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HARLAN'S SALVATION¹

Harlan Biggers attended his momma's funeral in shackles and chains.

Two deputies led him by leashes into the Fresh Fire Pentecostal Church like he was a dog, Sheriff Bull Dillard covering his rear with a double barrel. Bull had backed his Model-T delivery truck to the steps and the horses hitched there were still protesting, snorting and scraping their hooves at the packed dirt, jingling the tack that bound them to buggies and wagons. When the double doors opened the smells of horseshit and automobile exhaust invaded the gummy August air inside the church. The sixty or so souls that half-filled the sanctuary stirred the heat and stench to poor effect with hand fans, spruce-handled, single-weight cardboard do-dads with a likeness of my funeral home etched on one side.

The rapid fluttering stopped when Harlan shuffled through the doors and up the aisle. *Oohs, Ahs* and *Oh-my-Gods* rippled through the crowd, crude whispers.

Harlan stopped, scanned the audience with the green-eyed glare of a nervous wildcat. Bull goosed him in the ass with the shotgun to get him moving but Harlan stood his ground. One of the deputies, Beecher Burkle, who everybody called B.B., yanked Harlan's chain, hard, and Harlan stumbled forward.

I stood by the closed casket and stiffened, expecting Harlan, a stout man, to bull-rush B.B. any second.

Harlan regained his balance and clenched his fists. You could almost hear his tortured thoughts as he quelled the notorious fight that roiled within him. A gradual sigh arose when he simmered down and shuffled onward, resigned to his circumstances, mumbling and rattling his chains like Marley's ghost.

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Bull took a right at the second pew from the front and kept a wary eye on Harlan. He pulled up a cane chair at the end of the front pew, angled it toward Harlan then removed his felt hat. He straightened his hand-painted tie, adjusted his collar then sat, smoothing his long mustaches.

Harlan clinked into the aisle end of the front pew. His immediate escorts, the deputies—both dressed similarly to Bull but more plainly—sat on either side of him, removed their Sunday hats. Harlan wore an old suit coat, collarless shirt, bib overalls

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and work boots—the same outfit he wore the week before when old Judge Blake sentenced him to the gallows:

Harlan's payoff for a poker game gone bad, one that ended when he slit the throat of a rich farmer's son, a reputed cheater who'd reached for his pistol—according to Harlan, anyway.

The friends of the dead boy had a different story.

After the sentencing Bull Dillard hauled Clara Biggers from the courtroom kicking, howling and swearing to perdition her son had acted in self-defense. The poor folks in Rockcastle County agreed with her—the landed folks, the only kind allowed to sit on juries back then, didn't.

Clara died two days later. "Heart attack" was the cause of death I filled in on the death certificate, being the county coroner. But even then, before the funeral, I knew it was suicide, having smelled both the home-cooked hemlock on her lips and the fresh ink on the funeral directions she'd left for me. Like a fool I concluded her final act was nobody's business, that Harlan's death sentence had warped her the way it would warp any momma so attached to her son. Though a handsome widow Clara wanted to live with no man but Harlan, and walked arm-in-arm with him everywhere she went. Their attachment to each other was the subject of little talk till after the funeral, when the gossip ran dark and scandalous, unspeakable.

Fresh Fire's lay preacher, Brother Hurt Hornback, marched up to Harlan and knelt, talked in hushed tones. Hurt was a willowy, redhead bachelor, a fertilizer salesman during the week, sunburned and freckled from hurling sales pitches at farmers in their fields. He'd boasted far and wide that he and Clara had placed Harlan under "conviction of sin" in his jail cell while engaging him in a round-the-clock prayer vigil. Clara's funeral presented a tremendous opportunity for Hurt to close the deal. Hurt burned with righteous ambition, his bright, faraway baby blues backlit by The Holy Spirit as if it had par-boiled his brain.

Hurt pulled Harlan close and murmured a terse prayer. He was loosening up, stretching his evangelistic muscles so he could sprint for the prized soul of this condemned murderer. Why, here was the biggest lost fish ever to swim the pond trolled by Hurt's holy hook. Why, he'd be famous if he landed him! Weeeee!

Harlan gave Hurt a shaky nod then meekly whispered, "Thank you, Brother."

Hurt mounted the rickety pulpit, a full six feet from where he knelt, in a single bound. He turned to me, a signal to open the stained wood casket and give Clara the symbolic opportunity to witness her last sermon.

I opened her and sat alone in the empty front left pew.

There were the usual whispers, "She looks so good . . . So natural," and they were all correct in their assessment. I'd done a good job on her, yes, but I'd had a lot to work with. At fifty-one Clara died a bewitching woman: tall and shapely with long, curly black hair and a darkly featured, elegant face untainted by sun or disease. I'd dressed her in her best black dress, the double-breasted one with pearl buttons, and placed her hard-bound family Bible on her stomach under her folded hands—all of which she had specified in precise detail.

