

Scarecrow Gospel

by

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Chapter 1

“Words work wonders, but believe you me the wrong words rip and shred like a chainsaw. Today we come to remember Marianne Lenfield. We gather together as Easter people to celebrate her life in the past, now and in the time to come.”

“Amen,” a congregant called from the pews.

“Remembering, that’s what our celebration of communion is all about. The word Eucharist literally means, remembering. I did not have the pleasure to know Marianne. So, I’m careful with my words.

“A woman’s entire life. The essence of who she was, of what she meant to you and those who can’t be here today. I don’t have the words.” I paused, weighing the merits of the things to come.

“I remember a sermon I heard in theology school. An old boy said we should give ourselves the acid test of Christianity. He asked, “Are you a good Christian? Do you really want to know? This can be hurtful. I’ll ask a question and give you a few minutes to search yourself, to search your heart. How do you treat your family?”

“To everyone, especially me, the one hundred and eighty seconds that followed felt like a self-flagellating eternity. I thought back to when the California wholesale operation set up a pyramid scheme here in town. They appealed to our greed, our fears and our sense of the familiar all at once. That cool cucumber Country Gentleman rolled into town and offered us a method to make money outside of the back breaking labor and long hours of the mills and factories. He played on our generational feelings of being trapped in the sub working class. He told the dream-filled employees to, ‘Start with your sphere of influence. Sell to your family and friends. They trust you. Get them on board. Make them rich. Be a hero.’”

“After our time to reflect, the seminary professor asked his original question, ‘Are you starting with kindness, unconditional love with your family? I’m talking about forgiveness and redemption. In the Old Testament to redeem means to free from debt, obligation or beholdings of any kind, including slavery. We are slaves to petty jealousy, greed, spite and anger. Have you freed your family? Are you free yourself? How you answer these questions is the pass or fail of the Christianity acid test.’”

In my own mind I had crossed the point of no return. So I surged forward.

“I liked his idea. However, I think days like today beg a different question. Consider this: How will your friends and family remember you?”

Chapter 2

“Blood brothers,” Theo said.

“Til the end of time,” Henry added.

Only eight years old, Theo and Henry clasped hands to culminate their lifelong vow. It was a moment in time between two friends. Just one moment in time, but a friendship that defined the very essence of how we live life.

Theo shot to the size of man the summer after fifth grade. Other kids, boys and girls, feared him, and some teachers. Henry never hid behind Theo. He used his own overflowing aggression as a means to vent for all the things beyond his control. Bubbling anger often erupted unprovoked. Consequently, Henry ran into every day fearlessly. It wasn't like he was reckless; he clearly had no idea he was mortal. To him all things were possible.

Always together and never just sitting around watching the world spin, Theo and Henry made for a force of nature. I never knew why they let me tag along behind them. I was a grade below them and almost two years younger.

"You'll never amount to much," my mother yelled as I'd leave the house. "All you'll get is a snout full of trouble running the roads sniffing tail behind those two thugs."

She believed they were a bad influence on me. She had no idea.

Chapter 3

Hooker's Bait and Tackle sat a hundred yards in front of a lake, really a small pond, but well stocked. It seemed like a bachelor's lake as only men, young and old, fished there. Henry and Theo dug their own worms, as did many in the community, and thus Hooker's had long ago been closed. Still, the boys kept going to the bait shack. If nothing else it had a roof overhead to keep out of the rain and cold.

"Let's start a club," Henry suggested once while goofing off at Hooker's.

"Like what?"

"International Brotherhood of Men," Henry proudly announced.

"Homo," Theo said, and punched Henry in the shoulder.

"Okay, how about the Lady Killer's Club?"

"Psycho!"

"No, get it. We're chick magnets. We slay them. So our hangout should be the Lady Killer's Club," Henry clarified.

"Your gay idea would work if it was a club just for me," Theo said.

"Listen to the big man talk, but that's all you do. I'm the only one that gets down and bo-hogs a girl. You homos are just holdin' it."

I wasn't sure what that meant, but they both laughed like it was funny. Barring official confirmation or christening the rickety abandoned store was officially dubbed the Lady Killer's Club and trouble gained a central office.

Chapter 4

Teen angst gave many an awkward disposition. Martha took no shots. She openly displayed her torment. Most folks called her a tomboy or worse. Cruelly, nature allowed her to acquire a woman's shape much too soon. Seeing and breathing males took note, but the first one who made the mistake to move on her walked away with a limp.

Others picked up on the lesson with minimal growling from Martha, as they feared her bite, literally.

Like other pack animals, instinctually she gravitated toward her own kind, Theo and Henry. Martha carried her own without question. No one ever made sense of how she came to take a romantic interest in Henry, but it worked like the explosion of gas and fire in every spark-driven engine.

Chapter 5

Clowning around out on a street corner, Theo and Henry provided free street theater for passers by.

“It’s steaming out here. Let’s go catch some shade at Hooker’s,” Henry said.

“I heard my parents talking about Hooker’s finally being knocked down.”

“Shut up,” Theo said. “Why’d anybody do that? Hooker’s is like a landmark.”

“I think some rich old man out of California is putting up a building or something.”

“No shit, who wants to build in this hole of a town?” Henry asked.

“I don’t know.”

“I bet I know who it is. You remember when we saw that fancy convoy?”

“Yeah, I knew there was something weird about a high-fallutin’ fleet of luxury cars led by an ass ugly maroon Cadillac driving down Main Street,” Henry said.

“What makes you think that was the guy?” I asked.

“With all the BMWs and Mercedes hovering about he looked like the goddamn president of the United States,” Henry said.

“The size of his security team alone let you know he was important,” Theo said. “And the way that old fella was glad handing and working the crowd, I knew he was a pro.”

“Wonder what he’s up to?”

“Let’s go check it out,” Henry said, and it was on.

