

Imaginary Advice, Episode 34

EXORCIST DAVE STEWART (PART 2)

Episode written & produced by Ross Sutherland

Voice: Ross Sutherland

Transcribed by Sathya Honey Victoria

[electronic music]

[Robot voice:] Last time on Imaginary Advice...

The Neil family residence has found itself under supernatural assault. And only I have the tools to prosecute. I, Father David Stewart, highest ranking Exorcist in Northern Europe, voted Best Dressed Exorcist 2007 and 2010.

The Neils greet me at the door. The house reeks of broccoli—or ghost urine, as we exorcists have come to know it.

“Let the cleansing begin.”

She hands me a folder of grotesque finger paintings. Images of mother, father, daughter, and a grey figure with twelve arms, blood-red eyes, its mouth an endless black lake.

“The exorcism rite is scheduled for 4 a.m...”

“...if we can't out-smart this thing we're going to have to out-stupid it. If we are going to stand any chance of victory, this needs to be a race to the bottom.”

I hand Mr. and Mrs. Neil the lyric sheet for Mambo Number 5 by Lou Bega, the most sophisticated piece of sonic weaponry to be developed this side of Armageddon.

The burning chair begins to levitate, walls wailing in forgotten tongues.

“Prepare yourself,” I yell to the Neils. “Prepare yourself. [voice becomes distorted and static-y] The demon—it manifests! Steel your nerve—Get ready!”

[dramatic plot-twist music]

[Robot voice:] And now the conclusion. [echo rings out]

--

[eerie music]

And then...And then...White light. [speaking slowly] Nothing but endless emptiness. The centre of a snowstorm. The gap beneath the poem. A vast and deadly silence.

And boring. I...I forgot to say boring.

Time appears to have no meaning here. The very concept of time begins to feel like...[breathes in, searching for words] the dull anecdote of a footballer, heard across a dinner table. A story so full of nothing, it becomes an unmappable negative shape.

But then, slowly, I feel myself adjusting, until I realise [flames crackling quietly] I am in fact still standing in the same room as before. Arms outstretched, a smouldering armchair in front of me. The room, silent, save the crackle of charred upholstery. [panting like he just ran a mile]

The Neils look at me strangely.

“Uhhh, I’m sorry,” I say. “I’ve uh-I’ve forgotten the next line.”

[mysterious, lush strings swoop in]

The director approaches the front of the stage.

“Well, uh, don’t worry,” he says. “We can, uh...we can just end things here.”

A stage-hand runs on and extinguishes the flames. [fire extinguisher going off]

[coughing] “Are you sure?” I say, but the rest of the actors have already cleared the stage.

I catch up with them and grab a handshake. “Good luck”, says the actor formerly known as Mrs. Neil. “Nice to meet you, dude,” says the actor formerly known as Mr. Neil.

[music continues, pleasant but mysterious]

The director walks me to the stage door. “Thanks for coming down, Sebastian,” he says. “I uh, I really like the energy you brought to the part. We uh, we really see this exorcist as an enigmatic, uh...he’s a-he’s a layered character. And you really brought the...you really brought the mystery.” [sinister laughter in background]

Of course, like, you know if it was down to me, I'd be offering you the part right here, right now. But we-we-we do have still two more people to see today. You know-you know how it is." [faraway laugh again]

"Thanks, Andrew," I say, handing him back the exorcist jacket. "It was just a pleasure to come down and read for it, you know?" Andrew waves away the humility. "No-no-no-no, I mean it. I *really* think the part is yours. I know I shouldn't say. But I really think it is."

[sinister laugh, a bit closer] Somewhere in the stalls, I can hear the faint clucking of producer Karen Mogg and casting director Bertrand Hesseltine. Although I can't make out the subject of their amusement I am pretty sure that they are laughing about me—specifically the size of my hands, something that I am very sensitive about.

I reach the stage door, but hit the exit bar too hard, [slam echoing around the big space] the sound ricocheting through the empty theatre. Everyone stops and looks at me.

[sad organ music]

Curse these hands. These stupid, oversized flesh-claws that fool children into thinking that I am trying to grab them. My hands that make me look a lot nearer than I actually am. No actor of the stage should have hands this size. These hands that appear down-stage when the rest of me is up-stage. These scene-stealing, focus-pulling pillows of corned beef. [into his collar] How I wish I could pocket them forever.

