

The Smiling Man
Gerodan Goldtrap

The storm clouds hovered across the horizon as big mountains with flashes of twisted, stretching lightning and cracks of low, long thunder. Gusts of wind became more frequent and stronger as the storm forced itself upon the land. The atmosphere pressed down with a cold touch upon everything. The weather vane upon the roof of the house started to spin in a violent circle as the wind increased. The thunder even from a distance was now loud enough to rattle the windows. Gerry Nicholson sat on his porch sipping on moonshine in a rocker as he had been doing for hours before the sudden and terrible storm, thinking about the events of his life. The storm started to pound the old tin roof with huge and heavy raindrops, creating a raucous racket that proved to be too much for Gerry. He decided to move inside, where it was a little quieter, and where more jars of moonshine sat on his kitchen counters beckoning him to prove that alcohol poisoning was a myth.

Walking into the door frame with a loud thud, Gerry bounced to the table, where he stabilized himself and rested for a moment. It was okay to walk again. He looked at the empty Mason jar in his hand. He threw it to the trashcan, but instead hit the wall. The jar smashed and sent glass flying everywhere. This jar in its hundreds of pieces joined more bits of glass as part of the growing collection of smashed jars that littered the floor. He shuffled to his counter and grabbed another jar. He got pieces of glass in his left hand that was helping him stand. He bled a little, but didn't care as the pain barely registered. He slowly, and with exaggerated movements, made his way into his living room. He walked on the cigarette butts on his way to his favorite armchair which was surrounded by a semi-circle of cigarette butts and unlit cigarettes he had been too drunk to pick up.

Gerry sat down in the old chair, knocked the empty Marlboro cartons on the small table next to his chair, and set his jar on the cleared space. He reached down in between the cushion on the chair to grab the TV remote. In his present state, pulling out the TV remote was a herculean effort, and in his own mind was a hero of spectacular drunk legend. His titanic efforts were met with the remote not working as the TV had been knocked over earlier in an intoxicated tantrum. It was a broken mess that he stared at absently and angrily instead of whatever channel happened to be on.

Gerry frowned and threw the remote in no particular direction. It hit the wall knocking over a framed item that hit the floor. The glass of the frame cracked and the noise was enough to arouse his curiosity. He was that it was his PhD certificate. He growled and cursed the world. A lot of good that was, he thought, and then took a sip from his newest jar. A rolling and terrible thunderclap shook the windows as the storm continued. Gerry tried to remember which jar this was as he set it back down, but couldn't remember. He couldn't remember when he had even started to drink. Hours ago or even days ago maybe; it was all a long blurry memory to him. He reached over and picked up a cigarette. He lit it, finished it in a single breath, and let out a huge cloud of smoke which hung in the air in front of him for what seemed like forever. He sat there and watched it slowly disappear in front of him.

Sipping and thinking, time passed by Gerry without notice. The only things he noticed were the cracks of lightning and the burn in his throat from drinking so much. Then there was a knocking at the door. He sat there for a moment just staring in the direction of the door. There was more knocking, so he decided to answer the door. Having a task to accomplish gave him enough focus to not run into anything as he walked to the door. He flung the door open.

Standing on his porch was a young man. Lighting flashed and highlighted him against the still terrible storm. Gerry thought he saw something strange when the lightning flashed, but what he saw he couldn't be certain was even real. He was white, had a non-distinctive yet handsome face, was about the same height and build of Gerry, looked to be in his mid-twenties, and was dressed nicely. A blue long sleeved button down, khaki slacks, and brown penny loafers. He was dry.

"My car broke down on the main road. I saw your home and was wondering if I could call a tow truck and maybe wait out the storm until then. Would you be so kind as to help a stranger," he said with a smile. His speech was charming and articulate. Each word enunciated clearly. This gave the stranger's speech an odd cadence.

Gerry stared at him for moment, and without much thought, motioned him inside.

