

Chapter 12

An anemic yellow sun pierced the light overcast. Bradley shielded his eyes with a hand to his forehead as he walked, with little regard for where he was or where he was going. He had no plan except to distance himself from the dismal hospital room where Lizzie lay dying.

Generally oblivious to his surroundings, he was several blocks from the medical center before he became aware of others on the street, and then only because of some commotion ahead. A small knot of people, including a half-dozen teenagers, clustered around an animated little figure of a man who held a Bible aloft in his left hand and gestured wildly with his free right hand, pointing and thrusting, jabbing the air, demanding and threatening. The bystanders apparently were more curious than interested in what the man had to say; their number swelled and shrank in a random sort of way as newcomers joined the fringes and others, their curiosity satisfied, moved on.

“Jesus shed His precious blood for you, that even the vilest sinner may be redeemed,” the little man shouted. “Is there one among you who can say he has not sinned? Search your hearts, my friends. I come in the name of Jesus, crucified on the dark cross of Calvary, because all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.”

The little preacher’s voice rose. He spread his arms wide, imploring his listeners and waving his Bible.

“My friends, listen to Brother Percy! God will enrich your lives. Just give Him a chance. God loves you. Jesus loves you. Only in the light of Jesus will you find what you seek. Only through His blood will you find the way to salvation and eternal life. Only in accepting the will of God will you find comfort in this world.”

His speech was rapid, like the chant of an auctioneer: “When you hear the voice of God and listen to His voice, and accept the love of Jesus, God will give you the strength to stand up against the wicked powers of darkness. He’ll cloak you in the breastplate of His righteousness.”

A teenager at the front of the circle, nearest Brother Percy, began to mimic the preacher’s movements, bobbing and weaving like a boxer in the ring, pawing and jabbing with his right hand as if striking out at an imagined adversary.

“Breastplate?” mocked another. “Did he say breast? Hey, Brother Percy, does your old lady know you come down here on the street corner and talk to young chicks about breasts? Watch

your language, man, Erika here has sensitive ears!”

A teenaged girl, hanging onto the arm of the youth who was verbally taunting the sidewalk preacher, screeched gleefully. “Don’t give him too much credit, Rudy,” she said loudly. “You know he ain’t got no old lady. He probably likes little boys.”

“Listen to them,” parried the little preacher shrilly. “Hear the voices of evil! Young women, don’t sacrifice your spirits to these idolaters, these hypocrites. They don’t respect your womanhood. The Bible says the hypocrite will destroy with his mouth. But he can’t touch you if you walk in the light of Jesus . . .”

Bradley Morris moved on. He had witnessed the scene before, as street-corner preachers were common in this part of Memphis. Today it was Brother Percy, another time it would be someone else, but the pattern would be the same and he knew the pattern well. The little preacher would grow more agitated, his voice rising to an ever sharper pitch in his fervor. His crowd of listeners would grow. Some would revel in his message, while others listened in embarrassed silence. A few of those who took him seriously would seek to debate his logic, or his interpretation of the Scripture. The mimic, buoyed by the swelling audience, would join forces with the teenager who had begun to mock the preacher with words. Others in the crowd would pick up the cue and challenge the self-appointed messenger of God, deriding him openly.

Bradley also knew that their insults would not deter the preacher—would invigorate him, in fact, paying him the high tribute of persecution. For it was persecution that elevated this obscure little man to the ranks of the blessed, carrying him a step closer to the Kingdom of God.

Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you and say all manner of evil against you . . . Memory failed. How many years ago had he heard those words, sitting at Lizzie’s side in Shiloh Church? They were elusive to his own mind now, but surely must be the source of Brother Percy’s determination to take up his pulpit on the street corner and suffer the certain insults and hostility.

Bradley looked about, seeking his bearings. The pain in his leg was intense and he needed a place to rest.

Across the street, on one of the somber red-brick buildings, he spied a row of pigeons lined up body against body and clinging to the false storefront crown, dipping and swaying in the spring wind gusts. They seemed to form a solid living wall, a staunch cooperative line of defense against nature’s spasms. It struck him as both fascinating and absurd that some of the birds faced

in one direction, some in another, so that from either front or back the view would be head, tail, tail, head, head, tail. Did the birds know this and was it intentional, or were they like people, too often joined in what they hoped was a common effort but in fact headed in different directions?

