Dear Friends, 

I have spent the last fourteen mornings waking up in a hotel room full of people and bottles lying on their sides, dripping liquid from open mouths. Though some look familiar, most, I have to admit, I don’t remember meeting. The first morning this happened I was frightened and tried to piece together the past night, but I was younger then. Immature. I’ve grown now. I’ve learned to accept my place just the way it is. And, so far, the only thing that has made me nervous is the vision. Or should I call it a memory? No, I’ll call it a vision. I have had it every morning when I stand to search for my clothes.

In this vision, I’m sitting in the red, plush pew in my parents’ church, a large evangelical chapel with a towering steeple that sticks clouds as they go by. At least, that’s what I imagine because I’m at that age, 10 or 15 or 30, where church-

stuff—singing, dancing, praying, and speaking-in-tongues—is dull and boring, so I entertain myself by imagining clouds being ripped open by the church’s steeple and zipping around the sky like rapidly deflating balloons.

When the airless clouds fall to earth, they land in trees, parks, and parking lots. Many people see these, essentially, dead clouds, but they don’t recognize them as such because the clouds bear a close resemblance to used condoms—long tubes secreting some sort of condensation—so instead of picking up the clouds and saying, “Oh my god, I’m touching a cloud!” the usual response is something along the line of “Oh my god, don’t touch that!” Unless, of course, the ones finding them are from my parents’ church because they’ll say, “Oh, my God, please bless the sinners who defiled this parking lot,” not realizing that they are, in fact, partly to blame because it was

| 45:2-6 | d2Pe2:2-1; Jude 4; 1Ti4:1; Ac10:42; 1 Ti 6:14; Gal 2:4; Tit 1:16; 1Cor10:14 |
| 45:7 | eJoel 2:28; Ac 2:17; Isa 11:2; Nu 11:17; Jn 7:37-39 |
| 45:8 | fPr 25:14 |
| 45:10 | gJude 12; 2 Pe2:13; 1 Cor 11:20-22; Eze 34:2,8,10; Eph 4:14; Mt 15:13 |
The Boy and the Devil

11So in this vision—the one where I’m in a pew—something the preacher says catches my attention.

12As he struts the stage in a three-piece, pin-striped suit, he says with glorious conviction, “Life, yes, life on this planet is not, yes, I said, is not destined for the children of God, that the children of God will rise up, yes, I said, will rise up to the heavens and be with Our Father, yes, Our Father Which Art In Heaven, say it with me, yes, say it loud children of God, Our Father Which Art in Heaven, Hallowed Be Thy Name. Thy Kingdom Come. Thy Will Be, yes we said, Thy Will Be Done.

14“And He knows, yes, He knows us. He knows those who harbor evil in their hearts. He knows, as He did at the time of Noah, that life on earth is full of wickedness, and you need to be saved, saved from the devil that prowls the darkness, yes, I said, the devil is prowling, leading us into temptation, yes I said, temptation. But through God, He will, yes, I said, He Will Deliver Us From Evil, yes, say it with me, Deliver Us From Evil; For Thine Is The Kingdom, The Power And The Glory, For Ever and Ever, Amen. Amen. Amen.”

16I have seen this devil, not in church, though I do imagine one lurking in the darkness behind the wall of the speakers to the preacher’s right and left, a little red devil with a pointy tail, preparing to knock a speaker to the floor to show that there is no God there, but the devil I actually saw was neither little nor red but the size of a man.

