

“Virtues”

By T.D. Smith

A Short Story

For Mother’s Day, 5/10/2020

I.

I yawned, wondering if and when I would inevitably die of boredom. *Would* that I could die, and such a thing were even possible.

I had done my job now for hundreds of thousands of years and done it incredibly well. Not only had I been doing my job remarkably adequately, but I had been doing so since I was just a tiny little thing with the earliest, beginning-stage indications of nubs that eventually would become horns growing on the top of my skull and fluttering, puny wings that could scarcely hold my bodyweight as I bobbed about in mid-air. I had enormous self-esteem and confidence in my ability to do my job effectively, now being a fully grown, totally actualized demon with innumerable millions of souls of the lost and damned to his name to boot. I had an inkling that even the boss himself envied me.

Why, then, oh why did Hell have to adopt the abysmal corporate model of the human corporations in the overworld, and insist upon making me, the great manifestation of arrogance, sit in a chamber atop an obsidian skyscraper in the deepest pits of Hell? Why did it have me sitting through a mind-numbing, mentally-taxing, monotonous Power Point presentation about how to tempt people to damnation? It was downright insulting, and a useless, inefficient designation of downtime when we demons were not out in the field doing the actual tempting to have us sit in a boring, vanilla, sanitized conference room and pass the grueling hours in this manner.

I knew exactly why. We were being punished. It had been a difficult month for us tempters and our numbers were down. Punishment was the consequence anytime this was the case. I should have been happy, by the boss’s standards, not to be reeling in physical agony right now, instead being allowed to wear a black button-down shirt and business suit and sit inside, here in the cool air conditioning, while others were tortured outside in the hot lavafalls of Perdition.

Still. The *indignity* of it all, the principle that that Prince of the principalities and powers had put upon me.

“Remember, if all else fails,” the presenter of the wretched Power Point lectured, “just simply whisper nasty things into the human’s ear over and over. That tends to wear them down.”

I rolled my eyes.

“Oh my *idol*,” I thought to myself, “whisper nasty things? Amateurism!”

“Everything okay, Pride?” Sloth asked me in his deep, delayed baritone. Sloth is a “colleague,” (if one could even put him into that category, given his usual lack of consideration for timeliness and quality of his work) one of seven of us in my department. He’s a rather slow fellow, quite large and

deliberate in all his speech and movements, and coincidentally, I suppose he is my friend. I have a lot of those, though.

“What do you *think*?” I hissed back at him.

Before he could answer, the black landline phone on the wall rang, its ringtone chiming out like a death toll. Greed arose quickly, looking, well, greedy, and snatched the phone off the wall. He then eagerly ushered the poor Power Point presenter out, prematurely interrupting his presentation, slamming the door behind the indignant-looking demon. Stepping up to the table around which the other six of us were stationed, he enthusiastically addressed the group:

“Looks like we’ve got a mission, boys!” he said.

“Ooh, where and who is it?” I asked. “Hopefully someone important?”

“Or better yet, someone *attractive*.” countered Lust, scowling seductively, a flicker in his eye.

“Will there be snacks?” inquired Gluttony, easily three times larger than Sloth, his multiple chins jiggling as he spoke.

“Do we have to go *immediately*?” I was quite enjoying that presentation.” queried Sloth.

“Quiet! Sit back and watch, the live feed should be starting in a few seconds.” snapped Greed.

With the press of a button on the projector’s remote and a flash of momentary static upon the screen, we saw the story of our next victim, unfolding in real time like a movie, with a demonic voiceover explaining the juicy details of his case to us. The seven of us listened and took mental notes. I was beyond excited to get out of there and back into the human world again, to be given some real fieldwork, and to torment another living soul, win it over, and be commended by the boss again. I leaned in toward the screen intently, taking in every detail I could, my little demon heart fluttering with expectancy.

Upward we flew, the Seven Deadly Ones, together, over Hell, various demons and evil spirits weeping, wailing, and gnashing their teeth as they looked up and saw us going, our bat-like, hole-filled wings spread out and cutting the hot air. We ascended upward and soared out over the underworld until we came beneath the Earth to an entry point near where our case lived.

