

150,000 Volts

Fiction

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"What do you think about revenge?" Elijah asks, slapping a pack of smokes against his palm as the three, step out of the truck and onto the hill. Trees thin enough to look malnourished spread out beneath them. A line of transmission towers marches through the forest to the nearest town, which is a grey smudge on the horizon. Cackling birds packed shoulder to shoulder occupy sections of the power lines. The wind, as it rolls past the hill, smells like rain.

"What do you mean?" Ryker asks, chewing the inside of his mouth.

"Do you think revenge is ever right?" Elijah asks, leaning against the truck and pulling out a cigarette. Curtis kills the engine and hops onto the grass. There's a hunting rifle in his hands. The metal of the bolt-action lever gleams in the dim sunlight. Curtis opens the back door and pulls out a box of bullets. He pulls back the lever of the rifle and starts sliding bullets into the interior of the weapon. Beads of sweat roll down Ryker's face. He wipes them away. A swarm of gnats fly in chaotic circles above their heads. Insects are buzzing from all directions.

"I guess it depends if it's right or not. You talking about something specific?" Ryker asks. He looks at the rifle in Curtis's hands, who slides another bullet into the chamber.

"No. Just making conversation," Elijah says, inspecting each end of the cigarette. Curtis loads the last rifle cartridge and pushes the bolt back into place with a satisfying click.

"What did your parents teach you about revenge? Weren't they a big moral compass for you?" Ryker asks. A shadow crosses over Elijah's face. He sticks the cigarette behind his ear, grabs the rifle from Curtis, and takes aim, his jaw clenched. He takes a shot at one of the power lines strung between the transmission towers. The bullet whizzes past and falls into the expanse of trees. The groups of birds that'd been roosting on the wires take off in a panic, momentarily darkening the sky. Elijah chambers another round and fires again. The bullet is visible for a split second, small as a dime, before disappearing into the forest. Ryker can taste the sulfur of the gunpowder as the wind blows in his face.

"My parents," Elijah says, handing the rifle to Curtis, "are breaking one of the main rules they set for me. It feels like the foundation of my life is made of sand, and it's starting to crumble. I'm terrified I haven't learned anything valuable if my teachers are breaking their own rules like they're worthless." Elijah takes a deep breath and unclenches his jaw.

"Sorry," Ryker says.

"They told me divorce was an awful sin. You're supposed to forgive and forget, even if your partner cheated. It says in the Bible if any woman leaves her man for cheating, she will be doomed to be alone for the rest of her life. Why, then, would my mother do this? Why is she snapping their matrimony?" Elijah yanks the cigarette from behind his ear and hangs it on his bottom lip, then

brings a dancing flame up to the tip and inhales. Ryker looks down at the yellow grass. He digs a small hole in the soil with the tip of his shoe. The dirt feels brittle.

"The lessons your parents gave you weren't worthless," Curtis chimes in and takes a shot at the power lines. The sound of the gunshot bounces away into the atmosphere.

"My teachers are nothing but students themselves. I'm lost," Elijah says. Smoke coils off the end of his cigarette.

"Is this why you were asking about revenge? Did your father cheat?" Ryker asks, wringing his hands together like he's washing them. He moves away from the car and sits down on the hill. The dry grass pokes him. The other two follow and stand nearby.

"It's more of a side interest of mine," Elijah says, "because I was also taught by my heinous parents that revenge was a sin, but what the hell do they know? They're worse sinners than me."

"If I may, the word of God is what you should be following, not the word of your parents," Curtis says, caressing the rifle in his arms like a child.

"I wish I'd know that sooner. I feel lost to the will of Christ." Elijah takes another puff but doesn't exhale, just opens his mouth and lets the smoke crawl out on its own.

"The Lord will find you. Have no fear," Curtis says, standing and taking aim at the power lines. He fires another shot and misses.

"He better tell me if revenge is a sin or

not when He finds me,” Elijah mutters, his voice distorted by the smoke in his lungs. He exhales and starts to cough.

“One of the main Christian beliefs is compassion. That’s what my daddy taught me,” Ryker says, shifting away from the others. A patch of yellow grass crunches underneath him, making him wince.

“Compassion sounds like meekness to me,” Elijah says. Curtis offers the rifle, so Elijah trades his cigarette for the weapon.

