

Cliff Jortho, or CJ for short, became a janitor within a year after completing high school. He wasn't the most ambitious person, and as time went on, he didn't desire much more than enough money to pay for gas to get to and from the bar. At the bar, he met Lisa, who is now his wife. By age 27, he and Lisa, who was 25 at the time, had their first son, Ronald. A few months later, they moved into a fair-sized house that they were able to rent for a reasonable monthly cost. Cliff spent less time at the bar so that he could focus his energy on becoming the type of father Ronald needed. Unfortunately for Cliff, it was time to change his priorities. Every Friday, he made it a rule in the household that he would spend two hours at the bar just to have some personal time and not totally give up everything he enjoyed doing. One particular Friday night was more interesting than the rest.

Cliff ran into a few old high school pals. They moved from the bar to a table so they could all sit and chat together. Cliff shared the story of how he met Lisa and broke the exciting news about having a son. Doing it the old-school way, Cliff whipped out his wallet and pulled out a picture of his boy, Ronald. In the age of smartphones, carrying real photos has become a thing of the past, but Cliff thought it was a nice sentiment. It also helped remind him every time he went to pay his tab that there was something else in life that demanded his finances more. And that something was infinitely more important than beer. So, the picture helped keep him in line, which was a good thing.

One of Cliff's friends, Bobby, spoke up and told the group about his job manufacturing phone screen glass. He talked about the chemicals involved in the process and some of the interesting military contracts that the company he worked for had. He couldn't share the details, but his work was quite involved and paid really well. He also had a child. Another friend talked about studying copyright law, and the third became a truck driver. It wasn't long before Cliff felt like he had been left in the dust. As the drinks started to kick in, the honesty began to pour out.

"All you guys have done something interesting with your lives, and I got myself stuck cleaning floors, barely scraping by with a kid at home," Cliff said. Kevin, the young man studying copyright law, replied, "I'm friends with a judge who is helping me as much as he can. It's not much help, but I could see if I can pull some strings to get you a job with the county cleaning the courthouse and some offices. I bet it pays more than what you're doing."

Cliff perked up and hurriedly shook Kevin's hand, thanking him abundantly for making such a wonderful offer. It still wasn't an interesting job, but it helped financially.

Fast forward six months, Kevin stuck to his word, and Cliff began working for the county. He worked the night shift when he cleaned the courthouse and the day shift when he cleaned the offices. The schedule was difficult at times, but overall, it was quite a step up in the world. However, a new problem arose. Cliff couldn't stop thinking about that night at the bar. Everyone he grew up with was living interesting lives. They all had accomplished something. Cliff felt like he hadn't. He was jealous and driving himself mad with desire. He wanted more. He wanted to be something. He wanted a different experience. The mundane was no longer interesting. This unrelenting desire burned hot within him.

One early morning, he was cleaning the courthouse. A security guard was on duty with him, as always. It was about 3 AM, not long into his shift. He walked down the back hall and unlocked the storage closet. He leaned over a stack of garbage bags, toilet paper, and other miscellaneous janitorial items and pulled the pull string to turn on the one dim overhead light, which hardly served any purpose. As he reached inside for some cleaning spray and paper towels, he heard a voice call from the other end of the hall, "Don't you want more?" He was startled as he jumped back and grabbed hold of the closet door to close it just enough to peek behind it. Down the other end of the hall was nothing but the light being cast from the main room onto the walnut-colored walls and old green carpet. Assuming it was the security guard, Cliff went in search of him. He found the guard near the front door, propped up against the wall, sitting in an office chair fast asleep.

"Yo! Wake up!" Cliff exclaimed as he kicked the man's boot a few times. The guard jumped awake and said, "Whoa! What do you need? Everything alright?" Cliff asked him if he was playing a prank. Cliff asked if he had just spoken to him from the hallway, and the guard admitted to being asleep for over an hour. He swore he wasn't pulling a prank.

Cliff brushed it off and tried to explain it away as a side effect of exhaustion. He hadn't been sleeping much because of Ronald, and he worked all different hours. Maybe his brain just played a trick on him. About a week later, Lisa started a fight with him over who was making dinner. The truth is that tensions were building in the house just because of the pressures of life. Make no mistake, it was no marriage-ending fight, but it did cause more stress than Cliff wanted to take on at that moment. He thought to himself, "I should go to the bar, get food there, and let Lisa figure today out on her own. That'll teach her." Immediately after the thought was thought, he heard, "Do it!" The voice came from the living room where he and Lisa were standing.