A few fluttering moments of flight later, and our seven pairs of feet hit cold, wet, rocky ground. We ascended the mazelike cave by foot, until finally we exited the narrow slit in the hill face that had a tiny spring babbling into it. Looking around, I saw that we were standing in someone’s backyard, enclosed by a chain link fence. Spreading our vile wings once again, we took flight for a short while, over a ridge and wood and several fields, until finally we touched down in our target’s front yard, preparing the pass through into his front door.

We had watched the man’s story whom we were supposed to tempt. Some months earlier, his wife had passed from an aggressive, terminal cancer. She had been the center, the very foundation stone, of his life. Gone now, a situation which until recently had been completely unfathomable to him, he was lost in a dark vacuum, riddled with despair that intensified and laxed at unpredictable intervals in

the black abyss, the emptiness that had been left without her light and warmth in his life any longer. His work life was not going well. Usually a man of faith, his patience with his deity was beginning to grow thin and he was becoming fed up with his life situation.

Having locked himself out of his house earlier today accidentally, whilst trying to start his stubborn car which ultimately had needed towing to the shop, the man had stood screaming at his Lord, becoming not only quite a spectacle to both us as we watched him vicariously as well as his neighbors, but also very nearly cursing the creator. His soul was clearly primed for us to torment, and the boss, who appeared to us at the end of the video feed in all his fiery, red skinned, horned glory, his pointed teeth visible in his sprawling grin, beseeched us that now was the perfect time to claim him. We stood now, just outside the threshold, ready to step in and begin our work. I could not wait.

II.

Before we could enter, the conditions had to be right. The Holy needed to exit in order for the profane, i.e. us, to come in, to be allowed to test the creator's subject. We waited for the Five Angels who were consoling our target, Reality, Charity, Level-Headedness, Hope, and Acceptance, to exit.

A pregnant moment of pause, our energy of excitement veritably electrically charging the air outside the door. Then, the Five Angels of Consolation walked through the door and past each of us, and the changing of the guard began. Each of them was clad in a pristine white button-down shirt, tidy, with short, combed, well-kempt hair and no beards. Their white, feathery wings were neatly folded to their backs. They looked like veritable altar boys.

Each of the angels passed us, their line moving past ours, and as they walked by each of them turned his head away from us in their kind's typical fashion, refusing to so much as glance at us. The final one in the line, however, Acceptance, with whom I had certain dealings with in the past (but that's another story) was the only one who did not look away and instead inclined his head toward the 7 of us demons, nodding in polite acknowledgement as he passed by each of us, then finally shooting a quick grin at me, the final one in the demonic line, which I quickly returned, before any of mine noticed.

I had to walk in the back of the line, you see, to make sure that Sloth made it places on time, being rather slow as I mentioned before, and tending to take his time to begin to do just about anything. I would walk behind him any time we went places, (missions, temptations, ice-cream parlors, you name it!) and have to push him forward from behind, both my hands planted firmly on his back and sinking somewhat into his manifold rolls. Oh, the humanity!

Greed avariciously walked first in our line, like always, per his insistence, obsessively licking his lips clean of their desirous drool.

With the final angel out of the house, each of the divine beings raised its wings in synchronization, and took off upward, disappearing into the clouds.

We entered then, passing through the house's front door as if it were a mist. Sloth stopped once to scratch his buttocks. I elbowed him in the back.

"Hurry the hell up!" I demanded. He let out a grunt and moved forward.

We passed lamp and end table, desk, chair, and couch on the first-floor landing without any luck of finding anyone at all, let alone our man. I winced at the pain of a glaring light reflecting off a metal cross mounted above one of the doorways, and shuddered at a painted depiction of the Last Supper hooked to the wall, (to have such macabre art mounted in your home!) having to look down until we had passed out of that room.

We eventually found our victim upstairs, reclined on his couch, a deeply contemplative look on his face. He was holding an iPad. He wore a tattered, hole-filled blue T-shirt, with this or that human university sports team logo on it. (We take no interest in sports teams below, but hell is full of iPads and similar such things, you see.) His gray hair billowed off his scalp and rested on his shoulders, as did his gray-and-black, overgrown, bushy beard, which I assumed he had grown out since his wife's death, judging by the pictures on the wall and mantelpiece, wherein both sets of hair were remarkably shorter. There were dark circles under his eyes from doubtless late nights sitting up unable to sleep, and red veins throbbing in their whites from both this condition and reading at night.

