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NOT OF BLOOD

JOHN HOOKS

Predawn cold froze through the autumn leaves and pressed heavily upon the little trailer. He was awake before the sun, would be drunk by the time it rose. The preacher's sad eyes looked at the open book without reading; his ears listened for the sound of anything coming down the long dirt road. No one had come, no one would.

“And he said to me, he said ‘Pastor, if I am bathed in His light, then why do I feel so blind?’”

The crowd murmured in a perfect chorus with the constant squeaking of their old wooden folding chairs as the soft red light of a new sunset spilled into the muggy grey haze of a hot spring day. As he spoke, the preacher strode across the cracked black paint of a small wooden stage; stopping occasionally to flip through an old leafleted bible that lay open on a lamp-lit podium. Forty or fifty people sat in crooked rows under the green and white canopy of the stained, greasy-looking tent.

“He said ‘I feel so lost in this life, I feel so helplessly lost.’ And let me remind you this was a man from this very congregation, from your own flock. Lest you think hopelessness and tests and crises of faith cannot strike so close to home because surely they can.” A microphone sat comfortably in his right hand and he gestured animatedly with his left. Dark stains had formed under his arms and steadily grew even as the evening cooled. “And I know many of you feel the same way; you feel the same as this man. You feel lost and confused and even a little scared sometimes. I myself felt the same way for much of my life.”

The old ladies in the crowd let out an audible intake of breath through the soft rustle of

their constantly beating folding fans. Many of the women wore long-sleeved floral dresses and the men wore collared shirts tucked into jeans or overalls. The preacher wore a white short-sleeved shirt with pale yellow pinstripes, a short, thick forest green tie, and a faded pair of khaki pants.

“It’s true. It’s true I assure you. I once lived in doubt. I could not see, could not comprehend in my darkness what God’s plan for me could be. I couldn’t understand it and so in my weakness and in my confusion I doubted that it was there. We have all felt this way, we have all felt, as this man said to me, ‘blind’ even though we are showered in God’s pure light from the moment we enter this world.” He paused and looked at his flock. He had short, light brown hair with side burns that came down just past the bottom of his ear lobe. The air sat heavily under the canvas and was wet enough to take a drink from. Condensation clumped his hair together in pointed bunches and glistened on his flushed cheeks. “Now, would you all like to know what I said to this man? Would you like hear what my answer was to his earnest question?”

“Yes!” “Yes.”

“Speak the Word, Pastor.” The answers rang out from the seats. A wolfish grin spread across his face. He waited for all the cries to die down before he continued, calmly at first.

“If you stand here,” he stood still with his feet together and pointed down at the ground, “if you stand here on Earth and stare directly into the Sun,” he pointed to the roof of the tent, “what happens? Can you see the brilliance of its light? The warmth of its heart? No you can’t. When you stare at the Sun you are blinded, you get those little colorful shadows over your eyes and you have to blink a few times before you can see clearly again.” He blinked demonstratively at the crowd, who laughed warmly. “Well let me tell you that God’s light is just like the Sun’s light. In fact, God’s light is the Son’s light. And we can never see it in its full brilliance, can we? Not in this life.”

“Mmm mmm, no we can’t.”

“Most of us see the light of God just as we see the light from the Sun. We see how it warms us and lights our way but we don’t look up to see where it comes from, and when we do it is too bright for our foolish eyes and we must look away. But just because we cannot see the fullness of the light or understand where it comes from and where it leads us, that doesn’t mean it is not there.” The worn wood of the stage creaked as the preacher darted across, speaking louder and faster and stirring his arm in a fluid triangular motion. From side to side to the sky. “But yet I understand that for many of you here today the question is still: Why? You say ‘I know that the light is there and guides me through all things but I do not understand why I still feel so blind, why I feel so helpless.’ But I shall tell you why. It is because that blindness you feel is not blindness to God’s light or blind-

ness to his plan; it is blindness to the nature of your own self. We are truly strangers to ourselves, are we not? It is said in Romans seven fifteen: 'For I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.' How many people here today have felt those words in their lives?"

Hands rose from every seat. The preacher's own hand reached the highest.