Trees had been clear cut, and Hooker’s Bait Shop was nothing more than a thing of the past. Not even a moss covered shingle remained in the rubble. A foundation had been poured and a rough frame of the new building began to take form.

“Damn, you miss a day and somebody starts to build a new town around you.”

“The way I see it he tore down our hang out, so we have no choice but to tear down his,” said Henry.

With untamed ferocity the boys ripped up electrical boxes and smashed anything breakable. Roof trusses piled off to the side then sparked their creativity. After laying them out in a geometric pattern they set the wood on fire.

Sirens broke through the crash and bangs of destruction amid the construction site. Instantly, heels and elbows raced around the lake and vanished in the woods.

Chapter 6

“You boys want to make some money?”

“Faggot,” Henry bellowed. “How about we beat the shit out of your ass and take your money.”

“Take it easy He Man. My name’s George, I take care of lawns. My regular crew got drunk last night and laid out on me.”

“What do you want us to do?” Theo asked.

“Cut grass, run the weed eater, and that’s it,” George said.

“What’s it pay?” Henry asked.

“I’ll give you eight dollars an hour.”

“Each?!”

“Yep,” George said causally.

We got all pie-eyed and happily agreed to work. We hopped in the back of the lawn dude’s truck. He hauled a trailer full of tools behind it. Nobody called for shotgun and George didn’t invite any of us into the cab.

We could hear his radio blaring Toto and Survivor tunes. He could have been a world class pervert and we’d been punked. We never gave it a thought. He crossed the tracks, drove through the city and eventually pulled up to a posh house. The lawn man be-bopped out and strolled to the front door where he openly flirted with a woman for a while.

Walking back to the truck George called out assignments without ceremony. He pushed in ear buds, turned on his music and began singing aloud. He had a real thing for eighties rock bands. We laughed and worked until well after dark. Eight hours of grueling work and enduring eighties hair band songs transformed three poor boys to learn the value of a dollar. We always worked after that. We cut grass with George and on our own; Theo found a job at Sears or somewhere. He found one for Henry, too.

Chapter 7

Prior to sun up, countless worker bees transformed Town Hall’s parking lot into a fun festival, evidently the new word for carnival. Big Top music blared through high powered speakers atop telephone poles. Vendors happily handed out hot dogs, popcorn, funnel cakes, sodas, cotton candy and more, all for free.

Theo and Henry weren’t ones to miss out on a good time, especially when they didn’t have to pay. They arrived early, climbed the rock wall, poked fun at kids riding ponies and threw gum into the Moon Walk. Their limit of fun had yet to expire when the Country Gentleman stopped the music and took hold of the microphone.

“Good afternoon.”

Almost immediately he repeated, “Good Afternoon.”

Those in attendance roared, “Good Afternoon.”

“That’s more like it. I was afraid you weren’t having a good time. Are you having fun?”

Once again the crowd roared, “Yes.”

“I’m thrilled to hear it. I don’t want to interrupt the flow of good times. I want to thank you for coming out here and for so kindly accepting us into your community. Our office will be open soon. I’m sure you’ll agree it will be an asset to the community.”

“He’s the only ass related to that building,” Henry commented.

“As soon as we get back on schedule from our construction setbacks we will have an open meeting to discuss business opportunities and employment options. Once we hit

our stride I'm sure we will be able to sponsor numerous community activities like this one. So please enjoy yourselves and thanks for having us as your new neighbor."

"Boys, that was the biggest load of shit I've ever been handed."

"Wonder what that rich fart is up to?" Henry asked.

"Beats me," Theo said. "Who cares? Let's load up on the free stuff."

Chapter 8

Long after dark we rolled up to the construction site. Since our last romp on the premises, the Country Gentleman had boarded the doors and added a padlock. Laughter engulfed us at the insinuation that we could be denied. Theo traipsed around to the side and simply pushed through the unfinished siding and thin sheet of insulation. Once inside we made like little elementary kids as we decided to play hide-and-seek.

Theo and I could hear Henry's heavy breathing. He tried to take short breaths, but that made it all the louder. On approach we jumped up and ran. He closed in quickly. Out of desperation Theo pushed over a fifty-five gallon drum and a thick milky liquid oozed out and coated the floor. We immediately discovered the fluid was some sort of adhesive.

Henry gave up on the game at once and began rolling the big metal container spreading the tacky gunk everywhere. Then without a word he started tossing stuff in the goop. When he found a box of Styrofoam packing peanuts we all got in the game. Moments later each one of us found something to stick to the floor--sawdust, nails, roof shingles and anything else we could find.

"What the fuck are you doing?" a puzzled Henry asked Theo.

"I'm getting some of this ooze on my shoe so I can stick tar paper to the bottom," he said, while splashing in the glue.

"I can see that and you look pretty retarded at it. So why are you doing it?"

Henry repeated his question.

"Look around. We are basically leaving molds of our shoe prints. I'm going to smear mine out with this and not leave any more molds that could be used to track us down," he said, pointing to his newly tar paper covered shoe.

"Dude, it's not like they have CSI in this crappy town."

"Whatever," Theo quipped.

Like always we followed his lead. After another thirty minutes or so the three of us climbed out through the ceiling and smashed a skylight, sending hundreds of pieces of glass down into the sticky concoction. Oh, what a night! Pumped with endorphins and a full belly of revenge we lit out into the darkness.

Chapter 9

"What's up with this little hens' party?" Uncle Jimmy's voice called through the darkness. "Three little queers sitting back in the woods with drinks, a nice romantic fire glowing and the river bubbling. Don't let me interrupt, go ahead if you want to cuddle, kiss or something."

"There's nothing queer about me," Henry protested. "I'm a man, a lady killer to boot."

“Man? Ha!” Uncle Jimmy scoffed. “Look at you with your little peach fuzz lips. You don’t have a mustache between the three of you.”

Henry bowed up, but before he knew what happened, Uncle Jimmy had put his hand on his nephew’s shoulder and pushed hard. Henry plopped to the ground. The older man’s action was shrouded in fun, but Henry felt just enough violence that rather than trying again he settled in on the log by the fire.

