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John Crow's Devil

Written by Marlon James

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JOHN CROW'S DEVIL

Marlon James



ONEWORLD

A Oneworld Book

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To Ché, that other revolutionary,
and to my mother, who must not read this book.

Big Up

I wish to express my sincere thanks to all the following, who taught me that contrary to the name below the title, one person does not a book make:

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Three little children
With doves on their shoulders
They're countin out the Devil
With two fingers on their hands

—"Dachau Blues," Captain Beefheart

THE END

No living thing flew over the village of Gibbeah, neither fowl, nor dove, nor crow. Yet few looked above, terrified should an omen come in a shriek or flutter. Nothing flew but dust. It slipped through window blades, door cracks, and the lifting clay of rooftops. Dust coated house and ground, shed and tree, machine and vehicle with a blanket of gray. Dust hid blood, but not remembrance.

Apostle York took three days to decide. He had locked himself in the office as his man waited by the door. Clarence touched his face often without thought, running his fingers over scratches hardened by clotted blood. The Apostle's man was still in church clothes: his one black suit and gray shirt with tan buttons that matched his skin, save for his lips, which would have been pink had they not been beaten purple three days ago. Clarence shifted from one leg to the other and squeezed his knuckles to prevent trembling, but it was no use.

"Clarence," the Apostle called from behind the door. "Pile them up. Pile them all up. Right where the roads meet. Pile them up and burn them."

Men, women, and children, all dead, were left in the road. Those who scurried home with their lives imprisoned themselves behind doors. There were five bodies on Brillo Road; the sixth lay with a broken neck in a ditch where the bridge used to be. Clarence limped, cursing the hop and drag of his feet. At the crossroads he stopped.

"All man who can hear me!" he shouted. "Time now to do the Lord's work. The Apostle callin you."

Faces gathered at windows but doors remained shut. Some would look at Clarence, but most studied the sky. Clarence looked above once and squeezed his knuckles again. A dove had flown straight into his face, splitting his bottom lip and almost scratching out his left eye. He felt as if more would come at that very moment, but the Apostle had given him strength.

"I talkin to every man who can stand. Heed the word or you goin get lick with friggery worse than any bird."

Birds. They came back in a rush; in screams and screeches and wounds cut fresh by claws.

"You know what my Apostle can do."

Clarence knew the houses where men hid. He hopped and dragged to each one and hammered into the door.

"Sunset," he said.

Three days before, when noon was most white, the village had killed Hector Bligh. Reckoning came swift, before they were even done. God's white fury swept down on them with beaks and claws and the beat of a thousand wings.

But there were things the villagers feared more than birds. One by one they came out and the men threw the bodies on the bonfire.

"This was judgment," said Apostle York. He had emerged from the office after the fire was lit. The Apostle's face had no scratch. "Judgment!" he shouted over the brilliance of the pyre and the crackle and pop of burning flesh. "Judgment," he said again in morning devotion, noon devotion, evening devotion, night mass, penitence prayer, children's prayer, women's prayer, blood atonement, prayer for the saints, and the School of Boy Prophets. From that day, the incident was never to be spoken of lest God again unleash his wrath on Gibbeah.

The building had begun a week before the killing. With chopped down trees the villagers made a fence all around Gibbeah's boundary. Then they surrounded it in barbed wire. Every city of righteousness had a wall, said the Apostle. This was God's way of keeping holiness in and iniquity out. Sooner than expected, the fence was finished. It wouldn't be long before nature hid wood and wire in the deceit of leaves, vines, and flowers.

Soon Gibbeah would disappear from the map of men. Soon all would be spared from recollection but Lucinda.

She had also spent three days in a room, but her door was locked from the outside. Lucinda panicked whenever she trapped fingers in her gorgon hair. Her eyes popped from jet skin. She had believed the Apostle, for love and God had punished her for sin. Before she went mad there were two faces in the mirror, neither of them hers. After Hector Bligh's death there were three. Bligh's eyes snaked her. They tormented her in dreams. She screamed at him in the tiny room below the church's steeple. The room stank of bird flesh. In a fit of rage brought on by the fever that madness carried, she struck the mirror and shattered it. But in each broken piece was another face. Three faces became ten, then a hundred and a thousand and still more. A million eyes that saw everything and judged like God. She could do nothing but scream. By day her room was dark, but at night she moved back and forth in the light, a gaunt silhouette one instant, a ragged chiaroscuro the next.

Human ash became dust. What dust would not cover, wind swept away. Gibbeah built a wall that sealed the village from memory. But within her walls Lucinda would not forget. His ghost lived with her now, his voice mimicked her cries, and his eyes saw her secret skin. The Apostle had called Hector Bligh a disgrace, abomination, and Antichrist.