I was a child of 10, 15, or 30, and I was in bed when I saw him. The hallway’s nightlight glowed orange, and my eyes were blurred.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Verse</th>
<th>References</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>45:11</td>
<td>bPr 4:20-22; Ps 34:11-16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45:12</td>
<td>iPs 45:3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45:13</td>
<td>jPs 45:3; Ps 34:11-16; Mt 6:9-15; Jer 3:19; Mal 2:10; Eph 4:32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45:14</td>
<td>kMt 7:15; Jer 23:16; 1 Jn 4:1; Rev 16:13; Eph 4:27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45:15</td>
<td>mMt 6:9-15; Jer 3:19; Mal 2:10; Eph 4:32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45:16</td>
<td>nGe 3:1 o2 Co 11:14</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
because my glasses were on the nightstand. In the glow of the hallway and through the flecks of optical debris in my vision, a devil ran in front of my door. I knew it was the devil because as soon as I saw him my body shivered and my hair stood up—truly the feeling one gets when one sees evil. This devil was a tall creature with a long face, coat-tails and scoliosis, and he ran down the hall, not making a sound. I called out to the devil, “Who goes there?” I said it real movie-like because I wanted the devil to know I had a sense of humor. I thought humor would deter him from siphoning my soul.

The devil didn’t respond, nope, he didn’t say a word because what word should the devil say? For heaven’s sake, he’s the devil, he’s not going to waste words on me. I was about to close my eyes, when, whoosh, there he went again: long face smiling, coat-tails flapping, scoliosis bending his body towards the floor, towards home, I imagined.

Since I was younger, at the age of 10, 15, or 30 when boys try stuff to be men, I put my glasses on and took my pillow from its sham. I held the sham, embroidered with purple flowers, like a net and waited for the fellow to come back. My plan? Jump on the devil, put the sham over his face and make him talk to me. I wanted to ask him some questions, such as are you ever happy? Do you ever get tempted? Why coat-tails? You know, the—dare I say it—burning questions.

But, wouldn’t you know it? The creature never came back that night, and I fell asleep crouching at the end of the bed. I woke up the next morning on the floor with my comforter wrapped around my ankles, and around my neck, like a warning, the sham. From that moment, if I saw the devil run across my door—and it happened
many other times—I would turn my back and close my eyes because if he ever decided to question me, to ask why I wanted to catch him, what would I say?

**Interlude: A Song for Whores**

The vision always gets fragmented, becomes stained-glass, at this point. The preacher sits down and white banners with gold trim unfurl from the ceiling. The sanctuary’s chandeliers dim as ten women from the pews stand in the aisle. The women wear chiffon and twirl blue and pink flags around their bodies. On a screen behind the pulpit, these words are projected in black:

**THIS TITLE WAS WRITTEN ON HER FOREHEAD:**
**MYSTERY, BABYLON THE GREAT.**

The women put down the flags and pirouette, and, I can see that their faces are painted white and their lips painted red. The preacher says, “There I saw a woman sitting on a scarlet beast that was covered with blasphemous names and had seven heads and ten horns.” These women are the whores of Babylon.” The whores twist and gyrate as they march to the stage. Once on stage, they start crawling on each other, moaning. Music, a slow rumba, plays over the loudspeakers and the women climax with screams and shouts. The sanctuary goes dark. “Temptation,” the preacher says. A spotlight shines on the women, and the light penetrates their gowns, exposing their skin, the curves of their bodies, and the areolas of their nipples. “Temptation,” he says again and the spotlight goes out.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reference</th>
<th>Verse</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Eph 6:12; 1 Ti 3:7; Ro 8:38</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lk 21:5-6; Lk 19:44</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rev 17:5; Rev 14:8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rev 17:7-8; Lk 8:31; Rev 13:10; Rev 3:10; Rev 20:12; Rev 13:3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mt 6:13; Mk 14:38; Lk 11:4; 1 Co 10:13; Jas 1:13</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>La 4:3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rev 18:2-8; Isa 31:21, 22; Isa 34:11, 13-15; Jer 50:31-32</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eph 6:12; 1 Ti 3:7; Ro 8:38</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lk 21:5-6; Lk 19:44</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rev 17:5; Rev 14:8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rev 17:7-8; Lk 8:31; Rev 13:10; Rev 3:10; Rev 20:12; Rev 13:3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mt 6:13; Mk 14:38; Lk 11:4; 1 Co 10:13; Jas 1:13</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>La 4:3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rev 18:2-8; Isa 31:21, 22; Isa 34:11, 13-15; Jer 50:31-32</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
preacher sings:

She has become a home for demons.
Oh, she has become a home for demons.
In one hour, her doom will come.\(^c\)

42 The words come on the screen, and the congregation stands and sings with the preacher:

The great prostitute God has condemned.
Oh, the great prostitute God has condemned.
We praise our God because we fear Him.\(^d\)

43 The congregation claps and praises God for asserting His vengeance on the women.

A Slave Boy’s Damnation

44 The men have tambourines and rattle them above their heads. The preacher puts on a white robe and someone from the front row gives him a long, wooden staff. 45 He hits the stage with his staff and the men grunt and slap the tambourine against their legs. Again, the preacher hits the stage. Again, the men grunt—Umph—and hit their thighs with the instrument. 46 “Bring the children\(^e\) to the stage,” the preacher says. 47 “Line them up for spiritual auction.” Since I’m near that age, the age to be dragged by the men to the stage, I stand on the spot where the whores crawled over each other and I saw their breasts under the spotlight. 48 When all the children are in a line, we watch the preacher pace in front of us, pointing his staff to the audience and saying, 49 “Who here? Who here? Who here wants to pray for this soul, four, three, or two times a day?” He sweeps his staff above our heads. “Who here? Who here? Who here wants to help a child mature, yes, I said, mature in the Lord?”

50 One by one the children are sold with the younger ones going
for higher prayers. A red-haired girl with freckles is taken by a family for, as the wife said, “Ten. No, she’s so cute make it fifty prayers a day.” Another small child with big brown eyes is taken for thirty prayers. And down the line the children are sold and escorted into the sanctuary by ushers to meet their new prayer partners. 51When the preacher comes to me, he whispers into my ear, “A little old to be sold, don’t you think?” 52And I tell him the men brought me here. 53“Okay, but if no one wants you don’t pout.” 54He steps downstage and says, “Now we have one, yes, just one child left. He may look like a man, but a child, yes, I said, he is a child in the Lord’s eye. 55He needs your prayers, does anyone, anyone want to pray for him. Do I hear twenty prayers? Twenty prayers? How about ten prayers? Ten prayers?” 56He keeps going like that and the entire congregation stares at me as I stand there with my hands in my pockets. 58“Anyone, anyone, give this man-child one prayer a day? Anyone pray for this man just once? If you do, you’ll have an extra blessing in heaven, yes I said, I’ll see to it that God remembers your kindness.” 59No one offers a bid and the preacher takes my arm and says, “Sorry son.” 60When I’m at the top step of the stage an elderly woman stands and buys me for half-a-prayer. 61The old woman takes me to the lobby of the church. 62She wears a blue wig and Chanel. She speaks with a lisp and walks with a cane. 63She pushes me against the wall, pressing her hand into my chest, and I’m surprised at her strength. 64Her hand and wrist are covered in blue and purple costume jewelry. 65Trinkets, I imagine, she received for each soul
she saved. "My name’s Brian and I’m not a bright boy,” I say, hoping she will say her half-a-prayer and move on.

"Why?” she says.

"Because I see the devil,” I say.


"Sorry—”

"That explains why you don’t have respect for God.” She puts the end of her cane under my nose, as if she’s ready to shove the wooden curve into my nostril.

“I don’t—”

"Tell me,” she says. “Is it the devil causing you to be a malcontent?”

“Yes,” I say.

"Oh, you unholy pagan. You son of Satan. You misguided thing. Where will you go when you die?”

As I said before, I am at the age when boys are simply children not thinking about death. I stare at her, the skin hanging from her neck, the purple eyebrows penciled in large arcs on her forehead, and I say, “I never really thought about it.”

"Never thought about it,” she says. She brings her hand to her chest and gasps. “Then, dear boy, you will surely go to hell.” She leans to me and says, "Go to hell, pagan boy.”