“Listen you little pansies, it don’t take too much to know it’s you dumbasses who keep fucking up that office building construction site,” Uncle Jimmy said. “I hear that old boy from Cali’s not accustomed to losing. All in all I don’t like him or his Class A building. Dude acts like he’s Jesus walking in here and saving us all. That doesn’t sit well with me. I think what keeps happening to his building is funny, but sooner or later y’all are going to get busted.”

“We didn’t do nothing,” Henry exclaimed.

“You boys can take it from me--I’ve fought my share of authority,” Uncle Jimmy said. “Sometimes you have to let them win so you can fight another day.”

“It’s not like authority always wins,” Theo said.

“Yeah, that was the Hooker’s Bait Shack. It has history here in town. We can’t just lay down after they demolished it.”

“Okay dumbass, you got two choices, lay down or get knocked down. If you go for door number two, don’t call me to post bail.” With that, Uncle Jimmy left. On his way he took the three remaining beers still clasped together in a plastic ring and kicked over Henry’s half full can.

“Have fun and remember safe sex saves lives,” he said, and cackled to himself.

Chapter 10

“Uncle Jimmy bought a new truck,” Henry announced.

“That’s cool.”

“Yeah it is,” Henry said. “Cause now he needs to sell the van.”

“Man, Jimmy keeps that thing jammed up. It’s a shame we’re too young to buy it.”

“You’re supposed to be the smart one,” Henry said, with a poke to his friend’s chest. “I talked to Uncle Jimmy. He knows we got jobs, cut grass and all so he said he’d sell it to us.”

“Hell yeah,” Theo cheered, and slapped hands with his friend. “How much does he want?”

“\$1,972.”

“That’s an odd number.”

“It’s the year of the van,” Henry explained.

“Sweet.”

“Yeah it is.”

Theo and Henry never gave a thought as to how to work out sharing a vehicle. Far as I know, it never mattered.

Chapter 11

Theo and Henry slept on the sidewalk of the city in sub zero temperatures in front of a local music store. No, they weren't protesting. The boys had primo spots in line to purchase John Cougar tickets. There was a six ticket limit. Neither one of the boys had any cash, but they held the first and second positions in line. Theo didn't care much for crowds at concerts. Henry wanted two tickets for him and Martha. This left the hustlers with ten spots to sell.

Martha had an exam at school and to go to work, so Theo went with Henry. Tickets went on sale early Saturday morning. To ensure being first in line, the two friends pitched all else aside and arrived Thursday. Using the van as a home base, they rotated about every four to six hours to keep warm. Martha swung by to bring sandwiches and pop. I caught the bus and hung out for lack of anything better to do.

Come six o'clock Saturday morning, Henry had pulled the whole thing off with ease. In the end, he walked away with two tickets and one hundred-sixty dollars that he split with Theo.

Chapter 12

Below the rambling manse, a cherry paneled basement exuded élan and mystique.

"I call this my smoking room," said the Country Gentleman. "I chew on an occasional cigar, but mostly I come down here to pour a spot of whisky. How do you take yours?"

"Thank you, but I'll pass. A lot of whiskey has burned this town out," the alderman said. "I'm on the wagon."

"I can appreciate that. Want a cigar?"

"No thanks. I'll take a cup of coffee if you have it."

No prompting necessary, the Country Gentleman's personal attaché took off to fetch refreshments.

"I'm all about being a good neighbor. I can bring jobs here as well as a slice of city life. Not to mention, if you'll let me, I'll pour a ton of money into this piss-ant town."

"You are already fully permitted and have started building on the site. What's the purpose of all this ass kissing?"

Smiling, the Country Gentleman said, "It's all about building trust."

"The city fathers have your background information. It appears as though you have our trust, for now at least. We gave you the go ahead to build, so what is it you really want?"

Coffee arrived and neither man lifted a cup.

"I want to do a little empire building," the Country Gentleman answered. "An office building today, then a restaurant, sports bar, perhaps an adult entertainment complex or maybe even go for the big bucks with a casino."

"That's going to be a trick. A lot of that takes more than most honest men make around here."

"I don't recall saying I planned to help the poor man," the Country Gentleman said flippantly.

“I still don’t follow why you have invited me here.”

“I’d like to know who keeps impeding the progress of my office building, the cornerstone of all that is to come.”

“Sheriff Mellen believes it’s local boys,” the alderman admitted.

“Has he incarcerated the vermin?”

“Aw now, we aren’t in to all that around these parts. He’ll go see their folks and give the boys a stern talking to. That should be the end of it.”

“Boys or not, I’m out a ton of money and time. Haul them into jail.”

“Sheriff Mellen has a hunch, but at present he doesn’t have any proof.”

“If the law won’t reign in those boys, them I’ll take care of it west coast style,” the Country Gentleman said. “You hear what I’m saying.”

Chapter 13

“Look here son,” the Country Gentleman said.

“I’m not your son,” Henry interrupted.

“So you are not,” he said. “Look here, boy, make a wise choice for yourself and tell us what you know.”

“I don’t know anything.”

“That is indeed how you are acting, which is telling me you know plenty.”

“I need to get going,” Henry said, and attempted to stand.

“Sit down,” an officer said, and stood over Henry.

“Let me make this clear. We have witnesses who put ...what’s that damn kid’s name?”

“Theo,” a cop interjected. “Folks saw him there. There’s no point in lying for him.”

“Mister that damn kid is my buddy and I’m tired of telling you he was with me mowing lawns.”

“Listen boy, I’m going to give you a life lesson today,” the Country Gentleman said. “Here it is, do it to your buddy before he does it to you.”

“Well goddamn, I reckon I can up and quit school now. Thanks to you I’m set for life,” Henry said.

