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Devil in the Drawer

Francisco, a colleague of the Professor's, knew a guy who had an online sales business, who bought almost anything you brought to him, gave you something for it anyway.

They'd been through the house, ending up in the Professor's home office. He and Francisco agreed that his desk—oak, beautifully re-finished, originally his grandfather's—was the prize possession. Francisco asked if he could look in the drawers, and working through them, made a sound as he pulled out the bottom one.

"I can't believe you have that."

Throughout the house, the younger man had been taking photos to show his contact, but now he lowered his phone, put it in his pocket, and stepped away from the desk.

The Professor came over from the bookshelves, where he'd been pondering a pruning of his library.

His wife had given him the bronze devil statue—squatting, hands arranged in an arrogant nose thumbing, fingers as sharply pointed as its curled, crooked tail. She'd bought it mistakenly; on a walk on a Sunday afternoon visit to New York City, stopping at the display window of a closed shop, he'd pointed admiringly at a group of Pan Am Airline-themed shot glasses. She thought he meant the devil statue beside them.

It came in the mail a week after they got back. It wasn't the only thing about him she'd gotten wrong.

Something he'd long forgotten, the statue rested in the desk drawer on a mishmash of obsolete computer manuals and manila folders containing expired warranties and other useless ephemera. Because it had been a present, he didn't know what his ex-wife had paid for it. No doubt too much.

"You need to get rid of that," said Francisco.

"I am getting rid of it, with your help."

"This guy I know... he won't touch anything to do with the Devil."

The Professor considered it more a mocking presence than an evil one. Thumbing his nose at the world.

"I need to leave," said Francisco.

The Professor noticed the perspiration on Francisco's forehead. Maybe the younger man's reaction stemmed from a deep-rooted religious upbringing. The Professor believed less in a Hell with its Fallen Angel running an assembly line of perpetual torture than in the clear evidence of what people borrowed from Old Scratch to do to each other here on Earth.

Such as what had happened to him professionally. He'd been victimized by the actions of another colleague of his—Evan the Asshole—who'd accelerated the Professor's academic demise, stirred up and dumped a miasmic vat of career-drowning bile onto the Professor's long-labored-at

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dreams. The one who had sabotaged the Professor's already tenuous case for tenure, with a specious charge of "sloppy scholarship." Some people took everything literally; they only believed what they could see. Or hear, in this case. They'd repeat the most god-awful lie, if you laid it out for them. And so, his faculty committee had voted him down.

At the front of the house, Francisco took his jacket from the coat stand, as the Professor joined him in the hall. Through the windows in the adjacent living room, the Professor saw that the trees outside had picked this afternoon to shake loose and empty in a lazy blizzard of curled lemon twists and wads of orange-red. The trip with his wife down to New York City had been around the same time of year, two years previous.

"It's not like I use it for evil purposes," the Professor said, as a joke.

"Its power is going somewhere," Francisco said, "if not for you... probably to your detriment."

The Professor watched him go down the front steps, walk to his car, get in, and backing out of the driveway, knock into and scatter the pair of trash barrels empty from the earlier collection. Francisco stamped on the brakes as he pulled out onto the road as a large red pick-up truck swerved past with a blare of its horn.

As his panicked colleague finally managed to drive away, The Professor wondered if Francisco was too spooked to send any of the photos of the furnishings and belongings he'd taken for his friend. He also wondered about what he'd said.

If one acknowledged the other man's fears to any extent—had the Professor's wife inadvertently cursed him with the statue? Or maybe... not so inadvertently.

What had gone wrong the last two years since the object had arrived?

The split with her, of course. It had been ugly, and that they had started down that path at all was unexpected. At this point she'd been gone a year, and the last time they'd talked she'd urged him again to sell the house, so that they could split the profits.

What else had happened to him that might indicate the devil statue had brought bad luck? He'd gone through a series of unpleasant periodontal sessions, but that had been driven less by sudden emergency than too many years of dental neglect. Their dog Tucker had died, but he was old and on the decline. There'd been a series of disagreements with a next door neighbor—the roaming of the late Tucker across property boundaries, a fallen tree from the neighbor's yard the guy refused to help remove—but these were typical scenes from the suburban farce.

Of course, he couldn't forget the main one. His failure to get tenure.

But the Professor wasn't delusional; while Evan the Asshole's politicking had likely been the kill shot, the Professor's Chair had warned him repeatedly about the "weak tea" of his publications, and the Professor hadn't stepped up to the challenge.

Whether or not there was something to what Francisco had gone on about, the Professor didn't have any reason to keep the statue. Bad luck

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conduit or not, it would always remind him of his wife. He could put it out for the next trash pick-up, but that seemed like a waste. It was worth something, someone would buy it from some other shop, or from an internet posting.

The next morning, the Professor had to go to the college. When someone was denied tenure, there was a year's salary grace period, during which time the academic unfortunate had the opportunity to find the next waystation on the career road. The Professor needed to meet with someone in the Dean's office to confirm his health plan would continue during his job search.

On the way to his car in the garage, he remembered the statue. There was an antique shop near the campus, and he wanted to bring it by to see what it was worth. He went back into the house to his office, and in a rush, reached into the drawer and got stabbed by the statue's crooked tail.

Swearing, he put statue into his briefcase and tried to staunch the flow of blood with folded up pieces of paper off his desk.

On the campus where he'd spent the previous seven years, before he went to the Dean's office in the administrative building, the Professor went into the building next door. His old office was in a prime spot, first on the right as you entered. Its wooden door was closed, and the name in the slot on the wall beside it was no longer his. It made it all seem final now.

Ahead of him down the hall, a woman came out of another office and headed down toward the opposite end of the building. She had brown hair, and she looked good in her tight blue jeans. He didn't recognize her as a colleague or a student. But by her walk, he realized it was— longer-haired, but her—his ex-wife.

The Professor stepped back against the wall, not wanting to attract her attention. He knew whose office she was leaving.

Of course. Why wouldn't it be?

After she left, he walked down to where his wife had emerged. The door was open, but the office was empty, no one there.

Evan the Asshole considered himself to be One with the Zeitgeist, so he'd brought in an adjustable standing desk. The more traditional college-issued one remained, pushed up against the far wall and the Professor glanced up and down the hall and not seeing anyone else, went into the office. He crossed to the unused desk and yanked open the bottom drawer. As with his at home, it was filled with useless crap.

After he had done the deed, the Professor closed up his briefcase and left, walking toward the front entrance, now late to his appointment. As he came into the crisp October air, he looked at his cut finger. He put it to his lips.

He wondered if he had to make a wish or something. No, that was genies.

How did one unleash the power of a devil in a drawer?

He decided it would have to suffice that the statue was covered with his blood. Inadvertent or not, it made it the perfect gift.