

Andrew Steiner

## Perhaps You Will Be Sheltered

As we cross the border into Clark County, Illinois, Brother Lucas is smoking the last of the Pyramids, and Little Dani's in the back seat carving crosses into shotgun shells. It's one of those blinding blue days, dead of August, when the asphalt throws up heat like the very funeral pyre of the world. The brown buildings spin up toward us, one on the right side, two on the left, even the realtor's sign is faded behind smeary blue and purple windows, legible only where the plate glass has been shattered.

"There." Brother Lucas points at the windshield with his cigarette hand. Sure enough, a yellow plastic sign rears from the haze advertising the price of gas and Land of Lincoln Lotto. I coast in slow, rocking over the pitted concrete, and slide up to a pump so it stands between the car and the convenience store. We can see the man inside working out some calculations on the counter. Lucas leans on his elbow, sucks down the last eighth inch, and flicks the butt in a long arc into the trash barrel. "What could he be counting, I wonder?"

The LeBaron's engine thrums and falters as I take out the key. Little Dani slots her shells in and snaps the gun closed. And it's time, time, time.

"Good afternoon, folks. What'll it be?"

Dani drops the snout of her shotgun onto the counter and blows a crater in the cartons of Pall Malls just to the left of the man. Wisps of cotton and white paper drift around like snow. A cellophane streamer settles on the man's shoulder.

"Do you have a bag?" Brother Lucas asks.

The man doesn't swallow, doesn't clear his throat, doesn't speak. I know the feeling. It's like all the hollow spaces inside him have been packed with cold sand. He reaches under the counter, rustle of plastic, and produces the bag. "Thank You!" in mock Chinese script over a red pagoda.

"Three packs of blue Pyramids. A lighter. A can of Skoal. The jerky in that case right there. Some Spearmint Extra."

The man gathers these things and puts them in the bag. His eyes are a dirty blue, not unlike the sky over the road today, a cluster of mauve-colored veins in his left eye in the shape of a *W*. The man has a tattoo on his forearm that time has smeared into a blue-green blur, its original form indecipherable.

“You want something to drink, Dani?” She grins her savage grin. “How about you, Pastor?”

“Sure. I’m very thirsty,” I say.

Brother Lucas leans in and looks at the tag on the man’s red polo. “Well, Brother Merrick, we’re all a little thirsty. I’d very much appreciate it if you’d go pour three Pepsis from the fountain over there. No ice for me. Dani? No, Dani doesn’t like ice either. Pastor likes a lot of ice.”

Merrick does as he’s told. The country song piping down on us from the blown speakers overhead sounds like the band’s last drunken ballad before they scramble off the roof. Merrick lets the ice fall into my cup, the last of the three, all the way to rim, and then presses it against the soda lever, and the electric waterfall descends. The ice settles in, flat sides of the cubes finding each other all the way down. He lids the drinks.

“There you go,” Brother Lucas says. “Straws too. That’s just fine. You can leave them there. We won’t forget them. Now, I’d like you to take out your wallet. A bifold. Very nice. Very classic. I’ve always been partial to the money clip, myself. Living close to the bone and all that. Now, I’d like you to give us whatever you feel led to give.”

Merrick fingers out the bills. Two twenties. A five. Two ones. He holds the money out to Brother Lucas, and Brother Lucas takes it. “That was very kind of you, Brother Merrick. The Lord loves a cheerful giver. We’ll be able to get a good meal and maybe, slapped together with what we’ve got already, a bed for the night. Now, there’s really just one last thing I’m going to ask from you and that’s whatever you’ve got in the till, plus twelve gallons of premium on pump four.”

Merrick goes behind the counter and authorizes the transaction in cash. The register drawer sobs open, he takes out the bills, and slides the drawer back into place.

“Thank you very much. I’ll take my leave now, but I believe Pastor and Little Dani have some matters of the heart they’d like to discuss with you. If you’ll excuse me.”

Merrick looks at us, confused, as if Brother Lucas were a conductor who had just abandoned his orchestra on stage. One hand is still on the register. The other is on the counter, trembling now, either from fear or from some sort of bad wiring between limb and brain.

“Could you come back around the counter, Merrick? I’d like the three of us to talk.”

He does. I’m struck by the notion that he would walk back and forth all day for us if we asked him to. Some men, many I’ve found, are happiest when their decisions are made for them. It frees them from the terrible burden of having to think. He stands in front of me, looking at me. There’s

an essential vacancy there, as if he's resigned himself to whatever fate is going to befall him. Which is the wisest course, after all.

"Has someone ever knocked on your door around three-thirty in the morning, too late to still be called night but too early for any reasonable person to be starting the next day?"

"I believe they have."

"Then you know that terrible feeling you get right down there in your intestines, down where you feel guilt and bad gas. It's the feeling that says, this is it. Someone's life is in jeopardy here, either the person who's knocking—you can hear them knocking again, louder this time; it's rattling the storm door—or your own, because no one knocks on the door at three-thirty unless it's life or death."

"I know it."

"Tell me, then. Do you know what time it was when the apostle Peter heard the cock crowing out in the courtyard?"

Merrick shakes his head.

"It was about three-thirty in the morning. Do you know what time it was when Our Lord breathed his last?"

Merrick doesn't answer.

"Just about three-thirty in the afternoon. Do me a favor, Merrick, and read me the time on your wristwatch there. Tell me what time it is."

Merrick looks down at his hand and turns the face of his watch up. "It's twenty past three."

"Twenty past three. That's right. And somebody's knocking now, Merrick, knocking on the door of your heart, and make no mistake, it's life or death for you, and the question is, how are you going to respond?"

Little Dani is slurping her soda. Merrick's eyes travel over to her, and she meets his gaze with a gleaming eye and holds up a shotgun shell.

"Do you see what's carved on that shell, Merrick? I'd like you to answer me from now on when I ask a question."

"A cross."

"That's right. A cross. And do you know who was killed on that cross?"

A dry, spitless swallowing. "Jesus."

"That's right. And do you know why he was killed?"

Merrick looks at me. If he had it in him, the energy, the pathos, it would be a beseeching look, the kind a pet pig might give to its beloved master while he's slitting its throat.

