so happy it was only a dream.” She hugged him and hugged him, and silently she cried at the thought of ever losing him.

“It’s okay, Mommy. I’m okay. And Jasper is coming.”

“Jasper?”

“My brother. He’ll be here in July.”

Ali paled. “How did you...I haven’t even told...I just found out that...”

“I just know, Mommy.”

She kissed him on the head. “Well, let’s keep it our little secret for now, okay? I have to break it to your dad. But I think we’re all going to be very happy.”

“Yes,” Luke said. “And I’ll be there to make sure my brother isn’t scared of the dark.”

“Do you want your night light back? I can go and get it out of the trash. I’m sorry for letting you be scared all night.”

“No,” Luke said. “My new night light is...me.”

“What does that mean?” Ali asked, amused.

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Luke yawned. “I’m not scared anymore. I’m their king. King of the Wild Things.” Luke’s eyes fluttered, and he smiled peacefully, as he drifted back to sleep.

Ali rocked him, thinking on her dream, forever grateful for second chances.

## About the Author

Glenn Slade Clark, Jr. is the author of three books. He lives in Dallas, Texas, where he is the youth program director at White Rock United Methodist Church and serves on the North Texas Conference Council on Youth Ministries.

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