

Sanctified, In the Flesh

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HE DISENGAGED THE GEAR, GROUND THE KEY FORWARD. The motor clicked. The steering went heavy in his hands. He pushed the signal bar upward with his palm, crossed lanes.

"What is it?" she asked.

"Nothing," he said.

He pulled onto the gravel, let the car stop. Reaching beneath the steering column, he connected the hazard lights. In the corner of the mirror he could see his wife craning her neck toward him, watching his hands.

Opening the door, he stepped from the car. He kicked the tire nearest him. The headlights, he saw, were thick with the crusts of insects. He leaned toward the windshield, shins against the bumper, and placed the flat of his hand on the hood, against the warm metal.

He could see through the glared glass his wife, attentive. He slid a hand through the gap in the grill, opened the hood.

He examined the engine block. He spat on it, watched the droplet sizzle down to a white streak. Removing the dipstick, he squinted at the oil-dark tip. He twisted the battery cables. He wiggled the caps off the spark plugs, squinted down at the burning blank porcelain, forced the caps back on.

He closed the hood. He climbed into the car.

"What's the problem?" she asked.

"Oh," he said. "This and that."

He turned the key. The motor clicked. He turned off radio, the fan, hazard lights. He turned the key, without result.

"Motor?" she asked.

He shrugged. He turned on the hazard lights again.

"Want to go to the Lard over it?" she said.

"The Lord?" he said. "Not yet."

He turned the key. Nothing happened. Getting out of the car, he opened the hood. The belts were tight and showed little sign of wear. He thumped the battery casing with his fist. He climbed back into the car,

turned the key. Nothing happened.

"You say it," he said, and crossed his arms for prayer.

They lifted their heads together and uncrossed their arms. He turned the key. Taking the key from the ignition socket, he pushed it back in, turned it again.

"He give you the answer?" she asked.

He held himself fixed, as if listening for God. He heard nothing. He shook his head.

"Get out to take a look," she said. "It might come to you. God meets you halfway."

He climbed out of the car and opened the hood, staring at all the wire and metalwork as if to find engraved thereon God's awful word. He could not interpret it. He stuck his hands near the engine, as if manipulating something. His wife leaned forward, bringing her forehead against the windshield, trying to see.

He closed the hood, clambered back into the car. He turned the key. Nothing happened.

"You should say a prayer yourself," she said. "You have to exercise your own faith."

He shrugged. "We already prayed," he said.

"What about the extra mile?" she asked.

"What about it?" he asked.

"Christ says go it, Biggs," she said. "Pray."

He shook his head.

She threw up her hands. "We're stranded forever," she said.

"I put all my faith into the first prayer," he said. "That's where I'll keep it."

"Lard says pray always," she said.

"Wasn't the Lord exactly," he said.

"Out of his mouth or the mouth of his prophets, is the same," she said.

He shrugged.

"Apply the scriptures to your own person and you shall be full," she said.

They sat in the car, staring forward. A car approached but took the turn onto the town road before reaching them. Another followed.

He got out of the car. He raised the antenna by hand, knotted a handkerchief around the top. He turned, leaned against the trunk, looking backward down the road. No cars were visible. He climbed back into the car.

"Think you can get out of it that easy?" she asked.

He didn't say anything.

The car went dim inside, its edges softening and fading away. He lost

sight of his wife's knees, her calm hands. Her face in the mirror dissolved, flattened into incompleteness.

He examined her shadow in the glass, saw it burnt through by two headlights.

He unlatched the door, pushed it open.

"What is it?" she asked.

"Car," he said. He pulled his feet away from the pedals, dropping his ankles outside of the door. He stood, stepped the rest of the way out, closed the door.

He unbuttoned his shirt, beginning with the cuffs. The car drew closer, disappeared into a dip, its headlights rising again with the next swell. He undid the front buttons, pulled his shirttails out of his pants, worked the shirt off his arms.

He held the shirt in his hands, flapped it up and down.

The car hesitated at the turnoff, then jerked forward. He stood in his undershirt, watched the headlights swell larger. He waved the car toward him until it had him pinned in its lights. He squinted against the glare, brought the shirt up to cover his chest.

The car passed by them, dark and long. Pulling slowly to the edge of the road, it stopped.

He slipped his arms into the shirt. He buttoned the shirt up the front, left the cuffs hanging loose. The other car was ahead, headlights off, brakelights on, smoke chuffing from the tailpipe. He tucked in the tails of his shirt. The brakelights stuttered off, came back on.

He began to walk forward toward the car. There were vague shapes jostling within. He stopped, stared at the window, tried to make the shapes out. Turning, he walked back to his car, opened the door.

His wife looked up at him.

"They aren't getting out," he said. "I don't know what they're doing."

"Find out," she said.

"Let's wait for them to come to us," he said.

"You have to do your part," she said. "The Lard just points you down the path."

He slammed the door, walked toward the other car. He crossed behind it, felt the exhaust cross his shin warmly. Walking to the front window, he knocked on the dark glass.