Hurt raised both arms, his palms to the heavens, and said, "Brothers and Sisters, let us stand to summon the Spirit with song." The rattling of Harlan's chains punctuated the shuffling and rustling attendant to the congregation's single-minded

ascent. A high-back piano, a guitar, and a mandolin banged out the intro to "Shall We Gather at the River?" Hurt led the singing in that hearty baritone of his, swinging his arm like a baton, daring anyone to sing louder:

Yes, we'll gather at the ri-i-ver,
The beautiful, the beautiful ri-i-iver ...

He led the congregation in six more hymns. When the sinners squirmed and the faithful yearned he wrapped it up with, "When the Roll Is Called Up Yonder." The final hymn resonated in the little clapboard church. Hurt leaned into the final chorus like a farmer toiling the field, harvesting every grain of meaning from the phrases with a sweaty determination long drawn out:

When the ro-o-oll is called up yo-o-n-nder
When the ro-o-oll is called up yo-o-n-nder
When the ro-o-oll is called up yo-o-n-nderrrr
When the roll is called up yonder I'll be ther-r-r-e!

Hurt glared at the congregation triumphantly, wiped his brow and let the echoes drift away before directing everyone to sit. Thumbing a suspender and rocking on his heels he said, "Yes, Brothers and Sisters, I'll be there. I'll make that roll call."

Exhortations rang out from the congregation, things like, "Amen, Brother! . . . "Me too, Brother . . . Hallelujah!"

"And with the spirit as my guide and God as my witness-uh, Sister Clara Biggers is raising her hand to The Almighty as I speak-uh." Hurt raised his hand and smiled sublimely. "She's answering her call home-uh, announcing to her Lord and Savior-uh, 'Wayl-come me home, Lord-uh. WAYL-COME . . . ME . . . HOME!'" and he spread both arms and leaned back to accept a jolt of heavenly electricity.

His curly red hair standing on end, his body took to quivering as his feet stamped out a mad tap dance.

Now, emotions always ran hot and squirrelly at Fresh Fire, even at funerals, with people weeping and talking in tongues, leaping through aisles or writhing in their pews. But Hurt had revved it up even earlier than usual, and I had seen it coming when he started tacking those grunty "uh's" to the end of phrases as if re-loading his lungs.

The congregation showered more exhortations upon him, but this time there was the tinkling pop or two of a tambourine. Hurt straightened up and composed himself as if he knew he was moving too fast, like he knew he had to glorify this inglorious soul-of-honor before getting a shot at her lost son.

"Sister Clara was a fi-i-ne woman," he said, "a spiritchul woman. We here at Fresh Fire witnessed her testimony many times-uh, saw her brimming with The Holy Spirit-uh, saw her cup *runneth* over."

This was true, I suppose. Though Clara attended church infrequently, she was said to have holy-rolled the aisles in a most sporting manner when she did appear.

Hurt held back and glanced down at the fat man rattling that damn tambourine. I could tell he was wondering what to say next, how to elevate this earthy woman to virtual sainthood. Speaking quietly, he said, "Al-kee-hawl never touched her lips, and a foul word never left them."

I hold Hurt blameless since Clara was so discreet, but I knew these claims to be false. I sold a jug of 'shine to Clara and Harlan every month and drank with them often, and when Clara took to drink she'd flat break my heart with the forlorn way she cursed hard times and would set it to racing with her bawdy descriptions of the good.

"And she was kind to the church, *so kind.*"

Hurt milked what he could form Clara's few good works—baking cakes and pies for socials, donating a few dollars to the general fund when it suited her—then shifted course, praising her kin as devout Pentecostals, claiming she'd want her last earthly service to be blessed by The Spirit, would insist on it:

"Our departed sister would *de-mand* that every lost soul be saved here today-uh. She'd suffer no one to stay behind-uh! She'd want to wayl-come you to her new kingdom-uh!" and he danced a little jig back to the lectern, which sparked more tambourine pops and rattles, more shouts of praise and gaiety.

And with that he cast a hungry gaze at Harlan, who was obviously miserable, his head buried in his hands, his shoulders heaving. Serious now, Hurt turned to his text, The Crucifixion of Jesus, The Gospels of Luke and Matthew. He spoke solemnly of Jesus facing the Roman soldiers in the garden, of the treacherous charges of the high priests, of how Jesus faced down Pilate, then Herod, then Pilate again. Then he heated up, pacing to and fro and thrashing the air with his fist. "And, oh, brothers and sisters, how those Roman boys whupped him-uh. Took a cat-o-nine tails to him-uh, lashed every shred of skin away from his precious back-uh. And there was nothing left on it but muscle and bone-uh, his redeeming blood *dripping* on the prison floor beneath him!"