He tried to force his mind to dwell on such insignificant questions. A moment of consciousness devoted to the pigeons was a moment in which his brain might be relieved of the stress that came with thoughts about Lizzie.

Looking up at the pigeons, he carelessly bumped into a young man coming toward him on the sidewalk. He started to apologize, but the youth cut him off, demanding angrily, "Watch where you're fuckin' going, old man!" He stepped aside to accommodate an old woman clad in a heavy, dark-colored coat and wearing a green transparent sun visor on her head, walking slowly with the aid of a cane. She carried a large purse over her free arm, clutched close to her body as though she feared there might be thieves lurking nearby.

He sought refuge in a small café at the corner, and even though it was poorly lit and dingy he felt more comfortable once he had stepped inside. A few small tables covered with red-checked oil cloth lined the walls and sat at random in the middle of the room. He ignored the tables and shuffled to the back, slid onto one of the half-dozen or so padded bar stools that stood along a short counter, and asked the lone waitress for coffee.

Something about the unpretentious little café was familiar. It reminded him of the intimate trattoria where he and Lizzie had stopped for lunch in Vizzini, where the pretty waitress had made him think back to Lizzie as a young girl in Simpson's ridge. This was a memory he could not elude; any escape from the image of Lizzie lying comatose in the hospital room he had just left would be short-lived.

"How 'bout setting me up to a cup of that, buddy?"

Bradley was startled by the voice of a man he hadn't noticed, approaching from the side of the room. The man was young, probably in his mid-twenties. He was missing a hand, his left arm having been severed just above the wrist, and looked unbalanced when he walked. His jeans and heavy plaid shirt were frayed but reasonably clean, his hair long and unkempt and his face covered with scruffy beard.

"Damn you, John Henry," the waitress scolded, "I told you not to bother the customers. Now get the hell out of here."

"No, no, that's all right," Bradley Morris said. "Get him the coffee. I'll pay for it."

“I told him he couldn’t stay around here if he bothered the customers,” the woman protested, nonetheless pouring another cup. She shoved it rudely across the counter, in the general direction of the young man. “Here. Now drink this and go.”

“He can say if he don’t want to talk to me,” the young man whined. “I don’t bother nobody that don’t want me.” He turned to Bradley. “Thanks, man. I appreciate this. I don’t go around panhandling, just been down on my luck a little lately. You know what I mean?”

“Sure. I know what you mean.”

John Henry, taking his benefactor’s response as a cue, slid onto the next stool. He carefully poured a generous measure of sugar from a metal-domed glass container on the counter and stirred his coffee vigorously. When he spoke again, it was almost as if he were speaking to himself: “It’s hard for a guy like me to get work, you know what I mean?” He sipped the hot coffee, then turned and looked at Bradley intently. “Man, you look like shit. You sick or what?”

The woman, whose back had been turned, whirled and glared at John Henry. He ducked, as if expecting to be hit. The woman turned her back again and John Henry gestured obscenely in her direction.

“I’m okay,” Bradley said. “I’m just tired.”

He had an impulse to pour out his feelings to the young stranger, to tell him about Lizzie and recount their happy years together. He wanted to speak of the emptiness of life without her and describe his overwhelming sense of loss and despair. He couldn’t expect the young man to understand, but he needed to tell someone his story, to let his heartache gush forth. He said nothing, however, and the two men drank their coffee in silence, staring straight ahead.

The waitress came and refilled their cups. John Henry again poured a generous if imprecise amount of sugar and stirred with a loud clatter of spoon and cup, and drank half the coffee before speaking again: “My old man died. He didn’t look no worse than you, but there was something wrong with his heart. They put him in the hospital and said he was doing okay. He was s’posed to come home next day, but he was up setting on the pot and went out like a light. Just like my old man . . . shot hisself off to the pearly gates trying to take a crap.”

John Henry’s voice quivered. “It’s hard when you ain’t got no job,” he said. “You know what I mean?” He scowled at the woman, daring her to challenge his discourse with the customer, but she pretended not to hear.