"Thank you, sir. I'm David Geller by the way," he said, stepping into the house. "This is a nice house. Kind of big too. I'm guessing you own the farm?"

Gerry stared at him and shuffled his way into the kitchen leading David to the table. As David followed he glanced into the living room. David pulled out his own chair as Gerry leaned against the counter.

"I see you like to drink. Moonshine? That's strong stuff," David said trying to make small talk. Gerry just stared at him as he took another sip from his now almost empty jar.

David looked around on the ground and the spots of blood that stained the jar in Gerry's hand. "Am I interrupting something? Sorry if I'm intruding on your private drinking time."

Gerry continued to stare at the man, wondering what exactly it was about the young man that was off. He couldn't help but think about the thing he saw in the lightning on the porch. The flash of something...eerie.

David looked out the window. The lightning flashed again and was quickly followed window shaking thunderclap. "What a storm? When a storm like this came along my mom would say it was a sign of the coming apocalypse. That the Devil was trying to rattle us, scare us even with a small show of his power. Lightning like this puts the fear of God into man is what my dad would always say right after that. Well, when he was around that is. You're a God fearing man aren't you, Gerry?"

Gerry squinted at him and said, "How do you know my name?"

David smiled and said, "That's not a yes or a no."

"No," Gerry said. "Now answer my question."

"I know a lot of things. Simple as that. I know you're Gerry Nicholson, former engineering professor at one of the most prestigious universities in America, and current owner of a farm that's upside down on its mortgage," David said smiling. The smile was sinister and no longer friendly as Gerry had first thought. "The passing of your father must have been hard, but you couldn't let the family farm just be bought up by strangers could you? No, you had to go and return to your roots. But now you're alone, divorced, and really drunk."

"You're dry. That's what's wrong," Gerry said in sudden realization.

"Yes, I'm glad that finally caught up to you. You don't believe in God? That's what you meant when you said you weren't a God fearing man right," he asked. His voice seemed to have a slight unnerving echo, but the kitchen wasn't the kind of room where an echo could occur.

Slow to respond Gerry finally said, "No, I don't. Even if he was real, I don't see any reason I should be afraid."

"No reason? He's the almighty. He can do anything, Gerry, and you don't think that's worth being scared of," David said.

"What the hell are you doing in my house?"

“Ah, straight to business kind of man. I like that. No more of the dribble pretense that comes before the real point of a conversation. That’s what you want, but I’m not done with the dribble. I’m a fan of it. Well, that and the sound of my own voice. What can I say? It’s hypnotic. Why don’t you take a seat?”

Gerry went to the table, pulled a chair out, sat down, and then realized he didn’t choose to do any of that. He tried getting up, but his body wouldn’t cooperate. His muscles froze and he sat still across from the smiling man. Gerry looked into his eyes and saw that they weren’t even human eyes. Instead of normal pupils, David’s eyes had black slits like a reptile and were red where white should have been. David tilted his head to the side slightly and continued to smile sinisterly.

“What are you?” Gerry said terrified.

“You were right about God, but there are supernatural things in this world. Science hasn’t figured out everything just yet. I represent some of them, Gerry. There are some parties that are quite interested in the development of men, and you, Gerry, have something that is a very interesting development. Something awesome, something incredible, and something... that only you know. That’s why I’m here.”

David reached down beside him and pulled from under the table a noose. He laid the noose down on the table. His gaze never left Gerry. His smile never stopped. A deep and almost overwhelming fear gripped Gerry. He started to sweat and shake. The room seemed to grow smaller as Gerry’s claustrophobia started because Gerry was trapped in his own body.

“I can see your thoughts, Gerry. Yes, the invention. Yes, the notebook. The notebook is what I’m here for. You really were on to something there, Gerry. A technological game changer with almost every detail worked out. Hell, if you were to suddenly die someone could easily finish out your masterpiece. If you keep drinking the way you have been that might very well be true, but that’s not how it’s going to happen.”