“You little bastard,” the well polished man barked. “Here’s the point. You know officers have your butt buddy in one of these other rooms right this minute. Some hard nose detective is telling him that you buckled and squealed him out. Like you your buddy’s just a boy and he has to be pretty desperate by now. He’s thinking you aren’t worth a shit and so he’s trying to think of a way to bargain and save his own skin. If the cops give any indication they’ll deal, your buddy won’t hesitate to throw you under the bus.”

Beaming with that crazy smile of his Henry leaned back in his chair. “Here’s a lesson for you old man. Theo and me, we’re more than buddies. We’re blood brothers. That means we don’t roll on each other,” Henry said firmly.

“Henry, what would your grandmother think?” the cop asked.

“She’d be proud,” Henry said. “I told you the truth. That’s all I can do.”

Chapter 14

Henry took his licks and swallowed the pain. His daddy ran amok more often than not. Henry didn't make a secret of the fact that his dad beat him. During this shit storm his father hollered at all of us with spittle spraying wildly, mostly landing in our faces.

"Boy you had to do it didn't you? You had to go and act a fool. Grab some ankle!" he demanded.

Henry didn't bend over. He had never disobeyed before when his old man was in a mood. I was embarrassed for Henry. I had never seen anyone blow his gasket like that before. It left me paralyzed. I couldn't speak or even move. None of us wanted a public display of this crap. Tensions grew as Henry had no intention of bending over to take the lashes.

"If you don't get to moving, I'll make you drop your britches and I'll get the razor strap. Now, do as I say and get hold of some ankle, boy."

Theo stepped in to block Henry's dad.

"It's okay. I got this," Henry said.

Theo honored his friend and backed off, holding Henry's dad's gaze with each step.

Henry took a big round house swing on his father. He all but advertised the punch. His dad stepped back and popped him in the eye. Henry went in again only to be stopped in his tracks by a monstrous jab to the same eye. He stayed on his feet and moved in once more. His dad took the same route with less pay out. Henry blocked the punch and got off an upper cut.

"You might kick my ass today, but I'm just a kid. One of these days I'm gonna smash your face," Henry said.

"Don't bother to come back until you can back up all that trash talk. Get off my property and stay off."

Chapter 15

"You did right by me on the van," Uncle Jimmy said. "I'm willing to rent you the barn for next to nothing, but you better know I spent a lot of time and money fixing this place up. I love it almost as much as my wife."

"That's probably too much information," Martha joked.

"If you really want to do this we have to be clear about the rules. We all know I'm not your daddy and I don't plan on acting like it," Uncle Jimmy said. "Here's the deal. No smoking of any kind, no drinking and no parties."

We sat with our backs to the wall on the floor and nodded our heads as he spoke.

"I talked to your parents, and they're glad to get you out of the house."

Only Martha laughed.

"Should they have a change of heart and call me, then you have to go home immediately. Okay?"

No one spoke.

"I need to hear you or this is over now."

"That's cool," Henry said. Theo and Martha quickly agreed.

“Back to my rules. You three can sleep here and no one else. Jack, that means you.”

“Yes sir,” I said.

“I don’t want to hear a rant from your mom,” Uncle Jimmy said. “You can hang out, but at night go to the house. You got me?”

“Yes sir,” I repeated.

“Cut the grass, take out the garbage and fix anything you break.”

“Cut the grass!” Henry complained. “You have like a hundred acres here. That’ll take all day.”

“Would you rather pay full rent?”

“Grass is cool.”

“Lastly, don’t go hungry. If you guys need it call me or Diane. We’ll get you some food, but it won’t be an everyday thing.”

“Thanks Uncle Jimmy,” Martha said, and hugged the big man.

“Don’t worry about it; just don’t make me regret it.”

Chapter 16

“You did what?!”

“Lighten up. I bought that property long before we were married,” Uncle Jimmy said. “I’ll do with it as I damn well please.”

“First you sold those two knuckle-heads the van, which allowed them to wreak havoc on more than just our town.”

“They’re not that bad,” Uncle Jimmy said.

“Have you ever seen them without shirts, dancing on that van and throwing beer bottles at passing traffic as if to dare drivers to stop and confront them?”

“Now Diane, you know that’s just a little legend in a little town.”

“I don’t get it,” his wife said. “What kind of dumbass lets teenage hooligan run-a-ways set up a love palace in his barn?”

“Henry’s my nephew and you know his old man’s a piece of shit. Besides, the kids already moved,” Uncle Jimmy said. “I was telling you about it, not asking for your advice or commentary.”

“It’s your property. I’m okay with that part. Here’s what’s bugging me. You’re the adult, Jimmy. That makes you liable for them and anything they do out there. What are you going to do when some kid gets hurt at a wild barn party?”

“You keep asking questions if you want. I think you should study to be a lawyer instead of nagging me,” Jimmy said. “Henry’s family. Period. For that matter, you know Theo and Martha’s folks. Those kids are all better off without the drinking, yelling and fighting that goes on in their houses.”

“I’ll give you that,” Diane said. “You know I love Henry, but good lord, they’re just babies.”

“Come on now, babies they are not. All three of them are still in school and they have jobs. It’ll work out fine. Show a little faith.”

“I don’t like idea, but promise me you’ll check in on them regularly. No better yet, I’ll go.”

“You’ll mother them to death,” he said.

“I have to get it out of my system. Of course, if I had my own...”
“How about we stop taking about the kids and start practicing?”

Chapter 17

Finally, the night arrived for the big concert. Martha wanted to pack a sandwich for the ride, but Henry insisted on getting a bite in town. They geared up and hit the road for the hour plus drive. After circling the arena a time or two Henry refused to pay the exorbitant parking rates and stopped the van in an alley surrounded by abandoned buildings.

“Aren’t you afraid the van will get stolen?”

“No, it’s just as safe as it would be in those renegade parking lots.”

“At least there’s a guy to watch the cars.”

“You know those guys take off as soon as the show starts. Those gypsies probably don’t even have permission to be out here taking innocent people’s money.”

