

[Transcript] Sword and Scale Nightmares / Exorcism

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There are some who believe in the power of a man by the name of Jesus Christ.

To some of these people, the devil is not some sort of child's fable, but instead very real.

The devil can take possession of a human, physically warping their bodies and altering their minds. To save a loved one's soul from eternal hell, a priest may be called in to perform an exorcism. It's a dark and dangerous ritual, one that should only be invoked as a last resort. And with moral certitude that the person in question has become inexplicably supernaturally overcome by a demonic spirit. In the best case scenario, a series of sacred prayers will draw out and expel the devil. But some souls are so far gone, even God can't save them.

Welcome to sword and scale nightmares. True crime for bedtime, where nightmare begins now.

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by Glamour magazine for 2023. Guys, I got a FabFitFun box for my girlfriend, and she knows a lot about beauty products. She knows a lot about this kind of stuff. I don't so much because I'm ugly, but she does and she absolutely loved it. I think you will too. If you're shopping for yourself or your loved one, this is a great treat. And now's your chance to get a great deal too. Sign up at [fabfitfun.com slash podcast](https://fabfitfun.com/slash/podcast), customize your box and get access to discounts up to 70% off on brands like Fenty, Free People, and Our Place, just to name a few. Not in love with this season's options? Well, take the credit to shop their exclusive flash deals of up to 70% and save on the biggest name brands out there. If you join FabFitFun as a new seasonal member right now, you'll also get 20% off your membership, so your first box is only \$47.99. For up to a \$300 value box each season, but only while supplies last. FabFitFun boxes sell out. Join FabFitFun today and save at [fabfitfun.com slash podcast](https://fabfitfun.com/slash/podcast). [FabFitFun.com slash podcast](https://fabfitfun.com/slash/podcast).

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There's a church in San Jose, California. Well, it's a converted garage at the back of a house, but it goes by the name Iglesia Apostoles y Profetas. The church caters to a small congregation of less than 30 people, many of whom are El Salvadorian or Mexican. The religious practice of this particular church is what is known as Pentecostalism, which has grown significantly throughout Latin America. The preachers are charismatic, to say the least, oftentimes speaking in tongues when they are filled with the Holy Spirit. They are believers in miracles, in prophecies, and in faith healing, and that no matter your station in life, with enough devotion, God will lead you to where you are meant to go. Like any religion practiced under any roof, you put your trust in the faith leaders who are guiding you. You might assume that everyone in your congregation has the same good intentions, but you never really know for sure why a person needs saving. Churchgoer Victoria Mejia is responsible for watching her three-month-old grandson while the baby's mother is at work. Victoria has occasionally brought baby Brandon with her to church, and on April 25, 2022, she's brought him with her to Walmart while she stalks up on baby supplies. Victoria and her grandson have been driven to Walmart by another church member, Yesenia Ramirez, a trusted friend

whose husband just happens to be one of the church ministers. When they return to the house, Victoria places baby Brandon inside one of the bedrooms. Victoria comes back outside to the car to collect the groceries. When unbeknownst to her, a man carrying a baby car seat slips into the house and leaves with baby Brandon in just a few short minutes. He's captured on a security camera in broad daylight holding the baby carrier, but he's impossible to identify while wearing a hat and face mask. After police are contacted, they question Yesenia Ramirez, the preacher's wife who had taken Victoria and her grandson to Walmart that day. Yesenia's story keeps changing, at which point she's arrested. As the search for baby Brandon continues, police descend upon the Iglesia Apostoles y Profetas, where Victoria and Yesenia had first met and become friends. But as shocking as the developing kidnapping cases becoming, it turns out this is actually the second time that police have raided the church in regards to an endangered child in recent months. The public does not know about this previous incident involving the church, and it is still not exactly clear why it took police so long to release any facts about what happened. Seven months before baby Brandon was kidnapped,

police were called on September 24, 2021, just after 8 p.m. The woman on the other end of the line explained that her three-year-old daughter had passed away. The address she gave them was for the Iglesia Apostoles y Profetas. When medical teams and patrol officers arrived on the scene, three-year-old Areli Proctor was lying on the floor. She had numerous bruises around her neck, as well as swelling around her eyes and chest. Paramedics attempted lifesaving measures, but unfortunately, they could not bring Areli back to life. She was pronounced dead at a local hospital within the hour. Present at the church were Areli's mother, uncle, and grandfather, the certified pastor, and the leader of the Pentecostal Church. None of them were arrested that night or for months afterward. Missing three-month-old baby Brandon and deceased three-year-old Areli Proctor. Two incidents within the last two years involving congregants at the same tiny church in San Jose, California. As we prepare to untangle both of these mysteries, keep in mind that sometimes the ones praying the hardest are the ones to be the most afraid of. Do you have a point-of-sale system you can trust, or is it a real POS, if you know what I mean?