The glass slid away, into the door. He saw behind a bearded face, tainted blue from the instrument panel, eyes swollen behind thick lenses. The man outside stooped, peered into the car, saw next to the driver two other men, large of body and in disarray, shoulders pressed against each other.

"Need he'p, do ye?" asked the driver.

The man nodded. "The name is Biggs. Know anything about cars?" he said.

The driver looked at the other two. "Ye boys know something of automobiles?" the driver asked. The other two laughed, ribbing one another.

"Maybe they do, Biggs, but maybe they don't," the driver said.

Biggs stood, looked back at his own car. He stooped back down.

"Shall we he'p him, boys?" asked the driver.

The other two did not speak.

"Yeah, we gone give ye something," said the driver, turning to Biggs. "Get to hell out of here while we think her through."

The window slid up. Biggs stayed staring at his reflection, listening to the laughter within. He walked back to his car, opened the door, got in.

"They going to help us?" his wife asked.

"Said they were going to give us something," said Biggs.

"See, you done your part and the Lard's given the blessing."

"He hasn't given anything yet," he said.

She shook her head. "Doubt not, fear not," she said.

"I have no good feeling," he said. "Rough types."

"Books are not known by covers," she said. "These people are heaven-sent, aren't they?"

"I don't know," he said.

"Don't know?" she asked. "Losing faith, are you?"

He shook his head.

The doors of the car ahead opened. The three figures clambered out. They stood leaning on the open doors, staring back at the other car. The driver walked to the back, opened the trunk. In the light of the trunk, Biggs saw him remove a tire iron.

"They are getting their tools out," his wife said. "Here they come to help."

"The tires don't need fixing," said Biggs.

The driver closed the trunk.

The couple sat silent, watching the shapes mill dimly about.

"Why, there's three of them," his wife said. "Why didn't you say there were three?"

"You didn't ask," he said.

"The scales fall from our eyes," she said. "Them's the three Nephites of yore," she said. "Couldn't be nobody else, the spirit tells me."

He laughed despite himself.

She frowned him down. "Fools mock," she said.

A lighter flared up outside and they saw in its glow the three faces huddled together, bringing cigarettes down to the flame. The faces came apart and the lighter went out. From the car, Biggs and his wife watched

the dull red mites of the cigarettes bob up and down.

"The three Nephites don't smoke," he said.

"The Word of Wisdom came after their time," she said. "You have to break past your prejudice, feel the spirit."

"I don't feel it," he said.

"I do," she said.

The trunk came open again. In the glow Biggs saw each of the three load things into their pockets.

"We should get out of here," he said.

"Good things come to those who wait," she said.

"What scripture tells that?" he asked.

"Go talk to them—so as to feel their spirit," she said.

"I already talked to them," he said.

"Go on," she said.

He got out of the car, approached the group.

"You can help us?" he said.

"We told ye we gone do something for ye," said the driver. "Get back in yer car."

He got back in the car.

"What I tell you?" said his wife. "God's anointed."

He didn't say anything.

The driver opened the door, shined the bore of a flashlight into Biggs's eyes.

"Get on out," the driver said.

Biggs's wife opened the door on the other side, climbed out. Biggs himself kept to his seat.

"I said out with ye," said the driver.

"You don't need me out to fix the car," said Biggs.

"First won't stay in yer car, then won't step out. Want a thing done for ye, don't it?" said the driver.

"Come out, honey," his wife said. "These are good men."

"Good men, are we?" asked one of the other two with the driver.

"Yessir, yessir," said the driver, taking hold of Biggs's arm, tugging slightly. "Good fore to aft."

Biggs shook the driver's arm off, slowly got out of the car.

"There now," said the driver, smiling, "that wan't nothing, were it?"

Biggs nodded, pretended to smile. His wife on the other side of the car in the dark was smiling, he could tell in her voice.

"I can't believe it!" she said. "Wait until the neighbors hear!"

The driver shined the light on her. "What's she saying?" he asked.

"She thinks God sent you," Biggs said.

"Do she?" asked the driver. "And mayhap he did," the driver said.

"Must be something, living all those years, never dying," she said.

"What?" asked the driver.

"Serving the Lard in all things," she said. "How does it feel to be sanctified in the flesh?"

"The Lard?" asked the driver.

"The Lord, she means," said Biggs. "God."

The driver just stared. He reached into his pocket, pulled out a pistol, pointed it at Biggs.

"This yer wife?" he asked.

Biggs raised his hands, nodded.

"Yer stupider than it look," he said.

"Guess you can't blab about it," the woman said. "Spiritual matters, as they are. Not secret but sacred."

"Yeah, we're on the religious through and through, lady," said the driver. "Now shut up."

"My lips are sealed," she said.

"Grant," said the driver. "Take these two over by the car and see to it they don't run off."

One of the larger men shuffled forward, took Biggs by the arm, led him over to the other car. He waved to Biggs's wife to follow.

"You two don't want to run off now, do ye?" asked Grant.

Biggs shook his head.

