

Cleansing Fire

Jeff knelt in prayer. He prayed for strength and courage. The images that came to him, images of death and blood, filled him with a sense of dread as well as exultation. He opened his Bible, which fell open to an often-read page in Leviticus:

"If a man lies with a man as one lies with a woman, both of them have done what is detestable. They must be put to death; their blood will be on their own heads." Finishing his reading, Jeff rose and began to gather a few things. He had work to do. It was time to pick up Daphne for the weekend.

As he walked out to his van, doubts assailed him once more. He concentrated on his plan; it had to be the will of his God. He couldn't let doubts stay him now.

"Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge Him, and He shall direct your paths. Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge Him, and He shall direct your paths." Jeff repeated the proverb like a mantra.

He started the van headed for his ex-wife's house.

Janie glanced up at the clock.

"Daphne, get your stuff together, your Dad is going to be here soon," she said.

Daphne blew it off. She picked up a bridal magazine, and opened to a section on gowns.

"I like this one, Mom," she said, displaying an ivory gown with acres of lace and a very low cut bodice. "I think you'd look really cool in this."

"Daphne, please, your dad will be here soon, and you don't want to keep him waiting all afternoon while your get your stuff."

"Why do I hafta go, Mom?" Daphne whined. "Daddy's getting more and more out there by the hour."

Janie sighed. "Honey, he's doing the best he can. It's been a tough adjustment for him; can't you cut him a little slack?"

"Jeez, Mom," Daphne said rolling her eyes, "he drags me to a different church every week. All he does afterward is piss and moan about the minister, or the sermon, or the choir, or the church. Why does he bother to go if it's just going to piss him off? It's like everybody's going to hell but him. I mean it, mom, I do love him sometimes he really creeps me out!"

"Watch your mouth, young lady. And your dad wasn't always so bad. Like I said, he's just going through an adjustment. He was a lot different when we were first married, and even after you were born. We used to laugh, cut up a little now and then, go down to the National Guard Armory when they had dances. We went to that little Methodist church over on Second Street, but your dad had things more in perspective then."

"Christ, mom, he hates that church with a passion! He used to go there? And frankly, I can't picture daddy dancing; he hates music!"

Jeff pulled up in front of the house and walked up to the porch. He paused at the front door, listening.

"Never mind that. Look, honey, he's your dad," Janie said. "You need to spend time with him; he's the only dad you'll have. Really, baby, he's not that bad."

Janie was right, he WAS the only dad Daphne would ever have. She'd never had to worry about a stepdad, either. Jeff had known Janie was a sinner, but it wasn't until their

marriage ended that he realized the depths of her depravity. She sinned not only against her Lord God, but against nature, too.

“Mom, I do love him, but he’s really weird. He’s getting weirder, too. Why can’t I stay here and help you plan the wedding?”

That was the point where Jeff knocked on the door. He couldn’t stand to hear any more. Not only was his wife a sinner, but she was dragging Daphne down in to the Pit with her! The sanctity of marriage was reserved for a man and his woman, not this pair of...

Jeff shook the thought off before the image could coalesce in his mind. The idea was so abhorrent, such an affront to not only his beliefs but to his Lord God, too, he feared that to let the image take shape in his mind would either make him crazy or condemn his soul to the Pit, too.

The worst part was his daughter, his lamb, exposed to her mother’s depravity. Exposed to it, and taught that it was right and good. Leviticus 20:13 spelled out the punishment for homosexuality. While it didn’t specifically address lesbianism, he had no doubt as to his Lord God’s intent in that matter.

Crossing the living room to the kitchen, he composed his face. The smile he managed even felt natural.

“Daddy!” squealed Daphne, jumping to hug her dad. Jeff hugged her back, though he was obviously careful not to let their bodies touch below the shoulders. Behind her dad’s back Daphne crossed her eyes at her mom. Janie stifled a grin.

“Hey Sweetheart, get your bags,” he told Daphne. “We got a bit of a ride ahead of us!”

Though his voice sounded steady and confident in his ears, his stomach was full of butterflies trying to escape. He watched the reactions of Janie and Daphne, and was gratified to

see no sign of suspicion on either face. As Daphne padded off to get her stuff, he stuck his hands in his pockets to dry the sweat.

“Do you want some coffee?” Janie asked. “You know kids; she’ll probably be a minute or two.”

“Um, no thanks. Really. I’m fine. I, uh, I think I’ll wait on the porch.” Jeff was uncomfortable now alone with Janie. He wasn’t sure if it was just being this close to sin that made him feel giddy, or if it was the thought that he alone knew what came next. It would be so much easier if he had something to do, some action to take. He did, but not quite yet. He stepped out on the porch to wait.

