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Your Servants and Your People

Written by David Towsey

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YOUR SERVANTS AND YOUR PEOPLE

David Towsey



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For Kath

PROLOGUE

The Pastor adjusted his cassock. It was hot and itchy under the noonday sun. He knocked on the door again, harder this time. It was no surprise they hadn't heard him, with all that was going on inside. He would wait before knocking once more.

His shaggie was tethered to a rail that ran the length of the house. There was a trough that the animal was drinking from. The sky was clear today, but Pine Ridge got more rain than Barkley. The house was on the outskirts of town. Half a mile or more between neighbours – a good, discreet distance. He pulled at his collar. He'd like to take it off but the Good Lord was watching. Always watching.

The Good Book felt heavy in the Pastor's hand. He knocked again.

This time he heard movement from inside. Boards creaked and the door swung open. A large woman grimaced at him. She was sweating. Not just from her brow, but her arms were slick all the way from her rolled-up sleeves to her wrists. The sister.

'You've got some nerve,' she said.

'I'm here to see Josie.'

'I know why you're here. Come to see if it's got hooves?'

'That's—'

'You're not coming in. She doesn't want you here.'

'You can't stop me,' he said.

'Oh yes I can.' She planted a meaty fist on the doorframe. Her fingers were stained with blood.

'If you insist on being unreasonable.' He drew out a little pistol from his pocket.

She looked from the gun to his face. She went to shut the door, but he wedged his foot in the gap.

'Go away!' she bawled.

He pressed the pistol into her gut. Her eyes were as big as hay bales. If he fired, would she even feel it? He should have brought a shotgun.

She stepped back and let him in.

'Carry both on you, do you?' she said, nodding to the Good Book.

'When necessary. Where is she?'

'Upstairs.'

He got a foot on the first step before she pushed him out of the way. He followed her immense backside. A low moaning drifted down the stairs. The banister was broken. The wood had snapped there, and it bulged outwards in places. One of the uprights had broken off too. Looking at Josie's sister ahead of him, it wasn't difficult to imagine what had happened.

At the bedroom door she stopped. She opened her mouth. He still had the pistol and the Good Book in his hands. One or perhaps both made her keep her silence. She led him into the room.

‘Josie, girl, he’s here,’ she said.

Josie was lying in bed, the sheets pulled down below her knees. Her thin nightdress was coloured grey with sweat. It was damp against her; she was a slight girl. She looked up. Her cheeks puffed out and she growled at him.

He put the pistol in his pocket and went to her. He held out a hand, but she slapped it away.

‘You shouldn’t be here,’ Josie said. She panted between each word, dealing with the heat like a wool-wrangler.

‘I had to come.’

She stopped focusing on him. Her eyes glazed over and she cried out.

The sister huffed and puffed. She put a large pan of water on the bed. ‘If you got to be here, stay out the way,’ she said. She shooed him into a chair in the corner. It had one leg shorter than the rest, which caught him unawares every few minutes. He opened the Good Book. It was difficult to see the words in the gloom. The curtains were drawn, bathing the room in dull red light.

“‘Shall I bring to the birth, and not cause to—”

‘You can stop that right now!’ the sister said. ‘Last thing this room needs is more hot air.’

He forgave her her blasphemous words. There was no helping a soul such as hers. Josie had liked it when he read.

She would close her eyes with her head resting on the pillow. He could tell from her breathing that she wasn't asleep. But Josie didn't seem to be hearing him right now.

He skipped back a verse. It took all his concentration to focus on the words and not the noises around him. *Who hath heard such a thing? Who hath seen such things?* A high-pitched scream made him look. Josie's knees were hitched up. Her sister was attending, making soft sounds that weren't words at all. Josie wailed again and he went back to the Good Book. *Shall the earth be made to bring forth in one day? or shall a nation be born at once? for as soon as Zion travailed, she brought forth her children.* Children. He hadn't thought on twins. Josie was too small for that, surely? The Good Lord had blessed him in so many other ways it wasn't inconceivable. *Shall I bring to the birth, and not cause to bring forth? saith the Lord: shall I cause to bring forth, and shut the womb? saith thy God.*

He closed the Good Book, his thumb marking his place. Perhaps he'd chosen the wrong chapter? Talk of shutting the womb was not appropriate. He took his thumb out of the book. He mopped his brow with the cuff of his cassock.

The heat was unworldly. With the light and the animal-grunting the room seemed to spin. He held his head in his hands, but it didn't stop. The noises became worse: guttural curses, heavy moans. The Pastor tried to block them out. He curled in on himself, the Good Book wedged hard against his chest. This was a vision of his judgement. He should have known there would be no forgiveness for what he'd done. Condemned for a fiery eternity. Words he'd spoken so often

in church were now his own fate. He begged for the Good Lord's mercy. He was met with screams.

Piercing, hungry screams. He risked a glance. The sister was holding the child, smeared in blood, its little legs and arms flailing. She wrapped it in cloth and passed it to Josie, who smiled weakly down at her baby. He fell off the chair onto his knees. He clutched the Good Book between his hands and shuffled to the bedside.

'I knew it would be a boy,' Josie said. She ran a finger gently across his forehead and down his nose.

'A boy,' he said.

Her hair was flattened by sweat, the normal bounce of her dark waves gone. She looked beyond him. Her smile was not for him, or anyone.

The sister opened the curtains. Bright sunlight blinded him. Tears came but he didn't weep as the Good Lord washed hotly over him. He'd been saved by his son.

'He shall be called Obadiah,' he said.

The sister snorted. 'He'll be called no such thing.'

'Call him what you will, wench. Before the Good Lord, his name will be Obadiah. His servant.'