[steps, the empty street at night]

Outside the theatre, Toronto is bitter and vacant. The grey October light extends the carpark into the sky.

[wailing sirens in the background]

After fifty minutes I finally manage to catch a bus back to my apartment. [door squeaks open and closed]

My apartment. With my ex-girlfriend's bicycle still in the hallway and a week of washing up piled in the sink. My bedroom, watched over by framed A2 posters of films I once loved but now despise. The squeaky door that goes "argh" whenever the wind blows through the cracked window.

[Sebastian and the door duet, saying it together: "Argh." "Argh." ... "Argh."]

Sitting at my father's old bureau, the audition script for *The Last Days of The Exorcist*. [turning pages] I flick through my lines, all scored with my dying highlighter.

[reads in flat monotone] "FATHER STEWART: *We will almost certainly all die here tonight. But if I have anything to do with it, our ends will not be in vain.*" [paper rustling] "...our ends will not be in vain." [sighs] Yeah.

[flat monotone] "*The ghost is incredibly raw, incredibly. Fiercely original. I would very much like to-blah...blah, blah...*"

[melancholy ambient music]

Funny. This morning, for one brief moment, I truly felt as if I was this Father David Stewart.

Yes, Father David Stewart: cover star of the Vatican's in-house magazine no less than four times. Head psychic bodyguard for John Paul II on his deathbed. First exorcist to be awarded the prestigious Obsidian Cross after successfully closing that hell-gate in the middle of Euro-Disney back in 2002. Father Dave Stewart. "The Black Kingfisher" to his students.

For one moment this morning there felt no separation between my mind and his voice. But now, already...the bond is lost. These words [turning pages roughly] now feel nothing more than a small fire on the horizon. Someone else's story. Someone else's problem.

My fridge begins to buzz louder and louder. I punch it. [whack] The buzz returns to normal. Outside, the endless drone of the ring road... [the city in the background]

I heft the play-text into the bin. [thump]

I cook a potato waffle in my toaster and eat it in a sandwich with ketchup. Then, [sighs] I watch an entire DVD box set about an aromatherapist who solves murders. [breathes out, bored and waiting]

The theatre does not call. Nor the next day. Nor the next. Nor the next.

[sound bursts into a frenetic big band drum solo that loops and loops]

Sunday lunchtimes the nightclub on the corner of my street hosts a speed-dating event. [low-key jazz music begins]

I agree to go with my old school-friend Christopher. [sounds of chattering crowd in the background] Christopher arrives at the nightclub wearing a tee-shirt with a picture of Droopy on it. Beneath the picture of Droopy, the caption: *Boo*. “Boo,” I say, “uh, like the pet name that couples give each other? Like, “hey boo”? Like that?”

[crowd chatter getting louder]

“You’re overthinking it,” says Christopher.

The women sit at little tables, spread evenly across the dance floor, the tables alternating black and white like chess tiles.

Every three minutes a bell rings. [ding!] The men get up and move to the next table and the whole ordeal starts over again. [so bored:] Hello...what’s your name...what do you do...

The club still reeks of last night’s alcohol. [ding!] My feet stick to the floor when I move.

Christopher ends up being in front of me. This means every single time I sit down to begin a date, the woman says something about how weird the last guy was. I spend almost all of my speed-dates just learning incidental facts about Christopher.

[sounding suspicious] “He says he was the only son of Sir Jeremy Revlon, the cosmetics magnate.” [ding!]

[a bit offended:] “He-he-he claimed to be the inventor of the Oxygen Mojito.” [ding!]

[incredulous:] “He said he was Chunk from the Goonies.” [ding!]

[befuddled:] “He insisted that bees were instruments of class war.” [ding!]

“He claimed Vladimir Nabokov invented the quarter-length trouser.” [ding!]

“He said his spirit animal was a cattle-grid.” [ding!]

“He claimed to have invented the phrase ‘you go girl!’” [ding!]

And so on. I feel like I am actually on a date with Christopher, just one experienced through a membrane of baffled women. [ding-ding-ding-ding-ding!]