He screamed, "Did you just say that?" Lisa said, "You bet I did, buddy. You're lazy. I've been with Ronnie all day; the least you could do is make some dinner!"

"No, I heard that part. Did you just say, 'do it'?" Lisa shook her head no, and a confused look took over her face. "Do what? What are you talking about?" she asked.

"Nothing, never mind," Cliff said quietly as he tried to replay the details of the event in his mind to make sense of it.

He said to Lisa calmly, "I need to lay down for half an hour. When I get up, I'll go out and buy us something. We are both tired. Whatever you want for dinner, I will pick up. Let me know." He then turned from her and proceeded up the stairs to their bedroom. When he opened the bedroom door, he was met with a mostly dark room aside from the small amount of light breaking through the curtains. Suddenly, a black shadow that was so dark no other blackness on earth could compare slid across the floor from behind the dresser to under the bed. He paused for a moment. His heart began to race, and his fingers wrapped tighter around the doorknob. His other hand started to shake, and his vision focused tightly. Then, the shadow appeared a few seconds later on the other side of the bed, still on the floor. It hesitated, then darted up the wall, onto the ceiling, and disappeared. Cliff turned around and ran down the stairs at lightning speed. He grabbed Ronnie and yelled at Lisa to get in the car. She panicked because she saw the panic

expressed by Cliff. Without questioning the rush, they both got in the car and sped off. After she calmed down slightly from the adrenaline rush, she asked Cliff what happened.

"I heard a voice in the living room answering my thought, then I saw something in the bedroom. I know it sounds crazy, Lisa, but I think there's a ghost in there. I can't be losing my mind. I know what I saw," he said, stuttering and stumbling through the explanation. He knew by the look on Lisa's face that she didn't believe him. She obviously thought it was all in his head, and from that moment forward, she seemed concerned about his welfare. She talked about consulting a doctor and said things like, "Maybe you weren't ready for fatherhood just yet."

Although her disbelief infuriated him, he kept silent and drove them to the southern-style restaurant they loved. He needed a moment to clear his head, so after ordering drinks, he went to the bathroom. He walked in and stood in front of the sink, gazing into the mirror until his peripheral vision started to darken. A man wearing all black emerged from the bathroom stall and stood at the sink next to him. As the man was washing his hands, he turned to Cliff and said, "If she doesn't believe you, why not go find a woman who does? Go find one that loves you. Don't you deserve to be happy?"

Cliff's heart sank, and he got extremely light-headed. His knees grew weak, and he leaned on the sink for support. He rotated himself to face the man directly, and he started shaking as he asked, "Who are you?" A smile slowly formed on the man's face, stretching from ear to ear, literally. His entire face distorted into a wrinkled, grotesque mess. The whites of his eyes turned black, and his teeth were jagged and discolored. Blood poured from his tear ducts, and he laughed. The laugh sounded like 100 men laughing at the same time. It was slow and mocking. Cliff fell to his knees, and the man grabbed hold of him to steady him. Cliff was in shock and staring at the man's torso. His eyes were fixated on the buttons of the man's shirt. As the man slowly bent down to look Cliff in the eyes, Cliff noticed that it was his wife he was looking at. In her exact voice, this man—this thing—slowly caressed the side of Cliff's face and said, "Honey, are you afraid of me?" Cliff knew whatever was in front of him was sent straight from Satan himself. This was no hallucination, it was no alien, it was certainly a demon.

The demon grabbed hold of Cliff and pulled him to his feet. It then took the shape of Cliff's father. It even mimicked his voice. It paced back and forth with its hands behind its back while it gave a speech saying, "Oh my son, my son! I wanted so much better for you, you know. I told you that your actions have consequences. You chose this life, CJ. You chose it. But you don't have to continue it. You could let me help you."

"You're not my dad!" Cliff exclaimed. "Leave me alone! What could you possibly want from me?"

"I want to help you, CJ. I want you to live a good life. I want you to be better than your friends. I want you to be successful. I want you to have money, women, happiness. I want you to go to the bar whenever you want. I want people to want to be just like you."