"Look at that, look at all those hands. I know I myself have been guilty of that exact sentiment many times. But tell me something, is this room full of evil people? Is the man to your right and the woman to your left a sinner?"

"No!"

"No!"

"No, Lord!"

"Look at me in front of you, am I a sinner in the eyes of God? Am I an evil man?"

"No!"

"No, Pastor, you are saved!"

"That's right, because it is no sin for man to be confused, to feel that the face he sees in the mirror is the one that is most foreign to him. Because God does not ask that we understand, He does not expect that we will understand. All God asks is that we believe, that we place our trust in Him and let His light guide us wherever it must go. You may be a stranger to yourself but you are no stranger to God who has made you in His image, and if you let Him into your heart and let His light lead your life then He will lead you to paradise. As we are told in John one twelve thirteen: 'But to all who did receive Him, who believed in His name, He gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.' That is the message I came here with today." Words charged out of his mouth like an endless train bursting from a tunnel. The preacher clung on with great shuddering breaths that overpowered the dated amplification system and rained distortion upon the unfazed pulpit. "You are all children of God, and if you feel pain, if you feel sadness, if you feel anger or spite that is all in God's plan if you only put your faith in his hands and let him guide you along you will only end up in one place: and that is revival in the eternal paradise of Heaven. Somebody praise God!"

"Praise God!" "Praise Jesus!"

"Praise the Lord!"

"If I trust and believe in the power of my God then anything is possible! For my God is the God of miracles! People ask me 'do you believe in the God that can heal the sick?' and I say yes

I do! People ask me ‘do you believe in the God whose power can cast out a demon that has taken hold in someone’s mind?’ and I say yes I do, I have seen it! I have seen the God that feeds the hungry! I have seen the God that pulls the cripple out of his wheel chair and makes him walk again! I have seen the God that visits the addict and makes him put down the needle forever!” Upbeat Pentecostal hymns played on the speakers and the preacher jumped and spoke with the rhythm of the music, the giddy congregation clapped along and stomped their feet into the matted grass. “For my God, the God that I serve, is the God of miracles! He is the God to which I give everything in my life! All my joy, all my sorrow goes to God! In order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ! To Him belongs the glory and dominion forever and ever! Say Amen!”

A chaotic roar from the crowd drowned out the preacher’s screeched command and the whole tent danced and clapped in ecstasy. A tall man with a great stomach who wore a short-sleeved denim shirt tucked in to a worn and dirty pair of gray slacks leapt with unmatched fervor. He had short black hair cut in a straight line above his eyes and wore wire-framed glasses with big, thick circular lenses that made him look like a delirious bullfrog. After breaking through the compacting throng he found his way up to where the preacher was just stepping off the stage and swept him up in a passionate hug. His movement descended into the spastic when he finally let the flattened preacher from his embrace, arms and legs spasmed as he babbled away in shouted tongues. The soggy Earth stained the back of his shirt when he seized up and crashed down.

Someone had turned off the music and most of the congregation was gone. The remaining few filed out of the tent, but not before they stopped and shook hands with the preacher, thanked him, and told him what a great sermon it was. He looked each of them in the eye with a kind smile and thanked them graciously.

In a brief quiet moment he stopped a young woman carrying two wicker collection baskets filled with single bills and coins as she was making her way toward the back exit of the tent.

“Why don’t you leave those here with me MaryBeth, I’ll take care of the collections tonight.”

“Are you sure Pastor? I really don’t mind.”

“Oh yes of course, no problem. You go and relax, you’ve earned it with the great work you’re doing.”

“Well sure then, thank you very much Pastor.” She handed him the two baskets which he stacked and held in one arm.

“You’re very welcome MaryBeth, have a good night now.” He smiled warmly at the young

woman and she beamed at him as she turned away and skipped over to a group of her friends.

“That was a lovely sermon Pastor, thank you so much.” The preacher looked up from the baskets in his arms at the elderly couple who had just approached.

“Hm? Oh Rick, Betsy, you’re too kind. Thank you for coming.” He shook both of their hands. “God Bless.”