“The meek shall inherit the world,” Curtis says as he passes the rifle and sits down, taking a small puff of Elijah’s cigarette.

“Not in my lifetime,” Elijah mutters, aiming the rifle. The muscles in his arms bulge.

“The Bible says you can’t fight hate with hate in plenty of places. It just perpetuates more of the same, right?” Ryker asks, glancing at Curtis, who nods.

“Let’s get theoretical,” Elijah says, lowering the rifle, “say you had a child. Someone breaks into your home and kills that child. You hear the noise, rush downstairs, and get a look at him as he leaves. It’s one of your neighbors. What do you do? Show him compassion and forgive him, or would you kill that son of a bitch?”

“Compassion would free your heart so the Lord could fill it,” Curtis says after a few moments of thought.

“I guess I would just let the police do their jobs so I could start to heal,” Ryker says with a shrug. Elijah is shaking his head.

“The people who show mercy are always the ones getting stomped on, and the more they get stomped on the more they show mercy to those hurting them. Sometimes you need to do the stomping to break the cycle.” Elijah aims the rifle again and takes a shot. There’s a dull thud as the bullet is

lodged in a tree. The noise of the gunshot jolts through Ryker’s body. His heart is beating faster than usual. He puts a hand to his chest and takes a deep breath.

“Didn’t the Bible say divorce only happens because of the hardness in people’s hearts? Am I doomed if everything I’ve learned is from sinners worse than I?” Elijah asks and offers the rifle to Ryker, who shakes his head. Curtis stands and takes the weapon, trading back the cigarette. Elijah flicks the ash off into the grass.

“The teachings of God are the only thing you can trust, brother. Your parents will always be sinners, just like everyone else,” Curtis says, walking back to the trunk for the box of bullets.

“What God has put together let man not pull asunder,” Elijah mutters, watching the clouds slink across the gaping sky, “a verse my parents should’ve taken to heart.”

“We were just talking about revenge being right sometimes. Do you think divorce is ever just? Isn’t it possible?” Ryker suggests, not liking the blank expression settling across Elijah’s face, “perhaps, if someone is miserable in a marriage, they can get divorced and not go against scripture.”

“The best marriage is between two forgivers,” Curtis says from the truck as he pushes more bullets into the chamber.

“I don’t know if I could forgive adultery, and I don’t think my parents could either. I think that’s why they’re getting divorced. Someone must’ve cheated. What do you think, Ryker?” Elijah’s face is hard as he looks over at Ryker, who breaks eye contact and glances at the dead grass. A mosquito lands on his arm and pricks him, but he doesn’t slap it for he feels he will shatter under Elijah’s gaze.

“I suppose it’s possible,” Ryker mutters, shifting so the bug flies off.

“Your mother would be doomed to live alone for the rest of her life if she divorced your father for adultery. It says so right in the Bible,” Curtis says, returning from the car with the fully loaded rifle.

“I’ve never understood that,” Elijah says, still looking at Ryker, who wishes he’d stop, “cheating sounds like reason enough for divorce.”

“Then you aren’t accepting the word of God,” Curtis says, his voice gaining steel, “anybody can live with anybody else, no matter what they’ve done, if they learn to be a nobody. We must all be humbled by God.”

“Amen,” Ryker mutters quiet enough to hide his sarcastic tone.

“Your parents didn’t heed that, and it led to their marital destruction. You would do well to not make the same mistake,” Curtis says, aiming the rifle at the power lines. Ryker wishes they would put it away.

“I know the words of God. I know what He teaches. I just have trouble... accepting it. It seems impossible to meet adultery with forgiveness, especially when it comes to my parents breaking apart,” Elijah says, finishing the cigarette. He tosses the butt into the grass and stomps on it before pulling out another smoke.

“You would also do well to accept that we were meant to be meek before God,” Curtis mutters, looking hard down the sights before taking a shot. The bullet disappears into the leaves.

“You also wonder about meekness and revenge. We’ve talked about it many times,” Elijah retorts. Curtis nods thoughtfully and lowers the rifle.

"It seems, on occasion, that vengeance is God's will, and, sometimes, he uses man to enact that vengeance. After all, he sent Mosses with an army to enact revenge on the Midianites. It's possible he would use us as well," Curtis says, offering the rifle to Elijah, who tucks the unlit cigarette behind his ear and takes the weapon.