"Turn on the TV or step into a church on a Sunday morning, and they'll tell you it was for life, for your salvation, for the freedom of his nation as if Jesus of Nazareth were trying to win a congressional seat. That sounds nice, doesn't it? He died so that I could live. It's a beautiful sales pitch. But let me tell you something, Merrick. I have nothing to sell. That's why you're terrified right now because you know there's nothing I want from you except to show you the truth, and the truth is that Jesus Christ did not die to save you from your sins. He died so that we could receive the gift of true death. Before Christ there was only the cellular kind, drying up and

blowing away. He showed us the death of the soul, the death of the self, the death of that miserable primping self-interest that allows us to imagine nothing better for our lives than our own fulfillment. He showed us it was possible to cast it all aside. All the power in the world, and he chose to be strung up naked in a ditch outside Jerusalem. Yes, Lord, not my will but thine be done.”

I lay my hand on his shoulder.

“Well, Brother Merrick, he’s knocking on the door right now, and he wants to know, will you let him in?”

I hear Dani loading the shell into the chamber and shucking it.

“Will you let him in?”

Merrick nods.

“Kneel down.”

He kneels.

“Repeat after me...”

When we get back to the car, Brother Lucas has the red book out on his lap. He’s smoking the first of the new Pyramids. “One more into the right column?” he asks.

“Yes, indeed.”

I pull out onto the road in the slithering reek of the day, the steering wheel hot in my hands. Everyone has a chance to serve God willingly, but make no mistake, as the prophet Isaiah says, every knee shall bow.

Little Dani, naked as a deer, is standing, legs bowed, over Brother Lucas in the middle of the motel room, face crimped against the probing of his tongue. I’m at the table by the window reading about the doom of the Ammonites, or trying. Her mewling makes it difficult to concentrate. On TV, a plastic woman is talking about a fertilizer plant explosion in Texas. An aerial shot shows smoke and dark flame billowing up from a black hole in the earth. Apparently, when it went off, it broke windows a mile away. *Surely Moab will become like Sodom, the Ammonites like Gomorrah—a place of weeds and salt pits, a wasteland forever.*

I glance over at the undertaking in the middle of the room. Little Dani has her victim’s head pinned against the corner of the mattress and his face pressed into her sex like she’s trying to break his head off at the shoulders. It’s always fascinated me, this desperation. As if this is such a blessed race that we should want to add to its numbers. The cult of Asherah is alive and well.

*The Lord Almighty will be awesome to them when he destroys all the gods of the earth.*

In other news, in other news. North Korea is moving ahead with another missile test. American forces shift assets to Guam. A manhunt is underway in Boston. Someone has sent ricin to the president. The fox feints, and the hunters move around him.

Her cry tells me Dani’s gotten her satisfaction. Brother Lucas overmasters her and throws her sprawling onto the bed, climbs on top of

her and works his goatlike hips. Facedown on the polyester quilt, Little Dani talks to someone who isn't there.

"In the letter, the suspect gives some clues about his motivation: "To see a wrong and not expose it is to become a silent partner to its continuance..." Brother Lucas grunts like the wind's been knocked out of him, and Little Dani's body jerks on the bed, fingers grabbing as if she's anticipating something being placed in her upturned hands. "I am KC, and I approve this message." Rim shot. Laughter. Applause.

*You Cushites too will be slain by my sword.*

Brother Lucas slaps Dani's flank as he dismounts the way a mechanic might slap the fuselage of an old fighter plane right before the heroes climb aboard, scarfs and goggles agleam. Assuming a wide stance in front of the mirror, he opens his razor and begins to shave. Dani rolls over and without so much as wiping herself fiddles with the remote until the Waco tar pit is shuffled off the screen by a man in a plastic king costume peddling hamburgers.

It's nightmarish, that rigor mortis grin, but that's the spirit of the age. They don't try to convince you their products will make you happy anymore. It doesn't matter. They just want to keep your attention for fifteen seconds, make you wince, make you laugh, anything to distract you from the soullessness of it all. *Wail, all you who live in the market district. All you merchants, you traders of silver, all you who practice deceit.* Because the lie isn't about the products anymore. It's about the whole wretched machine, that it's your sacred duty to feed coins into one of its four hundred million slots. The lie that tells you buying a car, going out to dinner, putting that addition on your house is an act of charity, that, in fact, consumption is selflessness and greed charity. Such Satanic logic. The towers go down, and our Christian kings tell us to buy, buy, buy. Stimulate the economy, ward off recession, don't let the terrorists win. Oh, they've won, alright. They've given the world something to believe in while all we've given it is Prilosec OTC.

*Seek righteousness. Seek humility. Perhaps you will be sheltered on the day of the Lord's anger.*

"Oh, God damn."

I look over at Brother Lucas. He's staring into the mirror, holding his throat. His naked ass cheeks are clenched, accentuating his jug-eared hips. The razor falls into the sink like a chip of ice.

"Is it bad?"

"Yeah, Pastor, it's pretty bad."

I close the Bible and go over to the bathroom and take the roll of toilet paper off its rod. I stand behind Brother Lucas. He's trembling, scared. I ask him to remove his hand, and he does. The blood is seeping thin and fast from a cut in the soft mat of arteries to the left of his Adam's apple. I take the loose end of the paper and touch it to the blood. Then I wind the roll around his throat two, three, four times until the blood no longer seeps through and fold it under. He looks almost clerical standing there with his

new white collar. I touch a hand to his shoulder and look at him in the mirror. He reminds me of another man whose throat was cut in front of me years ago.

“Let’s find you a doctor, Lucas. We don’t want you going mute on us.”

The automatic doors gasp open into fluorescent light, green upholstery, and shiny floors. The only other person in the waiting room is a woman of no particular age, a perfect cylinder of human tissue sleeping upright in a chair with her arms wrapped around herself like twine around a sausage.

The woman behind the glass looks me up and down and, seeing nothing that gushes or hangs, asks me what I need. I hold my stomach. “It feels like something’s ripping apart in here. Is there anybody who can see me?”

“It’s a slow night. Fill this out and bring it back.”

I do so at the window. Sitting would indicate a lower level of urgency. Plus, I feel that blocking her view of the empty waiting room probably perturbs her. Meanwhile, Dani has installed herself directly across from the sausage woman, who’s grimacing and shifting in her sleep, perhaps sensing the now-precarious nature of her situation.

“Is she with you?” the woman behind the glass asks me.

“Which one?”

“The one who looks like a squirrel.”

“That’s my friend Dani. She drove me.”

“Fine.”

Ten minutes later, a big male nurse in green scrubs is wheeling me across the threshold into a long, deserted corridor, a stretcher here, a blinking crash cart there. Thirty yards down, a young orderly reaches up to make a note on a white board in Magic Marker.

