

City Of Churches by Darren Kasenkow

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The devil can be very enticing. Very tricky. Hell, extremely attractive even. I've never actually *seen* the creature, but I suspect I have been to its house. When I tell people about it I lie and try to explain that it was an accident, but destiny I fear is no accident when sometimes it is our own hands that mould the heartbreak. It's easy to stand in front of a mirror and wish blame to bounce off into the distance. It's even easier to go insane. Both I have done, in the company of others who explored in the same manner, and together we have seen the gateway used by the Gods. Know now that I have no doubt, there are many more scattered across the globe, however I can aid the map with only one discovery.

Which is more than enough.

I cannot reveal the city except to say it is known as the City Of Churches. There is a street within the heart of the city, a street with name I am unable to reveal although I can tell you it runs west and ends at a grave yard the size of two city blocks. Three quarters of the distance of the road away from the grave yard (approximately 1350 metres) lies an abandoned church which has not been used for nearly five years.

There is a small, unkempt garden dividing the church from the main road, a garden which had long ago ceased any attempt to spread over the small concrete fence which surrounded the property. Facing the church you would notice two things if you looked hard enough – that there was no actual cross to be seen, and nothing actually moved within the property. Not a single bird rested upon the solemn trees which scattered the property, not a mouse scurried and not a single web was spun. Besides these things its appearance was nothing unusual, in fact it was easily ignored considering the street was filled with modern buildings, a couple of dance clubs, plenty of food stores, a handful of private residents, a hotel, even a doctor's surgery. If you ask me it was one of those streets that slept during the day and awoke on those nights when the wind was warm and the humans restless. All through summer people pace up and down the street deep into the night, usually grabbing food and indulging in conversations which involved a moan, a laugh and a burp. Who knows, you may have been on this street at one stage or another.

I am no angel, nor are any of my companions. And while my friends and I are no angels, and as much as the darkness can sometimes be comforting, we are not the lovers of the devil either. On this night we were simply extending our ability to indulge, for want of a better word.

Many a drink was consumed in the modern town house which faced the backyard of the church. I have sworn that no names will be mentioned here, but I can tell you there were five of us, including myself. There were two girls who lived in the townhouse, and the two friends of mine who I have shared many a spirit filled night with.

It was a hot night and we were all drunk from both alcohol and excessive laughter. We weren't celebrating anything in particular, unless the dimming of the sun was a valid reason. It was a Thursday night, and we could hear that the city was filling at a rapid rate. By 10:00 p.m. two and a half bottles of scotch had been consumed, my voice was raised and slurred and the girls were dancing arm in arm to the stereo in the lounge room, a warm breeze blowing through the open front windows. When we poured the last of the bottle, it was unanimously decided to purchase another. I had only been to the townhouse once before, so when the girls informed us we might be able to cut through the abandoned church to reach the hotel, I was surprised and felt somewhat reckless and adventurous.

I cannot reach a decision as to which is worse. Experiencing a frightening situation or looking back and wondering "*if only*". At this moment in time both are just as torturous. When we walked out the front door it was dark. I couldn't see much of the church backyard, but could hear the hundreds of people partying the night away only a street from us.

The girls took the lead, showing us through a gap in a dying brush fence, and before I knew it we were entering the rear of the abandoned church through a smashed window. Once inside we were forced to spark our lighters in order to see. First there was a small room which contained a handful of chairs, and through a doorway we found ourselves in a slightly larger room. The girls were giggling and bumping into each other, and I found myself laughing because of how strangely quiet it was. Finally we found ourselves in the main room, some twisted and fractured pews scattered here and there. Our lighters weren't working too well so I couldn't actually see the roof, but in front of us we could hear the noise of the street beyond what had once been the entrance.

Why it was I that opened the church door I do not know. Whether I spoke or not I am also unsure of. I am sure only of every cell in my body screaming with panic. Right up until the exact moment that I pulled the withered wooden door towards me, the noise of the city streets filled the front room of the church. The second the door moved towards my stomach the noise vanished, replaced with the sound of a light wind blowing, only it felt as though it were coming from within my skull.

When I stepped out onto the street, well – at the time I didn't even notice I had soiled the front of my pants. It appeared to be the same street, only I could not see a single light burning. There were no stars. There was no traffic. There were no people. Except for the wind in my temples it was silent. Only metres from me I could make

out dark figures moving slowly and in no general direction. As my eyes adjusted I could not swallow. There were hundreds of moving dark shapes along the street. I turned and saw that my companions were frozen, not a sound emanating from their mouths.

I was sober. Icy cold sober. As I rotated my head from left to right I saw that at either end of the street was a strange red glow, as though the remaining embers from an open fire were piled into mountains bigger than the surrounding, vacant and suddenly menacing buildings. Sand scratched the inside of my throat. What can I say, except that I have contemplated taking a shark knife and hacking the memory from the fleshy castle that was once my mind.

When I turned to barge my way back through the church door, one of my male companions moved forward with a smile that I believe would sicken the most horrific of child killers. The sight left my stomach feeling as though I had suffered a tremendous punch while the moment appeared so much more surreal as the remainder of my company were showing only their backs as they rushed for the church door. I grabbed my smiling companion by the shoulders and stared into his eyes. They would not meet mine, and in the whites I could see the reflections of the red glow that rested either side of me.

“Let's get the fuck out of here!”

With all the air that filled my heavy lungs I screamed those words, and yet I barely heard a faint whisper above the wind in my temples. I threw my hands into the air like a waving fool when my fingers, except for one, burst into flames. My companion pushed past me and ran down the street, his movement appearing as a glide for his motion was silent. I slapped my hands against my thighs until the flames were extinguished, and ran back through the church front door. I have never understood or appreciated the sheer volume of noise that can exist within an empty room. I ran, blind for the darkness, slicing open a vein in my right forearm on the edges of the broken window. The next thing, well...

Hospitals designed to aid mental health conditions are quite effective in clouding unwanted memories. A bitter pill beneath the tongue and the world becomes soft walls and floating moments of absence. I have written this as I have refused to speak to any of the medical staff in regards to the night in question. And they always ask me the same thing. What happened to (-----)?

I have no answers. One of the girls was nice enough to visit me, however from the others I have heard nothing. Though I fear the screams that awaken me from somewhere above sound familiar. Through the church door I lost a friend, and every day I sit by the secured windows and ponder the same thing. When my heart beats its final tune, freezing the river of blood that flows through my body, and if I have a soul

that might continue after death, I can only hope I will not find this friend awaiting me on the other side, for surely then that will mean I am lost.