Hurrying along with the crowd Martha asked, “So what do you want to do about dinner?”

“I’m not hungry,” he said. “You can get whatever you want.”

“I’ll grab something inside.”

“Damn, Martha. It costs three times as much. Can’t we get a burger or something from a vendor?”

“I’m not really hungry either.”

“Fine,” he muttered.

“Hey, I’m gonna get a Coke,” Martha said, once they entered the concert hall.

“Come on, let’s find our seats first.”

“We’ve been here a hundred times. You know where our seats are. We’ve got thirty minutes before the opening band. Come on,” Martha said, and pulled at Henry’s arm.

“Whatever.”

As they lined up Martha grew notably tense and snapped to face Henry.

“Is that your slut, Christy Bender?”

Henry looked across the way and said, “I don’t know.”

Wrong answer.

“Yeah, you do. That’s your little whore.”

“How about we go take our seats? I’ll buy you a drink from one of those guys walking around.”

Too late. Christy and Martha had locked stares. Henry labored to pull Martha away.

Chapter 18

Three hours later an electrified Martha and Henry swayed in tempo and hummed with a sea of other fans as they exited the concert. Glowing from a grand evening of dancing and music Henry suddenly took on rigid movement and a concerned expression. His ex, Christy, stood on the other side of the glass doors with her two brothers and new beau. He knew Martha saw them, too.

“I don’t give a shit about your little feud with her,” Henry said. “This ain’t the time and I don’t love the odds.”

“It’s between me and her,” she said. “I’ll just go out there and whip her ass.”

“Oh hell no. This is a mess nobody wants around the house. I’ll go straight out toward them. You turn right and mix in with the crowd and book it to the car.”

“Henry this is my thing. Let me finish it with that bitch,” Martha insisted.

“I’m all about you giving her a beat down, just not here. There’s too many of them and cops are crawling all over this place.”

“So what are you going to do?”

“I’m going to tell them basically the same thing. If they want trouble my belt’s open to it everyday. I’m in no mood to get arrested, not tonight anyway.”

Henry charged headlong into the fray. He noted Christy rushing past him. He didn’t need to look. He knew Martha well enough to know she hadn’t done as instructed. Following orders, especially from a guy, well that wasn’t her way. Henry had a moment of pride and admiration all rolled up...upside the head. As he pondered about the rough charms of his gal, Christy’s brother sucker punched him.

Martha locked on Christy and unloaded. Henry managed to pull them loose.

“You got what you wanted. Now go,” Henry said. “I’ll be right behind you.”

“You wouldn’t leave Theo.”

“You’re not me. Get out of here. I mean it.”

Chapter 19

Finally, Martha saw Henry running toward her. She didn’t see the rage in his face until too late. Blood had already started to coagulate in his hair above the left ear. He grabbed her by the arms and shook violently. As Martha broke loose Henry shoved her sending her jolting against the van before falling to the street. Sweat mixed with blood and dripped down unto Martha’s face as Henry ranted. She lay on her back in the alley painfully pinned down. For Martha, having lost control brought far more frustration than Henry’s hostility.

“You should have left well enough alone!” Henry screamed, and noticed tears rolling over the sides of her face.

Instantly sobriety replaced his rage. He tenderly began to wipe Martha’s tears. Her expression softened and the tears streamed. Henry rolled off of her and held her close. He kissed her and made love to her in the van.

All was far from well, though, as could be noted by the stifling silence that filled the van on the way home. Martha switched on the radio. She rubbed her shoulder. Henry noticed. She laid her head on his lap and began to sing along with the song playing. Henry smoothed the hair behind her ear and joined her in singing.

Chapter 20

Theo and I were sitting on the stairs of the barn when they arrived.

“Your boy has been around with his chest all puffed out,” I said.

“I figured he’d come.”

“Did you figure he wants to stab you?” Theo asked, as he assessed Martha’s ginger movements. He also noticed the frigid body language between his roommates.

“Let him come back and he’ll get his chance.”

“I reckon he will,” I said.

Theo got up and took Martha by the arm. She tried to resist. That girl’s not one to show signs of weakness.

“You look washed out. How much did you drink at the show?”

“Nothin’. Christy showed up and we had a go at it,” Martha said.

“Did she whoop both of your asses?” Theo joked.

“Ha, ha.” Henry said.

“What’d you do to little Miss Missy?”

“I gave her the smack down she begged to get,” Martha said proudly. “The tramp is lucky....”

A car ripped into the yard throwing up grass and gravel. Henry and I jumped off the porch. Theo hurried Martha into the barn. She dragged her feet all the way. The two of us took up positions on either side of the car leaving enough room for them to get out. As soon as we squared off Theo ran out of the house. He pushed Henry aside and clubbed Christy’s older brother at the base of the neck. He crumpled to the ground. From there Theo unleashed a fury of the likes I’ve never witnessed. The sights and sounds of a real fight are nothing like what you see on film. Skin rips, bones break and boys to men scream and cry in pain.

Henry and I never landed a single shot. In his decisive and haunting rage Theo cleared the lot.

“Get up and get out of here before I thrash all of you,” he ordered.

Whimpering uncontrollably each of the fellows did as directed. Christy’s oldest brother piled the others up in a heap in the backseat. He jumped in the car, hung us a bird and spun the wheels as he squealed out to the street. Once on the road he stopped, backed up and demolished the mailbox then peeled away.

“Aw hell no. Let’s go kick the shit out of those fucks,” Henry said, through gritted teeth.

“It’s finished,” Theo said. His words hung heavy and authoritative while his eyes seemed to say, more to follow. We all knew he meant more than the fight.

Henry burned with frustration. In that moment in time I felt a friendship on the verge. They didn’t look at each other with anger but with stark understanding.

“That’s not who we are.”

What he said was right and what was done was done. I think this is the first it has ever been mentioned since.

