

1

HARVE SQUINTED INTO THE SUN.

“Bank’s where all the money’s at.”

Enos leaned on the concrete block wall and spat into a clump of jackweed.

“You’re a dipshit if you think we’re bank robbin’. We ain’t robbin’ no bank.”

“That’s where all the money is.”

“First off, I don’t need all the money. I just need nineteen dollars.”

“You said you owe the Colonel twenty-four.”

“I already got five. I need twenty-four total ’cause if I don’t pay the Colonel back before Tuesday, there ain’t no way the boys are gonna let me back in the game next week. So I need nineteen more.”

The Colonel and the boys had been letting Enos play Friday night cards in the back room of the V.F.W. the last few weeks since Bill Plachett’s wife wouldn’t let him play after losing a week’s paycheck on a pair of fours, and they needed to fill the seat. Enos did not belong to the V.F.W., on account of the fact he never served. Crooked knee, he told folks. Otherwise he would have been over there sniping Krauts with the rest of them.

Harve pulled a kerchief from his back pocket and wiped the back of his neck.

“What’s second?”

“What do you mean?”

“You said we ain’t gonna rob the bank ’cause first off we don’t need all the money. Just some. So what’s second?”

Enos slid down the wall and squatted on his heels. The shadow of the top of his hat just barely bumped out of the straight line of the shadow of the granary. Skeetflies hummed.

“Robbin’ a bank, that’s dipshit thinkin’. You rob a bank, you got a gaggle of J. Edgar Juniors blood-hounding you to high ground. That money is guaranteed by the federal government, and while Eisenhower might not come down from Washington and sniff out that stolen cash his own damn self, you can be three times goddamned sure he’ll send a couple agents from the F.B.I. to do it for him.”

“Figured it’d be the Treasury Department.”

Enos looked up at Harve.

Harve shrugged.

“Wouldn’t it be the Treasury Department looking’ after the banks?”

“Fuckin’ matter?”

“S’pose not.”

Enos looked back to the scrub field. Jackweed and chicory littered the place haphazardly in uneven knots. The whole thing smelled dry as blackboard dust.

“So we ain’t gonna rob a bank, and we ain’t gonna rob the Piggly Wiggly ’cause there’s too many people round and we might get recognized, even if we wore masks or covered our faces. The truck would definitely get recognized.”

“What ’bout at night? We could rob the safe after dark when they’re closed.”

Enos sighed.

“You know how to crack a safe?”

Harve shrugged.

Enos shook his head.

“Besides, you don’t rob a safe. You burgle it. But since neither me or you know how to crack one, we ain’t gonna burgle nothing. Not the Piggly Wiggly. Not the gas station. Not even a chicken coop. You get caught rummaging around in the dark, some ole boy more likely fill yer belly with buckshot than ask you what day yer mama was born.”

A fat crow fluttered down on the hot dirt and twitched its head one way, then the other. It reminded Harve of nothing in particular.

Enos spat again into the jackweed.

“I got it. You an’ me, we’re gonna rob a nigger church.”

Harve snickered.

“They ain’t got no money.”

“Correction. One of ’em ain’t got no money. But a bunch of ’em? All together at once? Lookit here. How many of ’em you figure go to church together?”

“Which church?”

“Don’t matter. They’re all the same. Sunday rolls round, and they come from far and wide, dressed up in their best suits and dresses and church hats, and they converge on whichever godbox is closest. Every single one of ’em. Wouldn’t dare miss it. Only thing they got to make themselves feel like real actual human people. So how many you figure that is?”

“Per church?”

Enos nodded.

Harve looked up and squinted. He put the stub of his right hand middle finger to the bridge of his nose and rubbed. The bone and nail above the knuckle had been crushed away years ago as a kid when he hadn’t let go of a rope and gotten the finger jammed up in a barn pulley.

“Maybe... shit. I don’t know. Maybe fifty? Sixty?”

“Sounds ’bout right. Maybe more. Maybe seventy-five.”

“S’pose so.”

“And how much you think each one puts in the collection? When that plate comes round, how much you think each one a them drops in?”