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You need Shopify for retail. Did you know Shopify powers selling in person, too? Shopify POS is your command center for your retail store. From accepting payments to managing inventory, Shopify has everything you need to sell in person. With Shopify, you get a powerhouse selling partner that effortlessly unites your in-person and online sales into one source of truth. Track every sale across your business in one place and know exactly what's in stock. Connect with customers in line and online. Shopify helps you drive store traffic with plug-and-play tools built from marketing campaigns from TikTok to Instagram and beyond. Get hardware that fits your business. Take payments by smartphone, transform your tablet into a point-of-sale system, or use Shopify's POS Go mobile device for a battle-tested solution. Plus, Shopify's award-winning help is there to support your success every step of the way. Do retail right with Shopify. Sign up for a \$1 a month trial period at Shopify.com/slash/sword-and-scale. All lowercase. Go to Shopify.com/slash/sword-and-scale to take your retail business to the next level today. Shopify.com/slash/sword-and-scale. All lowercase and no spaces. Shopify.com/slash/sword-and-scale. It's January 2022, roughly four months since the death of three-year-old Areli Proctor. Her mother, 25-year-old Claudia Hernandez, has posted a 40-minute video on YouTube so she can talk about the very short life of her daughter. Though she never mentions Areli by name, Claudia shares the story of how she first became pregnant and having a predictive dream that she would have a baby girl. Claudia also talks about what a happy baby Areli was. She would often use the Spanish phrase for I love you, Te amo, and she loved to help with cooking and cleaning in the kitchen. Claudia expresses just how hard it's been from having Areli in her life every day to not having her at all. While Claudia goes on about the power of God and knowing that her daughter is in a better place, there's something off about the tone of the video. Throughout the course of the 40-minute monologue, Claudia giggles, flipping her hair and chewing her gum. She's clearly aware of the camera and talks to her potential followers about female empowerment and a giveaway she was ready to do, but no one participated. Is the video tribute to your deceased daughter really the time to be doing this? The video was highly edited with special effect filters, with full music cues, and many photos of Areli laid over the selfie that Claudia is recording while sitting in the passenger seat of a car. I'd say her level of grief appears to be about equal to a teenager finding out their crush is dating someone else. Around 30 minutes in, Claudia explains that she could be negative and wish things were different, but as she states over and over again, it is what it is. What does that even mean? It is what it is. It's like a meaningless, useless phrase. She takes a moment though to chastise the people who turned on her after Areli died and explains that people can believe what they want to believe unless you were there that day. You could never understand the reality of what happened. As the video concludes, Claudia shows a tattoo on her chest from several years earlier of her daughter's name and date of birth. Claudia says that she is at peace, she is happy, and that no matter what problems come her way, God has her back. Well, the Lord must work in mysterious ways because six days after this video is posted, Claudia Hernandez is arrested and charged with felony child abuse. Let's change gears with a bit of positive news for once. Baby Brandon, who was kidnapped in broad daylight on April 25, 2022, was located alive by police the following day, just 18 hours after he was taken. You'll recall that police arrested a friend from church, Yesenia Ramirez,

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who it turns out was intentionally distracting Baby Brandon's grandmother at the time of the kidnapping. Yesenia's husband performed sermons at the church, but one of her several boyfriends, Jose Portillo, had been recruited in stealing Baby Brandon and taking the three-month-old to his home, where he was eventually found unharmed. Baby Brandon's mother recalled the way that Yesenia would hover over her son and wanted to be around him whenever he was present at church.

Neighbors observed Yesenia acting strangely in the lead-up to the kidnapping, and photographs show

Yesenia wearing a wig and holding a baby carrier, even though she had no infant of her own. During the investigation, police discovered that Yesenia and Jose had a stockpile of baby supplies, including diapers and formula. They eventually learned the very complex truth.