Glancing over his shoulder, I looked to see what he was viewing on the iPad. He had an e-book reader app up. I scanned the title bar to see just what he was reading.

It was the New Testament.

I grinned, ignoring the burning sensation the book was causing in my eyes.

This was going to be fun.

III.

The seven of us Deadly Ones set about tempting this man over the course of the next week.

Our attempts proved difficult.

On Monday, Lust began our onslaught against this man, trying his utmost to push him over the threshold of no return and onto the path toward eternal hellfire. The man, weary and ready to rest and read after a hard, overly, atypically stressful day at his workplace, kicked back on the couch reading his electronic copy of the New Testament. Lust called upon his powers and ability to manipulate nature, causing multiple pornographic popups to appear suddenly on his iPad. Alarmed, the man quickly tapped the red exes, closing out of the multiple attacks assaulting his eyes. Looking into his mind, Lust saw that the man was dismayed and did not want to see these things. After a few minutes, Lust changed his angle. He showed the man bottles of pills, pumps, etc. in popups, and other devices, as well as ads for dating sites, after discovering some thoughts in the deep recesses of the man's mind, flashbacks to finding these things in the back of his deceased father's closet, and a yearning for companionship. The man remained strong, exiting out of each popup. Thwarted, Lust backed off for a bit.

A little while later and the man ended his reading for the night and pulled up YouTube. He began watching old movies from when he was a child. His eyes would sparkle when he saw the more popular and outgoing actresses of his era and marveled at their beauty. Lust tried entering his mind and suggesting things, but to no avail. The man's own thoughts about his wife, whose beauty, strength, nurturing nature, and masterful leadership in the family he dearly missed and saw in reflected in the

starlets sparkling on his small screen overpowered any thoughts Lust feebly attempted to put there. The man didn't even notice them. Tears crept into his eyes, and the impressions in his mind were so powerful, Lust could not overcome them. Hanging his head, the demon crept away and bothered our victim no further.

On Tuesday, it was Gluttony's turn. Famished after work, the man made himself a small, modest meal consisting of a sandwich and low-carb yogurt. Sitting reading on his iPad again, his tummy began to rumble. The man's thoughts moved toward the pantry, which his wife used to keep stocked with plentiful snacks and treats. Getting up and opening it, and the man found it to be rather bare. This saddened him, but also, he thought to himself that he was better off simplifying as a man living alone, and watching his blood sugar, too. He drank a small glass of water and continued reading, his appetite curbed. Gluttony tried to penetrate his thoughts with subliminal diversions to snacks and goodies but to no avail; the man's mind only turned to his wife, whom he associated with these things.

By Wednesday, we were starting to worry. Greed failed miserably. Offering the man this and that, putting ideas into his mind to play online poker or purchase a lottery ticket and quit his job if he won, nothing came of it ultimately. The man had a modest income from his job, (despite the fact that it had been continually downsized and was now part-time) which when supplemented by the income he collected from his wife's insurance and disability, allowed him to live comfortably if he spent sparingly and was cautious. Greed could do nothing to sway this man toward evil. We all walked away from the man, congregating together in the basement, making mutual accusations, and quarreling amongst ourselves.

Thursday things seemed to be taking a turn for the better. It was Wrath's turn today, and it was perfect timing. The man was tense to the max this evening after work and was quite worked up. Pacing back and forth he complained about his work situation on the phone to his friend and close confidant, then sat pouting on the couch for a bit, not so much as touching his iPad. Wrath entered his mind. Discord, anger, fury was already raging there, a great tempest. Wrath had hardly to suggest anything to cause the man to finally break into a fit, shouting and flailing his arms all about. Wrath and the rest of us were exceedingly pleased to see his emotional episode.

Ultimately, however, to our shock and dismay the man not only deescalated, calming down, but to our utter chagrin began weeping and asking for his creator's forgiveness for his shouting, complaints, and accusations he made the other day when he was upset after his car would not start and he was locked out of his house. We left the room again, disgusted, and rather than bicker, we all lamented together, fearing failure this late in the week, knowing that surely our master would punish us as equally or more profoundly than we had fallen short on this case.