“Hard to say. Fifty cents maybe? A dollar? Just so hard to say. Most

of 'em ain't got a pot to piss in, but they always got a few quarters for the collection, seems."

"So figure it out. Sixty of 'em. Fifty cents apiece. That's thirty dollars. Probably more."

Harve stepped over to the door and looked through. The door was swung out to let a breeze cool through the building, but there wasn't a breeze that day. The clock read twelve twenty-seven. The whistle would blow soon, and then it would be back to bagging seed.

"Don't seem worth the risk for just fifteen apiece."

Enos put his hands on his knees and pushed himself up to standing.

"Nineteen for me. You get the rest. I owe the Colonel twenty-four by Tuesday. An' also, there ain't no risk."

Harve huffed, unconvinced.

Enos took a step closer to Harve, removed his hat, and brushed back hair and sweat with his hand. He slipped his hat back on. His voice when he spoke was low and deliberate.

"You rob the Piggly Wiggly, even if you don't get recognized, even if yer truck don't get spotted tearin' ass outta town, you got a whole lot of people pissed off and afraid they's next. And they're gonna be tellin' the sheriff to get off his fat ass and find those boys who done it and lock 'em up 'cause that's what they's payin' their taxes for and how can they shop at the Piggly Wiggly if armed gunmen's gonna be bargain' in just 'bout every other day snatchin' their purses? They're in mortal danger they tell him. Action must be took. But you rip off a bunch of nigger folk fifty cents apiece, you think anybody's gonna care enough to raise a fuss? You think the Sheriff's gonna give a god-damned shit?"

Enos raised his eyebrows and tilted his head forward.

"What? He gonna lay down a statewide manhunt with roadblocks at every intersection gettin' back a bag of nickels?"

The break whistle blasted.

Enos put his arms out wide and stretched his back. Those seed bags got heavy afternoons.

"They ain't got no phones out there at them churches, and they ain't

gonna have no guns at service. The sheriff ain't gonna care, and you ain't gonna get recognized. If they all look alike to us, then we must all look alike to them. 'Sides, we'll cover our faces. Park the truck down the road apiece. Walk in. Empty the plates. Walk out. Drive away. Pay the Colonel. Head over to Irene's to celebrate."

Harve nodded.

"S'pose that's 'bout right."

The two men headed inside, Enos leading the way.

"So that settles it. This Sunday, you and me, we're robbin' a nigger church."

2

PASTOR STOKES STOOD IN FRONT OF HIS CONGREGATION, sweat beading on his forehead. It was going to be a hot one. That was good. Make them work for it. The way Pastor Stokes saw it, the gates of heaven do not open for men—or women—who decide to let the Lord come to them. It's an uphill climb, heaven. And if sitting here in God's house with its dry-grain walls and wood-splintered seats, with the heat of God's glorious morning threatening to make the air boil, well, if it helped remind these fine folk of the ripping hot flames of damnation, then sitting here was time well spent. Salvation don't come cheap.

Say, that was pretty good.

Pastor Stokes took a breath.

"Salvation don't come cheap..."

The Tillmans sat near the back. Absolom was dozing off slightly, so Ruby swatted his knee. His eyes popped open. Their little girl, Lulu, sat next to her mother on the aisle. Sonny Harper and Sarah Robbins were in their usual seats on the left. How long had Sarah been letting Sonny walk her to and from Sunday service? Two years now? Mr. Arthur sat by himself in his grey suit, his cane resting against the wall.

Little Gracie sat alone in the back. Her daddy was laid up after getting horse-kicked in the chest, and either Gracie or her momma had to stay with him pretty much night and day. Today was Gracie's turn to attend. And in the front row sat Miss Temperance in a violet dress. Her back was straight as a trotline with Sunday supper fighting on the hook. Her hands were on her knees, her eyes were opened wide, and her mouth was warm and inviting.

"Least, that's the way I see it. Course, I'm just a man. And men are fallible..."