The nurse brings me into an empty examination room and leaves. I get out of the wheelchair and onto the bed. Five minutes go by. I fill the time reflecting on yesterday’s acquisition for the Lord. A senile old veteran someone had parked on the sidewalk outside his group home so he could wave at traffic. He was all out of proportion, manhandled by time. Ears enormous, jaw gaping, a pair of wide-receiver’s legs crammed onto a shrunken torso, waving with a long yellow hand that looked as if it had been specially designed by God to poke cotton into dead bodies. He thought Little Dani was his wife, and this probably made him more amenable to our message, although I think he would have repeated the Big Mac jingle with equal enthusiasm.

Inspired by the man’s demented sweetness, I took a quarter out of my pocket and put it in his hand. “For Charon’s boat,” I said. Little Dani kissed him on the cheek, and we got back into the car. Another soul embalmed. Another into the right column.

Here comes a woman in burgundy scrubs. She’s older than me, thirty or so, with gray eyes and rusty brown hair tied at the back of her head. She

introduces herself as Martha Schimmern. The tag on her shirt proclaims her a nurse practitioner.

“So, I hear you’re having stomach problems.”

“That’s right.”

“Do you mind elaborating a little bit?”

“I’d be happy to. Do you mind if we closed the door first? It’s somewhat personal.”

“Not at all.” She gets up to close the door, which latches with a whisper. By the time she gets back to her chair, I’ve got the razor out and open in my hand. The blade catches the light and throws it away. She doesn’t move.

“About thirty minutes ago, my friend Lucas Nestor cut his throat with this razor. I want you to stitch him up.”

Martha looks at the razor, then at me, and crosses her right leg over her left and nets her fingers over the knee, calm as a therapist. “Then your friend Lucas should be seeing me, not you.”

“That would be ideal. Unfortunately, it’s not possible for Lucas to visit you here.”

“Why’s that?”

“For one, he doesn’t have insurance. For two, he has a certain wariness of public institutions, owing to the line of work he’s in.”

“And what would that be?”

“I’m an evangelist. Lucas is my road manager.”

“I didn’t realize preaching was so dangerous these days.”

“Well, that would relate to how we earn our wages.”

“Which is?”

“Nontraditional.”

“Why would I be interested in leaving the hospital at three-thirty in the morning with a man I’ve never met to treat a criminal who might not exist?”

“A perfectly valid question. This is why: Another associate of mine is waiting for me in the lobby right now. She has a nine-millimeter handgun in the pocket of her coat, and it’s pointed at the woman sitting across from her. If I come out alone, she’s been instructed to use it. Counting the woman behind the desk, that would be two unfortunate outcomes in the lobby, plus my friend Lucas who won’t get the treatment he needs, and—” I direct her gaze to the razor again. “Well, I prefer not to be indecent.”

Martha thinks. Her face is alive with excited fear, but her expression is controlled. I imagine she has a genuine laugh. I imagine she often cries during movies. “Okay,” she says, “let me get my coat.”

When I open the door, Lucas is lying on the bed, shirtless, the toilet paper still wrapped around his neck. The red blotch has spread considerably. He gets up to shake Martha’s hand.

“Lucas Nestor.”

“Martha Schimmern.”

“Pleased to meet you.”

“You can sit there on the edge of the bed.” She sheds her coat and pulls up a chair. “I hear you cut yourself.”

“That’s right.”

“May I?”

“You surely may.”

Martha finds the edge of the paper and begins to unwind it from his throat, revealing a darker, wetter red at each pass before coming to the wound itself. She talks to him as she peels the paper away, strip by soggy strip, as deliberate as a harpist.

“Have you been using a straight razor long? It’s okay, you can answer.”

“A few months,” Lucas says, trying not to bob his throat.

“My fiancé goes to a barbershop where they give straight shaves. I see the appeal. It’s classic. Although, from a medical point of view, I have to advise against it.”

“Duly noted.”

“Not for the accident potential as much as intentional self-harm. It’s the same reason I recommend people get rid of their guns.”

Dani, who’s sitting cross-legged on the other bed, cleaning her Springfield, lifts her head and hisses.

“There was a study done in England about twenty years ago that found an eighty-percent drop in suicide by cutting after the safety razor was introduced.”

“What about male self-esteem? Another eighty-percent drop?”

“Not my area of expertise. I deal with the body. There.”

The last of the bloody paper removed, Martha studies the wound with critical intensity, like an authenticator of paintings.

“It would heal eventually, but you’d have a monster scar. You’re lucky you didn’t slice your larynx.”

“That would have been the end of my singing career.”

Martha nearly smiles. “Lie down.”

Brother Lucas obliges, and Martha bends to take her equipment out of her backpack, first spreading a white towel on the floor, then opening a black case and removing syringes and surgical implements and laying them on the towel one at a time. Lying open, the wound looks like a red gill. It’s started to bleed again. Martha tucks a rolled towel up under his neck and flushes the wound with a clear liquid from a syringe. Then she takes up a long, stinger-looking needle.

“This is a local anesthetic. Try not to move.”

Crouching over him like Nosferatu, Martha inserts the needle into the skin of his throat and pushes it in to its full length, pressing the plunger as she draws it out. She does the same on the other side of the cut. Lucas has a frozen grin on his face, the look of pure, cowed terror. He looked that way when the police were closing in on us in Phoenix, clutching his flashlight with his knees drawn up to his chest, praying then as he’s doing now. This done, Martha squirts the wound again.

“So, tell me,” Martha says, “how long have you been on the road?”

Little Dani snorts.

“Dani was born on the road,” I say, “under an overpass outside of Muskogee, Oklahoma.”

“What about the rest of you?”

“I took it up about four years ago, after I dropped out of school,” I continue. “Lucas here, young as he is, lost his house, his car, and his kid in a divorce three years ago and turned to it as a more constructive way to channel his anger. I met him and Dani when they were holding up a Waffle House in Wichita about eighteen months ago. I was impressed. It was clean work. They didn’t have a car then, so they forced me to drive them. By the time we got to Missouri, we were partners.”

Martha dabs Lucas’s throat with the gauze and fishes a hook out of her white case with a pair of crooked pliers. Holding the hook with the pliers, she ties a line of black surgical thread to it. Then, taking up a small forceps, she pinches the edges of the wound together and pokes the hook through.