Envy experienced a brief spark of bright hope on Friday, when the man saw a social media post of a close friend who was retiring with his wife somewhere beautiful. Thoughts of jealousy arose and fluttered about inside the man's skull. Wonders of what would have been had he had a more affluent career, had his wife survived longer than she had. Perhaps he, too, would be retiring somewhere with his wife and posting something similar. Envy grinned from ear to ear to see these thoughts, and applied his power to the thoughts, attempting to amplify them. Alas, though, the man eventually decided to go to bed early, and with a snuffle and tear in his eye, shook his head and said, "You give and You take away." The words burned our very essences and we each backed away several steps from the man,

daring not to make any further moves toward him. He closed his bedroom door for the night, and, hanging our heads, we retreated.

Saturday was my turn and I ventured toward our target with a spring in my step. I knew I would turn things around and succeed where my colleagues had failed. I was the best among them, and incredibly so, after all! I, Pride, chief among the tempters, the greatest among the Demons, perhaps second only to the boss himself, would surely win this man's soul over for the powers of darkness.

I began my work on Saturday morning by whispering consolingly into the man's ear. He was taking a pause while sending one last email from his work account before beginning his day off, having forgotten to send it while he was still in the office the previous afternoon. He glanced up at the wall above his desk in his home work space and glanced at his multiple degrees, framed nicely, their glass gleaming in the glinting setting sun shining through the window. I told him how great he is, how smart, clever, and wiser than most of the other humans surrounding him in the world. The man stiffened up for a minute, then smiled, and I, too, grinned, thinking he was falling for the allure of my suggestions. Then he burst into an all-out belly laugh. He said that if he were so great, where is the physical evidence of that? He worked so hard and got the degrees displayed on the wall before us, but what, ultimately did they get him? He had an overall disappointing career, not the promising enterprise he had imagined in his youth. The man whispered back to me that there was nothing great about him whatsoever.

The sincerity of his humility burned me and I recoiled.

After a few moments, I gingerly risked leaning back over his shoulder. I whispered to him again telling him how great he is for his humble outlook on things, that he ought to take great pride in his modest, Spartan lifestyle. Again, he looked up at his framed degrees and smiled. I thought for one lingering moment that I had won him. I felt my demonic heart leap for joy within my ribcage. But then the man chuckled again. The chuckle turned into a sob. Tears streamed from his eyes.

"I would not have made it through these degree programs if it weren't for her," the man said, referring again to his departed beloved. I frowned. "She was with me through it all, and even had our first child while I finished the final one. The degrees would not be on the wall at all if it weren't for her. She framed them, not me. She was my inspiration, my muse, my motivation for doing it all. And without her, it means nothing. Nothing. Just pieces of paper behind glass, hanging on a dusty wall."

I was speechless. I could not believe I had failed. More than that, in several thousand years I had never encountered a human with such resolve, such commitment to his beliefs, such turmoil in his soul yet resilience and willingness to repent. Just who was this woman who had been his partner, who could inspire such things within him that lived on long after her passing?

I hung my head, completely stunned that I, Pride, supreme among the Deadly Ones, had failed so miserably, and perhaps worst of all of us.

Sunday came and it was gloomy and rainy out, a fitting forecast on a day that held little hope for us Deadly demons, as it was Sloth's turn to take a crack at this crumbling case. He failed as horribly as any of us (who could have predicted that!) having not thought or planned about how he was going to go about tempting the man at all. In fact, Sloth did not begin his task until late afternoon when the sun was going down, much to the vexation of the other six of us. Sloth, having not paid any attention to the man's daily routine and habits, suggested to him that he watch TV, something none of us had to date

seen him do, only watching videos on his iPad occasionally, rather than walk his dog. Unsurprisingly, this did not work. Not only that, but to Sloth's sheer shock, the man gave his television away to his son after his walk with the dog, declaring he did not need it due to using it so seldom. In one final, desperate attempt, Sloth tried to cause the iPad to malfunction and pull up YouTube videos. The man simply turned off his internet connection in the end and read his New Testament instead.

If we were worried before that we were facing impending punishment for our lack of any kind of effective temptation, it was glaringly obvious now. We began our dejected descent to the house's foundation together, none of us uttering a word to one another this time, so filled with the anxiety of impending doom were we.

IV.