Hurt knelt to put the final touches on the picture he'd painted, beseeching the pulpit floor with trembling hands and baleful eyes, pausing for effect while the women bewailed their Savior's plight.

Then he stood and pounded the lectern with his fist. He threw off his coat, revealing the circles of sweat spreading from his armpits, and loosened his bow tie. He marched to the back of the pulpit and crouched in a boxer's stance, panting and punching the air. "And Jesus never complained-uh, not even when they shoved the thorny crown on his head-uh, or when they drove the nails through his loving hands and his feet-uh. AND HE SUFFERED IT ALL . . ." he cried, and exploded from the blocks to take a running leap from the pulpit, pointing at the congregation in mid-air as he shouted, "FOR YOU!" touching down as gracefully as a circus acrobat, then sprinting down the aisle to the cacophony of Hallelujahs! and Amens! exploding around him, spinning adroitly at the end of it to work his way back, patting shoulders, rubbing necks, laughing, crying, shouting, saying, "He did it for you, Brother, and you, Sister, and you, Sister . . ."

A young woman wearing a worn gingham dress stood rigidly in the aisle in front of Hurt. He gave her a little stiff-arm, said something indecipherable and popped her lightly on the forehead with the heel of his palm. Her eyes rolled back in

her head, rapturous, and her body fell backwards to the floor, *slain by The Spirit*. The heels of her high-buttoned shoes punctuated her collapse with a woody thump.

He broad-jumped her and went directly into a baseball slide on the varnished floor, rocking up at the end of it to squat face-to-face before his quarry, Harlan. Hurt rose slowly as he spoke, his face red and contorted, his fists clenched in front of him as if he'd punch Harlan in the mouth if he didn't listen. "And he suffered it all for the likes of you too, brother. Those old Romans planted our savior's cross between two criminals-uh--MURDERERS, boy! And he listened to their pleas-uh. He accepted their souls in heaven-uh. HE BROUGHT THEM WITH HIM TO PARADISE-UH!"

"Oh-h-h-h, blessed Jee-sus!" Harlan cried and thrust his hands and face toward heaven, rattling his shackles.

The crowd erupted, squeals and shouts.

Deputy B.B., who sat to Harlan's right, was panting, his glassy eyes fixated on Hurt. Deputy Elmer Scroggs, on Harlan's left, tried to look detached but was moved nonetheless, his mouth and hands trembling.

Sheriff Dillard, a well-known snake-handler who belonged to another Pentecostal sect, stood by the window clapping his hands, stomping his feet and giggling like a drunk walrus.

Hurt moved in for the kill, his face the brightest crimson, his voice as high-pitched and tremulous as a vibrato fiddle: "Jesus is listenin' now, boy. He wants ya in paradise-uh. He wants you and your momma to be together-uh. Lookey there at her, boy. She's layin' there lookin' peaceful-uh, lookin' restful-uh, but she cain't rest without ya! Remember how she stayed by your side, son-uh? How she nursed ya in sickness-uh? How she loved ya? How she begged you to find Jesus-uh? SHE'S CAAALLIN' YA TO JESUS, HARLAN! CAIN'T YOU HEAR HER PLEAD-UH? CAIN'T YOU HEAR HER BEG-uh? BEGGIN' YOU TO JOIN HER-UH! SHE'S BEGGIN' YA, SON-UH. BEGG-GIN' YA!"

"Oh-h-h-h, I hear her, brother! I hear my momma." Harlan stood and shivered so hard a shock of his curly black hair fell across his brow. "I wanna be near her. I wanna listen to my poor momma. I WANNA LISTEN!"

"I'll walk you to her, boy. I'll guide you to her and Je-sus!" and with that Hurt wrapped his arm around Harlan's shoulders and walked him the short shuffle to the casket, whispering in his ear as the chain leashes dragged the wood floor behind them. B.B. and Elmer followed as stiffly as zombies but kept a respectful distance. Bull stayed by the window, a faraway grin on his face, stunned by the same holy high-voltage that had dazed everyone else.

By then I'd stood in front of the casket—a practice born of necessity. In my years as an undertaker I'd seen the grief-stricken fling themselves on corpses, watched them hug them, kiss them and stroke their hair. Even had to wrestle a man to the floor once to stop him from dragging his wife from her coffin. So I wasn't the least surprised when Harlan fell on Clara's bosom, weeping and writhing on top of her family Bible while Hurt leaned on his back to console him.

I must confess to being quite shocked, though, when Harlan unsnapped the strap that kept the hard-bound Bible shut, flipped it open, then whipped around and stuck a chrome .38 Derringer between Hurt's eyes.

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"You move and I'll blow your fool brains out!"