[Emcee in the background:] “OK, refreshment break, everyone! Just keep the conversations going. We restart in fifteen minutes. See you then.”

I manage to fit two beers into the fifteen-minute break. The barman pours me a tequila for “Dutch courage.” I think it’s on the house but actually it’s eight dollars.

[Emcee, sing-songy:] “OK, back to the tables everyone! [ding-ding-ding!] Good luck!”

“Uh, so...Sebastian, tell me,” says my speed-date. “Where do you see yourself in ten years’ time?”

Being an actor, I have spent my life imitating much happier, more confident people. I know breathing exercises that can relax one’s posture, I can dilate my pupils by staring at spot behind someone’s head. I know that confident people under-explain, they gloss over questions like these, their net worth being a sum that they solved long, long ago.

“Well, uh, I’m already doing what I love,” I say. “I’m very lucky like that, I suppose. So...more of the same, probably.”

I accidentally make a hand gesture and then quickly bury my huge monster hands back beneath the table.

“Maybe I can come see you in something,” says my speed-date, whose name is Siobhan, as it turns out. A pharmacist.

“Uh, I’m just about to start rehearsals actually,” I lie. [chuckling:] “Yeah, I’ve just been cast in this new ghost story. I play a priest! [feigning coolness:] This uh, this guy who doesn’t play by the rules. It’s called Last Days of The Exorcist. It’s being directed by Andrew Schnezzelebart, if you know him.”

“No,” says Siobhan. “But wow.”

“Actually,” I say. “Actually, that’s a lie. I-uh-I...I didn’t get the part, actually.”

Siobhan reaches for my hand. She reaches for it and I-I want to pull it away, but she takes it. She takes my hand and...she never lets go.

[dreamy synth love song]

Two years later Siobhan and I move into a house together. We have dinner parties once a month. Many pharmacists attend. I get a job walking dogs in the neighbourhood. Each night we sit in our back garden and tell stories of our youth.

Soon after, Siobhan's mother dies. We cry and cry and cry and promise each other we will never leave the other behind.

Christopher dies in a yacht fire the same year. We attend the funeral together, along with a large group of women with incredibly tonged hair. Their exquisite eyeliner does not run, I notice.

[music fades]

[lift sounds]

For the anniversary of our first meeting I take Siobhan to a new restaurant, the well-reviewed one at the top of the Shangri-La Tower. The restaurant is punky in a professional kind of way. Little neon mushroom clouds animate themselves around us. We sit, hand in hand across the table, her fist like a pearl in my hulking mollusks—no, no, Sebastian. No more self-deprecating big hand similes. Remember what your therapist told you: poets are c*nts. You don't need to convert everything into self-pity, not any more. Not now that you have her.

[soft sounds of the restaurant]

Outside the restaurant, snow falls on Toronto like an old badly-tuned TV set.

“You know...” I say to Siobhan, “Recently, I've uh...[chuckle] I've been thinking again about that play. That final audition before I met you. I mean, I-we probably wouldn't have met if it hadn't been for that. And it meant so much to me! I mean, I *cared* about that role like I can't tell you. There was something about that character. [tries to articulate:] To be an *exorcist*, you know? Someone who could...who could diagnose the darkness...someone who could *drag* the-the monster from the mist. When I lost that part, I felt a hole open up inside me. A hell-gate, you could say.

But then, when you came along, I-I-I felt like...I felt like I was seeing that exorcist again...I-I was seeing it in you, Siobhan. You see, I was *haunted* by loneliness but then *you* came into my house [smiles]. And you...you closed that hell-gate. [voice thick with emotion] You closed it once and for all.”

I open the ring box and I ask Siobhan to marry me. She says yes. I give her the ring. She puts it on her finger. A nosy old man on the other side of the room begins to applaud. [“Yaaay!” clapping]

[Sebastian:] “Mind your own business, old man!”

“Oh God, Sebastian,” says Siobhan. “I can't-this is-this is really happening, isn't it? I-I can't believe it's happening.”

At that moment the waiter brings over our meal: [setting down heavy bowl] a huge bucket of steamed broccoli. “Uh...Do-do you have anything else?” I ask.

The waiter is incredibly offended. “This restaurant only serves steamed broccoli, sir. And we make a pretty big thing about it too.” He gestures to the menu. It just says “Broccoli.”