Chapter 21

“What are we going to do tonight?” Henry asked, wild eyed and smiling.

“Let’s go to wreck the building at Hooker’s.”

“We’ve done that to death,” Theo said.

“We could go down to Water Head Road and mess with the freaks,” Henry said.

“Those damn inbreeds are going to flip out and kill somebody one of these days,” Theo said.

“Shut up,” Martha said. “You guys know that’s all make believe talk. My whole life I’ve heard the same old tale with a different spin. There’s no family with big heads living down there. I think adults talk about it to keep kids from going over to that drug neighborhood.”

“No, it’s for real. I’ve seen them. We egged them a few years back,” Henry said straight-faced. “Seriously, that dirt road used to mark the outskirts of town. That’s where they sent deformed folks and retards. Back in the day speds from all around got dropped off and had to fend for themselves. Over the years they survived and made a mud puddle of a gene pool. I’m telling you it’s for real.”

“Go if you want to, I want no part of this foolishness,” Martha said.

“We could go mess with the Gallow Girls,” I suggested.

“That’s like taking a trip in a rattling death trap,” Theo said.

“Yeah, you go there,” Martha said. “Those girls will hook you up with VD or a baby, either way you’re dead.”

“This whole cardboard town is a death trap; we need to get out of here,” Henry said.

“Where’s there to go in an old van and less than thirty bucks among us?” Theo asked.

“What’s worse, toughing it out here or running off only to have to come crawling like babies back home?” asked Martha.

“I want to live,” Henry interjected.

“Last I checked you were very much alive.”

“No, I want to do something wild, to be a free spirit.”

“I can’t wait for this,” Martha mused.

“Make fun if you like,” Henry said. “I think I’m going buy a motorcycle.”

Chapter 22

Live indeed. Once Henry bought a motorcycle he lived life renewed. He seemed to go a little soft on us. He rambled about the animals he saw while riding and babbled on endlessly about nature. Never before had he noticed the turn of the seasons, not where he really stopped to admire and appreciate their splendor. He drove slowly, looking left and right. Trees, flowers, leaves--they all seemed like the work of pure magic. Of course the foliage came, blossomed, changed colors and hibernated until time to do it again. No magic there, he had learned the life cycle in earth science in third or fourth grade. What was miraculous was that he had never before noticed its majesty so clearly.

Unfortunately, he didn’t survey oncoming traffic with the same detail.

Chapter 23

I went to the thrift store the night before and bought a suit, some dark socks and a tie. Uncle Jimmy’s wife tied our ties. While Diane worked my tie, she and Uncle Jimmy poked fun at the stained shirt I wore. It was the only thing the store had in my size and it only cost fifty cents. Mostly, I figured Henry wouldn’t care.

It’s kind of funny. You see Henry’s grandmother dragged him and Theo to church every now and again. I never went. My momma said it wasn’t right for me to be

there if I wasn't a member. My family didn't belong to any church, so I never went. What's funnier is the preacher man didn't no more know Henry than the man on the moon.

I twisted and fidgeted from the minute I stepped out onto the parking lot. My face grew hot. I felt like some powerful force was weighing down on me. I slipped into a seat in the back row. I found no comfort in the pew or in my own skin. I wanted to scrape it off as the preacher talked about Henry. He went on about a good boy who loved his mother, had lots of friends and did well in school. Henry hadn't lived in his mother's house for years. He skipped more than he attended school and other than Martha, Theo and me he didn't have another friend on the planet. I don't know why the preacher saw fit to unload such a bellyful of crap.

During the service the preacher man droned on endlessly about a guy he clearly did not know. I understand people have expectations for what is proper, good, upright and all, but the way I see it, we were in a church. Henry's grandma told us you have to tell the truth 'cause lying is a sin. Only Jesus can help you if you sin. She said it was especially bad to lie at the church, even in the parking lot, like the deacons and church ladies did every Sunday afternoon.

So in my eyes the preacher was writing himself an invitation to Hell as he told these many blatant untruths about Henry. To be perfectly honest, he should have said that Henry rarely attended church and in many ways he was a weird child. Fact was, when he took a mind to it Henry was a wild, wild boy.

Instead, armed with his Bible and catch phrases the preacher proclaimed, "This precious child has left our community, but take solace beloved as our faith lets us know Henry is in a better place."

I wondered if Henry was in such a good place if he might send a picture postcard sitting next to old Saint Pete. I'd feel comforted then to see that weird smile on Henry's face like he was about to sling a Coke bottle or something. I reckon that'd be more like the truth.

Once he was done, the preacher went on to tell us about Jesus. Smiling broadly, he visibly changed demeanor as he made this transition from eulogy to sermon. He handed out words from scripture like he had written it down himself. I had quickly come to determine that the preacher didn't know anything about a boy from his neighborhood, so what could he possibly tell me about Jesus? It was the longest two hours I ever endured.

Chapter 24

Henry got so messed up from being dragged by the car that his family couldn't bear the sight of his broken and torn body. Long before they had the good sense to divorce, Henry's parents couldn't agree on anything. This proved the exception as they had him cremated, and compromised by placing the urn in a wildly elaborate casket. All of it left me shell-shocked. I detested their choices. Henry was poor guy who hated the heat. He complained all summer long. He walked around bare-chested and carried a shirt around to wear in stores. Make no mistake Henry hated wearing anything more than shorts from spring to winter.

Truth be told, I was mad because I didn't get to see my friend one last time. His school picture on the on top of the urn filled casket did nothing for me. Speaking of school, Principal Jackson might as well have cancelled classes for the day. Friends of the deceased or not, kids didn't know what else to do when someone their age died. Tons of students skipped school to attend the funeral and added to the prolonged procession to the cemetery gravesite.

"From dust to dust. Amen," the preacher said, and as if on queue it began to rain.

