



Bastardized to Fear

I grew up in a small farm town.

I remember the town like an island surrounded by oceans of fields and images of tractors tacking across the horizon. One of my most divine visions I hold from that small farm town is the actual observation of the anthem's depiction of the Amber Waves of Grain. One would think only peace would be found in such a town.

The Narrows of Temperament, however, does not hold peace for someone who does not fit—does not belong. On the island of this small farm town, there were churches that seemed to be on nearly every corner. The townsfolk consisted of almost half Christian, half Mormon. From testaments to brimstone, at one time or another, I attended both religious services, as religion held the zeitgeist way of life on this island.

And there was more!

The memory of Father Sam. Such a remarkable short man with a thick beard, I always remember him in a Catholic robe, in a Catholic church, though I am unsure if my thoughts hold an accurate memory. I must admit I had rarely experienced a greater presence of God other than when I walked into that Catholic church and listened to that awe-inspiring Catholic priest.

Christian, Mormon, Catholic—the collectives of the town held the mark of religion. Faith and agape love, in such a Godly town, one would think there would be nothing to be afraid of.

About a block away from the house I lived in sat an abandoned house. Yes, I used to live in one of those small towns which had that one abandoned

house with a dark history, also warned as, *the Haunted House*. I always remember walking by that creepy house, wide-eyed and cautious. And if I was going past that house at night, I just ran!

Now the house I grew up in—no, not the Haunted House—creaked like a dilapidated old barn. At night when the house settled from the heat of the day, the wood floors would pop and crack. Pop. Creak. Pop. Creak. From the front room to my bedroom door, sounds would echo louder and louder in the darkness, like footsteps of something coming to get me. I would often lie awake at night, afraid of the something creeping down the hall. No, I did not grow up in the Haunted House, but many a night I felt my house was haunted.

Now at about the age of six, and do not ask me why, my mom and my aunt took all us kids to see the movie *The Exorcist*. I do not believe I need to tell you this, but I had never been so frightened as a child. There on that big screen of life—a young child spitting green vomit and turning her head completely around. A creepy voice: *Do you see what she did!* Holy priests battling a young child possessed by the Devil. Again, as a child, I had never been so frightened!

To top off the movie, after the Devil had been cast out of the small child, my aunt tells me—perhaps thinking how funny it would be—*See, now if you do bad things, the Devil is going to possess you*. Oh, the horror in a child's mind—for years I thought everything I did would be potentially bad and if I did anything—*anything*—the Devil would possess me.

Many, many, terrifying nights in that popping and creaking old house—the Devil was definitely going to possess me!

I remember one time at a town fair when I won a stuffed animal—a green and white hippo. I had never won anything before, and it took but a few minutes for the hippo to become my best friend. I took the hippo everywhere and slept with the hippo every night—it protected me when I slept. My hippo protected me against a haunted house. And my hippo protected me against the Devil.

Every morning, however, when I would wake, I would find the hippo on the floor. Now, from the mind of a child, I thought; *You can put a leash on a dog to keep it by your side, so, to keep the hippo by my side, I could put a leash on my hippo*. One night I got a piece of rope and tied a noose

around the hippo's head, and I tied the other end around my wrist. I was determined to keep the hippo by my side, all night.

I remember waking up in the darkness of the early morning. I could not breathe! It was the rope. The rope was around my neck. The rope burned as it choked the breath from me! In a state of frantic desperation, I took the noose from around my neck and immediately searched for the hippo. The hippo remained by my side and for a moment I could feel the cold rush of relief resolve the fear of what just happened. Until the realization hit me. I remembered placing the noose around the hippo's neck. I remembered tying the other end around my wrist. The part of the rope that burned my neck ... the noose! The other end was now, tied, around the hippo's arm!

Now, as I am now an older and wiser Yoda, I am fairly confident one of my siblings was only messing with their little brother. But as a young child, that hippo had been possessed by the Devil, and the Devil hippo tried to kill me! The hippo went in the closet, and I never touched it again. No more protector. No more best friend.

I hated being afraid when I was young. I would challenge myself often. Staying up late to watch Nightmare Theater. Turning off all the lights and walking the hall to face the haunting footsteps. Ultimately, I outgrew the bogeyman, and I abandoned the Devil. Never did touch that hippo, though.

It is astonishing how stories can turn a house into something frightening. It is downright baffling how religious stories and religious teachings can turn a child's toy into the Devil!

Unfortunately, as I grew older—though no longer afraid of monsters and devils—I found that there were other, real things, to be afraid of.