She called him the Rum Preacher.

PART ONE

THE RUM PREACHER

Make we tell you bout the Rum Preacher. Even if you never live anywhere near them parts, you must did hear bout the Rum Preacher. After six years, false story and true story rub together so much that both start shine. People think that everything shoot to Hell after the Devil take hold of Lillamae Perkins, but if you did know Pastor Hector Bligh of the Holy Sepulchral Full Gospel Church of St. Thomas Apostolic, you would know him was on the road to Hell long before that.

Before Pastor Bligh come to Gibbeah nobody ever see a man of God drink. Some people say Second Book of John, verse one to eleven, say that Jesus turn water into wine, so him must did drink wine too. Three man who sit down outside the bar all day say that him is man after all and man have right to get drunk just as him have right to scratch him balls when him want to scratch him balls or beat him woman when she don't act right.

Bligh drink like drinking goin out of style. All Saturday night when him should be readying himself for church, him down the bar drinking liquor and talking out people business. And when the time come to do the preaching, him don't know what to say. We never see preaching like this yet. When Bligh drunk all you hear is mumble. When Bligh dry him sound like that mad captain in that Moby Dick picture that show at the Majestic. The preacher before him did have fire. Hector Bligh have nothing but ice. Maybe is fi we fault cause country people take things as them be, as if white man goin beat we if we change them.

Lillamae.

Lillamae Perkins. Is was two years since the morning her father wake up but just for a minute to see him bed all red and blood gushing like spring from where him penis used to hang. Nobody never see what happen, but everybody see Lillamae, outside her gate looking like them obeah her, with one hand holding the knife and the other hand holding the bloody cocky. She eat green pawpaw to kill out the baby. Two years later, Sunday come and Pastor Bligh was him usual drunk self. Him fling himself into the Pastor seat by the pulpit like him would crash on the floor if him did miss. Lillamae goin up to the altar to have them drive out her sin and iniquity, even though Preacher never call nobody yet.

Everybody hear she.

"Lawd Jesus Christ! Lawd Jesus Christ! Consuming Fire! Consuming Fire! LAAAAAAAAAWD!!!"

Lillamae Perkins fling herself pon the ground. Her leg turn into scissors, she swing them open, then close, then open, and everybody could see her fishy which never cover up with no panty. Then she see Lucinda, who scream out to Holy Jesus Christ.

"Wha Jesus goin do fi you, river-whore? Satan watching you from you start mix tea," Lillamae say. People screaming and running, and tripping and crushing and more screaming, cause when she open her mouth is a man voice come out. Then she see the Pastor and all Hell break loose.

Five deacon rush the altar. Churchgoer and sinner both call them "The Five."

"One idiot, two drunkard, one sick-fowl, and one who beat woman. Now who is who? Who is who?" is what she say. The Five circle her, wrestle her, but nobody could pin down Lillamae. She slip from one like grease and claw through another one face. She kick a deacon in him seed bag and five man become four. Lillamae beat up all of them. She crick the second man neck, break all of the third man finger, punch asthma back into the fourth man chest, and blind the last deacon in him left eye.

Nobody know where the knife come from. Some people say she jump, some people say she fly. When demon take you, you can do anything. All people see is when she leap after the Pastor with the knife and him hold out him hand like him was goin catch her and she stab right through him

left hand middle and him stuck on the wall like Holy Jesus crucified.

"Fool. You should a do this two years ago when we was one. Now we is one and seven," was all she say. Pastor Bligh bawling and screaming, but nobody goin cross a girl with eight demon in her. Then she scream and run out of the church.

Two day pass and nobody can find Lillamae. Then Wednesday, a little boy find her body sailing down Two Virgins River. Pastor Bligh did drunk when him bury her. After that plenty people stop come to church.



Coming home from the bar, Pastor Bligh made his way up the road, teetering like a drunken colossus. But the fire dug holes in his gut and sent flame down his thighs screaming, *Let me out!* He moved over to the side of the road and released himself, bursting a black circle on the pavement with a torrent of yellow piss. The sun teased him from behind and suddenly there was lightness to the morning. He had learned long ago never to trust happiness. But something came over him, bringing both pleasure and a slight fear. A silliness that made him fall in love with pink-striped skies and opalescent dew bubbles and chickens crowing themselves awake. Bligh was still very much drunk. His pants were around his ankles and when he moved he tripped, fell backwards on the base of his skull, and knocked himself out.