I was halfway down the staircase from the man's living room to his den when I noticed something out of the corner of my eye.

"Hold up, everybody. What's that?" I asked my comrades, pointing.

The other 6 Deadly Demons looked and saw what I did, a swirling, dark orb of shadows fluttering in one of the corners of the living room that we had previously not noticed. Climbing back up the stairs into the room, which the man took no notice of, being invisible to him, we circled the black mass. It twirled and writhed, and growing larger, its shadow casting out further from the corner. Its shape morphed, changing gradually into a tall, slim, humanoid figure wearing a dark cloak and hood. It pulled back its hood to reveal its identity:

It was the demon Despair.

He wore a sour, thin-lipped smirk on his face and looked at us with disdain. His eyes were dark as night, with black irises to match his pupils. It sent a shiver down even my demonic spine.

"You gentlemen have done *tremendous* work. You really have," Despair spoke, sardonically. "Admittedly, it is a difficult case. But now, it is time for you to witness a pro in action. I have known this human from the time he was young and know how to work him. Watch and learn."

Despair stepped forward then and set upon the poor man. The vile, twisted, evil things he whispered in his ear, the inane distasteful, depressing suggestions he made in the man's ear not even I dare repeat. The man's eye twitched, but he remained steadfast, and pulled his iPad closer to his face, its screen's soft glow highlighting the whiter threads of his beard. The demon entered him then, and a horrific look of torment appeared moments later on the man's face: every demon in that room could sense, even veritably *smell, feel*, his inner turmoil, so nearly tangible was his staggering emotional and mental pain.

The man cried out aloud, bellowing tears, weeping greatly.

"It's not fair!" he shouted, "My life is over! My wife is gone! I have NOTHING left to live for! Please, end it Lord! Take me! Take me now, I beg of you!" he called out.

I was sickened by this spectacle. I mean, I really, honestly, truly felt for the man in a way I had never felt empathy for any other living thing in all of creation. What the demon of Despair was doing to him was truly dreadful and defies description as to its horror.

I was appalled, as were the rest of my colleagues. Greed's jaws hung open in astonishment. Gluttony threw up. My mind raced faster than my heart, and it occurred to me that Despair was taking cheap shots at the miserable man, and employing what despite his own description were amateur, novice tactics, those described earlier that week by the demon giving the Power Point presentation. As I stood witnessing Despair's relentless torture of this innocent, righteous man, I found myself having feelings contradictory to both my name and nature it reflected, misgivings about the nature of my occupation, disillusionment with the devil and all his deeds.

The demon of Despair finally finished. The man was lying on his back on the couch, despondent, tears having drenched his long, thick beard. He shook as he breathed heavily and his chest moved up and down, this poor man who had had any kindling of hope sucked out of him. The demon walked past us, only nodding and smiling nastily at us as he descended the stairs and walked through the front door. His eyes flashed at us as he went, a knowing look on his face, understanding full well what lay in store for us for our collective failure.

We had nothing left to do but call the boss and beg for mercy.

Greed, his hand shaking, took out the black cellphone from his suit jacket pocket and dialed him. We all waited, breathlessly. Our boss was not known for his sense of compassion or clemency.

V.

Astonishingly (though it pains me to say it, some might even label it *miraculously*) the boss gave us another week to work on damning the man, if with a steep warning and notable lack of enthusiasm and sympathy in his tone of voice.

I glanced at the man, who had risen and was sitting up on the couch. He had dialed someone on his phone and was talking to them. From the sound of it, one of his children or a close family friend. There was a glow about him, ever so slight, an aura I had previously not noticed emanating from his person, having been invisible to my prideful eyes. I looked back to my colleagues.

"Huddle, up, everyone!" Greed commanded. We all did so. "We've been given seven more days. And we aren't going to torment or tempt him, are we? I mean, we can't, can we?"

"No!" Gluttony cried.

"Certainly not!" Sloth bellowed in his belabored baritone.

"I mean, he is, finally, a really good guy," I offered, "a decent chap!"