Yesenia had another boyfriend in addition to Jose and her husband. To keep this third man in her life, Yesenia said she was pregnant and had given birth to his child. When the boyfriend moved in and wondered when the baby was coming home from the hospital, Yesenia became obsessed

with taking Baby Brandon and raising the child as her own. Yesenia seduced her love-struck accomplice,

Jose Portillo, into helping with her kidnapping scheme. And in fact, Yesenia and Jose had attempted to kidnap Baby Brandon on three previous occasions before they were finally successful, including one instance where Jose pretended to be a child protective services worker, but was thankfully turned away. There was also evidence to suggest the pair had attempted to cut the brake lines in Brandon's mother's car. During their sentencing in March of 2023, her defense attorney described Yesenia's life of poverty in El Salvador, as well as the graphic incidents of rape and domestic abuse that led her to becoming a broken woman, but not yet an unsavable one. Yesenia spoke at length, apologizing to the people she had victimized and taking responsibility for her multiple attempts at kidnapping Baby Brandon.

Ultimately, the judge cited the couple's clearly premeditated crimes and sentenced mastermind Yesenia Ramirez to 13 years in prison and five years for her accomplice, Jose Portillo. It takes a certain kind of arrogance to think you can get away with kidnapping a friend's baby and then raise it as your own. Yesenia was not only pathologically lying to the people around her, but she was also lying to herself infatuated by an imaginary, impossible future. Sometimes the reality you want isn't the reality that can exist, and the thing that prevents you from making things worse is something called character. But if I may be so bold, there is an even more dangerous form of delusion practiced by the entire congregation at Iglesia Apostoles y Profetas, a daily conversation with the Lord, thinking that he, with a capital H, is guiding you through your every living moment and that whatever actions you perform are actually the will of God. 25-year-old Claudia Hernandez says in her 40-minute YouTube video regarding the death of her daughter that God is the center of her life. Trusting God has made her life so much better, and in her words, God is what keeps her sane. Claudia's actions that day were the opposite of sane, and will soon learn what God had in store for an innocent 3-year-old girl. There's something wrong with Arelli Proctor. It's sometime in the early morning hours of September 24th, 2021, and Arelli's mother Claudia is convinced that her loving 3-year-old daughter has become possessed by a demon. Claudia's younger brother Rene Hernandez

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Jr. is also present, agreeing with Claudia that something otherworldly is happening, and certain that his niece is in pain. As little Arelli stands up, he places his hands on her chest and back, applying pressure. It doesn't seem to make much of a difference. At 6.30 in the morning, Claudia and her younger brother Rene Jr. drive Arelli to the Iglesia to continue praying for her. Somehow, they have convinced themselves that if Arelli throws up, she will rid herself of the evil spirit that has taken over her tiny body. Once inside, Arelli is placed on the ground at the front of the altar. Claudia then begins squeezing around Arelli's waist and neck in an attempt to help her vomit and bring the demons out. Claudia also forces Arelli's mouth open with her bare hands and sticks her fingers deep down into her throat. The evil spirit is turning out to be more stubborn than expected. Thankfully, Claudia's father Rene Hernandez Sr. is a certified pastor. He arrived at the church around 12.30 p.m. and Claudia explains that his beloved granddaughter has become possessed. They prepare for their prayer sessions. Now, the real work will begin. For 90 minutes, Claudia, Rene Jr. and Rene Sr. hold Arelli by the torso, neck and legs, all of them pushing and contorting Arelli to compel the wicked spirit out. Arelli wiggles and fights back, strengthening their resolve that the plan is working. The three parties rotate positions, sometimes lifting Arelli off the ground and performing a ritual perpendicular to the floor, asking the Holy Ghost to come and save her. At one point, Rene Jr. holds Arelli by the stomach face down while Claudia pushes down on her throat. Arelli dips in and out of consciousness as she is choked multiple times. During the later prayer session, Rene Sr. has his arm wrapped around Arelli's abdomen when she begins to exhibit unusual strength and attempts to bite his arm. Surely, by now this demon has had enough. Looking past the bruising around her neck and eyes, down her injured mouth and tongue, the internal damage to Arelli is staggering. The amateur exorcism has resulted in internal bleeding to her pancreas, heart and bowels. Still confined by the wrists of the people claiming to love her the most, Arelli eventually vomits a clear, purplish liquid. Around this time, Rene Sr. claims to have stepped outside to answer a phone call. Rene Jr. kneels down beside Arelli, crumpled on the floor and somehow still alive. He once again places one hand over her chest and one hand over her back. He closes his eyes to pray and begins pushing his hands together, maintaining pressure for 10 full minutes. When he opens his eyes, Arelli's body becomes limp and it is clear that she is dead. It's around 6.30 p.m. now, 12 agonizing hours since Claudia and Rene Jr. first entered the church. And still, two more hours pass before Claudia finally calls 911. None of them attempt to perform life-saving measures prior to police arriving. Medical examiners would later reveal that Arelli had neaten anything in over 20 hours and had only been given about 6 ounces of water during that same period of time. Rene Sr., the pastor who poisoned both his children's minds with so much nonsense that they all tortured and killed a little girl, said the following about liberating Arelli of her evil spirits. If you read the Bible, you'll see that Jesus cast away demons and made sick people healthy again. It's not when I want to do it, it's when God, in his will, wants to heal the person. The preacher is like an instrument of God. What we do is what God says. In other words, hey man, don't look at me, this was God's idea. That's basically what he's saying. When his daughter Claudia was questioned by police about what led to this horrible series of events, her statement was truly shocking. What in the literal hell had happened that night to convince her and her brother