"We don't have armies, though. We aren't being tortured or run off our land. There isn't much to collect revenge for," Ryker says, shrugging. Curtis sits down next to him; the pair watch Elijah line up a shot.

"Would someone deserve punishment if they tempted my mother into lust?" Elijah asks as he aims the rifle. Ryker grabs handfuls of his own pants. His knuckles go white. The smell of rain is overwhelming. The grass starts to feel like needles against his skin.

"Is that what you think happened?" Ryker asks in a whisper, not looking over at the pair. Elijah turns his head to look at him. His lack of expression frightens Ryker.

"I know nothing," Elijah says, his voice even, "and this is just theoretical."

Curtis is nodding, "you know, I can see God using us for His vengeance. Maybe people are used to punishing affronts against God all over the world. Perhaps all this violence we hear about is a slow rapture until the Earth is cleansed."

"That can't be right," Ryker says, "God never condones violence."

"Have you read the Bible?" Elijah snorts, "God loves deserved violence. His wrath is described as never-ending pain. If someone deserves it, why wouldn't God use His people to deliver punishment?"

"And nothing deserves punishment more than leading someone away from God," Curtis says then smiles at Ryker.

"That doesn't sound right," Ryker mutters, not liking the smile, but Elijah takes a shot at the power lines. There's a sharp ding as the bullet bounces off one of the transmission towers. The three listen in awe as the bullet bounces off a few of the support beams on its way down to the ground. The ringing noise hangs in the air even after the bullet lands in the moss below the tower.

"Holy fuck," Curtis chuckles, standing and slapping Elijah on the back.

"What luck," Ryker says, also standing because he doesn't like the two towering over him. A few of the gnats descend to buzz around their ears.

"Or maybe a sign we figured something out," Elijah says, looking up into the sky. The three stand in the wind for a few moments. Ryker's heart is beating fast again. The silence feels accusatory to him. He speaks to break it.

"So, Elijah, you feel adultery is grounds for divorce, right?" Ryker asks.

"It's hard to believe otherwise," Elijah says, his smile dropping.

"I just remembered, Jesus said lust is the same as adultery, and I guarantee most men have felt lust for someone besides their special woman. That would mean every marriage has grounds for divorce." Ryker watches Elijah roll the idea around in his head.

"Hm," Curtis says, nodding.

"Then adultery isn't reason enough to break matrimony, and everyone can cheat without consequence," Elijah mutters, head hanging low, "God is as confusing as he is powerful."

"Amen," Curtis says with a chuckle. Ryker nods his head and gives a wry smile. A few melodic bird calls, carried by the wind, fill the space around them for a moment.

"I understand this situation even less now," Elijah says, handing the rifle to Curtis.

"Yes. The Lord finds ways to humble us. Our own understanding means nothing. We're to lean on the understanding of the Lord," Ryker says, starting to relax. Curtis nods again in approval as he aims the rifle.

"The only thing I've learned is my parents are sinners just like everyone else. I'd hoped they'd be immune to sin since they were my idols, but God should've been my only idol. I just wish the destruction of my family wasn't so... out in the open." Elijah rolls his eyes towards Ryker with an intense glare.

"Well, then we can enact revenge. Isn't that the conclusion we've come to, that we're God's chess pieces?" Curtis asks, lowering the rifle.

"Yes. Leading someone away from God is worthy of vengeance," Elijah says, stretching his arms.

"What are you guys talking about?" Ryker asks, turning so both men are in his view. Sweat glints on his forehead like there are diamonds pressed into his skin.

"What do you think, Ryker?" Curtis asks, "what if someone tempted Elijah's mother with lust? In fact, what if they conceived a bastard child together? Do you think that person deserves vengeance?" The rifle looks threatening in his hands. Ryker is frozen, struggling to catch up.

"I think being the creator of a bastard child is sin enough for vengeance," Elijah growls. He drops his cigarette and stomps it out.

"Okay! Okay!" Ryker screams, holding up his hands, "she fucking forced herself onto me, alright? I swear to God!"

"You will do no such thing," Curtis mutters.