Then, the demon walked towards the sink. It climbed onto the porcelain sink and hunched over, exposing through its shirt the protruding vertebrae of its spine. Its hands now looked withered and bony as it reached for the mirror. It climbed into the mirror and jumped off the sink

on the other side. It walked from one mirror to the next, and Cliff followed it closely as his breathing became increasingly labored. Then the demon appeared right in front of Cliff, in the mirror, and its new appearance was that of Cliff. It looked and sounded just like him. It spoke to him and said, "I'm not here to hurt you. I'm here to help you. Invite me in, and I will make you better than anything you could dream of." It reached into its back pocket and pulled out a blank piece of paper and handed it to Cliff through the mirror. "Sign this, and your life will never be the same." Cliff hesitated for a while, tears rolled down his face, and he moaned and grunted with anxiety and confusion. The part of him that was unhappy wanted change. The rest of him was filled with fear. A heightened curiosity caused him to reach for the piece of paper to read what the offer was. Once he reached for it, his nose began to bleed. The paper was blank. He inquired why that was. The demon replied, "We will write the script as we go. Whatever you decide to do, it will be written in the contract. If you want money, wealth will be added. If you want power, we will add power. The contract is yours to write, Cliff. Wipe the blood from your nose and give me a fingerprint on the page. Then, we will become one." Slowly and carefully, Cliff did as he was instructed.

Once the contract was signed with a bloody fingerprint, the demon came back through the mirror and entered into Cliff's body. It took over him. Cliff became a passenger in his own skin as he watched his hands move without him deciding to move them. The same with his legs, and his words. He watched his actions from within himself. He could talk to the demon through his thoughts. He requested to return to dinner as though nothing had happened, and so it was. For a while, he appeared normal. At home, at work, and with family, he was normal. Subtle changes started to occur in moments of heightened stress. He lashed out more at his wife. He was more aggressive and impatient with Ronnie.

Some time had passed, and the demon in control had socially connected Cliff to other inhabited humans. Through their help, Cliff got to meet a lot of powerful and wealthy people. Making record time, Cliff went from poverty to power. He managed to get a job as an executive for a construction company. He made more money than he knew what to do with. His wife was in utter disbelief but simultaneously overwhelmed with joy. She would randomly sing as she moved around the house. Her affections for Cliff were more frequently expressed, and intimate. For example, when he least expected it, she would come from behind him and wrap her arms around him in a loving embrace as she repeated how much she loved him. Although she saw Cliff as her hero, his heart grew cold. None of Lisa's emotions were reciprocated. She took notice of Cliff's emotional distance, but with how well their lives had been, she saw no need to seek answers for his change in character. But Her joy didn't last long.

Less than a year later, Cliff had divorced Lisa and moved into his own home. He never spoke to Ronald and wouldn't return any of Lisa's calls. He left her everything, so she would leave him alone. He hosted parties featuring prostitutes and drugs. He had money to spend, and it was all spent on fulfilling his pleasures. He grew in status, and everyone wanted to be near him. His health improved, he lost weight, and he was more attractive than he had ever been. He radically changed his whole appearance to look the part of a wealthy executive. Although

whatever he dreamt came true, everyone took notice of how cold his heart was. Employees would occasionally plead for time off or increased wages to support their families, and he would fire them with no conviction. He would treat women disrespectfully and make awful comments about people who stood in his way. His actions became violent as time went on. In one instance, he planned to become a partner in another business. He had brokered a deal with the owner of a real estate investment company. Before signing any contracts and making his involvement legitimate, they had backed out of the deal at the last second, potentially robbing him of millions of dollars.