Daphne hit the door with a bang, calling her good-byes to her mom over her shoulder. Jeff walked out to the van with her, and once she'd gotten in he told her a little lie. While the Lord God’s word told him that liars would be cast into the Pit and consumed in a lake of fire and brimstone, he knew he would be forgiven the lie. Hadn’t the Holy Spirit shown him the way?

“Be back in a minute, babe. I need to give something to your mom.”

Not entirely a lie: when Jeff walked back into the house, he planned to give her four inches of steel. Entering the house swiftly, he strode back to kitchen. Janie had her back to him as she washed dishes, and he’d started to say something about catching up on the child support.

"About what you say I owe you..." he began.

Her back stiffened, but before she could turn to face him, Jeff shoved the ice pick deep into her ear. He’d loosened the shaft in the handle, and it stayed in her ear while the handle went into his pocket. She died with her eyes open. He thought he could see the flames of the unholy fire as it claimed her soul.

He walked easily back out to the van, marveling at how calm he felt. It had been easier than he'd thought. As he climbed into the driver's seat, he saw that Daphne had retreated behind a copy of Seventeen and had erected a wall of sound with the Back Door Boys, Back Room Boys, or whatever the hell their name was. He couldn't keep track of them anymore. Good enough for now; he needed to get his thoughts together before he talked to Daphne.

As he pulled away from the curb, he stole his first real good look at his daughter. The long strands of her once golden hair was tinted a light blue. What kind of nonsense was that? The Lord God had given her hair the color of ripened wheat; this color was not natural. It did match the paint around her eyes. Her eyeshadow had been applied with a light touch, and while he appreciated that, it also showed just how worldly his little girl had become. Combined with the thin tanktop with its spaghetti straps and men's *men's!* boxers she wore, Jeff was convinced his daughter was no longer pure. Chances are, living with her mother, it was likely her sin was unnatural, to boot.

Not only was his wife a sinner, but she had been dragging Daphne down in to the Pit with her! He ground his teeth. His wife and her --"friend"--, and their impending "marriage." Jeff shook the thought off before the image could coalesce in his mind. The idea was so abhorrent, such an affront to not only his beliefs but to his Lord God, too, he feared that to let the image take shape in his mind would either make him crazy or condemn his soul to the Pit, too. The sanctity of marriage was reserved for a man and his woman, not that pair of...

He stole another quick glance at his daughter, and wondered if he would have the strength of Abraham when the time came.

Daphne glanced up from her magazine. She expected to see the city flashing by the window, and was surprised to see open countryside unrolling past the window. Obviously, they

were headed into the mountains. Her eyes narrowed, and she shifted uneasily in her seat.

Weren't they spending the weekend at her dad's apartment? She hoped he wasn't dragging her off to some weird retreat in the foothills. She'd heard stories about some of the churches out here. They handled snakes and stuff. Yuck!

"Um, Dad, where are we headed?" she asked.

Jeff glanced at her briefly, and looked back at the road.

"I've rented a little cabin up here, Baby," he replied. "I thought we could spend some time alone, just you and me. Like we used to do."

"Just us, Daddy?"

"That's right, Kitty-cat. Just us."

Daphne smiled at his old pet name for her. It'd been some time since he called her that. *Maybe Mom was right, maybe he is getting a grip, coming to terms with things*, she thought.

"I wished you told me, I would have borrowed Mom's Nikon. Are we going to do some hiking?" she asked.

"You bet, Kitty. Anything you want."

Jeff felt a stir of unease. More lies, albeit little ones. Still, when the accounts were totaled up at the End of Days, he thought his soul would stand in good stead. After all, wasn't about the work of his Lord God?

He turned onto a dirt track near the summit. He wasn't sure if it was an old logging trail or what, but it served his purpose. It was half-overgrown and deeply rutted, and he dropped the transmission into low. He wanted to get well off the road for this next part. He turned off the headlights, and clicked on the foglights. It seemed unlikely anyone else would happen this way,

but he didn't need his taillights to be noticed from the roadway and have some curious forest ranger interfere with his efforts to save his daughter's soul.

The van bounced along the rutted track. The van lurched to left, Daphne's head bounced against the door.

"Ow-w-w-SHIT!" she cried.

Jeff saw her snap a furtive glance his way, but instead of upbraiding her for her language, he smiled gently. He saw her start to relax back into her seat. Good. Very good.

Daphne looked at her dad uneasily. He didn't react to the expletive, and that was really out of character. And what was the deal with the lights?