"She molested me! I was looking for Elijah because I was drunk and wanted to chill. She just pushed me on the bed and went at it. I didn't know she was pregnant until weeks afterward!" Ryker yells.

"Liar," Elijah whispers. His expressionless expression is curling into a snarl.

"I promise it's the truth! I promise on the name of the Lord!" Ryker yells, trembling hands still held out in front of him.

"You do not deserve to use His name!" Elijah screams and lunges forward. He grabs one of Ryker's outstretched hands, yanks him closer, and decks him. Ryker is knocked flat. Curtis scuttles forward to join the fight. Ryker scrambles to his feet only to have Curtis slam the butt of the rifle against his shoulder, cracking something. Ryker screams and grabs the rifle. The pair grapple over the weapon as Elijah sprints for the truck and pulls the tire iron from the back seat. The rifle goes off between Curtis and Ryker, making them both scream and drop the weapon. Curtis reaches for it first, and Ryker kicks him in the jaw before seeing Elijah running at him with the tire iron. Ryker goes for the rifle and feels an explosion of pain in the back of his head. He groans and rolls to his side, hands around the rifle. Elijah tries to hit him again, but Ryker fires the rifle into the air, making him flinch away. Ryker chambers another round and staggers to his feet. Everything is spinning, and the back of his head feels wet.

"Stay there!" Ryker yells, stumbling backward. Both Curtis and Elijah are in his sights, but they're tilting to the left so far Ryker has to tilt his head to keep them straight, then he's back on the ground. There are frantic footsteps; Ryker blindly fires the rifle, and Curtis screams in fear. Then Elijah

is trying to yank the rifle from Ryker's hands, who holds on like it's the Holy Grail. Everything is still spinning, so he doesn't see Elijah raise the tire iron and smash it down on his right hand, but he feels it. Ryker screams and lets go of the rifle. The tire iron hits him again. He whimpers and rolls to his side, covering his head as best he can. The blows of the tire iron hurt worse each time. Ryker thought pain was supposed to subside while you were being beaten to death. The blows continue until he feels like he's nothing but shattered bones and bruised skin.

"Enough!" Curtis yells.

"He almost fucking shot you!" Elijah retorts.

"The Lord protected me. He's had enough." Curtis's footsteps approach. Ryker cracks his eyes open and sees the two men he thought he knew. Curtis is grabbing the tire iron from Elijah's hands.

"I could hit him a thousand more times," Elijah says in a low voice.

"I don't want to get arrested for murder. He's had enough," Curtis says firmly. He walks back to the truck and replaces the tire iron. Elijah reaches down and grabs the rifle. Ryker wants to stop him, but everything aches. It feels like he's full of nails. Elijah aims the rifle and fires.

The noise is that of an explosion. There's an arc of white electricity that crawls into the sky along with a flash of light bright enough to blind the trio for a moment. There is a sizzling and a pop as the wire, cut by the bullet, dangles half the length of the metal tower; 150,000 volts of electricity spew into the air. Elijah lets his arms fall to his sides, staring with an opened mouth. Curtis makes a cross in the air in front of him. Everyone is speechless.

"That must've been a sign," Elijah says eventually. The birds are still cackling from further down the power lines like a stadium full of laughing people.

"A sign we did the right or wrong thing?" Curtis asks, loading the rifle into the back seat.

"I don't know," Elijah says, walking to the truck. He pulls the cigarette from behind his ear, looks at it, then rips it in half and drops it. He gets into the passenger seat looking dazed. Curtis starts the truck and drives off.

Ryker is left laying on the yellow grass, listening to the hum of electricity and the laughing birds. He rolls onto his back and watches the swarms of gnats, wondering how the little creatures never bump into one another. The first raindrop falls, sliding through the cloud of gnats without hitting a single one.

We're surrounded by small miracles, Ryker thinks to distract himself from his aching body. Ryker stays on the hill after the noise of the truck fades away. He stays on the hill even as the rain starts to fall. The water washes away the smell of gunpowder and cigarette smoke. Ryker sits up, holding what he thinks is a broken shoulder, and notices the birds are huddled together on the power lines. Shoulder to shoulder, birds that are complete strangers working together for the betterment of them all.

Better than humans, Ryker thinks. He stays a few minutes longer in the rain before starting the walk home. His mind feels like it's full of gnats as he limps down the muddy road.