“This should need four stitches,” she says. I can see the line vibrate as she pulls it through, can almost hear the grit of it as it comes through the subcutaneous tissue and out through the pink and swollen skin. With a series of quick twists, she ties off the suture and clips it. “You doing all right so far, Lucas?”

Lucas gives a thumbs-up.

“So, how does it work? Do you pull out the Bible before you rob them or after?” she asks.

“After.”

“You must be a hell of a closer.”

“It’s easier than you might think. By then they know it’s life or death, which puts them in a very receptive frame of mind.”

“Give me the sales pitch.”

“For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. Don’t you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? If we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly also be united with him in a resurrection like his.”

Martha finishes her second stitch and clips it with the scissors. “It sounds like death has a lot to do with it.”

“Death has everything to do with it.”

“Why?”

“That’s the moment you slip from this world into eternity, and up until that last instant, your decision determines where you’ll spend it. Up against eternity, nothing else matters. You can be a good person, live a good life, be loved and respected by all kinds of people, but if you miss salvation, it’s all meaningless. Multiply any number by zero, it’s still zero.”

“How much value does that decision have when it’s made at gunpoint?”

“More than you know. That’s why I always dreamed of being martyred when I was a kid. To give the right answer when it’s all on the line. There’s nothing higher than that.”

“I’d tell you anything you wanted to hear if you had a gun to my head.”

“I think you underestimate the sincerity of those facing their own death.”

“It’s not about sincerity. It’s about choice.”

“That’s a comforting concept, isn’t it?”

“You don’t believe in it?”

“It’s a useful illusion. Do you mind if I tell you a story?”

“Feel free.”

I glance at Brother Lucas immobilized there with the hook in his throat. His eyes are trained on me. They’re wide and hard. Not this one, you bastard, he seems to be saying. Well, yes, this one, I answer back, road manager.

“I grew up in a small Ohio town called Gatehill near the Indiana border. I was the third child, second son, of five. Everyone knew our family, and that’s because everyone knew my father. He wasn’t rich, but he had as much power as a man could have in Gatehill. He had two jobs: deputy sheriff and pastor of the Free Believers church. He liked to say he held the laws of God in his right hand and the laws of man in his left, and when there was disagreement between the two it was up to him to mediate. When I was little, I was proud of him. He seemed like God to me, almighty, all-knowing, fair and absolute in judgment.

“My mother died about four months after she had Jeremiah, my little brother. I was five years old at the time. I remember holding her hand maybe twenty minutes before she went. Complications from the pregnancy combined with major depression and malnutrition. She stopped eating. She stopped speaking to us, to anyone. Her middle name was Apple Blossom. They buried her in a green dress and carved a flowering cross on her headstone.

“After that, I started to see things. Maybe these things had always been there, and I was just blind to them. The death of a parent is like losing your sight or your hearing. It sharpens your other senses. I became aware of the health of the people around me. I paid attention to their moods and the words they used. I was most alert at night. I could hear our father turning the pages of his newspaper or his Bible or the heavy green legal volumes he kept on the bookshelf next to the fireplace. I could track him through the house by sound. I could hear when he went to the kitchen to get a glass of water. I could hear when he switched off the light and came upstairs. I could hear when he stopped at the door of Grace and Naomi’s room, and I could hear when he went in.

“The room was on the other side of the wall from the one I shared with Elias and Jeremiah. I could hear everything that happened in there, even though I didn’t know what it meant. Sometimes he would have Grace recite Psalm 23 or the Lord’s Prayer or the Fruits of the Spirit, and sometimes he

would just tell her to talk to Jesus. I could hear Grace's voice shake. I could hear Naomi watching in the dark, pretending to be asleep, and I could almost hear her struggling to understand. And sometimes, when my father left the room and closed the door behind him, I would hear him stop outside our door before he passed on into the darkness, but he never came in.

"Something was wrong, we all knew that, but none of us could explain what it was. Grace stayed home from school for weeks at a time. She stopped playing with us. She stopped eating. It was like living in a haunted house where none of us admitted there was a ghost.

"My brother Elias left home when he was fifteen. He took a backpack, a change of clothes, a furnace lighter, and some money from our father's wallet. No note. Not a word to anyone but Grace, and she never told us what he'd said. I learned later that he went to California. It was far away, it was warm, and there was always work. We didn't hear anything from him for three years. It took a toll on our father. He broke a chair one night, a heavy dining-room chair. Smashed it right over the countertop. We'd never seen him do that before. His anger had always been cold and quiet. Now he raged. He threw out the TV. He burned boxes and boxes of comic books, old magazines, photo albums. He belted us for small offenses, like using the wrong verb tense or dropping a piece of silverware. His sermons changed too. He stopped talking about the love of Jesus. He stopped talking about forgiveness. Often, he would spend half the message railing against the government or against the wickedness of the music industry or the movie industry or the video-game industry. He did a three-month series on the book of Judges. Six months on the minor prophets. It extended to his other job too. He shot a twenty-two-year-old who was trying to steal a car. Hit him in the spine and paralyzed him. It was the first police shooting in Berry County in twenty years.

"I don't want to give the impression living under my father's house was hell, at least not in the traditional sense. I have happy memories too. He took us houseboating once, for an entire week, on some lake in Tennessee where we splashed around in tubes and fished and ate hot dogs every day. Sometimes he brought Jeremiah and me to the sheriff's office. He kept little badges in his desk for us that said, 'Dad's Deputy,' and would clip them to our shirts and tote us around in his patrol car, plastic revolvers and all. There were times when we all laughed together, even the girls. What got us going every time was the impressions he did of the old folks at our church. Mrs. Olivet, who could be relied on to gasp at least once during every sermon. Or Deacon Meeks, who typically fell asleep before the Scripture reading was done, chin to chest, knuckles in his lap. Or Mrs. Becker, the widow, who once farted so loudly she woke him up.

It was one of those times, at dinner, all of us laughing at something he'd said or a face he'd made, that Elias came back. He came in through the front door, silently, and stepped into the dining room from behind my father's chair, so all of us could see him except my father. We were all too

shocked to say anything, except Jeremiah, who was too young to know better. He just said, 'Hi, Elias,' and put a spoonful of mashed potatoes in his mouth. The knife was at our father's throat before he could turn around.

"He was taller than he'd been when he left, more muscular. I could see the threads of his forearms tensing as he pressed the edge of the knife up under my father's chin. I started to cry, and Naomi did, too, but we didn't move.