Hurt moved and took a backward step, his surprised look instantly replaced by one of anger. Then he made a grab for the gun saying, "Why-y-y, you--"

Before Hurt reached the pistol Harlan, as promised, blew his fool brains out. Red-orange sparks flew from the back of Hurt's head like brimstone blown from an overheated furnace.

The congregation, initially confused and frozen, went wild and stampeded to the door, women shrieking, men shouting, but there wasn't anything rapturous about it anymore.

Hurt landed at my feet with a thud. I jerked to avoid the dead weight of the corpse then stood stone still while smoke wafted about my head. My mind raced, overcompensating for the horror, my only thought being, *If I live through this I got me another funeral, another funeral, another funeral . . .*

B.B. and Elmer made a quick move at Harlan but he threw the pistol down on them quicker: "Don't nobody move!"

The collective rush to the door halted.

He turned to the deputies, wild, panting. "Hoo-boy! Hoooo, boy! Now we got us a carnival! . . . C'mon, boys! Which one a you fools wanna join the reverend?! Huh? Which one?!" Harlan's eyes were wide and twitching, dancing from one deputy to the other with that double-barreled pistol thrust forward with both hands. He had only one bullet left, so if one fool stepped forward the rest of us could take him.

B.B. and Elmer weren't the smartest birds in the tree but they stayed put, balanced on the limb. Both looked down at Hurt and the fleshy red-white brain matter strewn about the floor. Then, like me, they stood perfectly still.

"You boys ain't as stupid as I thought," Harlan said, and snatched B.B.'s .45 revolver from his holster, then Elmer's .38. Now he had thirteen shots. The game was over. "Everybody lay on the floor! Everybody!" The deputies hit the floor along with everyone but Bull.

Harlan whipped B.B.'s .45 around and aimed at the end of the pew he'd been sitting in. "Don't do it, Bull!"

Bull froze mid-step, his outstretched hand still a full foot from the shotgun he'd leaned against the wall.

Harlan said, "I like ya, but I'll kill ya! Believe me, Bull. I ain't got nothin' to lose! I'm a dangerous man!"

Bull looked at me--I was belly-down on the floor, my head below Clara's—and I shook my head at him. He read the pleading look in my eyes and eased himself to the floor.

Harlan told Elmer to get to his knees. He held B.B.'s .45 to Elmer's nose and cocked the hammer. "Unchain me."

Elmer complied.

"Crawl over here, Bull," Harlan said as he took the keys from Elmer. When Bull complied Harlan backed away and ordered Elmer to shackle one of his hands to

Bull's, to loop the chain through the iron leg of the pew bolted to the floor, then to shackle one of B.B.'s hands to Bull's. Then he ordered them to empty their pockets of ammunition and cash, to lay on their bellies and put their hands behind their heads.

Harlan took a few seconds to stand before the casket. Tears welled up in his eyes as he said in a pitiful, little boy voice, "I told ya not to do it, Momma. I told ya," and let out a quick, choked-up sob. "But I'm a thankin' ya, and am forever yours." He leaned over the casket to kiss her corpse I suppose, though I couldn't tell for sure from where I was. He lingered another second or two before turning to leave.

He stopped when he got to the first pew and gave B.B. a swift kick in the ass. "That's for yanking me down the aisle, *peckerhead*." Then he marched to the door, armed to the teeth, shouting as he went: "Anybody so much as raises their head's gonna get a load of buckshot, ya hear! Same thing goes for the mother's son that sticks his head outta this church before they hear Bull's truck pull outta sight!"

I heard one of the screen doors creak at the entrance to the church then heard Harlan start to laugh, big. "Hal-le-lujah!" he shouted. "I said halleluuyaah, ya holy rollin' s'umbitches. I'm saved! HARLAN BIGGERS IS A SAAVED MAN!" and he let a load of buckshot fly at the pulpit that blew the lectern to shreds, splinters and pellets spraying against the back wall and rattling to the floor.

Harlan Biggers was never seen in Rockcastle again.

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I ignored the commotion around me and stood to inspect the casket. Clara's family Bible was open across her abdomen. A square deep and wide enough to hold the Derringer had been freshly cut from the middle of the pages that ran from I Samuel through Zechariah. Bull and I ultimately found the remnants of the missing chunk of holy pages Clara had cut away, wrapped in ribbon and squirreled away in her cedar chest.

I realized as soon as I stood and looked at Clara, though, that she'd committed suicide to facilitate Harlan's escape. I guess your mind plays tricks on you, I know that, and most people claim I'm either crazy or too vain to admit to shoddy workmanship. But, by God, I'm the undertaker that formed her smile, sutured, wired and waxed those muscles so firmly they'd rot before they moved even a fraction. And when I bent over to look at Clara's face, I swear, her smile had changed, had become broader, had cracked the wax and make-up at the corner of her mouth.

Hell, folks, Clara Biggers was *beaming*.

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