Some congregation hummed "mmhm." Oneida Pate let loose a "yes suh." Violla Babineaux sat behind Oneida with her simple man son, Boy Junior, trying her best to keep the gentle fool from raising a giant paw and smashing a horsefly resting itself atop Oneida's new hat, white-brimmed and pristine as a morning lily.

"So maybe that means I'm wrong. Maybe I haven't got a clear picture..."

Pearla Brown and Esther Rawlins both nodded. Oneida Pate cried out "no suh" and shook her head firmly. Miss Temperance also shook her head, and her smile turned down at the edges like she did not care for the thought of Pastor Stokes being anything less than what she thought he was—a good, good man.

Pastor Stokes raised his eyebrows as if to say "maybe it's true—maybe I don't have a clear picture of the way things work." Miss Temperance mouthed the word "no." Sometimes, Pastor Stokes thought as he looked at Miss Temperance's soft, full lips, it was good to pump the gas a little. Warm up the engine before tearing down the road full throttle.

"But if I am right..."

Pastor Stokes did not wink at Miss Temperance, though he thought about it, and the look of relief on her face suggested she knew he had thought about it.

"If I'm right, then the gates of heaven do not open for the men..."

Pastor Stokes turned to Oneida Pate, rocking forward and then back, her paper fan huffing puffs of warm air into her thick face.

“Or women...”

Oneida Pate nodded. Boy Junior grunted and laughed.

“Who decide to let the Lord come to them...”

Pastor Stokes slid his shoulders back and inflated his chest.

“It’s an uphill climb, heaven. You never seen a hill so high. If you want to get up there, you’re going to have to dig deep and reach up...”

A dozen or more folk let out an “amen.” Pearla Brown was clearly working up towards a “hallelujah.” And Pastor Stokes knew that when Pearla Brown let loose a “hallelujah,” well, then it would be the precise right time for Brother Gordon to send round the collection plates.

“And folks, you got to remember, we’re climbing that hill each and every day we wake up here on God’s green earth...”

A “yes suh” from the back.

“We’re climbing it every morning we set out to work...”

Another “yes suh.” Possibly from Ruby Tillman. It was hard to say. Then another. Then many more.

Pastor Stokes looked at Mr. Arthur, who had recently blasphemed the Jackson boy for cutting through Mr. Arthur’s cabbage garden on his way to call on Zadie Smith so they could share a lemonade at her auntie’s house.

“Every day we open our mouths and speak to our neighbors, even when we feel those neighbors likely deserve them cross words...”

A multitude of affirmations.

Pastor Stokes looked to Viola, who put her arm around Boy Junior’s shoulders and massaged his neck to keep him from getting any more restless.

“Every time we raise our voice at our brothers and sisters and at our sons and daughters because Lord knows we only got so much patience and it sometimes just ’bout run out...”

Viola smiled and nodded. Pastor Stokes looked down at Miss Temperance sitting in the front row in her violet dress.

Pastor Stokes looked to Gracie alone in the back row.

“Every time we’re tasked with takin’ care of those who rightfully should be takin’ care of us...”

Gracie put her head down.

“No, suh. That hill, it ain’t going to be easy to climb. Because that’s the way God grew it. And you best believe he grew it big for a purpose. He grew it mighty tall and mighty steep so he could know that anyone who reached the top was deserving of that one last step right through the gates of paradise and into the waiting arms of Jesus himself...”

The room erupted with exuberant cheers. Miss Temperance smiled. Good Christ was that smile inviting. Pastor Stokes closed his eyes and tilted his head to an angle.

“So I might just be a man. And I might make mistakes, but that ain’t going to stop me from climbing that hill...”

He was barking now. Folks were cheering. Miss Temperance was leaning so far forward she was in danger of slipping off her pew. Pastor Stokes smiled to her.

“And I invite you all to climb with me.”

Pearla Brown released a profound “hallelujah,” and it was time for Brother Gordon to send round the collection plates.