"Elias, son, let's talk,' our father said in a strangled voice. It was the first time I'd ever seen him afraid. 'Put the knife down, and we'll talk.'

"Elias concurred. 'That's why I'm here. I want to have a talk, right here, you and me and everybody.' But he didn't put the knife down.

"My father said nothing for a minute. His chest was puffed out, as if the edge of the knife was preventing him from breathing out. Then he said, 'Okay.'

"What's your name?'

"Isaac Whitman.'

"What do you do?'

"I'm pastor at Gatehill Free Believers Fellowship, and I'm a deputy sheriff of Berry County.'

"And I'm your son?'

"You're my son.'

"And those are your children?'

"Yes.'

"Name them.'

"Peter. Jeremiah. Naomi. Grace.'

"You've raised them in the faith?'

"Yes.'

"You taught them how to pray?'

"Yes.'

"You taught them Scripture?'

"Yes.'

"Psalm 23. The Lord's Prayer. The Fruits of the Spirit?'

"My father pauses. 'Yes.'

"Look at Grace.'

"My father looks at her. She's breathing hard. Her delicate throat is trembling under her pulse. When my father looks at her, she looks away.

"You taught her something else, didn't you?'

"Again, he says nothing. The corners of his mouth are shining. Spit is building up in his mouth because he can't swallow, and because he can't swallow, his mouth is making more and more spit, trying to flush the thing away. But the knife isn't going anywhere.

"Did you abuse your own daughter, Dad?'

"Nothing.

"Did you touch Grace at night in the girls' bedroom when you thought the rest of us were asleep?'

"My father's eyes are closed now.

“Did you violate my sister after Mom died? Did you rape her?”

“My father is crying now. Spit is running out of his mouth, which he can’t keep closed anymore, and tears are coming down his face, and it’s as if I’m watching a man dissolve, fluid, muscle, bone all coming apart and running down. But Elias is getting impatient with the silence.

“All right, Dad. That was a hard one. Let me give you a question you can answer. Do you acknowledge Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior?”

“My father swallows. And then he says, clearly, in a voice that sounds like his own, ‘Yes, I do.’

“You believe he forgives your sins?”

“I do.”

“I hope so too.”

“And then he cuts his throat.”

Martha ties off the fourth suture. Tight, close. The black knots like swallow-tailed flies sucking nectar from a split fruit. She flushes the wound again and dabs it with the gauze. “Did he die?”

“Elias wasn’t well-practiced. He cut his voice box in half but missed his carotid. My father could never speak again after that. We were sent to be with our aunt and uncle in Columbus until they decided they didn’t want us anymore and put us in foster care. The truth came out in the investigation. There are only so many reasons a son would try to murder his own father in front of his brothers and sisters, right there over the mashed potatoes. Elias is still in prison, but our father was never charged. He never worked another day in his life, though—for God or the law.”

“Is he still alive?”

“He’s still in Gatehill, in the same house. In my mind, I see him puttering around, moving things from room to room, dusting bookshelves, cooking Campbell’s soup in the same saucepan he used when we were kids.”

“He’s alone?”

“I think he’d rather Elias had killed him that day.”

“Have you ever seen him?”

“No.”

“But you’re in his line of work.”

“A fair point.”

“I think you should see him.”

“My point was that his soul is already saved. What he does with the rest of his life isn’t my concern.”

Martha lays a bandage over the wound and presses it down gently so it adheres. She wipes the scissors and the hook on the towel and puts them back into the case with the crooked pliers, the gauze, the syringe.

“I think it is your concern. I think you find it very concerning. I think it bothers you that he never confessed to what he did, that he was never held accountable. And I think you drive around the country terrorizing people because it’s easier than sitting down with your own father and looking him in the eyes and talking to him. And frankly, if your faith can’t help you with that, then I don’t think it’s worth any more than that idiotic razor.”

Martha puts the case into her bag and addresses Lucas. "In three weeks, have a doctor take those stitches out. Try not to get them wet, and don't pick at them." She stands. "It's time for me to go."

"Very well." I open the door for her.

"Thank you for making the house call, Ms. Schimmern," Lucas says.

"Take care of yourself, Lucas."

"You too."

As she steps outside, Lucas starts fishing around for the red book. He finds it. "Left column?" he asks me.

"Left column," I say, and Dani and I get into the LeBaron with Martha and speed away, leaving Lucas struggling to spell Schimmern in the motel room by himself.

Her words curdled in my stomach for days. Three nights in a row at the Chillicothe motel, I sat outside in the sodium twilight striving against the growing certainty. I wrestled with the Lord. Send me somewhere else, anywhere else. Let me be gutshot in a 7/11. Let me be struck head-on by a fifty-three-footer. Let Little Dani and Brother Lucas betray me to the police. But none of this happened, and when the mongrel tide of thought receded, there it was, the stony fact: *You wicked servant. I canceled all that debt of yours...* I step back into the room and, when they've finished, announce my intentions. It's about one-thirty when we pile into the LeBaron and point it east.

From WGLT to WHIO the news on the radio is one long obscenity. Mass shootings, child abductions, random death. Everyone dies, of course, but it's the purposelessness that terrifies me. When it gets to be too much, Brother Lucas slides in our only cassette tape, *Show Time! The Sacred Heart Elementary School Fifth-Grade Choir Sings Broadway*. "Seventy-Six Trombones." "I Feel Pretty." "Whatever Lola Wants." "How Are Things in Glocca Morra?" "Jesus Christ Superstar." Little Dani's in there somewhere, croaking away. The only thing she kept from her unfathomable childhood.

The gray border country looms. We cut the Indiana-Ohio line at Union City and head south through Palestine and Eldorado into Berry County. More buggies than cars, too sparsely populated even for a Taco Bell. It lies to the north of I-70 and to the West of US-127, beyond the castle wall, a domain of crumbling red barns, clean white churches, and miles upon miles of soy, dark green, lustrous, and silent.

The hand-painted sign, "Welcome to Gatehill," rises stiff-backed from the landscape like a vampire from its coffin. White clouds flex their muscles over gray. I roll down the window. The air smells like rain, although none is in evidence. We come to the village center, composed of the same collection of businesses sustained not by the skill of their owners but by scarcity: the hardware store, the Bibles for Mexico thrift shop, the gas station where an Amish boy will fill up your tank and try to bum a cigarette, the Tune-Up, sole restaurant, coffee shop, and bakery in town and the only place to get the *Greenville Daily Advocate* or the *Cincinnati Enquirer*. A quarter mile

down the road, Gatehill Free Believers Fellowship stands white and straight on the edge of an asphalt pool, as it has from days of old. I can still conjure up the oaky smell of its sanctuary and the watery hush of Mrs. Ebels's organ as the collection plate is passed.