Once everyone had left for the night the preacher took the collection baskets and went out the back of the tent to the small settlement of trucks, trailers, and campers that was his revival ministry. The last blood red sliver of sun slipped behind the trees, glinting crimson off the smeared and cracked windows of the rusty encampment. A cool breeze tempered the dim light and his hair, still damp from exertion, stood on end. He walked to the far edge of the camp where his battered old tin can airstream was parked, and went in through the tattered screen door that hung ajar.

At the small table with a fake wood top pockmarked by scratches and circular water stains he stared at the two baskets in front of him filled with wrinkled dollar bills and dirty coins. For a long time he just sat and looked down. The olive green acrylic pleather seats groaned and squeaked anytime he shifted his weight. With a sudden movement he dumped both baskets out on the table and began to separate their contents. All the coins he put back in one of the baskets, but the bills he collected into twenty dollar stacks that he secured with rubber bands. When he was done he had three of them. He went into the small bedroom and came out with seven more.

A small closet held only eight hangers. Two were free, three held collared shirts, two had folded pairs of pants, and the last one held an old corduroy jacket. He put on the jacket and stuffed the stacks of bills into the inside pockets. From the top shelf of a cabinet by the sink he pulled down an old Makarov pistol which he tucked into the back of his belt and walked out of his trailer.

Outside the dozen or so workers of the ministry were gathering around a small campfire, eating sandwiches and laughing. Crickets whirred in the grass and a few lightning bugs fluttered around in the dark.

“Coming to join us Pastor?” A young man by the fire asked as he walked out of his camper.

“A little later Stephen, I’m going to go into town for a bit and get a few things from the store.”

“Would you like me to go with you?” The young woman who had held the collection baskets sprang up to ask.

“Oh no, that’s fine. Thank you MaryBeth but I’ll manage on my own. I’ll see you all shortly.” The group accepted his genial departure and bid him well. He opened the door of a battered

brown 1994 Nissan pickup and, after a few false starts, got the engine going. The headlights flicked on and he pulled off the grass onto the dirt road that ran along the western edge of the camp.

The preacher drove on the dirt road for fifteen minutes, and then on two-lane highway for twenty more before he reached town. Dirty yellow headlights illuminated the road ahead of him, but the dense foliage on either side swallowed the light like a black hole. Hemmed in by darkness, the truck could only sputter forward into the cast light. A hand painted sign proclaimed entrance to Eunice, seat of St. Landry Parish and the street opened to the uninhabited buildings and intruding weeds of the outskirts of town. Eunice was a central-Louisianan collection of single story houses with chipped paint and unkempt yards and flat, rectangular businesses with oil-stained parking lots where weeds and grass pushed through the cracks in the asphalt, and it felt like it.

Flickering orange streetlights drenched the main avenue, there was only one to each block, alternating on the right and left side of the street. He didn't see any other cars as he passed a small white building with a smeared window front that said Johnson's Grocery, or as he passed more small buildings with locked doors and dull grey neon signs. He took the left after a large gray building with no windows that smelled like spoiled poultry.

A few blocks away from the main avenue he pulled into the parking lot of Crawford's Automotive Parts & Repair. Moonlight reflected from puddles nestled in the litany of potholes. The two garages were closed and dark but light came out through the blind that was covering the window to the office door. A large bearded man in a leather jacket sat in a white plastic chair with his legs outstretched and watched the preacher park and turn off his lights. He sat for a moment with his hand on the keys before taking a deep breath and stepping out, slipping the keys into his pocket as he walked toward the door.

The large man stood up in front of the door, bearing no expression as the preacher approached.

"We're closed." His voice was gruff and curt. "Come back tomorrow morning, garage opens up at nine."

"No, well, um, I'm here to play." The preacher shifted his weight uncomfortably, the man's eyes narrowed.

"I don't know what you're talking about man, but whatever it is you're in the wrong place and you need to leave." He stepped toward the preacher and grabbed his shoulder as he made to turn him around. The preacher startled out of the man's grasp and frantically reached into the pocket of his coat.

“No no, wait! Wait! I have money! Look.” His voice was agitated and scared and his hand shook as he brandished a handful of bills. The large man looked at him suspiciously for a moment then took the money from his hand and grabbed the preacher by his tie.