“Yes, I understand,” Bradley replied. At another time, he might have responded to the

emotional turmoil evident in the young vagabond's manner, but now he was too encumbered with his own pain to be concerned.

The young man scooted off the stool and walked away, muttering to himself as he went out the door.

"I'm sorry about him," the waitress said. "I chase him out all the time, but he always comes back. I keep hoping he'll take his business somewhere else. I do kinda feel sorry for him sometimes, though. Like my grandma used to say, his brain's like two grains of wheat hid in two barrels of chaff."

"He didn't bother me, really."

"Don't you want some pie or something, hon? You look like you could use something to eat."

"No. I'm fine. I'd just been walking a bit too long. I've got a bad leg, and sometimes it gives out on me. But I'm all right now. I need to be moving along."

"Stay and visit," the waitress said. "I'm good to talk to, and there won't be many people in here today. I'm just like a bartender back here. You can tell me your troubles, or practice your bad jokes on me, whatever . . ."

"Thanks, but I need to go."

The waitress looked disappointed, but said nothing more.

Bradley paid for the coffee and left his change on the counter, then limped out of the café and walked west, toward the Mississippi. A few blocks farther on he came to the riverfront, where there was a modest-sized public park atop the bluff and a long, dilapidated concrete stairway that led down to the river's edge. Two solitary figures sat on park benches and looked out over the river. Overhead, a large flock of Canada geese winged its way northward, the birds' rude and incessant honking countering dramatically the graceful beauty of their flight and intricate pattern of their formation.

The wind off the river was cool. Bradley's thin cotton jacket was too light for long periods outdoors, but he gave no thought to the cold. He wanted to feel the ever-present and enduring river, to dip his hands in the murky water and tromp along the river's edge as far as he could go, to keep walking until he had lost track of time and place and no longer had to confront his mental image of Lizzie, pale and dying in her bed. He leaned heavily on the rusted iron railing and dragged his aching leg down the broken, uneven steps. The descent was longer than he thought

and it took several minutes, but at last he felt the wet sand under his feet.

He walked for perhaps a hundred yards along the edge of the water, limping badly, then paused and looked back. His tracks stretched behind him like a dotted line on some giant parchment. When a man dies, he reflected, he leaves no tracks. *A life is like my tracks in the sand. The river will wash them away.*

The flat and smooth river's edge soon gave way to a ragged, muddy embankment and he was forced to turn back. He mounted the steps slowly, the arduous climb back to the top of the bluff sapping what little strength he had left, and lowered himself onto a cold wooden bench, forgetting the city at his back. All the other benches were empty now; he was alone.

From this high vantage point, Bradley could see for miles up and down the Mississippi. He studied the river as if seeing it for the first time, awed by its paradoxical power and tranquility. Rivers were created to keep pace with eons, not the infinitesimal lifespan of mortal beings. The Mississippi had churned its way toward the Gulf of Mexico for countless centuries, and who knew how many mortals had sat where he sat now, atop this bluff, looking down upon the river, astonished by its splendor.

Far downriver, a tugboat pushed a string of barges in his direction, butting stubbornly against the strong current as it made its way upstream. The throb of the tug's powerful diesel engines was barely perceptible to his ears. He could make out a lone deckhand, busy on one of the front barges, as the tug churned the water into a white wake that stretched out behind for a great distance and, measured against the flowing river, looked to be moving rapidly. In reality, it was making slow progress, more accurately measured against markers along the riverbank—the bushy willows and towering cottonwood trees.

What did the barges carry? That question occupied Bradley's mind and helped him escape, for the moment, the mental torment that was his affliction. He wondered about the crew of the tug. How many were there? Where was their home port? Did they have wives and children who waited while they plied the river with their string of barges? Were there women among them? Who was their captain?

He watched the tug for some time before it drew close and began to edge toward the near shore, herding its barges in the direction of the Memphis riverfront docks. Rivers were not for hurried people. Rivermen must be patient, their tugboats moved so slowly. *Maybe I should have chosen life on the river instead of the railroad. But then I would have had to be away from*

Lizzie, and I could never have done that. His anguish returned.