"Wouldn't want to have to give out something before ye made peace with yer Lord," he said, "but I will, you make me."

Biggs's wife said, "Bet you three've helped a lot of people."

Grant nodded cautiously. "We taken care of a few in our time."

"Bet you have some inspiring stories to tell."

Grant grunted, closed his eyes.

"Biggs, you see his metal band?" she whispered, pointing at Grant's armband. "Just like the pictures in the Book of Mormon. He's a Nephite, through and through."

"They're just pictures," said Biggs. "They don't mean anything."

"I thought you been told to shut up," Grant said.

The driver came over, carrying the woman's handbag.

"What we get?" asked Grant.

"Nothing much." He passed the handbag to Grant. "Throw it to the trunk," he said.

Grant opened the trunk. He opened the handbag, removed the wallet, opened it. He removed a locket, opened it, dangled it from his fist.

"These your kids?" he asked her.

"Yes," she said. "Three good boys, all. I made sure to raise them right."

"Kind of scrawny, aren't they?"

Grant turned to pack the handbag back up. Biggs leaned to his wife.

"Nephites, bullshit," he whispered.

"Shut yer trap," said Grant.

"My husband's losing his etiquette as well as his belief," the woman said.

"Yer a gabber, lady," Grant said.

The hood of Biggs's car popped open, and they saw the other big man bending over the engine, a flashlight in his jaws, the driver beside him.

The driver walked back to them.

"Hand across your billfold," he said to Biggs.

Biggs fumbled it out, handed it over. The driver opened it up, began counting.

"Do Nephites steal billfolds?" Biggs asked his wife.

"It's a test, Biggs," said his wife. "Stand firm alongside your faith and you will be blessed."

"Listen to the wife, Biggs," said the driver.

The hood closed and the other man came up out of the dark, flashlight swinging between his teeth.

"Ye got her fixed, Lamont?" asked the driver.

Lamont nodded. "Nothing much were wrong with her," he said.

The driver held out his hand to Biggs.

"Got to start it up," he said. "Fer sureties' sake."

Biggs reached into his pocket, pulled out the keys. He gave the keys to the driver, who handed them to Lamont.

"Drive back to town and wait fer us there, Lamont," said the driver. "Don't ye done nothing til we got there."

"I don't get my turn with them?" asked Lamont.

"Ye heard me?" said the driver.

Lamont stamped back to Biggs's car, climbed in, slammed the door. He started the engine, was gone.

The driver turned to face husband and wife.

"Ye gone to ride with me and Grant," he said. "We gone to give ye the baptism."

"We are already baptized," she said. "We are believers."

"We gone give ye a new baptism," the driver said. "The one that sticks. Get in the car."

Biggs and his wife sat in the back, Grant and the driver in front. They turned off the old road, onto a farm route. The road turned to dirt. They kept driving.

"You hear what they said?" his wife asked. "We're getting the second endowment."

"They are going to kill us," Biggs said.

She looked at him, surprised. "You're crazy," she said.

He tried to open the door, found the handle missing. He threw his body against the door.

"Somebody back there don't want to be in the car," said the driver.

"Look that way, don't it?" said Grant.

"Don't ye want the second baptism?" asked the driver.

"I want it," said the wife. "Lard knows, I have done everything I know to deserve it."

The driver looked at Grant, laughed. He slowed the car, pulled over.

"Hell," the driver said. "You want it bad enough, we ready to give it to you."

The driver opened one door, Grant the other. They held their pistols pointed at the couple's chests. They dragged the pair out of the car and into the headlights.

"Thought you needed a temple or a mountaintop," she said.

"The whole earth is holy," the driver said.

"I want it first," said the woman, pushing her way past her husband, squinting into the headlights.

"Turn around, then," said the driver.

She turned around.

"Close your eyes," said the driver.

"They're closed," she said. "I'm ready. You can start."

"Turn toward us again," said Grant.

She turned slowly back to the killers, her eyes closed, her face mooned upward, and they both shot her through the face. She fell into the long grass, dead.

"You ready?" asked the driver, pointing a finger at Biggs.

Biggs raised his hands above his head, stumbled a step forward.

"Kneel on down," said the driver.

The man collapsed to his knees, stared at the crushed grass around him. Through the grass he could see the dark sprawl of his wife. He smelt black powder, felt the pistol push against his temple. He squinted his eyes, gritted his teeth.

Grant said, "These are Mormons, haen't it?"

"Shit, Grant, how in hell should I know?" asked the driver. "Ye Mormon, Biggs?"

Biggs nodded his head.

"Well, I be jiggered," said the driver. "Never killed a Mormon before."

"How many wives ye got?" asked Grant.

"One," Biggs said.

"Only one?" asked the driver.

"She were a handful," said Grant.

Biggs nodded.

The killers stood quiet to either side of him a moment. Biggs let his hands fall slowly, and nodded again as if in assent.

"Ye better take a deep breath," the driver said.

Biggs nodded, this time meaning it, and was shot dead.