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that Arelli was possessed by a demon? Was Arelli hovering in mid-air, head spinning? Was she cursing and laughing maniacally in a deep and raspy and human voice? I'm going to read directly from the statement of facts released by the San Jose Police Department, as it's the only specific indicator we have about that previous night. She began to believe the victim was possessed because the victim would wake up and scream or cry periodically. No torrents of pea soup, no spider walking on the ceiling, not even an upside down cross. Just a normal three-year-old girl who was probably hungry and may have been scared from a bad dream. Nothing could prepare her for the real nightmare that family members would force upon her. Even though Arelli died in September of 2021, no arrests were made until the following year. A police spokesman stated that they were waiting for a comprehensive medical examiner's report before making their arrests. In the meantime, all three family members were free to go. In the course of those months, members of the local church community and experts in religious studies of Latino Pentecostalism condemned the actions of Renee Hernandez Sr. Nobody could believe that Renee had used such a dark practice as an exorcism, let alone one that inflicted so much damage and even so horrifically one performed on a three-year-old girl, his own granddaughter. Finally, in January of 2022, less than a week after posting a YouTube video sharing her own thoughts on God's will, Claudia Hernandez was quietly arrested. It wasn't until months after that April of 2022 that police began searching the Iglesia Apostoles y Profetas for a second time, this time in regards to the kidnapping of Baby Brandon, which we covered earlier in this episode. While everyone was looking into Baby Brandon's story, a local news source began reporting on the hush-hush exorcism incident that occurred within the same church. And then finally, at long last, the leader of that church, Renee Hernandez Sr., was officially arrested along with his son, Renee Jr. In June of 2022, a judge ruled that all three family members would have their cases consolidated and tried together. At that time, it was announced that they could each face 25 years to life in prison, and an attorney stated their plea wouldn't be coming anytime soon. Nearly a year later, at the time of this episode's recording in May of 2023, we are still waiting. Plea hearings for the Hernandez family have been delayed and rescheduled multiple times, with another potential date set later this summer. Until then, we can only judge for ourselves, based on the statements made by those directly involved. During one of Renee Sr.'s post-exorcism sermons prior to his arrest, he said everything is the will of God, no matter how small or big. But if you ask me, that's giving entirely too much credit to something outside of yourself. We all have to make our own choices, no matter how big or small. Each of us has a set of beliefs that will determine our most likely reaction to a situation, but in the end, we are ultimately free to choose our own path. Think about the choices you've made in your life, and how differently you may have acted if you only knew then what you know now. Oh, and if you find yourself face to face with an actual demon, or with God, for that matter, stop what you're doing and speak with a mental health professional before you hurt somebody. Because, as some famous person somewhere at some point said, when you talk to God, it's praying. When God talks to you, it's called schizophrenia. If you enjoyed the show, please consider joining Plus at [swordandscale.com slash plus](http://swordandscale.com/plus). But if you can't, consider leaving us a positive review on your preferred listening platform. Sweet dreams, and good night. Customers are rushing to your store. Do you have a point of sale system you can trust, or is it

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