

The Devil's Backbone  
Shayna Silverman

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About a year ago, I acquired the Devil's backbone. I was not given the vertebrae. And no, I did not trade him my soul for it either. I, myself, lowered into the depths of Hell and took it on my own, for my own. It was both my desire and my trophy. And he cannot have it back.

It was a simple task. There's not very good security in Hell, I may as well have walked through the front door. But instead, I entered from the ceiling. I noticed steam rising from the storm drain one day on the way back from work between Lafayette and Nostrand. Steam rising from a drain in the middle of Brooklyn isn't unusual, but the terrifyingly deep laugh that crawled out with the steam was curious. I crouched down onto the icy street to take a look. The pavement was frozen but the metal burning hot. I waited for some of the smoke to subside and peeked in. It looked dark, but a closer look and I saw some little red figures bouncing around. Abruptly, a single eye eclipsed the hole I was looking through. The eye squawked, "*Watch yourself, Blondie!*" And hissed until I walked away.

Weird things happen in New York all the time, but I kept seeing that little red eye staring at me in my dreams and my soup and my laptop camera and my cat's face when he pops out from under my bed. There was no way that was some lurking homeless man in the sewer or some horribly evolved creature of the New York underground—neither of those things could have been so well spoken. What could that have possibly been? I couldn't stand it. So, one night I made my way back to Nostrand, pried open the manhole, and lowered myself down the ladder toward the indistinct laughter.

The ladder went on forever. After what felt like the first mile, it began to twist and turn further down. At one point I even thought I had started going back up. The only thing that told me I was going in the right direction were the walls, which dissolved from a deep black into a harsh red. When the eternal ladder finally ended, I plopped onto a squishy floor. There were hundreds of people around me. Well, not people...partially deteriorated persons. Some were complete skeletons while others had only a tibia or a scapula exposed. The walls were veiny—membrane-y—sticky and breathing short with impatience. It was one of four stomachs of a gigantic cow that had swallowed us all whole and was digesting us slowly. And it was so hot. So hot that my skin began to burn red immediately and I quickly realized how these bone-people may have lost their original casings. The smell of rotting flesh floated through the air in heaving clouds so thick I could feel the particles when I inhaled.

The worst part about this place was the blasting of deep house music that echoed throughout the cavity. The skeletons didn't seem to mind the music. Most even danced along to it, but those were the skeletons that were complete skeleton and not at all human. They seemed to like the bass that crept up their bones and vibrated their skulls. This was the music of choice in Hell, the hottest underground club in

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of the dance floor and the fist-pumping skeletons. It was made out of bone, muscle, and some semi-alive beings who made small talk with the lonely, damned souls who just wanted to drink and tell someone a story from their past lives. I noticed The Devil staring at me; he must have realized my appearance had gone wild; maybe he even liked what he saw?

I wasn't dressed well: a frumpy sweater and leggings, which I regretted wearing to Hell terribly. But, for some reason, I had become The Devil's innate object of desire. His eyes were glued to my thigh, wrapped in a thick black ace-bandage material leaving absolutely everything up to the imagination. Maybe he didn't care about a girl's looks. Maybe he was better than that.

He stared at me like he wanted to tear the wrapper open and let my white flesh seep out onto his lap like yogurt. He wanted to feel the foreign object of unharmed skin. The touch of a woman, curvy and voluptuous with juicy muscle. Not one of his army of skeletons that wasted away in the heat.

When he noticed my gawk at his gaze, he retreated his eyes. "You still haven't shown much bone," The Devil picked up my red hand in his claw, "Most of The Dead would have almost melted completely by now. But you're still perfectly intact." I smiled, couldn't he realize I was still alive, just a party crasher in his most private club? Maybe he didn't want to know.

"Just a little wild looking, though." I laughed and he chuckled and looked down towards my feet dangling off my bar stool next to his talons, firmly planted on the ground. "I guess I'm just not like the other Dead." He smiled at me. I tried to peer over his back to see his crawling spine. He shifted to face me more head on.

"I guess not," He dropped my hand and took another drink.