“You like broccoli” says Siobhan. “I-I-I know,” I say. “It’s just...I just feel like I’ve had broccoli for every meal for, you know, [laughing] about as long as I can remember...”

[beautiful dreamy music]

On the other side of the window, the snowfall ends. The city re-emerging from the white noise, a steady glowing transmission. “What is it?” asks Siobhan. “Sebastian, what’s wrong?” Her face looks like a massive, beautiful anvil falling from the sky.

“No-nothing,” I say. “Uh [long breath] excuse me for a second.”

I head towards the bathroom, then duck into the elevator. Coatless and freezing, I leave the restaurant, hailing a cab to the occult book district.

[cars, traffic; forceful knocking]

I hammer on the door of Patterson’s until old Patterson himself lets me in. [door creaking open]

“This better be good,” says the old man. [door slams]

“Ghosts that can conjure ridiculous plot twists,” I blurt. “Have you ever heard of anything?”

[mysterious music begins]

Patterson leads me into the back room and drops a leather-bound tomb onto the table.

The book falls open on an illustration of a grey figure...with twelve arms, blood-red eyes, its mouth an endless black lake.

[horror story music]

[can barely contain his anger:] “Oh...you bastard...You cheap nasty bastard. Now I see...”

Old man Patterson brings out a bowl of steamed broccoli. “Would you like some—”

“—Fuck off Patterson! [through angry gritted teeth] I know you’re just masking the smell of ghost piss. You’re nothing more than...psychic Febreeze, you little dick! You’re not real!”

[door slams; city rain]

I run back into the street, heart pounding. Toronto is not real. [running and panting] None of this is real. The horizon slopes, the snowy pavement leaping up to greet me. And now I am on my hands and knees [car honking] blinded by the headlights of the stopped traffic, my limbs amputated by the cold.

“Are you OK?” asks a pedestrian, “Do you want me to, uh...Do you want me to call someone?” [honking in background]

[effortfully:] “Mambo...Number 5,” I mutter.

“Pardon?” [honking continues]

“Mambo Number 5” [eerie sounds begin]

[darkly:] “Jump up and down and move it all around. [breathing hard:] Shake your head to the sound, put your hands on the ground. [creepy buzzing] Take one step left and one step right. [buzzing increases] One to the front and one to the side. Clap your hands once and clap your hands twice...” [continues into the background]

[electric buzzing continues] The streets begin to dissolve around me. All of Toronto now phasing out of cognition. The Scarborough Bluffs. The Hockey Hall of Fame. The Prince Edward viaduct system. My new house, with all that expensive kitchen remodelling. All the neighbourhood dogs I look after: Sylvester, Abraham, Waffles. My entire life, in all its rich and complex Canadian splendour, evaporating into nothingness.

Even her. Especially her. Probably still sitting in that restaurant, waiting for my return.

Siobhan ceases to exist.

[recitation of Mambo Number 5 echoes into the foreground, then cuts out]

Opening my eyes, I am once again standing in the Neils' front room. [flames crackling] Still mid-exorcism, the Neils still wearing their little crucifix hats, our faces lit by the diminishing flames. The Neils look at me desperately for reassurance, like a pair of vomity dogs.

"W-what?" I say. "Sorry?" says Mr. Neil. "Never mind," I say.

[roaring noise]

The house begins to shake. The walls yawn with evil, the ceiling churning into a whirlpool of smoke.

I run upstairs to my suitcase, pop the secret compartment, retrieve my Glock 37 then run back downstairs, my head aching with false memories. Had that entire hallucination been compressed into just a couple of minutes? [roaring beat continues, tense]

"Keep chanting!" I yell, gun aloft. Every bullet in the magazine is laser-engraved with the entire text of the King James Bible.

"Oh, and uh, and be aware: this ghost, [breathing hard] it can conjure incredibly convoluted plot twists. It really has very, very little respect for our time and intelligence. So, uh [cocks gun], just stay sharp. Yeah."

The Neils return to their chanting. Immediately the flame turns blue, the walls dissolving into black ash. [otherworldly screeching] The room fills with bloody howls, like an elephant in a car-crusher.