Immediately everyone hurried to their cars. Theo watched as one of the workers started up a Caterpillar to push the fresh dirt into the grave. Theo rushed back and dove face down beside his friend's burial plot. I started after him and out of nowhere Henry's grandma snagged me by the arm. I tried to pull loose and she squeezed harder and gave me that scary "don't push me boy" look.

"Let him be," she said.

"I'm not going to say anything. I just want to get him out of the way so as not to have any trouble," I said. "You know he'll hurt those guys who are trying to do their job."

"Naw son. Let him be. Theo loved Henry more than he loved anything in this world. There's a hurt on that boy right now that can't be consoled," she said. "Theo knows he's alone. From now on he's really alone. He won't take out his pain on those men. He'll do what's right, for Henry's sake. Now come on and help an old lady to her car."

A monstrous arrangement of flowers arrived courtesy of the Country Gentleman. He directed his manservant to place them by the headstone. We overheard him speaking to Henry's parents.

"I didn't know the boy. In fact, I have it on good authority he may be one of the vandals who wrecked my work site," he said flatly. "But at the end of the day he's merely a child. The death of a little one hurts every human soul in deep places. I'm terribly sorry for your loss."

"You have moxie to come here and to talk like that to my daughter," Henry's Grandma said. Before she continued Uncle Jimmy guided the unwanted guest and his body guards away. The man opened his oversized umbrella and took his leave graciously.

"What about Theo?" I asked, looking at him groveling in the mud.

"He'll take care of himself. You have to let him do what he's going to do," she said.

Chapter 25

Theo disappeared for three days. He showed back up with a tattoo of the van.

"Love the tat," Martha said.

"Thanks," Theo said. "I thought it was the best way to remember Henry. 'Friends Forever' seemed...I don't know, girly."

"I like it. Henry would, too," Martha said, inspecting the intricacies of the artwork. Quiet followed.

"Where ya been?" she finally asked.

"Down at the river," he said.

"Did you sleep in the van?"

“No, I sat out on the bank and watched the water roll and the fire burn,” he said. “I didn’t sleep too much. Think I’ll crash now.”

“Your manager called twice,” Martha told him.

“Was the second time to tell me not to come back to work?”

“No, he heard about Henry.”

“Doesn’t matter, I’m done with that place.”

“What are you talking about?” she asked.

“It’s time for a change. I don’t know what for sure; I’ll make up my mind when I wake up. Right now I’ve got to get some sleep.”

“All right then. Do you want something to eat? I can make you a sandwich.”

“Thanks Martha, I appreciate you, but I’m gonna hit the sack. I’ll catch up with you when I wake up, hopefully in a week or so. I don’t care about much else anyhow.”

“Fine. We’ll chat when you finish your Rip Van Winkle routine.”

They hugged long and hard. As they slowly pulled away their eyes locked in a moment of pain and understanding.

Chapter 26

Martha was sipping juice at the breakfast table when Theo finally emerged from his slumber. He fell into a chair, still rubbing sleep from his eyes.

“What are you going to do?” he asked.

“I want to go back to school,” Martha said, hoping she understood the question.

“Sounds like a good idea to me.”

“What about you?”

“I’m thinking I’ll spend a few more days and get my head right,” Theo said. “Then I’ll hunt for a new job or something.”

“Uncle Jimmy said we can stay here as long as we want.”

“Hmmm.”

“Well?”

“What?”

“Do you?”

“What?”

“Do you want to stay here?” Martha asked.

“Yep,” Theo said. “That was sort of what I was hoping for.”

“People will talk.”

“They already do, noisy fucks.”

“I imagine it’ll become even less charitable.”

“Half the town already thinks we were kicking it in a three way.”

“I know that,” Martha said somberly. “They’ll talk more junk when it becomes obvious.”

“Say what?”

Martha looked down. In a circular motion she rubbed her stomach. “I’m pregnant.”

Enough words had been spoken. Theo held Martha for hours. She fell asleep in the comfort of his arms. He watched her until she woke.

“If you want you and me can...”

“Theo you know better than that. I don’t need no man.”

Chapter 27

“What can I do you help you?” Martha asked.

“You could have saved me this intervention,” Theo said, indicating Diane, Uncle Jimmy and me.

“You can’t stay high all the time.”

“Paradise doesn’t seem to amuse me anymore,” Theo said. “Nothing seems worthwhile, I got nothing and I’m going nowhere.”

“It doesn’t have to be that way,” Diane said.

“What do you want me to do? Finish school, go to college, get married and have two point five children?” Theo jeered. “None of you did that. My parents didn’t. So I think I’m doing the best I can.”

“Smoking it up, fighting everybody in town and drinking until you pass out every night, is that what you call your best?”

“Theo, I loved Henry as much as you did,” Martha said through tears. “Sure you knew him longer, but I was his girlfriend. I ache that we lost him. I can never paint a picture clear enough for his child to really know him the way we did. Henry was something special to you, we all know that. If he was being stupid like this you’d be the first to snatch a knot of good sense into him. So, stop acting a fool and be faithful to Henry in death the way you were in life.”

“He went too soon and nobody had to pay for it,” Theo said. “Nobody but me.”

“Sheriff Mellen has a number of leads. Hit and run carries a heavy penalty, but when it takes the life of a child... Well, let’s say that son of a bitch will never see the light of day once he gets caught,” Uncle Jimmy counseled.

“Not good enough. I pulverized Christy’s brothers, her boyfriend and even security guards at the construction site. If any of them knew what happened they would have talked. I’m empty. I don’t have answers. I don’t have Henry.”

Theo’s jaw tightened with each word and his face reddened. Uncle Jimmy moved closer, but that spooked the big kid. He rammed his way out of the barn and took off on foot. Uncle Jimmy said the best course of action was not to follow, but to let Theo settle down before confronting him again. That proved a bigger mistake than the intervention.