We ride Zimmerman Road out past the dip at Gabriel Creek and up again onto the dead-flat plain. We pass houses that are familiar to me, where children I had gone to school with lived, the little red house whose basement was full of iguanas under heat lamps, the one with the log cabin façade where Ben Rodenbach lived with his grandfather, the neat stone house where Jamie Lahmeyer and I touched each other for the first time. I see other things that cause scenes to flicker in my memory. Here by the turnoff for Stuckman's hatchery is the place where Davis, our foster father, crashed the Plymouth with all of us inside. There, across from Edison's farm, is the island of trees where I hid for three nights. The culvert where I found the litter of coyote pups, abandoned by their mother.

Right on Sanctuary Road and half a mile more: There it is. I can see it now, the old brick farmhouse with the white eaves and the porch whose floorboards are always damp even though the house stands alone and unshaded. A dog I don't know is lying in the road directly in front of the drive, chewing the face off a dead possum. I sit there waiting for it to move. It regards me out of the corner of its eye. Some kind of short-haired shepherd. It occurs to me that if the possum had been playing dead initially, it's dead in earnest now.

Brother Lucas hangs out the window and barks at the dog. The dog looks up and points its ears. It comes over to the car and wags its tail, and Lucas manhandles it about the ears and scruff. It's my father's dog. I'm confident of that now. It has his native charm.

I pull into the gravel driveway and park the car. The basketball hoop that once hung over the garage has rusted away, leaving a stained white backboard. The truck parked under it is the same green Ford my father had fifteen years ago. A maple tree is growing through the center of the picnic table. I shut the engine off.

"Wait for me here. I need to do this alone."

Brother Lucas puts a hand on my thigh. "We wouldn't dream of interfering."

"If an hour goes by and you don't see me..."

"We'll come find you."

I look at Little Dani in the mirror. She's cracking her gum and staring around. The shotgun is cradled in her lap.

"No guns, whatever happens."

"No guns," Lucas says.

I get out, walk across the yard and up the steps to the porch, whose boards sag slightly underfoot. The doorbell has been replaced. I press it. It's the only thing that's new here, from what I can tell. Same glazed flowerpots filled with bare soil. Same white curtains in the window.

The inner door opens. A figure stands behind the screen, difficult to see, but he's seeing me. In a minute, he pushes the screen door open. The creature standing there with his arm out looks like my father in bad stage makeup. Prosthetic ears, false nose, thick, black stick-on eyebrows, hunched at the back, crimped at the knees. Only his hair is as it was before, minus the color, neatly swept and parted, as if he's ready, this very morning, to testify before a judge or deliver a sermon. He's a full foot shorter than he was in my memory.

"It's Peter, Dad. May I come in?"

He says nothing. Of course, he says nothing. I can see the white scar peaking around the point of his chin. It looks like something that doesn't belong to his body, like a seagull feather stuck in the collar of his shirt. But it does belong to him, more than anything else. He presses the storm door out straight, careful not to touch me as he does, and I step inside.

No lights are on in the house. It smells like old man, which is the smell of mothballs, soft food, and intestinal complaints, but it also smells like surfactant, as if he's recently scrubbed the floor and countertops. In and through this, though, is a smell I remember, of wood paneling warm in the afternoon and somewhere, flitting through the hall for half an instant, the cool smell of my mother's hand cream. When we get to the kitchen he turns around and without looking at me holds up a finger, which means wait here, and shuffles out of the room.

The windows over the kitchen sink face north and let in a pale, steady light that falls over the sink and onto the table. It's the same table, wide and darkly stained, that has always been here. All but one of the chairs have been removed, and the one that remains isn't placed at the head of the table but in the middle of one long side, facing the wall. He comes back holding another chair and sets it down for me. I sit, and he sits. Somewhere outside a blue jay jeers.

"I haven't seen you since I was twelve," I say, trying to control my breathing. "I never wanted to see you again, but a friend told me I should. She seemed to think we needed to resolve something. Anyway, I'm here."

He doesn't move. His eyes pass over my face for an instant and flick away. He doesn't offer me coffee the way he used to offer it to members of his congregation when they would come over, at any time of day or night, seeking his counsel. He just waits, like a man who's been on death row far too long.

My hands start to shake, so I make fists.

"You taught me that only one thing in life is important, and that's where you're going to go when you die, because life is over like that, but heaven and hell are eternal. I believed that for a long time, and I still do. I can't help it. It's just who I am. But sometimes I think, I'm living here, right now, and every day goes by so slowly, and there's this thing in here that's not right. It's not right. And I have to live with it every minute, every day. The only time I don't feel it is when I'm sharing the Gospel."

I look at him. He's looking at my hands the way a starving man looks at pastries through a shop window. Better stick to the script.

"I don't know what you know about me. If you've heard anything. I went to Ashland for a couple years, for the divinity program. I couldn't stand it. The God they taught us was so meagre. He had no power, no justice, no consuming fire. It was like being slowly starved on a diet of thin soup. When I dropped out I had nothing. The scholarships that paid for everything when I was there were gone. I was too old for the foster system, and the Oakleys didn't want anything to do with me by then anyway. I got a job at Hot 'n Now. I was a cashier. I hated it. I'd see these people waddle in, fat parents with their fat kids. They were obese, and I was giving them burgers and cheese taters. They were diabetic, and I was giving them pop. And for all that, I barely got paid enough to buy the trash I was selling.

"So, the day it happened, my manager was out sick. Around eleven-thirty, I got the idea to tell the customers the register was broken and put their money into one of the deposit bags. Mikayla, the girl who was working, didn't like it at first, but when I gave her half, she agreed to forget about it. After a few weeks of this, I took the extra money and bought a gun and a new battery for the LeBaron, and I was gone.

"I did small-town restaurants, ice cream stands, western wear stores, any place the security cameras were likely to be out of tape. I learned to stay away from pawnshops because the owners always carried. I learned not to be greedy. If it was a choice between a close call on a thousand dollars and fifteen bucks, I'd take the fifteen bucks. I survived. I could buy shirts when my old ones got holes. I could put gas in the car. I ate better than I had since Mom died. But after half a year, it started getting stale. I had this sense of waste, this draining-away feeling. It was guilt—the only way God ever speaks to me—this sense that I was wasting my life.