"He is." Wrath acknowledged. "and you have to think of it this way. We fell. Hundreds of thousands of years ago. We *chose* to dedicate ourselves to evil, to bringing all of creation under the boss's rule, even going so far as each of us naming ourselves after a destructive vice. This man, he is an actual, truly good person. One who has been through a lot, in fact. He didn't choose to be born into a

fallen world. He just was. He also didn't choose any of the bad things that have befallen him. Yet, he persists. He is good. And he continues to strive to be so. Guys, I think this case is a lost cause."

"Me too," said Envy, "but I think he deserves a little help over the next 7 days from us. We can do him a lot of good before we go, erm, for good. You know?"

We all agreed. Then, we discussed just exactly how we were going to go about doing so.

Over the next seven days we set about helping the man, setting up his life for future success. We agreed to appear to him in a form he would recognize and find acceptable, wearing the yoke and collar of a priest in a black robe, with a long, gray beard, similar to his own. He met us willingly in his dreams, and we gave him intensive lessons in each of our areas of expertise, teaching him the opposite of what we normally would.

Monday Greed went first. He taught him personal finance skills, how to budget and pay bills, something the man desperately needed a brushing up on, his wife having insisted for years that she handle the financial needs of the family. He gave him tips and tricks on how to maximize the management of his modest means and taught him how to do much of his banking online. When the man awoke we witnessed that he had put to use what he'd learned in his dream, spreading out bills and papers and invoices on his kitchen table, and setting out to manage them on his laptop computer. He whistled while he worked, indicating the beginnings of an appreciation for the labor that his wife had had, something he had told Greed in his dream, and which he had never quite understood about her until now.

On Tuesday Gluttony took his shot. He taught the man delicious recipes and how to cook for himself, another thing his wife had done more often and better than him during their many years of marriage. The meals were as nutritious as they were mouthwatering, and in the evening after work in the waking world, the 7 of us smiled in satisfaction as we witnessed the man cook one of the recipes our priestly persona had taught him in his sleep.

Wrath's turn came on Wednesday. He taught the man meditation and breathing exercises that could help him manage his anger and fury when the disconsolation and injustice of his untimely loss would inevitably come to him, stirring up consternation in his heart of hearts once more. He also suggested the man buy a small punching bag and take out his anger when it became unmanageable by means of the breathing and meditations. The next day the man did this, setting up the punching bag in a cleared space in the corner of his basement that was fast becoming a home gym.

Envy went next on the following night, speaking to the man. He told him that he should not envy the living, but rather the righteous dead and their reward, like his wife and the life after death she was doubtlessly now living. The man's face lit up with a deep hope that none of us had heretofore seen. He awakened the next day having a spring in his stride, visibly happy, for reasons I suppose he probably could not quite put a finger upon.

On night five, Lust showed the man different dating sites for people of various faiths. He told him that when he's ready there are plenty of other lonely, faithful people out there who are good, decent ones and are looking from anything from a full-on relationship to simply companionship and

something platonic. He might be able to offer them love and touch their lives positively, eventually, if ever he found himself ready to do so. He told him that love is infinite and takes many forms and is patient and kind. He might find it again, maybe not in exactly the same way he had it with his wife, but perhaps in a way he never thought he would, thinking himself spent and incapable of having love and affection for another again.

“Love, is, finally, ultimately,” the small, kindly priest who appeared to the man said, “patient and kind. It will be waiting for you, always, and if you open your heart when you are ready, will come to you. And if not, that is okay, too. There is love in celibacy too, in a different form, and living more monastically is a suitable alternative wherein you eventually will reap the reward of reuniting with your late wife, experiencing your love for each other in eternity beyond its human limits you encountered in your marriage. Love will always be there, waiting for you patient and kind, either here or in the next life, in one form or another.”

The man awoke pondering these things in his heart, and with a feeling of calm and resolve he did not have before.

Speaking with my colleagues, we decided that on Saturday night Sloth and I ought to double team the final lesson of help for the man together. I paced about all day, nervously. I found myself full of self-doubt, not sure of my ability to help someone and go against (what I had previously thought, at least) was my nature. I had only done evil and temptation for so very long, could I really do anything good for someone, a man such as this one, that would actually help him? Could I succeed in counseling him, or anyone for that matter, in a way that by comparison far exceeded the magnitude by which I had failed to tempt him?

I anxiously dialed my friend, the Angel Acceptance, asking him for advice. Acceptance willingly gave some to me without hesitation.