[roaring sound]

"It's weakening! I can feel it. Soon it's gonna be forced to materialise. We just have to remember who we are and what the point is, OK? And FYI, the point is shooting a ghost in the face, OK? That is the only purpose for any of this. That's the only closure we care about! So, if you start to feel like the story is drifting away from that...if you start to feel like you're learning some kind of hacky emotional lesson about how to be in the world, you just need to reject it, OK? Reject it! That heartfelt epiphany brewing inside you, it's just the ghost trying to subvert the plot. You've got to swiftly and decisively undercut that bullshit before it takes over completely. [churning noise continues in background]

Just, just remember who you are, Neil. Remember that you don't deserve a happy ending."

A scream rips a hole in the wall beside me. A shadowy creature rushing forward, arms outstretched—

[horrible screech; two gunshots]

The creature skitters over a coffee table and crashes to the floor.

[videogame achievement sounds]

“End simulation”, says Professor Foidelburke, stepping out of the wall. [glittering sci-fi sounds]

The living room vanishes, and the three of us are once again standing on the holodeck of the Balthazar.

Armitage chucks my shoulder. “Nice shooting, Carter. But next time I get to be the exorcist.” [sci-fi choral music]

“Sorry to interrupt,” says the professor, “But I thought you should know [chuckling] that whilst you three have been playing holo-games—

—No!—

—galactic peace has just been—

—No!—

—declarrrrrr—

—Nope! [echoes out]

[muttering quickly:] A little bit of Rita is all I need a little bit of Tina is what I see a little bit of Sandra in the sun a little bit of Mary all night long.... [fades into background]

The room darkens and three of us are once again back in the Neils’ house. A charred smoke-filled lounge, the ghost gurgling inside the walls.

I slap Mr. Neil. “Come *on* man! Concentrate! Don’t let it derail you into some kind of epiphany about the follies of man. [monstrous roar] We’re not letting it off the hook that easily.”

The mirror above the mantle slides up revealing a hidden room [stone grinding on stone] inside which thirty little orange men applaud my words. [whimsical victorious music; tiny little claps and wohoo’s]

“Congratulations,” says Willy Wonka, swivelling his chair toward us. “That...was the final test! [said with such mirth] It was *all* a test, dear boy!

—No!—

—I had to see if you were worthy!—

—No, not doing this!—

—And now the chocolate factory can be—

—Oh, my-NO! [echoing]

[muttering quickly:] A little bit of Rita is all I need a little bit of Tina is what I see a little bit of Sandra in the sun a little bit of Mary all night long....

I grab Mr. Neil. “Come on, man! It can’t keep throwing plot twists at us forever. Christ, that last one was insanely patronizing. God, it really thinks we’re some shit-munching sons of bitches. Keep going, keep going!”

Mr. Neil removes his mask. [dramatic music from a black and white movie] Beneath the prosthetic disguise: an exact copy of my face.

Mrs. Neil does the same, whipping off her plastic skin, my eyes and beard beneath. “Welcome home, Number 8.”

—No!

—I’m sorry, Father,” says the other one.

—Oh my God.—

—Your instincts were right. You...are a... [faltering]—

—No!—

—a...c-clone!

—No, thank you!—

—[with less and less conviction:] This whole ghost charade was staged to bring you back to us.

—Oh my...

—[ad-libbing now:] It was all a-a...it was a ruse! To reunite as a family—

—Are you-are you *serious*?—

—[like an actor reading lines they think are ludicrous:] Now you finally understand why you felt so-so different all your life—

—No, no, no. Unforgivable. Oh, my God-NO! [echoes away]

[through gritted teeth:] Little bit of Monica in my life little bit of Erica by my side little bit of Rita is all I need...

[flames crackling angrily] The mirage dissolves. The living room now dense with smoke. I can hear the chanting from my dream, the ancient language spoken only within the deepest ring of Hell. The ghost is here with us. [roaring] *It is here*—

[nightmare screeching]

“The name of Christ compels [gunshot!] you! The name of Christ compels [gunshot!] you! The [gunshot] name [gunshot] of Christ [gunshot] compels you!