"What are you drinking?" I swirled my martini, but he drank a mysterious drink from his special skull-goblet the demon bartender had for the club owner.



already looking for. I missed the dancing skeletons—with only their one primal act to *shake it* when they hear the beat drop and to take a few breaks to drink with the musing-muscle bar. I thought about The Devil, so monstrous and overpowering, laughing at his bopping, burning skeletons. And then his backbone, staring at me...what would it feel like to wear? Would it hurt? Weigh me down? Would it be callous? Slimy?

The next day I called in sick to work. I wore my parka and almost nothing else out to Lafayette and Nostrand and dropped it to my ankles. In just my skimpiest tank top and shorts, I began my new routine of descending into Hell.

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“You know I looked you up in the directory and I didn’t find you.” I had met The Devil for drinks again at the same bar, possibly the only one they had in Hell as far as I knew.

“You don’t even know my name.” I looked away from him. I hadn’t expected him to confront me so quickly.

“It’s Lilith,” He moved his head closer to mine.

“How do you know?”

“The bar told me,” He turned back towards the talking bar and patted the counter, “Anyway, you weren’t on the list.”

“Must have been some processing error,” I sipped a glass of Fireball nervously, “I don’t know how paperwork is done down here. Can you do paperwork down here? Does paper just burn up immediately?” He chuckled, it rang in a symphony of the screams of orphans.

“I don’t even know how the paperwork works down here!” And with that, we continued to drink.

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When The Devil brought me back to his place it wasn't what I had expected. There were no big wrought iron gates. No cave of doom with fang-like stalactites. No people chained to the walls screaming in horror. It was just a nice studio built into the side of the stomach-Netherworld. To be fair—everything was black and red and the lights were torches (all electricity in Hell went to the DJ)

massive purple jaws, I felt his body expand and contract like a pulsing heart swooning at our sadomasochistic rom-com coming to a head.

He took me to his bed—black with red bedding—and laid me next to him. He turned to look at me, “Look, it’s been awhile.” I didn’t want to talk to him anymore so I rolled myself on top of him. He began pulsing again, rapidly. His hoof and claw shrunk into hands, talons soften into toes. His horns melted away into his skull, which rounded out around the edges into an oval. I moved back to look at a very average looking man. His face was perfectly symmetrical, roundish even. He wasn’t extraordinarily handsome, or even particularly ugly. Just kind of...cute. Normal. “What?” The Devil stood naked in front of me, “Everyone’s got to get undressed. And it’s not like you could have sex with the pitchfork-penis of Lucifer.” He laughed, still his usual uproarious mammoth laugh, but it didn’t match his new form. I laughed at him. I had seen The Devil in his most naked state, and he could not take that away from me.

After a night of making fairly average love to The Devil, he fell asleep in my arms and gradually turned back into his evil-self throughout the night. I slipped him out of my grip and stood over his sleeping form. I rolled him onto his stomach and began gently tearing at his spine until the vertebrae hung from my hand like a candy necklace.

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I waited until I got back home to Brooklyn to try on my new look. The spine was large on me—it strung from the top of my head to the bottom of my ankles when I first laid it across my back. But it soon shrunk to fit my small form. I twisted around the mirror to look at myself—my skin so white against the brown bone that now crawled along my skin. It felt warm, and the heat radiated through my body. I was beautiful.



The next day, I took the subway into Manhattan to show off my new spine and quit my job. My new job, my spine had convinced me of, was to become the world's greatest she-devil. I couldn't fit a normal shirt over my spine and it felt too raw to cover. I cut holes down the zipper of a hoodie, put it on backwards, and laced a ribbon through the holes over my exo-

I got off the train and went to quit my job at the shitty food magazine I worked at. We mostly printed fake nutrition facts that sold to bored house moms. I slammed open the door with the sign that read, "Nutrition is Just *Fiction*!!" I grabbed the sign and tore it in half before storming into my boss's box-sized office.

"Well you look healthy for a girl on a sick day, or should I say week?" Paul was a passive aggressive middle-ag

top me off. I crushed the clock with my claw and threw it down. I laughed. I laughed and it sounded like the screams of orphaned children. I laughed and it sounded like the New York City tumbling to the ground one tower at a time. I laughed and it sounded like the center of the world