“Who are you?” He asked sternly. “Why did you come here?”

“I’m, I’m a preacher,” he stammered frantically in the man’s grasp, “I run the revival ministry that’s been set up out west of highway eighty-three, we’ve been there for six weeks now. A member of my congregation told me about this place. She, she said you could buy in for two hundred, I have two hundred. I’m just, I’m just a preacher. I don’t want any trouble.” The man held him for a minute longer as he looked the preacher up and down.

“Alright, come in here. If you move at all too quickly you’ll really regret it.” The man held his grasp on the preacher as he unlocked the door, pulled it open, and dragged him in. Once there, he pushed the preacher in front of him into the room.

The inside of the building was a normal looking mechanic office, but the couches and reception desk had been pushed up against the walls and the open floor space was filled with a large poker table with seven men seated. Stale cigarette smoke settled in the air and dull yellow lamps lit the room halfheartedly from each corner. Three more large men in leather jackets sat around the wall. They all looked up as the preacher stumbled into the room but none of them spoke. A very tall man with clean-cut short gray hair and small wire framed glasses who sat at the dealer’s seat spoke first.

“What do we have here, Eric?”

“This guy came up, said he wanted to buy in. Said he was a preacher and heard about us from someone in his congregation. He’s got money.”

“A preacher?” The man stood up slowly and walked over to where the preacher trembled by the door. “Don’t hear that one every day, where do you preach at, preacher?”

“I, I run the revival ministry that’s been set up out west of highway eighty-three for a month and a half. But like I told this man here I’ve got money, I’m not-”

“You told Eric that you heard about this little game from someone in your congregation,” he didn’t seem to have listened to what the preacher had said, “who was it?”

“I’m sorry, but I don’t want to tell you that Sir, I hope you can understand.” The preacher met the man’s gaze with timid assertion. There was a short pause that felt like a very long pause as the tall man looked at the preacher like he didn’t believe there was a man in front of him.

“Well alright then. You say you’ve got money, you know the buy-in is two hundred?”

“Yes, that’s what I have.”

“Is that all you have?” The preacher nodded.

“He only gave me a hundred.” Eric interjected from the doorway.

“Oh no, no I’m sorry I have the rest here.” He drew the rest of his money out of his coat and put it in the tall man’s outstretched hand, he looked up expectantly at Eric, who walked over and gave him the remainder.

“Well come on and have a seat then preacher. At least if you lose the first hand you’ll be out of here quickly. And you don’t need to call me Sir, Mr. Crawford is fine.”

The men around the table shuffled over to make room. One of them stood up and got another chair for the preacher which he sat directly to the right of Mr. Crawford. None of their distant, heavy eyes moved up from the table for more than a brief furtive glance. Most of the players wafted the smell of drink: all of them reeked of shame.

“Eric take a seat by the door and enjoy the show if you want, no one else is gonna come tonight.” Mr. Crawford said as he sat down and began shuffling the cards expertly, dealing out two cards to each player as he spoke. With his shoulders relaxed he sat straight in his chair, looming over the hunched bodies around him. Periodically, the men would produce flasks from shielded interior pockets but Mr. Crawford payed no mind to the glass of water in front of him. There were no chips on the table, each player sat behind stacks of bills with which they bet. The dealer’s was the biggest. “So obviously you don’t have any money to bet right now preacher, and I can tell you that all these guys are gonna be pretty sour if you win the pot you didn’t put anything up for.” He dealt his final card face up, a ten of diamonds, and turned to look expectantly at the preacher.

Under the shield of his left hand, the preacher looked at his cards. Nine of hearts and the ace of diamonds. His face lost some of its anxiety.

“Why are you here preacher? What’s a man of God doing in a place like this?” His hand was clasped firmly on the deck of cards, the game would not continue until he got an answer. The preacher set his cards back down and considered his response.

“My ministry is struggling, it’s hard to establish any kind of permanence when you move around so much, but our time in St. Landry Parish has been our best. We’re almost out of our agreed tenure on our current plot and we would like to get a lease on a more permanent residence in town.”

