

Word count: 3,044

My forehead hurts. I smell neoprene contact adhesive with a trace amount of unleaded gasoline. I see an extreme close-up of orangish black indoor/outdoor carpet. I conclude that I am lying face down on the floor of my office with my forehead pinned to the carpet and the familiar puddle of slobber pooled on the floor beneath my mouth. This is not the first time I've awoken like this. In fact, it's my fourth time in recent memory. I'd ballpark "recent memory" to mean the last ten days, but that's just a guess. I'm sure Virjean, she of the smoke-colored wig and permanent scowl, would be able to tell you exactly. Her voice will come screeching through my intercom any moment, no doubt.

I roll over, simultaneously peeling my forehead off of the carpet which separates like a strip of Velcro. I lie on my back and groan as loud as a percolating coffee maker reaching the end of its brew cycle; the kind of groan that expresses both suffering and relief. I wonder if Jesus groaned like that on the cross. I bet he did. I think about Jesus a lot.

I feel my forehead with the fingers of my right hand. I notice that I'm developing a scar from all of this late night supplication and penitence. I stare into the recessed lights in the ceiling and the light burns my eyes. I keep staring. I deserve the discomfort.

The intercom beeps. "Brother Jimmy! Brother Jimmy, I know you're in there." Virjean's voice sears into my brain through the lo-fi sonics of the NuTone intercom on my desk. She's like a red-faced turkey vulture zeroing in on a dead skunk with a rug burn on its forehead.

"Bill Fairless is on the phone again. He demands to speak to you about your sermon last Sunday. He's not standing in the lobby anymore. He keeps calling. He's not going away," she grunts and hisses.

I like Bill, despite the fact that he's one of these childless men in their late 50s who know everything there is to know about everything (everything important or relevant to Bill, that is. Say, for instance, the topic of young women's fashion trends comes up, as it did recently when his wife Diane went on endlessly about how much she loved all the colors of these polyester dresses with rayon ponchos that the girls are wearing now, her favorite being flame red-- Bill dismissed all of this as useless and trivial.) Now that I lie here thinking about it, maybe "pity" is more of how I feel about Bill as opposed to "like". I wonder if Jesus confused "pity" and "like". Did Jesus like anyone? Pity, yes. But like? Did he really like anyone?

"He says he can't stand in your office and wait for you any longer. He can't leave Diane alone in the hospital. The doctor says she needs round-the-clock attention and he's afraid to leave her. She's in that hospital bed because of that sermon!"

That sermon. Man. That was a heckuva thing. It might be my greatest moment. Or my worst. Most misunderstood? It doesn't really matter. It's done.

"Bill says he's contacting his lawyerrrr." She added a not-so-subtle amount of vibrato to the end of the word "lawyer", similar to the "R" sound in the old hymn "How Great Thou Art". "He said he's going to sue you personally for Diane's doctor bills because of that sermon."

I reflect on my sermon, how I told the congregation that they don't give a fucking shit about the poor. I actually said those words, "fucking shit". That was ballsy. Or was it? It really woke them up, that's for sure. But woke them up to what? What can they really do about it? Just feel bad? Is there any utility to this? So far the only thing that's come of my aggressive message is that it's almost killed Diane Fairless.

"I am not going to sit here all day and listen to this man (two syllables, "may-un") complain about you and your disrespectful and thoughtless cursing in the house of the Lord!"

This must be what it feels like to be an artist. Always walking that fine line between chaos and order, success and failure, helping or hurting, never totally certain about what one has done, but completely certain that it *had to be done*. It's a powerful but scary feeling. Maybe John Lennon feels this way. He found out. Maybe Jesus felt this way. He found out, too. I think Jesus was an artist.

I sit up. Oof. Whoa. My skull feels like the dusty shell of an out-of-balance concrete mixer. I burp: soft, puffy, fat. I see that I'm still wearing my light grey suit from yesterday. My pant legs are covered in dirt. I'm shoeless and my black Gold Toe socks are caked with dried mud. But topping the list of curiosities is the pair of spurs I have strapped around the heel my socked feet. The studs, arms, and neck of the spurs are also mudded, and the rowels are stained with dried blood. I'm covered in dirt. I look around and notice that I'm on the floor between my desk and my credenza. This must be my favorite place to shut down for the night because I've risen here each time I've stayed the night in my office. After each night that I've been out with Them.

I see my jacket draped over the desk chair. My shoes are nowhere in sight. I look down at my torso and see my tie loosened and splattered with blood. There is also blood splattered on my white dress shirt. "Alkaline loam," I mutter to myself.