Bradley struggled up from the bench, uncertain at first, then limped slowly to the lone structure at the edge of the deserted park and entered the dimly lit men's room. He began to retch. The heaving pulled at his stomach and strained his chest. He pushed into a toilet stall, eyes running and throat inflamed from the exertion, and stood over the bowl expectantly until the retching subsided. Insensible to his filthy surroundings, he felt better inside the tiny cubicle, its walls pressing closely on three sides and a steel door securely latched at his back. Here, no one could invade his tranquil solitude. This was a place where he could remain, alone in his grief, for as long as he felt the need.

Vulgurities scrawled in ink and pencil on the cubicle walls drew his attention: "Bash a queer for Christ," "faggot ass," then something that must have been a racial epithet but was no longer legible, followed by "dumb nigger" and "Save this land, join the Klan."

Other inscriptions had been scratched into the paint, then scratched out, as the compartment endured long seasons without new finish. What appeared to be the most recent addition, on the side wall at Bradley's elbow and initiated with green felt marker, had begun as an obscene drawing of hairy testicles and a fat, dangling penis. A later artist had added to the sketch, penciling in eyes and mouth so that the scrotum became a puffy human face and the penis a bulbous nose. Below the crude drawing was scrawled "A HEBREW," and after that, "stupid jew."

The opposite wall of the cubicle, as if through some unstated but universally understood agreement, had been spared the worst obscenities. It offered an absurd collection of what its contributors must have considered contemplative discourse: "Jesus loves those who love themselves." "Those who truly love themselves do not fall into the false consciousness created by belief in religion." One writer, perhaps agitated by the coarseness of what he saw or perhaps merely eager to demonstrate a brush with intellect, had added an indictment: *Voice écrit le mots de sots*. Bradley concentrated briefly on this simple epigram. He recalled little of his high school French, but decided that it said something about the words of fools.

At another time, he would have been repulsed by the bigotry and ignorance displayed by the ugly graffiti and embarrassed that it was here in a public place in Memphis, for all the world to see. But on this day, his disgust was tempered by an inescapable sense of resignation. What did it matter?

After several minutes, although he was reluctant to surrender the haven offered by the protective walls, he left the toilet stall and moved with purpose across the room to a dirty sink. He cupped his hands under the dripping faucet, filled them with cold water and splashed it on his face. He looked about for paper towels, but the metal rack on the wall was empty. He wiped his palms on his trousers, rubbing them quickly over his thighs. He was about to turn toward the door when some subtle hint of motion in a solitary, gurgling urinal caught his eye.

A narrow shaft of fading afternoon sunlight angled across the room from a single small window near the ceiling. Like a theater spotlight, it illuminated the performer: a large cockroach trying to climb the face of the urinal, struggling against a continuously flowing sheet of water. He watched, appalled yet fascinated, as the insect clawed its way torturously up the stained porcelain surface almost to the top, then finally lost its grip and slid back. At the bottom, saved by a foul wire screen in the drain, it kicked frantically until at last it gained enough traction to begin the ascent again. This time it got half way up before being washed down. But again it persisted, found treacherous footing, and began once more its hopeless climb.

What might the insect gain even if it succeeded in its heroic effort to reach the top of the urinal? There was no way for it to escape. It was fighting a battle it could not win.

Bradley Morris was a gentle man; he felt pity for all living things. Even this loathsome cockroach deserved better than the torment it must be suffering. He found a small bit of pine branch on the ground just outside the door and, returning to the urinal, raked the insect out onto the concrete floor and watched it drag itself toward a corner of the room.

It was as if he had been God for that brief instant, he thought to himself, exercising the power of life and death. *And I gave it a chance at life . . .*

But God would not favor Lizzie with new life. She would be taken from him and there was nothing he could do. He still felt intently the bitter distress that had driven him from her bedside earlier in the day, but knew that there was no eluding the awful reality. He would no longer try to run away. He went to a telephone sheltered on an outside wall of the building and, with a trembling finger, dialed the number he and Lizzie had shared for more years than he could remember. When Sarah answered on the second ring he told her, in a plaintive whisper, "I need help. Can someone come and pick me up?"

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