"I remember the day it happened. I was in a bakery in Ashtabula. I had my Walther pointed at this man's head. He was close to your age. He had on this white apron and a big class ring. I told him to go to the register, and he went to the register. I told him to take out the money and stack it in a white paper bag, and he took out the money and put it in the bag. I told him to put his class ring in there, too, and he worked the ring off and dropped it in. And I had this epiphany: I could ask him to do anything, and he would do it, so I asked him to repeat after me, 'I believe in Jesus Christ as my personal Lord and Savior,' and he said it. It was a joke, and I laughed when he said the words. But when I left I had the most incredible high. I just saved a soul, I thought. Right there. Just now. So, I did it again the next time, and the same thing happened. Old men, teenagers, women. It didn't matter. It's incredibly easy to make a person think about eternity when they're staring into the mouth of a gun. I felt like I'd finally found my calling. What I was put on this earth to do."

My father is working something up in his throat. He can't escape this.

"Someone tried to do that for you once, remember? Your own son. But you were already saved, so he asked you a different question, and you made

your choice. Maybe you hoped he was going to kill you, and you'd never have to admit what you'd done. Death can be merciful. Take a motorcycle accident, for example. Would you rather be paralyzed from the chin down or just be taken? Or dementia. Or watching people you love suffer. Or, in your case, the knowledge that you violated your own daughter and that everyone in your small world knows it and that, even if they're too cowardly or too embarrassed or too Christian to do anything about it, they'll never have anything to do with you again. Then to have to walk around with that wound on your throat as a constant reminder, that's a kind of living death in itself, isn't it?

"You'll want to know how Grace is. And Jeremiah and Naomi and Elias. I'll tell you they're alive. I'll tell you Grace is married. I'll tell you she lives about a thousand miles from here, that she has a little girl, and the little girl's name is Allie. I'll tell you she's happy and that a large part of that happiness comes from knowing she'll never have to see you again. Not in this life or the next because she's rejected our faith. You must think about that every day. Have I damned my own daughter? Why didn't I wear the millstone when I had the chance? Before long you'll be dead, and you'll meet Jesus, and he'll take you in to see the Father, and all your sins, all the guilt from your sins, will be wiped clean, and you'll be able to walk the streets of heaven arm in arm with Mom and Grandpa and Grandma and everyone else you've ever loved, but you'll know, even as you're singing and laughing, that your own little girl has been cast out all alone into the darkness where the torment and the sorrow and the loneliness go on and on and on without end or variation, and you'll know that it's all because of you. You'll know that even if you wanted to trade places with her, you can't, because the judgments of God are final, and that's a fate worse than any I could devise for you."

My father is weeping silently. Not even his crying makes a sound anymore, like Zechariah if Elizabeth had miscarried. His old face crinkles like wrapping paper. A nettle of hair has come ungelled at the back of his head and is pointing out, making him look frayed and childish. The dog, the ugly shepherd that had been eating the possum out on the road, comes and stands in the doorway, head down, taking stock of the scene.

"I have a gun in the car. It would be very easy, and it would satisfy a very deep need of mine. The problem is this matter of the truth. That's what Elias wanted to hear, and it's what I've come all the way from Illinois to get. I can't threaten you with death because something much worse for you and for Grace has already happened. But I had a lot of time to think driving here. I thought, maybe I could promise to go save her soul if you just admitted what you'd done. Maybe she's beyond hope. I don't know. But maybe the joy of seeing her long-lost brother and the release of knowing you were forced to confront the truth would be enough. Maybe. I'm willing to try."

My father sits there with his hands on the table. The tears are still coming, wet and painful. I've spoken more to him in the last five minutes

than I have in fifteen years, so I determine to wait now and not make a move until he does.

Looking at his hands, I think of the summer before Mom died, when he took all of us up to Lake Erie, and we swam together, my father and the five of us while Mom watched from the shore. I loved to be held by him, to feel the strength in his arms and chest and hands when he'd pick me up and send me flying into deeper water. I would pass through layers of heat and light as I sank down, gripping my knees. Warm to cool to cold, getting darker and darker until my bottom touched the rocky silt where I would wait in the cold darkness until I felt him plunging down to seize me and haul me up into warmth and light and crystal droplets flashing everywhere.

He's standing from the table now and going to the kitchen counter. He's opening a drawer and taking out a sheaf of receipts. He's removing the rubber band and taking one out. He's bringing it over here. It's a receipt for twenty-two dollars in gas. He turns it over and starts writing on the back with a plastic pen, the same sharp cursive he used to write his sermons in, but shakier now, less confident. He withdraws his pen slowly as if unwilling to stop, as if he had more to say or had already said too much. I turn the paper around.

It says, *I abused my oldest daughter Grace when she was thirteen. I continued to do this until she was sixteen. I have ruined her life. God forgive me.*

"Did you rape her?" I ask, and push the paper back to him.

He sits there for a moment, but not nearly as long as he sat there before. *I touched her*, he writes, then he takes the paper back, *and I made her touch me.*

"But you never touched Naomi?"

*I never touched Naomi.*

"Why not?"

*She was too young...*a pause. This last part he can barely bring himself to write, but he does, and he pushes the paper back to me, *...and she didn't look like her mother.*

I look at my father. His face is wet, but he's not crying anymore. He looks like a man who's been standing in the prow of a ship in wild weather. He looks scoured, like a copper vessel. He looks free.

I sit there for a few minutes, not speaking, just listening to the silence. Then I get up. The shepherd's eye follows me as I stand. His breath is loud and huffing, as if he, too, is scared that I'll leave. "I'll find Grace and do what I said I'd do."

My father nods. He takes the receipt back, turns it sideways, and writes one more line. Then, after a brief pause, signs his name. He holds it out to me.

*I love you. Have a meaningful life. ~ Isaac Whitman.*

I fold the receipt and put it in my wallet. As I step to the doorway, for some reason I can't explain, maybe the destitution of the dog, I'm prompted to look in his refrigerator. I pull the door open. The condiment racks are full

of ancient bottles. Mustard, ketchup, Worcestershire, soy sauce, obscure marinades, their labels stiff and cracking. The refrigerator itself is completely empty except for an open box of baking soda and a half-gallon of milk, mostly gone. I look in the cupboards. Nothing but cans of soup and, high up, pushed to the back, an ancient bag of egg noodles and a box of pancake mix. Not a loaf of bread or piece of fruit in sight.