I didn’t even get my half-a-prayer. She leaves me in the lobby surrounded by the hums and thick, breathy sighs of adults speaking-in-tongues with their prayer children.

The addict, the beast, and Brian’s salvation

In the back of the sanctuary, I watch a former addict take the stage to discuss his life as a cokehead and speedballer. The addict tells of his first hit of blow at a party where he and three guys were in a back room. He had enough money for the one hit, but he wanted more, more, more. "I told those guys I’d do anything, anything for more, and they asked
to sodomize me.” The addict stops talking and looks at the stunned congregation. He looks to the ceiling of the church, he sniffles. “So I let them because I needed another taste of that girl,” oh, god, that sweet bitch.”

He tells the audience how he spent $500 a day on cocaine. He was fired from his job at a used-car lot because he was caught snorting in the back seat of a Cadillac. His wife has a restraining order against him because he told her that he was thinking about selling the children as sex slaves. “You see, I just wasn’t right, but I didn’t know it. No, I kept doing as many drugs as possible and living in and out of motels.

The day I crashed I was in the Mountain Grove Hotel off of I-90. I was in a bad way, yup, heading straight to hell. It was the middle of the afternoon and suddenly the sky outside went dark and a strong wind blew. The ceiling then opened up above me and stars, hundreds of them, began falling around me. I could almost touch them. I noticed the stars that hadn’t fallen, the ones still a great distance away, disappearing, like they were turned off. I squinted my eyes and saw they were being eaten by a serpent, a large snake. The snake wrapped itself around the sky, constricted, and ate everything. When the snake swallowed the present sky, there was another sky beneath it, and the snake kept eating and eating. I screamed and the snake turned to me and said, “I am the natural law.” He coiled his body and snapped at me, his mouth had chains for a tongue and fire for teeth.

Knowing I was facing the devil himself, I ran to the bathroom and flushed all the drugs I had. I put my face to the floor and begged Jesus to forgive me. I looked up and the snake was eating himself. When the snake
finished, the ceiling closed and butterflies came from the floor and
roses grew from the wall. And at that
moment God took my addiction
away. He pulled it from my body, cut
it into lines and snorted it into the
heavens."

Someone in the crowd shouts
an Amen. The former addict stands
at the edge of the stage and says,
"God is addicted to our sins. He
can’t get enough of them, so who
here wants God to take their
addiction away?” People in the
crowd jump into the air and say
Amen. "God can deliver you from
any addiction whether it’s drugs,
alcohol, gambling or porn. God
would love to suck away that porn
addiction. You just have come to the
altar and let me pray for you. God
is waiting for you.”

Everyone in the congregation
runs to the front of the church. A
man looks back at me and asks,
"You coming?" Before I can
answer, the old woman who bought
me says, “Don’t talk to him.” She
takes the man’s hand and they
push their way through the crowd.

The addict’s arms turn into
vines, and he wraps them around
everyone, but not me because—
being at the age where boys have to
take things out on their own—I
had already left the church. The
church is far behind me, being
consumed with the addict’s story,
which, of course, is a lie because,
as I said, the devil isn’t a snake,
just a crooked fellow running near
the thresholds.

I tell no one in my hotel
room of this memory, or, as I call
it, vision. Instead I go
to the closest
bar, The Neighborhood, where
bartenders greet me with “Good to
see you, Brian.” “I’m glad you came
back, Brian.” “Don’t worry about
your tab, some woman paid it last
night, Brian.”

So I order a round of
drinks for everyone there. On a red
stool, I watch cigarette smoke swirl
smiles as patrons exchange their purple drink chips for beer, or whiskey, or scotch. Strangers crowd me, put their arms around me, and shake my hand in thanks for the drink. As I stand, I raise my Bloody Mary into the air. The crowd circles me, lifts their glasses or cans or bottles, imitating me, and we toast all that is good and all that is evil. Amen.