

Tension And The Devil

by Steve Finan

Walking on the street I can feel the tension. I feel the nails and screws driven in to hold together the gates and doorways. All woodwork has been tortured this way. I sense, through my soles, the crushing power of gravity keeping the pavement in place. Occasionally I must put my hand to a building. I almost succumb under the avalanche of the tremendous stresses on the steel framework. I am buried by the weight of stone in older constructions. Timber-framed newbuilds are bolted together until the constricted wood screams. All the world that civilisation has built is held in place by unbearable force. Even the frame of my bed was bolted tight so it groaned in agony when I moved. The rough men have artificed, hammered, bent and hewn the substance of nature.

The forces transmit raging headaches. My blood overpumps until its pressure flows in my veins as pain. My sinews are pulled and wracked in sympathy with the surrounding materials. I arch and writhe beneath the grind. No-one can help. Doctors will not listen. All my long years I have tried to release the prisoners by pulling out nails — oh how they squeal when my claw frees them. I undo bolts with a spanner I carry for the purpose. I dig up the tarmac to leave it loose and comfortable. I pull smaller stones from under their larger oppressors.

I was deconstructing a gateway when I met The Devil in the guise of a black-coated old man. .

He asked why would I do such a thing? I did not, of course, recognise him as the Devil — who recognises undiluted evil? We are told he shall come upon us unawares. The Devil watched me loosening the bolts — and they were particularly vicious. They were of a type named "expansion bolts", which use a screw thread to widen a sheath in a drilled hole. Can you imagine the tensions in such a device? The Devil asked again why I would do such a thing.

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The question was sincere. He was genuinely curious and I, of course, had nothing to hide. So I told him what I was about, how I was freeing this unnatural construct . . . letting the tension dissipate in the air and blow away on the free winds.

The Devil then revealed himself. He spoke of such a heresy that I had difficulty comprehending. He spoke of the world, and everything in it, needing to be bound and screwed down. Nailed and bent into shape. Held in place. Thrall. He said the world needed this kind of order. It needed an order that must be held tightly. The Devil said he spent his time tightening screws, making sure nails were hammered in correctly. He carried an adjustable wrench and sometimes even a hammer to "help" keep all the world's fixings as taut as possible.

I am very far from a violent person but it was all I could do to keep myself from striking him.

The Devil saw, I think, that his wickedness perturbed me and said a quite polite, "Good evening" and went on his way. But, dear reader, what could I do? I was compelled to follow to ascertain whether he would commit terrible acts. The Devil observed me and quickened his pace, glancing over his shoulder from time to time. He did not, though, commit any acts of tightening, which I was particularly glad about as I am unsure what I may have done. I would certainly not wish to grapple with the fellow.

Eventually he stopped, allowed me to catch up, and asked why I was following in his cloven hoofsteps. I could think of nothing at all to say except the truth. I said I was worried that he might be about to tighten already cruelly wrenched fixings or hammer already driven nails. He could not, though I knew he was casting about for a way to deny his compulsion, say he hadn't have been tempted to commit such acts had it not been for my vigilance.

He hurried on his way and I hurried after. I followed The Devil to his lair and stood defiantly outside, attempting to loosen the screws in the hinges of his little wicker gate. I shuddered to think of what horrors might lie within his dark and nailed and tightened domicile. I had to act, do you not see? How could I do other than what I did? Evil will flourish when good men do nothing. He shouted through his

letterbox. Something about the world falling into ruin if he did not keep up "his work". I was able to counter his false testimony, his heresy, with truths of how free and open everything could be if only we all took it upon ourselves to release the tightness of the world.

I liberated the top hinge of his gate. It was surely too much for The Devil. He reacted as if I had sprinkled holy water upon his furnaces. The Devil sallied forth and laid his hands upon me, pushing me from his lair. Or, at least, the garden of his lair. But I was not to be gainsaid. I pushed back and I pushed and pushed with all the righteous strength of my eighty years of good works. And goodness did prevail. My faith loaned me strength and I cast The Devil down. He lay quiet, as all defeated evils must, bloodied and unmoving. And I did face them, all of them, in their uniforms and with their coloured lights atop their vehicles for I had smote down the beast and I had fought the good fight and I had triumphed.