The smoke begins to clear. The Neils have...disappeared? No—there on the floor. Mrs. Neil sits, cradling her husband, blood spreading across his chest and neck. Mr. Neil looks up, eyes wide, his jaw slack and trembling as if he were trapped in the path of some terrible invisible beast. [sirens in background] It takes mere seconds for the bullet wound to kill him.

[sad piano song]

Shortly after, the police arrive and arrest me. “Yep, we’ve been looking for this one,” says the detective as his deputy puts on the cuffs. “He escaped from Parkside Sanatorium last month. The lunatic thinks he’s some kind of...hot priest...”

“He’s a monster!” says Mrs. Neil. “He came into our house talking about monsters but he was...he-he was the-the real monster...the-the real monster all along, you could say—”

—[sounding far away] OK, I get it!—

—And that-that meant that-that he was the thing—

—Are we done? Thank youuu—

—searching for all-all along—

—Oh, my God—No! [echoes away]

[muttering again] A little bit of Monica in my life [faster, through gritted teeth] a little bit of Erica by my side a little bit of Rita is all I need a little bit of Tina is what I see a little bit of Sandra in the sun a little bit of Mary all night long a little bit of Jessica here I am [drones on in background; crackling flames]

The police vanish. My hands now uncuffed. Mr. Neil dematerialises, standing in the corner like a fucking idiot, just like before. The room refilling with smoke and noise. [eerie music building]

Somewhere in the far distance, but also somehow inside the room, the outline of a figure coalescing in the smoke: twelve arms, double hinged, stretched toward us.

I check the gun: empty. Or...is that a twist? Or, is it really empty? I mean, which of those two possibilities sounds more like a hackneyed contrivance to force an emotional denouement? Concentrate, David! Concentrate.

[voice breaking:] “I said keep chanting, you bastards!” But the Neils are paralysed with fear, backs pressed against the wall.

“Well, get out then!” I yell, [voice thick with emotion:] “Go on, before it’s too late!”

“Well, what do you care?” bleats Mr. Neil. “You don’t care about us! In fact, you don’t care about the living at all! I mean [cries] we might as well just die right here, for all you care!” [weeping]

“...Good point.”

“What?”

“Yeah, that’s right. For a moment, I forgot I actually don’t care what happens to you guys. Because if I did care...if I did care...then that would suggest that all these hallucinations have somehow helped me develop some kind of new compassion for human life. You know, that by hallucinating a four-year romance with a pharmacist in Toronto, or hallucinating that I murdered you by mistake...I’m now gonna somehow miraculously come to-to value the simple honest lives of dickheads like you. But I won’t say that, Neil. [gritted teeth] I will never ever care about you. Because learning to respect you sounds exactly like the kind of hack bullshit emotional closure that saves a ghost from being shot in the face.

[sing-songy:] “*Oh, I suppose defeating the ghost doesn’t even matter! The real battle was for my humanity! Ooh, what a twist!*” Oh, author, author, you fucking HACK!

You know, this ghost, he thinks he's so clever...but it's like...Christ, anyone can read a screenwriting manual. I'm not falling for it. Sorry, hell-beast! I've got some script notes for you, Jonathan Nolan! This is a story about shooting a ghost in the face and sending it back to Hell, and that is it. That's all it is. It's not about the whole thing turning into a big metaphor for something else! It's not about me as a character [doing air-quotes] *growing* or *changing*, and it's certainly not about you schlubs living or dying. So basically, in short, fuck you, do whatever you want. I don't care."

"Fuck you!"

"No, fuck you! And actually, you're right, Neil: the dead *are* more interesting than the living. For one, there's just more of them. A lot more. So just in terms of statistics, the more interesting party is probably going to be on the other side of the line, don't you think?"

[ominous sound building in background] Mozart, Einstein, etc., etc. And you know what? Confronting death and losing is pretty much the *only* interesting thing that happens to someone. Before that it's just...hairstyles and food categories and secretly looking at each other's arses. So, I'm sorry if I prefer my company with a little more substance! And yes, I recognise that word sounds weird considering ghosts are invisible and don't weigh anything."

"We're leaving then."

"I don't care."

[terrifying roar]

The howl runs through us. Gravity eases away: ashtrays, mugs, spare change, floating into the air. Through a corridor of crimson light the abomination comes, arms outstretched towards us.