David slid the noose to the center of the table. A single fly started to buzz around the room and despite the thunder and rain Gerry could hear the tiny creature fly around the room.

“What you have in that notebook is simply a threat to the parties who sent me,” David said. More flies started to buzz around the room. A cockroach crawled along Gerry’s wrists as it made its way across the table. “They can’t allow it to come into being, so I’m going to relieve you of it.”

The house shook from a crack of thunder. Gerry’s mason jar fell from the table with its contents spilling on the floor. Gerry could feel more cockroaches crawling on his feet toward the new mess.

“You’re a man with a fragile ego; a proper genius that grew up with a father you always wanted to impress. But he was just never there. Too busy tending to the farm. That was your father. It’s why you couldn’t let the farm go. It meant so much to him,” David said. His nose started to bleed. “Oh, this body is burning out quicker than I thought. I better hurry this up. Do you have any questions before the end, Gerry?”

Gerry thought for a moment, and then asked “How?”

“Always the man of science. I like that about you. You just skip over the ‘oh pitiful me. Why me why me’ part and just ask how in the world I can be doing this,” David said. Blood slowly poured from David’s mouth. “Well Gerry the secret is I’m not doing anything nature wouldn’t let me do. Science and magic are just two different ways of describing the world. All I’m doing is acting within the rules. You see, words have more power than you would expect. David here found out the hard way. You really do have to watch what you say.”

The storm continued to rage on as the lightning illuminated the room. Gerry saw that David had two shadows. One was definitely not human. The shadow was moving, shifting. Gerry couldn't give the shadow a shape, but imagined that it was the shape of insanity. David's head tilted to an unnatural position, but his smile never stopped. Flies buzzed around him and cockroaches crawled along his body and face.

"Words are information and information doesn't just exist in this world. Humans don't have ideas. They sense them. I'm from where information comes from. A spirit world of sorts in a concise manner of explaining it to you. This storm is happening because I'm here. It's not exactly normal for me to be here. David thought he would contact a god using a sigil and meditation. What he got was me instead. The line between this world and my world is thin. Your invention would destroy this line. We can't let this happen. There is a reason why they are separate, Gerry," it said. David's jaw fell off. Blood started coming out at a greater rate than before, but not as fast as Gerry would have expected. Despite having no jaw the thing continued to smile as David's were up and his upper lip was still in a half moon bowl shape.

The thing continued to speak with David's voice saying, "Well, I guess we should wrap this up. You see what's at the center of the table. That's my present to you. No one will question it. Drunk, stressed beyond reason, and alone. Why don't you slip it on? You know you want to use it."

Gerry's hands trembled as he tried to resist the power of the thing in the rotting body in front of him. Flies landed on his arm and flew away quickly as Gerry reached out for the noose. He didn't want to die. He wanted to live. The moonshine was just for the pain. Everyone who would miss him flashed into his mind. Before this, he might have been terrified, but he was beyond horrified now that he was about to die.

David's left ear fell off. Gerry swung the rope up, securing it as he stood in his chair. He slipped the noose around his neck, wishing he could say goodbye to his ex one last time and let her know how sorry he was for everything. His right foot went out in front of him. The thing continued to stare and smile at Gerry. He didn't want to die. He wasn't ready.

"No one will miss you," it said.

Gerry's left foot knocked the chair out from under him. The noose instantly tightened around his neck. Gerry gasped for air to no avail. Consciousness slowly started to fade to nothing as Gerry hung. The last thing he saw was the rotting body of the possessed David Geller.

Gerry's body swung slightly as the thing in David walked out of the kitchen and into the study. Flies buzzed around him and cockroaches followed. The thing grabbed Gerry's notebook and left the house with a trail of blood. The storm crackled with lightning and continued to pound the house with huge and heavy rain. Gerry Nicholson's masterpiece was gone. The only thing he left behind were jars of homemade moonshine. The storm started to move on. The rain let up and the mountain sized clouds moved on past the horizon, past Gerry Nicholson.