“How much is that gonna cost you?”

“The down payment is eighteen hundred dollars.”

“Huh, you’ll need to be real lucky to get that here, why don’t you just take that out of your collections?” The preacher was getting annoyed, but answered the questions as well as he could. He had nothing to hide.

“The people who come to my ministry are mostly very poor, it would take months, maybe even years to collect that much.” Mr. Crawford seemed more amused than anything by the preacher’s responses and kept asking questions without any clear intent to continue the game. The rest of the men at the table looked at the preacher resentfully but said nothing.

“Hmmm. Does anyone else at the ministry know about your little plan here, do they know about the church you’re eyeballin’?”

“I am sure they will be overjoyed when I tell them about it.” Mr. Crawford snorted out genuine laughter at the preacher’s answer.

“You’re a confident man preacher, that’s for sure. You must believe you’ve got God on your side.”

“Yes I do. I have full faith in God and all actions I take in His name.”

“Yes you do. Well,” he cleared his throat, “since we’re on the subject of collections, you know, every collection basket I’ve ever seen, which has been a few, they’re always filled with crumpled, ripped, dirty old dollar bills. The ones that are so fucked up you’re not sure any real store is gonna accept them so you throw them in the swear jar or in a piggy bank or something and occasionally grab a couple every few weeks or so when your wife nags you about it. And this stack here that you gave me,” he thumbed through the wad of bills, “every one of these looks like they just went through the fuckin’ dryer. Do you really think God’s gonna help a preacher who takes his collections straight to the blackjack table?” Eric and the three other men sitting around the room all laughed. The men at the table remained silent but keenly watched the exchange.

“Well,” the preacher coughed and squirmed uncomfortably in his chair, “I believe that God is aware of the purity of my intentions and supportive of the means I have to take to achieve them, even if they are...” The preacher struggled for the words.

“Not exactly the most righteous?” He nodded furtively at Mr. Crawford’s suggestion, which made him laugh again. “Well shit then, let’s find out if you’re right. Hit or stay?”

The preacher took a moment to reply, but he didn’t need to think about it. “Stay.”

“Goddam, you are a confident man, aren’t you preacher? How about the rest of you, you as confident as the holy man?”

The preacher didn’t pay attention as the rest of the players made their bets and took their

cards. He sat in his chair and watched the pot grow without daring to try and keep track of the value. He was brought out of his daze by Mr. Crawford's voice in his ear.

"Preacher? You still with us preacher? Come on, flip 'em." The preacher showed his hand. "Oh holy shit, twenty! You might have God on your side after all. Anyone got something to beat that, I know I don't." The three men directly clockwise to the preacher folded their hands, as did the two closest to Mr. Crawford. The man in the middle of the table directly across from the dealer held on to his cards. "That everyone? No? Oh, Frank. What you got, man? Is God with you?" The man smirked and turned over an ace and a jack.

His heart dropped into his stomach with the weight of an old cannonball and splashed stomach acid through his body until every inch burned with shame. A dull high-pitched ringing filled his ears and turned the laughter he saw in his peripheral vision into muted murmurs. The ringing grew louder and louder in his ears as he stared down in shock at the pile of money in the middle of the table. It reached an ear-splitting peak as he saw the man, Frank was his name, edge out of his chair and reach for the pot.

In one frantic but surprisingly fluid motion the preacher stood up from his chair, drew the Makarov out of his belt, and whipped the side of it with desperate strength against Frank's intruding temple. He crumpled immediately and began to bleed on the table. Everyone in the room stood up and cried out, the four men in leather all moved for weapons of their own but the preacher was quick and pointed the gun at Mr. Crawford. His hand shook violently but he was close enough it wouldn't matter.

"Don't move! Nobody move! I'll shoot him, I swear to God!" Mr. Crawford looked at him calmly, even amused.

"It's cool, it's cool. Everyone relax, we know if he swears to God he really means it. Eric, Ryan, all of you keep your fucking guns down. But seriously, what the shit Eric? You didn't search him?" His hands were raised but he stood right where he had risen from his chair. The preacher stepped back from the table.