The Neils scramble from the room. I hear the front door slam. They could be immediately hit by a car outside for all I fucking care. I am so unbelievably horrendously ambivalent about them.

Jesus Christ in Heaven, give me strength. Give me the power of your divine equivocation. Your holy ambivalence to life and death. Grant me this gift. Deliver me from these cheap emotional payoffs so that I might fulfil my holy purpose.

The creature is inside the room. I realise now just how accurate the daughter's finger painting had been. [eerie choral singing] The creature *is* blurry. A twelve foot badly-rendered cockroach, limbs stretching out across the ceiling.

[shuddering breath] I take aim.

[gun clicks, empty]

Well...that's fucking that, then.

[singing rising, more tense]

The demon closes in, its footsteps burning through the carpet. The air between us, whirling with levitating knick-knacks, my back now pressed against the wall as the creature advances. I throw my empty gun at its mandibles.

There is no denying the...boundless creative energy of this monster. I for one, have been thoroughly bowled over by its presence, something that I can describe as nothing less than ground-breaking. [music still rising in pitch] Thoroughly challenging. The bar was certainly raised. Although I must admit that I wish that it rated *my* intelligence as highly as it rates its own. Some of those hallucinations were very ITV.

Of course, [breathes out] of course, thi-this could also be a hallucination. [muttering fast now:] The whole “hero dies and fails quest” twist. I mean, nothing else has been real, w-why should this be any different? And uh, you know, having no twist... that is in itself a kind of twist, right? I mean, these days, am I right? If only I could just [breathes] if I could just undercut my death somehow, if I could undercut it, then maybe the illusion would just dissolve away like all the others.

The creature looks down at me, red eyes in a shifting black mass. “Hey, demon!” I say, holding my Bible over my crotch, “Check out my [space-time distorts, stretching out the sounds] biiiiig squaaaaaaaare peeeeniiiiiiiiiiiiissssss—”

[sound washes out]

--

I wake up. Sunlight catching dust as it climbs the air above my bed. [quiet breathing]

[music, gently rising]

In a corner I can't see, a voice cries out; the words quiet at first, but then louder, slowly taking shape in my mind.

“He’s awake!” it cries. “He’s awake.” Fingers curl around my hand. A wet cheek against my face: “At last,” says the voice. “You came back to me.”

And now there are many hands moving across me, doctors and nurses urgently adjusting my body, their language quiet and secret and full of miracles. A light blinds my left eye, then my right. A plastic mask un-cups my face, the world roaring into focus: the Styrofoam tiles. The hospital ward. [hospital machinery whirring quietly in background]

And then I see her.

And it all comes back in an instant. Looking down at me, face streaked with tears, my wife: Splarxenoid Wangdoogolax.

After all my adventures, it appears that in truth, I have not moved at all. My body remains in the same place it has been for the last four months: the coma ward of the Royal Excelsior Hospital on the second moon of Cryopop Gizsoodlanx in the Spor Nebula.

“Splarxenoid,” I whisper, “I had...[choked up with emotion] the most incredible dream. There was a-a battle. A fight between the forces of light and the forces of darkness. And it went on and on, I mean, it felt like it was wrapping up several times, but then for some reason it just kind of kept on going, but I-I held on, my love. I held on. And I won.”

“That’s right,” says my wife, her eyes pink oceans. “You won.”

[peaceful ethereal music]

This is the story of Kevin Custlordious Wangdoogolax, a simple Blarg operator who fell into a coma after being hit on the head by a flargid schnezzler. Through my coma I came to believe that I lived on another planet. A planet far, far away, a planet with a single yellow sun.

I believed that I was a religious man. A man for whom the mortal world was nothing more than a badly lit road through the endless land of the dead. A man who answered a calling to guide the living along this road, for they were stupid and ugly, and quite frankly, needed all the help they could get.

[chuckling] In the end, my whole adventure proved to be nothing more than an incredibly convoluted metaphor for my subconscious battle against brain injury.

But now, finally awake, I realise: the real adventure can now begin. The adventure of recuperating from a serious injury on a planet with no concept of a welfare state at all; a planet where brain surgery costs around 150,000 grarrbs, not including

hospital charges, physicians' fees, bills for anaesthesia, charges for physical therapy, medications, and other post-op treatments—not to mention scrobulon tax—very little of which is covered by the insurance package offered to a Blarg operator, such as myself.