“The key to pride, my good friend,” Acceptance spoke over the phone, “is moderation and directing its energy not inward upon one’s self, but outward, into the world, and into others. Working toward a greater good, taking a pride in that, is a very good thing. Taking pride in one’s work, in a job well done, is good, too, as is pride in your children, relatives, friends, and neighbors, and really, truly joining in their experiences of elation when they achieve or do something good. This man you are trying to help, he needs encouragement, to be able to build a sense of healthy pride. Give him small encouragements for the things he is doing in his life that are good. Don’t push him to think he’s better than anyone else, just let him know that in the last several days he’s done better for himself, compared to himself before. That is good pride.”

I went to work in the man’s dream along with Sloth that night, whom I appeared with as one elderly priest. I went first and told the man the things Acceptance had told me. I showered him in praises for what he had been doing, cooking, paying bills, thinking more positively, etc., and promised him he’d see better times in his life and be happier because of doing them. Sloth surprised me by encouraging the man to join a local walking group that met twice a week, getting outside, moving, walking his dog there and with other people, and becoming more active.

“An active body means a healthy mind!” Sloth said, and my mouth in our mind’s eye dropped open, wondering if it was, indeed, Sloth saying such things. I then spoke up and added to Sloth’s aid,

praising the man for his more frequent walks with his dog and punching bag workouts, encouraging him to keep those up.

It was nearly time for the man to awake, but from out of the depths of my heart, one last thing came to me. I looked at the man and tapped into my power. Placing my hand on his shoulder in the dream, I showed him visions of former patients he had served in his meager job, and how they were doing now. Many of them were doing exceedingly well, and, remembering words of encouragement and wisdom he had given them during his ministerial work with them, had improved their lives considerably. He was truly overjoyed for his former patients, and woke up crying, this time tears of joy.

VI.

On Sunday, we rested. The man rose and got showered and dressed, and then went off to church in his car. We waited for him to return, not following him out into the world, but choosing rather to stay and communicate with him in his home, like always.

That night, we all conjoined as one, the seven of us, making one final appearance as the little, withered priest to say goodbye. We told him our work here had finished and he would no longer see us in his dreams. He teared up a little, but then the moment passed, he hugged us, and thanked us profusely, asking if there was anything he could do to repay us. We told him no, we did not ask anything in return, only that he heed what we had taught him, and continue in the good habits.

He smiled and said he hoped to see us again one day. We smiled back and told him one never knows. We left his dream, then, letting him slip to dark unconsciousness, and truly rest for a while, just as we had done that day. We prepared to leave the following morning, packing up our various spiritual belongings into our bags we had stashed in his basement.

In the morning, the man rose, dressed for work, and out the door he went for his car.

We prepared to follow suit, having all collectively chosen to dial into the boss on speaker and face the music together, but to our surprise when he confessed what we'd done, rather than respond angrily, he merely sighed and said he'd deal with us in person in Perdition, together. First, he had another assignment for us, and he quickly gave us the details. After Greed hit the "hang up" button on the screen, we nervously glanced at each other, not daring to talk about what unspeakable punishment lay ahead of us once we got home. Instead we stood together contemplatively. At length, Envy spoke up.

"You know who the man is going to think we were in his dreams," Envy said to the group.

"Yeah...one of the other side, doubtlessly." Lust admitted. "Some Saint or angel."

"Maybe we don't mention *that* part to big Lu," Greed gasped.

"Still, I think it was worth it, you know, doing the right thing. At least just this once." I said, after a pause.

The rest of my friends voiced affirmations, agreeing with me.

VII.

We left the house together, exiting out the way we'd come in, passing directly through the heavy oak front door, filing out in a line with Greed in front and myself bringing up the rear behind Sloth. Strangely, Sloth walked at an acceptable pace, not his normal, slow trot, pausing to look at this or that, or catch his breath. We walked down the sidewalk and toward the corner, where we would enter the driveway that was on an incline, a suitable takeoff point.