"I'm sorry Mr. Crawford, I got distracted by the whole preacher thing."

"I don't want to hear it right now Eric!" He brought his gaze back to his target. "What now preacher? What are you gonna do now?"

"Get back against that far wall there!" He motioned with his head to the wall across from the door and brandished his weapon along the table and around the room. "Come one! All of you, let's go!" One by one, the rest of the men in the room begrudgingly made their way over. Mr.

Crawford was the last one to move, his amused smirk still stretched across his face.

“Alright preacher, we’re going.” He stepped slowly backwards towards the wall, looking at the preacher the whole time as they all backed up against the wall. Holding his aim on Mr. Crawford he reached his free arm toward the table. His eyes flitted quickly and constantly back up to the wall as he grabbed his wadded cash from the dealer’s seat and scooped up all the blood-free money he could from around the rest of the table.

The preacher side stepped carefully over to the door and stood beside it, his small pistol still raised across the room. “What are you gonna do now preacher, there is no church, not after this. You can’t do anything with all that money. If you drop it all right now and don’t try and run we won’t have to go out to that ministry to look for you. I think anyone we might run into out there would be real thankful to you for that. Just put that gun down preacher, put it down now and this whole thing stays in this room.”

“No I, I can’t. I still, there’s still so much I have to do.” The preacher sputtered out loud as he scanned the room for a way out. With both hands occupied, he hooked his left foot around the leg of the nearest table chair and dragged it next to him.

“Come on preacher now just what the fuck are you doing here?”

The preacher bent his leg back and braced his foot against the door. He tried to force it open with a firm push but failed. The back of the room erupted in laughter. He drew his leg forward and kicked in to the center of the door as hard as he could and it burst open.

“You’re not getting out of this preacher, if you don’t want anyone else to get hurt you need to stop this right now.”

The preacher muttered inaudibly as he took a few shaky backwards steps out the door until he was clear of its radius. He hooked the chair again and drug it out with him. The room was silent for a few seconds as he stood there, pointing his gun. Mr. Crawford had lost his smirk and annoyance took over his face.

“This is your last chance you fuckass. If you run, everyone left at that ministry is going to feel how angry we are. Put that goddam gun down!”

The Makarov rattled in his violently shaking hand. “I just, I just... I can’t.” He took a deep breath and then kicked the door shut. As quickly as he could he lowered his gun and hooked the tips of his fingers around the bottom of the back of the chair, jamming it up under the doorknob in the way he had seen in films and ran towards his car, still holding the gun in his right hand. Bills flew out and fell into the parking lot behind him as he ran, but his left arm was clutched tightly

enough around the pile that he held on to most of it. He could hear multiple shoulders throwing themselves into the door as he reached his car.

As he drew level with the cab of his truck he tried to grab the keys in his pocket but his hand wouldn't fit. He looked down and saw the gun still clutched tightly in his fingers. He tried to drop it, but he had gripped it so firmly for so long that his brain couldn't make his muscles let it go. In desperation he slammed his hand as hard as he could onto the side of the truck bed and managed to knock the pistol out of his grip. The old weapon clattered to the ground a few feet away from him. It could have gone off when it hit the pavement, if it had been loaded.

His numb and mostly broken fingers fumbled in his pocket and clutched his keys. He wrenched open the door and climbed into the cab, letting money spill out onto his lap and down the seat as he took the wheel with his left hand and tried to jam the keys into the ignition, finally turning it just as the door burst open behind him. The truck started on the first turn and he sped over the curb and into the street as bodies poured out into the parking lot. A single gunshot cleaved open the night as the back windshield shattered behind him. Unharmmed, he sped off down the road as fast as the truck would go.

He drove west on the highway for two hours in pure shock before he realized where he was or what had happened. There still had been no headlights behind him since he left the garage. His whole body started to shake and both hands were clenched around the steering wheel as hard as he had held the gun. Breathing had been heavy and labored the whole time, but he started gasping for air as his eyes filled with tears, an uncontrollable groan came out with every exhale as if the wind had been knocked out of him. He sobbed with all of his body as he took exit two seventy one north to highway fifteen.