“Splaxenoid,” I say, “Help me, help me to the window.”

Together we look out over the twisted glass spires of Glax, our mandibles pressing against the glass, our breath slowly fogging the scene. I draw my wife close, smell her hair, the past filling me like a novelty egg-timer.

The sun rises over the city. And then immediately sets again. After all, a day on Glax only lasts twenty-eight seconds.

We watch the hospital courtyard many stories below us, peppered with tiny Glaxians wandering back and forth talking on their mobile phones, each of them in their own separate little world, their shadow spinning beneath them as the sun chucks itself across the sky. Some of those phone conversations were probably bad, we reasoned, and some of them were probably good. Patients relaying diagnoses, sharing secrets, re-ordering their futures in little phone-calls, as they wove in and out of each other on the concrete below, walking in their little circles, doubling back and forth, each in their own little story bubble, the insides of which neither I nor Splaxenoid will ever know.

[clock ticking in the background, comforting]

When a day is as short as this, who can deny the endlessness of time, the infinite possibilities of existence? There are so few things that we can ever know for certain. Here, on a planet that has five hundred different words for ‘kiss,’ a planet of lilac clouds that sing before they storm, a planet that recently passed a law giving trees the vote and that openly worships the glowing excrement of talking birds.

On a planet like this anything might be possible. And is.

[time passing]

--

[nostalgic music]

[Imaginary Advice]

[Ross:] Ok, I think that's it, that's the end of Exorcist Dave Stewart's story.

"What are you doing tonight, Ross? Do you wanna come to the pub or do some adult stuff, like do your taxes and build a cabinet or some shit?"

"Uh, no, thank you. I'm gonna go into my office and shout about ghosts for three hours."

My-my neighbors—I-I think they hate me. They must, they must really hate me. Do you know what? I give them chocolates at Christmas and they just look at those chocolates like they're drugged. There is *no trust* between our households.

But, what can I do? I love making [laughs] I love making Imaginary Advice and, you know, disturbing my neighbours' dinner by shouting "Check out my big, square penis!" uh, um, well that's just part of...that's just part of the modern podcasting experience.

Ok, this is the part where I ask for money, strap in. Um, I wanna keep making Imaginary Advice. If you'd like more stories I need your help making them. One of the things I love about Imaginary Advice is that I get to create stories that nobody else [laughing] would ever let me make. I'm still learning, of course. Imaginary Advice, well it's basically just a set of massive crash mats that I can hurl myself at once a month. And even when it fucks up I think that the results are still-interesting. Right? [nervous laugh]

So, currently I receive about a hundred and twenty pounds a month through Patreon and I am so, so grateful to those twenty-eight people that support the podcast. Um, still, minus hosting expenses and other fees that leaves about a hundred pounds per episode, and episodes take about two weeks to see through, from writing to recording to editing. So, uh, currently the podcast has about fifteen-hundred listeners so if I just got a few more people signed up to Patreon to give five dollars every month, then I could get myself to a place where I don't actually lose money on every episode. I know, I know, I got-I got real with you guys.

And don't sign up if you're super poor or you don't have a regular salary—I don't want your money. Alternatively, you can always just post about the show online, cos that also makes like a huge difference. So, um, thank you, if you've ever done that as well.

Um, yeah, I'll put a link to my Patreon page in the liner notes of this episode. Ok, enough about that!

[big breath] I'd really like to do another Dave Stewart story at some point. I mean, I think it would have to be a prequel, seeing as he's now trapped inside a kind of narrative babushka doll, living out an alternate reality as a brain damaged alien, but

you know, maybe we could do, yeah, maybe we could do like an earlier story with Dave Stewart back in the academy—or do that Eurodisney hell-gate story. I dunno! Maybe we can reveal why he shares the same name as that guy from the Eurythmics. Seriously, though, just look up what Dave Stewart from the Eurythmics looks like now and tell me that he doesn't look like the most badass exorcist you've ever seen.

Ok, this has been Imaginary Advice. I'm Ross Sutherland. Thanks for listening. Bye.

[music continues then fades out]