Angry and impatient, Cliff waited for the appropriate time. One night, he went for a late-night drive and looked in his rearview mirror, saying to his demon, "Let's make that real estate deal." As his eyebrows raised and a grin grew on his face, the demon took control of his body, and they raced to the home of the real estate company's owner. It began to pour outside. Cliff grabbed an umbrella from his car and approached the man's front door, keeping his face toward the ground and the umbrella over his head. No one answered. The demon said to Cliff, "Go wait in the car." Once Cliff turned around, the demon expelled itself from Cliff's body in the form of a pitch-black shadow that fell to the ground like a puddle of Indian ink. The puddle moved towards the front door and grew into a smoky outline of a young girl. The smoky outline eventually took solid form, and a blood-curdling child's scream echoed all around the house. "Help me, somebody!" screamed the demon in a young girl's voice. Then, the door opened, and a man knelt down in front of the young girl asking what was wrong. The demon turned around and looked at Cliff, who was sitting in the car, and smiled arrogantly. Cliff was watching from the driver's seat, and for the first time in quite a while, he felt a real emotion. He felt regret. He didn't want to hurt the man. He knew what was about to happen, and he wanted to prevent it. But it was too late. The girl told the man at the door she thinks her dad is having a heart attack. The man ran past the girl towards the car in the pouring rain wearing only pajamas and a tank top. In an instant, the demon re-entered Cliff. Cliff screamed for it to stop. He commanded that they leave at once. The demon laughed and said, "This is what you wanted. It's written on the contract." So, Cliff watched his arm reach down next to the seat and grab the steering wheel club. He pretended to be in anguish as the man approached the driver's side door. The man opened the door to pull Cliff out and administer aid but was met with the blunt end of a metal rod and a violent assault that left him laying in the cold rain at night with a broken nose, two broken legs, and a threat to his family and his life. By the following week, Cliff made his investment, and the deal was complete. One week after that, the owner sold his portion of the real estate company off and moved his family away, so he had no ties to Cliff—the man who ruined his life. Empowered and seemingly invincible, Cliff began to become numb to the demon's actions. He felt a rush from the thrill of violence. Any time the demon left him after that, Cliff ceased to feel regret or remorse.

On one fateful night, Cliff got drunk at his favorite local bar. He had a few beautiful women waiting for him at home and a stash of drugs to keep him awake for even more fun. So, he slammed his final shot down on the bar and reached for his wallet. He pulled out three one-

hundred-dollar bills and tossed them nonchalantly on the counter, thanked the bartender, and hopped off the bar stool. He stumbled his way out the front door and to his car. He opened the car door and practically fell into the driver's seat. He fumbled for his keys, but before he could put them in the ignition, he got violently ill. After using his forearm to wipe his mouth and the sweat from his forehead, he relocated his keys and started the engine. "Ok Cliff, take me home," he said to his demon. There was no answer. "Cliff!" he shouted. Still no answer. "Don't mess with me, take me home." Yet again, radio silence. So, Cliff took it upon himself out of anger to drive himself home. He had no co-pilot anymore. That was the night he caused a four-car pile-up and killed a family of five.

Cliff was arrested and awaited a court date. Since the accident, he hadn't heard from or seen his demon. When his time in court had finally come, he pleaded insanity and told the jury the story of his possession. He looked at the judge and begged for mercy. The judge said, "Cliff Jortho, you are a man who went from rags to riches. You are a self-made millionaire, and you have established a high-profile network of friends. Nobody who has provided their character witness statements has accused you of anything less than a business giant and financial genius. You are not insane, sir."

"But it wasn't me doing any of that! It was the demon!" Cliff cried out. The judge then looked around the courtroom slowly and methodically, took a long deep breath, then replied, "Cliff, I don't see any demons here. I only see you." The judge issued his sentence of life in prison, and as Cliff was remanded over to the officers who were responsible for escorting him from the courthouse, he turned to look at those in attendance. At the back of the courtroom, near the two large wooden doors, sat a man dressed in all black. He smiled at Cliff and gave a subtle wave, goodbye.

Years passed as Cliff rotted away in a cold, dim cell. He replayed his life daily and wished he could go back to Lisa. He wanted ever so desperately to rewind to the day of the argument over dinner, hold her tight, and never let her go. Lisa and Ronald had visited him once in prison. She was married, happy, and getting by just fine. Ronald was loved, protected, and transitioning into a fine young man. Cliff was never going to get his ticket to the past, but he was grateful that Lisa and Ronnie were well. He missed them. One day after chow time, he returned to his cell to find a Bible laying on his bed. Having nothing else to do, he read little at a time, day by day. He finally got to the verse that changed his life. James 2:19 reads, "You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder!" That verse was etched on every fiber of Cliff's being from the moment he read it. As Cliff went from rags to riches to condemned, prison went from sorrow to hope to salvation. But the story doesn't just end there. Cliff knew not to conceal the truth of God's word. He knew how to apply it. So, Cliff became a minister and shared the gospel among the prisoners and became a beacon of hope to those who heard his voice. He shared his raw testimony with his fellow men, and he served as one who would guide them, free of judgment. Cliff was saved because he believed. He repented. Most importantly, he obeyed.