"Uh, Dad? What happened to the headlights?"

Jeff smiled that same gentle smile. "I clicked them off, baby. I can see well enough by the foglights, and I thought we might spot some deer this way."

Daphne wasn't reassured; this was too weird, too out of character. Had he tipped over completely? She didn't think he would molest her; she knew some fathers did that, but it was ludicrous to think her dad might try some weird sexual thing with her.

Maybe it's a custody thing. Maybe he's trying to get me to choose sides. Daphne despaired at the thought. She became more convinced that was what his game was. Why else would he try so hard to be some weird Brady Bunch perfect dad all of a sudden?

"How much farther, Dad?" she asked. "I gotta pee real bad."

"We're almost there, Sweetheart," he said tenderly. "We're near the top. Give me a few minutes to park, and we'll have a little talk."

“I thought we were going to a cabin – are we sleeping in the van?” Now she was really getting creeped out. Had he lied? The thought that her dad, saint that he tried to be, may have lied worried her. If he was lying, then he had to have completely lost it.

"Uh, daddy, please, you're making me nervous..."

“We’re just going to stop up here and have a little talk, honey. I wanted to talk to you up here, up close to our Lord God.”

Watching her closely, Jeff saw Daphne open her mouth, then close it and shrug. She bit her lip and looked out her window. Jeff was grateful she wasn’t making a too much of a fuss at this point. He wanted this to go quickly and smoothly. He pulled the van into the clearing and shut off the engine. He turned to face his daughter.

“Babe, I know you don’t understand, but our Lord God has a plan for you, and me, and, well everyone. That includes your mom. We all have to live our lives according to his plan.”

“Daddy – please, no lectures...” Daphne pleaded.

“Kitty-cat, you have to hear this,” Jeff said. “Our Lord God is a harsh God, but he loves us deeply. It hurts him when we sin and turn our backs on him, as your mother has.”

“Daddy...”

“As you have. It’s not your fault; it’s the courts and your sinful mother. The courts don’t know what it takes to raise a child in these wicked times, ...”

"Daddy, if this about custody, don't ask me to choose," Daphne interrupted.

"...and to allow you stay with your mother and her, her..." Jeff started.

“Lover, Dad. She’s her lover. Her life partner. You don’t have to like it, but you do have to accept it. What are you afraid of? That I’ll grow up to be a lesbian too? Is that so bad? Say it, Dad: Lesbian. Lez-bee-en. Dad, get a grip!”

Jeff smiled a small smile. He saw now that his Lord God was wise, and the Holy Spirit was right. His sweet daughter had been turned by the Imp, and there was only one way out.

Daphne saw the smile and felt a chill. Something in his eyes...

Jeff raised the gun.

“Daddy – what are you – daddy please!” screamed Daphne.

Jeff hesitated just a moment, unsure where to put the shot. He hated for the bullet to tear her heart asunder, but he didn't want her face ruined either. She should be able to have that lovely, shining face in Heaven. Yes, the heart; it had been twisted by her mother and by sin and by Satan. He fired.

Daphne jumped, then slumped in her seat, her life pumping out of the hole in her chest. Jeff opened his door and went around to the back of the van, opening the double doors on the side. He opened Daphne's door, and pulled her slack body out. Twisting with her in his arms, he laid her on the carpet in the back. Swiftly he removed her tanktop and boxers. He paused for a moment; she was wearing a thong, whore's panties. He hadn't planned for this, and for moment he was unsure. Would it be better to send her to her Lord God in whore's underwear, or without panties as a slut would dress? Better whore's panties than none at all, he decided. Bad enough she had no bra. He used her clothing to mop up the blood from the front of her, and threw the bloody rags in a corner. Opening his suitcase, he pulled out a dress of white lace. It was a near duplicate of the baptismal dress she'd worn so long ago before her mother fell into the depths of sin. He drew it on her and buttoned the back. Placing her in the middle of the floor on her back, he laid a Bible on her chest and arranged her hands in an attitude of prayer.

“Whether it is pleasing or displeasing, we will obey the voice of the Lord our God.
Whether it is pleasing or displeasing, we will obey the voice of the Lord our God.”

Repeating the verse from Jeremiah, Jeff splashed gasoline around the interior of the van, taking care not to stain the pure white dress. He flung the empty can into the brush, and striking a match, he said:

“And I will cleanse them from all their iniquity, whereby they have sinned against me; and I will pardon all the iniquities, whereby they have sinned, and whereby they have transgressed against me.”

And he lit the cleansing fire.