

Neil Gaiman

by Jowell Tan

"Tell me a story," he said, toying with his top hat, running his fingers along its brim.

We were seated facing each other, on these cushy 18th-century Victorian chairs, dressed to the nines, suits and ties. We were surrounded by shelves, fully stocked with books from everywhere and every time. Hemingway, Kerouac, Salinger, whoever - they were all there, hard-bound and pristine. Behind me, against the wall, a vinyl player cranked out Mozart's *Piano Concerto No. 24 in C Minor*.

So, this was where the Devil rested. No fire and brimstone, no tortured souls crying out for redemption - Just books as far as the eye can see, and classical music playing out of an old player.

"But.. what do you want me to talk about?" I enquired, naturally nervous and scared out of my wits.

"Oh, I don't know, Neil," He replied, leaning back into the cushioned back of his chair, casually waving his hand about in the air, "You're the writer. I gave you your gift for a reason."

Suddenly he was out of his chair. He moved with blinding speed across the room - Before I could react he was standing in front of me, his face so close to me I could smell his breath, one of cigarettes and burnt flesh. I hadn't seen him place his top hat on his head, where it now was, nor had I seen him pick up a kitten - I couldn't recall if there were even animals around before - and place it on his right palm, where it now sat peacefully, meowing. His eyes were full of glee and malice, as if expecting something that would, figuratively, blow him away. He started talking animatedly, his mouth twisting into the ugliest shapes as he babbled away enthusiastically;

"You could talk about kittens, the size of buildings, who play grotesque games with the people of your race before clawing them to pieces;"

His left hand waved over his right palm, and in a flash the kitten was gone, replaced by a gas mask, horribly disfigured to resemble a demon.

“Or the king of dreams, who escapes from 70 years of captivity by black magicks, and embarks on a quest to reclaim his former kingdom;”

Again, and the gas mask was replaced by a button.

“Or a young girl, who falls into another world, where her mother is not really her mother, and eyeballs are replaced by buttons;”

Again, and the button was replaced by a pair of wedding rings.

“Or a lesbian couple, who has decide which of the two is to die to save the life of their child;”

Again, and this time, a key appeared. It wasn't your typical sort of key, made of metal and silver in colour - this was made of human flesh, it seemed, throbbing muscle vibrating in beat to the music playing, and sharp edges formed along its blade, pointing in all directions. His voice changed, become more angular, focused, and deepened, as if he was now dropping into his real voice and not the fake, airy one he has used before this.

“Or even, or even! You could tell a story about me, a fictional me, who one day tells himself, *I've had it*. So he kicks everyone out of hell, locks all the gates and doors, rips off his own wings, returns the key back to the man who had sent him there in the first place, and retires on earth, opening a bar where he plays piano requests for drunken American businessmen for the rest of his day.”

He clenches his hand into a fist, very quickly, and immediately the key is gone. There is nothing left on his hand on display.

His soliloquy finished, he stood up straight, visibly exhausted. He stepped back and pirouetted a few times, cleanly and with perfect execution, before falling back onto the chair, top hat slightly askew, breathing out a loud sigh. He crossed his leg, right over left, finely like an educated gentleman, removing his top hat and once again, running his finger along its brim.

“You're the writer, Neil, the one with the stories - *It's in your hands.*”