Being the last in line, as I was about to round the corner into the drive, I noticed a man out of the corner of my eye. Turning, I looked and saw him fully. He was wearing a tattered white robe and had long, brown hair, and a beard. His skin complexion was olive, and he had deep, dark brown eyes and a long, pointy nose. The sun was just beginning to rise over the mountain ridge and beamed through the branches and leaves of the tree he stood under, casting shades of green onto his robe. I noticed with a gasp that the light shone through holes, wounds in both his hands, and realized at once who he was. As if in confirmation, I glanced up and saw the man standing with purpose under a bough where it connected to the trunk of the tree, which he gently rested his hand upon. He smiled at me.

And normally, that would have burned me. Strangely, it did not this time. (Was I crazy or had the light from the man's electronic Bible also not hurt my eyes as badly last night?) I noticed to my wonder another, female figure appear next to him, standing under that tree beside him. It was not the typical one you might expect. She too, smiled at me. Before I could gaze upon this man of import and his guest any longer, another figure appeared, quite suddenly, under that tree, with a dash of black smoke, on the opposite side of the trunk. I recognized his short, sleek, well-kempt, gelled down black hair and perfectly tailored black suit, as well as the red, spindly tail that protruded from his trousers and ended in an unmistakable point. He flashed a devilish grin at me, bearing his pointed teeth for a second.

I snapped my gaze away and quickened my step to catch up to my colleagues, whom I had fallen a pace or two behind. Just before I turned the corner, I heard the men speak to one another.

"It's been a while, my old friend," the man with long hair in white said, "When was the last time I saw you?"

The man in the black suit shrugged. "I dunno, Gethsemane? Golgotha?"

The other threw back his head in laughter, genuinely tickled. "No, no it was a bit sooner than that, by a couple of days...at *your* place, remember?"

My boss *did* remember. So did I. I doubt he smiled. He certainly didn't laugh.

"Your boys did well on this mission!" the man with holes in his hands said. "There might just be hope for them yet. Why, they even learned to rest on the Sabbath, like someone else I know..."

"Yeah, yeah. Rub it in good, why don't you," my boss shot back, a hint of what might have been amusement in his tone. "I just have to ask you, why all this again? Why do you keep doing this to people, good guys like the one who lives here? Testing them like this? It's a pleasure to burn the wicked, sure, but this one, well, this one *really* hurts."

"You know why. In the end it makes them better. He's good, but if he persists til the end he will be better than he would have otherwise been. Losing things, the best things ending, their finality, makes

people truly appreciate them, love them *fully*, if only they work to gain the right perspective. It makes them better. And remember, time and pressure, friend.”

“Makes diamonds. Yeah. I know. I saw you do it the first time it was ever done.”

“You did,” said the man in white, something present in his tone I could not quite identify. Perhaps it was love. “and I still remember that look of marvel on your face when I showed you.”

There was a pause then wherein none of them said anything.

“Well,” the man in the white robe finally went on, “in the meantime we’ll keep testing him. Mine will try to make better, others of yours will tempt a few more times. I’m interested to see if the habits yours taught him this past week hold.”

“Me too.”

“Sound good to you?”

With one final dart of the eyes backward, I saw my boss nod.

“The usual arrangement. Fine by me.”

“Great. What do *you* think, Wanda?”

The woman standing with that man of great renown smiled broadly then. The sun rose fully from behind the ridge and illumined her and her companion in brilliant light and cast the third figure in shadow under the tree’s canopy. I had to squint to still make out the radiant figures. The woman watched the man’s car back down the driveway and looked on fondly as it drove on down the road and disappeared out of sight.

“Sounds acceptable to me.” She said. “And I think he will pass.”

The man with holy hands smiled the brightest and widest I’d yet seen then, raising his hands to the sky. All three figures faded, disappearing into the growing daylight.

I turned the corner and joined the other Seven Deadly Ones.

“Ready?” Greed asked the group.

“Ready.” We all said.

I pondered briefly, puzzled by just who this woman was. I of course recognized her from the pictures in the man’s house. But I wondered who she *was* that even the man outside had consulted with her, that she had been such a beacon of light, a steadfast fixation in our man’s mind, heart, and soul that we had found it quite impossible to win him over. I marveled.

Together at once we leapt from the ground and into the air, spreading our bat-like, hole-infested black wings, and soared off into the dawn light, our hair fluttering in the early morning breeze, around our horns. We moved onward and upward to our next assignment far away, to meet whoever waited for us at the next house. Whether we would torment and tempt or attempt to aid, I knew not.

THE END.