As I say those words, an image from last night comes crashing into my mind. I am being hoisted onto a strange horse, or bull, some kind of large beast. The skin on its back feels like old, wet tree bark that's covered in prickly hair. I hear laughter and shouting. It's dark and cool out, but the beast is sweaty. I'm straddling it. I look down to the side of the beast and see the

silhouettes of three men. One of them I see clearer than the others. He's red-faced with sandy-colored hair attached to his matching sideburns and mustache. He yells out above the laughter, "...so we can pull somethin' out of this goddamn alkaline loam!"

"Well, I'm putting him through. You'll just have to deal with it," seethes Virjean through the intercom. She likes this. She likes being agitated. It's the perfectly acceptable vehicle for her vitriol. The sad metal and plastic of that intercom on my desk is her violin, and she plays it like one of the masters. I detect her notes of sheer joy masked by her powerful antagonism that all culminate in her sublime state of being *right*. Hostile rectitude. Nothing else satisfies her need for control, justifies her sense of right and wrong, and sets her amygdala off like a fireworks show in her brain than a blast of hostile rectitude, which has been known to trigger sexual orgasm if done correctly (which she, no doubt, does), and this vibrant self-righteousness gives her a savory morsel of gossip to share with the other old hens of Three Oaks Baptist Church, thereby asserting her position among their ranks as Madame Hen of the Coop, simultaneously claiming primacy over me as pastor and head of the church, resulting in her move one rung closer on the ladder to the Big Man himself. She must be so happy.

"You're going to lose your *damned* job, *Mister* Peck, and that could not happen soon enough!" Oh, she loves this so much. Emphasizing every syllable. Using "damned" with that authority and confidence, without a care who heard her say it. I bet she hasn't said the word "damned" out loud to anyone other than her damned husband since that damned Catholic got elected president. The "damned" is followed by her dismount with that "Mister" instead of the more appropriate "Brother" Peck or "Pastor" Peck, and then sticking the landing with the slamming down of the phone. Brilliant. I should get a "thank you" gift for this.

“...the electro cardio...electra...not cardio. It has to start with a “K”. E-K-G. They keep saying E-K-G. If it’s a EKG then it’s not cardio with a “C”. Then it oughta be E-C-G. Well, anyhow, the E-K or C-G or whatever it’s called, is supposed to...” Bill Fairless is in mid-ramble after Virjean sent him through to my intercom. Fortunately, Bill has that laconic Texas drawl that is made up of only three or four sounds that are stitched together with occasional consonant that has the effect of listening to a bass viol. He drones on about his wife’s current medical troubles. His voice becomes pleasant white noise.

I brace myself on the credenza and manage to stand. The spurs clang. I forgot about the spurs. I consider removing them, but, in my condition, there is no bending over now that I’m bipedal. I decide that they’ll simply have to stay on indefinitely.

“...and Dr. Panunu said that if Diane is comfortably seated in a controlled environment, like a church sanctuary-- his words-- there should be no reason to fear the instigation of a cardiac event...”

I collapse into my desk chair. I lean back and sigh. Or groan. I look at the blood on my tie. I can hear the laughter of those men. So loud. So uncontrollable. Was it joy? What caused them to laugh? I recall that I was laughing, too. What inspired that laughter? Did Jesus ever laugh like that?

I reach around and grab my suit jacket hanging on the back of my chair and pull it around to the front. It’s covered in blood and dirt. Sacrifice. It was a sacrifice.

The memory of last night storms in again. “Hyah!” I can hear one of the men shout. It sounds raspy and painful. Deadly. I hear a loud crash of flesh on flesh. I feel the beast underneath me begin to trot forward. I almost fall off. “Dig in, Preacher! Dig them spurs in,

son!" one of them yells to me. I do as told. The beast groans deep and low. It's like nothing I've ever heard. I lay face-down on its back, trying not to fall off. The laughter and shouting of the men grows fainter. I'm alone on the beast.

"Why do I keep going out with these guys?" I ask myself out loud, as I open the bottom drawer of my desk and grab a bottle of Jim Beam and place it on my desk. I think about the fact that I can drink anywhere. I can easily hide my boozing up in Austin, or even Houston. The Showdown in San Marcos, I could disappear there. Or Dalton's, or some dive in Brownsville. It's not hard to do. But something draws me to these men. There's a hunger or thirst that they satisfy, but what could it be? I wish I knew. I stare at the label on the Jim Beam bottle and achieve a meditative state while gazing at the black letters with gold shadow around them. Why do I continue to go out with these men every chance I get? What am I satisfying? It occurs to me that every night when I lie down on this floor and bury my forehead into the orangish-black carpet, I am praying to God for an answer to that question.

"...and the other lady in the room, in the bed next to Diane, why she plum fell out of her bed and onto the floor, right there in the hospital. Gee whiz, Pastor Peck, I'd just hate for something like that to happen to my Diane. I don't know if she'd be able to..."