“Come on, Dad,” I say. “Let’s get you something to eat.”

The McDonald’s we pull up to outside Dayton has a PlayPlace as big as Xanadu but with more slides. I lead us in and set the tray down at a high top against the glass. It’s warm and humid in here, like a terrarium. My father looks smaller than he did in his kitchen, a little like a rabbit that’s been kept in a cage in the basement all its life and suddenly finds itself in a wild glen. He picks up his Egg McMuffin with both hands and raises it to his mouth. Watching him eat gives me a feeling of suspense, but he bites off a healthy chunk and brings the sandwich back down to the tray without incident.

A girl with three braids slides face-first into the ball pit, shrieking in a way that’s half terror, half delight. A barrel-chested little boy with hair so blond and short he looks bald cannonballs down on top of her, and now there are tears and parental interventions and the screams of other children who feel emboldened by the noise.

Brother Lucas picks at his stitches with his free hand as he eats his hash browns. He’s been different since he cut himself. He doesn’t talk like he used to, on and on about nothing in particular—the impending government shutdown, the resurgence of the buffalo, hypothetical death matches between American presidents. His nicotine intake has at least doubled, and I can tell that our failure to acquire any cigarettes on our last job has him worried. He might have to buy some, and he knows we don’t have the money. I suspect he’s feeling his own mortality. I also suspect he’s thinking about Ms. Schimmern. I can tell by the soft, mournful way he tongues his straw that he misses her touch on his throat. Maybe he’s questioning his calling.

Little Dani is flipping through the pages of one of the comic books she collected from the hobby store we robbed in Veedersberg, some sort of public-service issue called *Anthem BlueCross Presents: Iron Man and Habit Heroes*, peeling the plastic off little tubs of pancake syrup and shooting them like tequila. Everyone’s quiet: Dani, Lucas, my father, myself. Cars are circling like swan boats in the lot outside. A maroon-colored Cutlass, paint peeling, breaks from the swirl and parks by the cotoneaster. The driver ratchets himself out. Tall, piebald, chimerical.

Brother Lucas, staring into nothing, jerks back when the hard edge of Dani’s rolled-up comic book touches his forehead. He shakes his head and sips his coffee from the straw. She pokes him again, and this time he swats the comic book away. A third time, and now he’s up, hands out, wrestler stance. She breaks, and he chases her into the ball pit. I laugh, in spite of

myself. *Let the little children come to me, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these.* I look at my father. His eyes are bright and happy, almost beseechingly so. He wants to tell me that he has no judgment anymore, not for Lucas and Dani, not for me, not even for the perverse and avaricious world he used to rail against from his pulpit. All forgiven. Washed in the blood of the Lamb. Atoned for. Loved and held and called by name.

The chimerical man from the parking lot has creaked his way through the door and stands stiffly at the counter, looking at the girl behind the register. I think he says something to her, but I can't hear what it is through the glass. The girl is attractive, a high schooler or college student, her natural hair only half-contained by her hat. She has a kind, wry face, as if she's used to deflecting the compliments of strange men. I look back at Dani and Lucas rampaging through the tunnels and ropeways. Heaven help the kids in their path.

I don't recognize the sound of the rifle shot immediately. It's too small, too high-pitched, like the little twists of tissue paper that pop when you throw them on the driveway, leaving a smell of gunpowder in the summer haze.

I look. The girl isn't standing behind the register anymore, but the man is still there, and I can see that he's holding a tactical rifle. He's shooting again, this time at the people in the booths. The stuffing flies out of the benches. Trays and paper cups clatter to the floor. A tall boy in cross-country shorts breaks for the door and stumbles as his knee comes apart. A man in a suit covers his face as the bullets enter his body. Someone had been delivering a speech, but the speaking has stopped.

The man is making for the PlayPlace now. I hear the screams for the first time, of men and women, which sound the same. A mother dives onto her son, the same bald-headed kid from the ball pit, and onto the girl with the three braids who isn't hers but whose father seems to have disappeared, or is that him lying in the doorway, covered in glass, trying to do sit-ups?

The man is shooting into the ball pit, making the balls hop, and into the plastic tunnels with a sound like a shoe tumbling in a dryer. *Drup! Drup! Drup!* I see Brother Lucas scuttling through the tunnel, his legs crabbing past the bubble windows, and I see the plastic frost up where the bullets hit. Through the windows, I see Lucas jerk against the far wall and go down on his hands and knees. The rounds follow one after another, and I see his legs donkey-kicking behind him. Where is Little Dani?

There she is, lying cockeyed on the slide, head hanging down, her thin blond hair floating around her in the static charge, her fingers grabbing, grabbing, grabbing as they do when she and Lucas make love.

A shout from behind as a bald, bucktoothed man charges through the doorway and lunges for the gunman. Calmly, as if he were being addressed by a stock boy in a grocery store, the gunman turns and fires, and the bald man drops without a sound, a red carnation sprouting from the back of his head. The gunman's eyes fall on me, and he seems to notice me for the first

time. His eyes are fish scales. His mouth is gaping and hard. His skin is gray, the color of a statue in a garden, and his hair and beard are those of a feral king. It occurs to me that this is my time. Not in some primordial jungle at the edge of a stone knife or in some collectivist firing line, but here, now, in a McDonald's PlayPlace at the mouth of a Remington carbine.

My body is flooded with giddy warmth. I get down from the stool and kneel. The Remington follows me. At the critical moment, I remember that my father is right there watching me. After all these years, he's here to witness the culmination of my life. He's here to see that, in spite of the horror, in spite of the sin, in spite of the years spent wandering in the desert, none of it was wasted. None of it. I think of the cracked leather spine of his beloved Bible. I think of the fusty smell of the coatroom at Gatehill Fellowship. I see my mother, the back of one white heel disappearing around a corner. I would suffer all indignities. I would be drowned, burned, or crucified, yes, Father, in your name, and when they ask me whom I serve, I will say I serve the Lord Jesus Christ with all my heart and with all my soul and with all my life.

He steps toward me and presses the mouth of the gun to my forehead. I'm waiting for him to ask as his finger tightens on the trigger. I'm waiting for him to ask as an old man begins to wail, wail as if being dangled over the very mouth of hell. I'm waiting for him to ask, and I'm waiting for him to ask, and I'm waiting for him to ask.