It was a goodly amount that day. Pastor Stokes could see that as the plates reached the front and Brother Gordon placed them on the gray table by the window. Pastor Stokes was already divvying the sum up in his head. Four dollars to the Widow Martin for canned beans, candles, dewberry preserves, cinnamon, pork belly, corn meal, and apples. Seven dollars to James Adley for a new fan belt so he could get back to driving Emmalee Welton cross town to her job keeping house for that white family. The Parkers? He thought their names were the Parkers. Or maybe the Richardsons. Right now Emmalee was back to walking the three miles in the morning and the three miles home at night, leaving her two little ones before the sun even rose up. Seven dollars for a fan belt would fix that right quick.

And maybe a dollar or two for a box of chocolates for Miss Temperance who was surely, if her current posture was any indication, going to be inviting the Pastor over for evening supper someday soon, if not this very night. Maybe another fifty cents for eggs and coffee the next morning. God willing.

“Brothers and sisters, let us bow our heads for all the heavenly gifts God is sure to bestow on us in this coming week. Let us pray—”

The door in the back of the church crashed open, snapping off one rusty hinge and hanging limply. Two men stood there, white boys both. They wore dirty kerchiefs round their faces, hiding everything below the eyes. Both wore beat-up, felt-brimmed hats pulled low. The shorter one carried a burlap sack. The taller brandished a shotgun.

“Next one a you what moves gets his head removed from his shoulder bones.”

Folks twisted in their pews to see what was happening. Ruby Tillman pulled Lulu close, Oneida Pate clasped both hands to her mouth, and Pearla Brown cried out, her stout frame leaning generously into Sonny Harper who nearly buckled from the weight. The goings-on confounded Pastor Stokes, and his brain spun, hardly able to register the events playing out in the back of his church.

“Gentlemen, we... See, we’re in the middle of Sunday worship, you see.”

The tall one took a step.

“Where’s the fuckin’ money, preacher?”

Pastor Stokes’ mind was all a jumble. Money? What in hell were these boys talking about?

“What money?”

The short one moved to the gray table by the window.

“Here it is.”

This couldn’t be happening. Pastor Stokes tried to take inventory of his flock. Somehow, Mr. Arthur’s cane was now gripped in his knuckly fist. Viola was sobbing with both arms wrapped tight round Boy Junior. Brother Gordon’s fists were also clenched, and he had silently slid up alongside Esther Rawlins. Miss Temperance’s eyes were bulging, threatening to burst forth with tears. And some broke-ass cracker was dumping the offering plates into a dirty burlap sack. Pastor Stokes looked down to the Good Book clenched betwixt his hands. When the good Lord tests a man, he thought, He really knows how to put His back into it.

The short one dropped the last plate to the floor with a clatter and spun tight the neck of the sack.

“All done.”

The tall one didn’t look to his partner as he spoke. He kept his eyes on Pastor Stokes.

“Not quite.”

The tall one went to Lulu Tillman and took the girl by the arm. Ruby screamed “no no not my baby,” and the white man swung the barrel of the shotgun up to her face. To Absalom he said:

“Behave your woman.”

With hate in his eyes, Absalom pulled Ruby back. The tall one yanked little Lulu from her seat and to the back of the room out of arm’s reach of anybody.

“How much you reckon we got?”

The short one paused, opened the bag, and peeked in.

“I don’t know. A bit. Maybe thirty.”

“Goddamnit. That ain’t enough.”

Miss Temperance could no longer hold back the tears. Pastor Stokes held his Bible tight to his chest, hoping he could force the word of God directly into his heart and rally the courage he needed to make it through the next five minutes.

“Suh, I’m going to ask you not to blaspheme in God’s house.”

Someone on the left of the room gasped. Surprise washed across the countenance of the tall one.

“Fuck you say?”

“Suh, I respectfully request you consider where you stand. You’ve entered a house of the Lord. I just ask you keep that in mind when you speak under His roof.”

The tall one laughed dryly.

“Preacher, you got sand. I give you that. But that’s all I’m gonna give you.”

He twisted Lulu’s arm, and she yelped and her knees went limp to the floor. Her mama cried out, and Absalom buried her face into his shoulder so she could not bear witness.