Chapter 28

Martha showed no signs of distress even with no sign of Theo in days. I went to church the following Sunday, a different one. I figured I should pray for Henry and for Theo. Afterwards the pastor encouraged those with heavy burdens to come down to pray at the altar. I went to beg God for mercy on Henry’s soul, I feared he was too proud to do it for himself, even in the seconds prior to his death. While I was at it I said a word or two for Theo, Martha and me. Unlike anytime before I listened to the Bible passages and like a miracle I heard exactly what I needed. I rejoiced and smiled at the kismet, but I knew the errors of our ways. When the time came and the invitation was extended I went down and knelt before God.

I hadn't been there long when the preacher placed his hand on my shoulder. He moved away and laid hands on others who came to the altar rail in prayer. I went about praying even though I had long run out of words. I was the first to kneel down and the last to stand. From all the falderal that was going on my guess was the people around me thought I had just accepted Jesus as my personal lord and savior. I had no idea how correct I was.

Without notice, the preacher stood me up and announced, "Brothers and sisters another soul had been led to the Lord. This boy, formerly a hoodlum known to our community, has opened his heart to walk with Jesus and be washed in the blood of the lamb. Here at the foot of the cross he has come to be a witness for the Lord Jesus. Amen."

I was infuriated. I closed my eyes and prayed for the folks around me as much as Theo and Henry. It seemed to me the preacher and his flock needed prayer more than we did. That day I thought I might just become a preacher myself. It was not because of a moving or meaningful experience at that altar rail and certainly wasn't my love of Christ, but after the funeral and this terrible experience I wanted to help people. I set out to be there for those who lost a friend or family member or people who simply wanted a place to come and pray.

Chapter 29

Henry looked up only to see a glint of chrome as a bumper smashed into him and drew his body and motorcycle under a speeding car. His agonizing cries were muted by screeching wheels. Pinned beneath the vehicle, asphalt quickly shredded his clothes and flesh straight to the bone. The car kept rolling and dragging Henry. He just wanted it to end; it did but not end soon enough.

Martha woke from her reoccurring nightmare to the ringing of the phone. She had last been awakened in the middle of the night when she received the fateful call about Henry. She picked up the phone to find herself hauntingly in the nightmare's sequel. Some say lightning never strikes twice. Martha took no stock in the phrase as she processed the information coming across the line.

"Can you give me the name and number of his next to kin?"

"What happened?" Martha asked.

"Are you a relative?"

"Tell me what happened." Martha demanded.

"He was in an automobile accident."

"It's not him," Martha said. "It can't be. His van is here in the driveway."

"What's your relationship to the patient?"

"No, there's no way," Martha said racing to the front door. "I told you the van is here."

"Ma'am, the young man was struck by a car. We need to talk to his family."

"I'm his...his... I'm his family."

Chapter 30

Word of Theo's accident rocked the small town like a nuclear bomb, complete with fallout. Rumors abounded. Armchair detectives considered possible suspects in the persons of Christy's brothers and boyfriend, the Country Gentleman, Henry's dad and even Martha. No arrests were ever made. None of us were ever the same.

"I went by the barn, and found it empty. Uncle Jimmy said Martha packed up and moved. He said she wouldn't say where she planned to go."

"Yeah. She came by here," Theo said. "I told her somebody had to break the cycle. I gave her all my money and told her to get out and to go far."

"You think she's really gone?" I asked.

"I hope so, for all of us I hope she drives until she runs out of road. You know that Martha's a rough cut. She'll do everything a woman can do to give her child a fighting chance at a good life."

"I imagine you're right. She'll come out all right. What are we going to do about you?"

"Way too late for that, I'm not the one. You know, I've always felt like a freaking scarecrow. I'm forever out there in the middle of the field. It's like I'm part of this place. I'm out here trying to do something good, but nobody sees anything except the creepy thing on the outside. I could handle the rain, but the blood spattering broke me."

Theo told me to leave, too. When I wouldn't, he asked me to stop coming to see him. Over the years I slowed the frequency, but I still went to see him now and again. I don't know if it was a blessing or a curse, in either case I saw him hours before he passed. He coughed and laughed through his respirator.

"It was a mistake to put Henry underground, cause he's out there doing a little earth shaking. Martha, I believe, is living it up and making the world go round."

"Who knew you're a poet. You pegged it, those two are unstoppable."

"Do something for me," Theo said.

"Sure, whatever you want. It'll be done."

"Don't say any more prayers for me."

"What are you talking about?" I asked incredulously.

"I didn't get to grow old," Theo said. "I made too many foolish choices to regret them all."

"It wasn't just you. We all played a hand. Perhaps ladies fate and destiny had a dangerous dance in our lives."

"No way, I made like a wall flower and sat that dance out," Theo said. "It is what it is."

"Since we are being philosophical, I've always wanted to ask, do you think that Country Gentleman had anything to do with yours and Henry's accidents?"

"No, it was all us. We lived carelessly, but it's close to over."

"You're not making any sense. Maybe I should come back another time."

"Won't be no tomorrow and I'm fine with that because I'm not afraid to die. Do you want to know why?" Theo asked.

"Sure."

“Because through the full catastrophe of life we lived,” Theo stated. “We lived without boundaries. It cost us, one and all, but we lived and I can rest easy. It helps to know that you won’t waste time praying, instead you will remember that we lived.”

Chapter 31

“In their precious years together Theo and Henry lived. I can attest to the fact that they lived. Along the way they chose to do irrational and often illegal things. Nonetheless they loved each other and I loved them.

“Sometimes a good notion is only that. I know good and well I never should have become a preacher. Hypocrite used to be such a big word to me; it doesn’t mean anything to me now. I’m not the one to talk to you about resurrection. That’s what you need to hear on a day like today. You see for me, I want to live. That makes it quite difficult to preach at funerals. In these my final words from the pulpit I leave you with a question and a comment. How will your friends remember you?

“I’m saddened to admit that I no longer have friends in my life like Theo and Henry, but I thank God to have known them. And that’s the Scarecrow Gospel. Amen and amen.”