With the help of Bill's deep contrabassoon voice and the black and gold lettering from the Jim Beam label, I close my eyes and drift off as the events of last night become clearer to me. I try to fill in the gaps. A minute or two passes and I feel myself back on the beast. It's almost at a full gallop now. My spurs are gashing into its side, as if functioning on their own. I hear a couple of gunshots from the men behind me. The beast cries out again and begins moving faster. Another round of shots. The beast gets faster and faster. It yelps at a higher pitch than before.

It now sounds like a strange trumpet that's choking. "Now, Preacher! Do it now!" I hear one of the men shout. I begin to pray. The whiskey-soaked words stagger out of my mouth. "May the Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face to shine upon you..." I remove a pistol from inside my jacket. I continue to pray as I take aim at the base of the beast's skull. "...and be gracious to you; the Lord turn his face toward you..." I'm panting and I can barely speak. "...and give you peace!" I pull the trigger and shoot the beast through the brain. I'm launched off of its back as it immediately falls. I turn around to see the three men running up to me. They're celebratory, whooping and hollering and firing their guns. "Did you say the prayer?" someone asks. I confirm to them that I did. "Well, fellas, that's about the best we can do," says the man with the sandy-colored hair. "If you can't pull any oil up from this old South Texas alkaline loam after tonight, then I don't know what to tell you." The men breathe heavily. "Shit, Lionel, I'm startin' to wish we hadn't done this," one of the men says as another man helps me up. "Alls I know is my buddy Chuck, he's got about 200 acres up near Oklahoma City, he had some Kiowa tell him to make a sacrifice like this and his wells started comin' in directly," says the man with the sandy-colored hair who is evidently named Lionel. "Hell, he can't turn it off up there. Those goddamn Okies are swimmin' in oil." I stand and dust myself off. "But couldn't we have just sacrificed a rabbit or a goat or something?" says another of the men as they pass a bottle of Jim Beam around. "Nope. Said it had to be a young bull. And we had to have our medicine man here do the job and say a prayer. Shit, I don't know. What the fuck? Worth a shot I guess. And a little bit of fun, right Jim boy?" Lionel wraps me on the shoulder. I finally look at the beast. I see its dark grey skin covered in light fuzzy hair. It's lifeless. Its head is a mass of blood and bits of brain that cover its long grey trunk that extends from its skull. "Why an elephant though?" said

one of the men. "You want to waste one of your breedin' bulls on this, Dave? I sure don't. What the hell else are we gonna do with this thing," Lionel kicked its corpse.

There is a knock at the door that rouses me out of my trance. I know instinctively who it is. "Come in," I say as I scratch my chin. The door opens and in walks Lionel. He appears fresh and congenial. He looks me in the eye and smiles as he walks over and pushes the mute button on the intercom, silencing Bill's voice.

"Nice meeting you last night," Lionel says as he saunters in and gestures to the chair facing me. I

nod and he sits down. "Tom told me you're a good sport. And he was right."

"I've gotten to know Tom and some of his friends since I've been pastor here," I say as I put another glass out on the desk for Lionel. He declines. "They're a...they're an eccentric group of gentlemen."

"Eccentric. I like that," Lionel chuckles to himself. "Cut from a different cloth, that's for sure."

There's a pause as Lionel stares down at his white snakeskin boots. He brushes off something from the left knee

of his starched blue jeans. He looks around the room and smooths his mustache with his right hand. I am watching every move he makes. His eyes finally lock on mine. We hold an intense stare for an uncomfortably long time.

"You're a little eccentric yourself, aren't you, Pastor?" He smiles. All I can think about is death.

After a moment, Lionel gets up and tosses down a set of car keys on the desk. "1978 Cadillac De Ville. First one in Texas," he says as he winks and smiles. "I bet your congregation might get a little suspicious when they see you rollin' up Sunday morning in that rig." I shrug and take a drink of whiskey. "Don't you worry what they might think?"

"I don't worry about them at all," I say as I lean back in my chair. He laughs and turns to leave. "Boy, you are one helluva sonofabitch. I'm sure I'll be seeing you again," Lionel smiles. I put my socked feet with the mud and bloody spurs up on the corner of my desk and put my hands behind my head.

"Lionel, I want you to know that I don't do it for the money or the treasure or even the women."

"Don't do what, the preachin'?" we both chuckle at his little joke.

"No, no. This. You guys. Them."

"If it's not the money or the pussy, then what is it?"

I take my feet off the desk and turn my chair to directly face him, my feet on the floor. "I do it because none of you guys are in love with yourselves." It's silent and still for a full ten seconds. Then after a beat, I add, "Or I just like hanging around a bunch of assholes. Gets me out of the house."

"Booolshit," Lionel laughs as he walks out the door. The door closes behind him.

I begin to doze off sitting upright in my desk chair.