A church sister saw him first. She had come out to water her hibiscus and thought a mad man or a drunkard had fallen dead in the road. She inched toward him, afraid that he was merely asleep and would awake at that very second to rape her with calloused hands and dirty fingernails. But when she saw Pastor Bligh's face, the woman frowned, disgusted and unsurprised. "Disgrace" she said. And yet she was relieved by Pastor Bligh's behavior, as were many in the village. So tormented was he by his own sin that he could never convict them of theirs. But as she summed him up from head to foot, her view came to a halt midway. There looking at her was his dark penis and balls, sprawled as carelessly as he was, bracketed by his thighs and the open ends of his shirt. She forgot his arms; the

right spread open and the left under his back. She forgot his face, gaunt and gray, his mouth open and pooling with drool. She forgot his shoes, dirty, brown, and mostly covered by pants that strangled his ankles. There was only the thing, lifeless between two legs yet as monstrous as a serpent in Genesis. Her dark face went white, even pink, as she rushed back to her house. For several minutes he was unconscious. Minutes that horrified old women and scandalized children who passed by on the way to school. Lucinda, who never witnessed the incident, would nonetheless report of it in the first person in that tone she reserved for special heresies.

After the pee-pee incident, the concerned citizens of the village, namely Lucinda, had had enough.

"Him goin mistake him chair for a toilet next Sunday, just watch," said one observer, but as he was not a member of the church no one heard, anticipated, or dreaded it. In short, that person was not Lucinda, who had begun a letter-writing campaign to have Pastor Bligh removed. Lucinda remembered very little schooling other than the Bible, so her words often packed more Hellfire and damnation than she intended. She wrote to every church she knew, even the archdiocese, despite Pastor Bligh being no Catholic. Bligh answered to nobody but God, and Jesus wasn't saying anything that Lucinda wanted to hear.

Nobody answered Lucinda's letters. She would never curse God, but reminded Him that this was why she also prayed to someone else. Then the Majestic Cinema started showing Sunday matinees at 10:00 and chopped the halved congregation to a quarter. The Pastor now drank day and night. He was spiraling downward and would have taken the village with him were it not for the other, who lead them instead to a light blacker than the thickest darkness.

He came like a thief on a night colored silver. He came on two wheels, the muffler puffing a mist that made children cough in their sleep. As his motorcycle coursed up Brillo Road it left a serpentine trail of dust. There were no witnesses to his coming, save for an owl, the moon, and the Devil.

You say you saw it coming, Yea
But still you did not flee

—"Splints," Sixteen Horsepower

THE PREACHER AND THE APOSTLE

A murder of crows came first. Hundreds. From no point of origin they blackened the sun, forming a shifty eclipse that descended on Gibbeah. The birds flew up the road in a parade of darkness, their wings cutting through the wind and scaring even the smallest children. As a few landed in the road their red necks exposed them. Not ravens, but vultures. Country people called them John Crows. Several more landed and hopped and hobbled, picking through garbage as they overthrew the village. As soon as they saw people the birds would tilt their heads and frown, looking curious and angry. Between the John Crows and the village began a horrific game of wait.

Then they took off. A chorus of flutters, louder than before, flew from roof to roof as if shaking loose evil spirits. Then nothing. The morning began to assert herself. Routine returned.

Brillo Road cut through the village like the trunk of a crucifix. Hanover Road sat near the top, completing the cross. From above the village looked like a squashed hot cross bun. This was Gibbeah.

The Astor Sugar Plantation was nearly thirty miles away. When slaves were finally set free in 1838, they were evicted as well. The white missionaries who pursued emancipation for the negro nonetheless recoiled at the thought of one in the dining room, boardroom, or bedroom of anyone white. They established free villages all over the island, Gibbeah being one. The freed slaves had their own land but no money or food. One year after the death of slavery, the ex-slaves were back on the plantation willingly contributing to its rebirth.

And yet the plantation died, wounded by a dastard class of white men who fled back to the mother country. The ones who stayed either denied or reveled in their decline as fields dried up or were taken over by land reform. Neighbors disappeared; the mother country enforced Crown Colony government, and lesser suitors like beet dethroned King Sugar. In their place rose a new breed of white man who was sometimes black. They were merchants, machine men, and dealers, men who brought the Americans. Men who turned plantations into guesthouses or hotels if they were near the sea. Moneymaking shifted to a new kind of Massa. Men like Aloysius Garvey.

By 1928, Mr. Aloysius Garvey had bought, built, and owned most of the land. He renamed the village Garveyville, but everybody kept on calling it Gibbeah. He was a thin man, almost skeletal, even when he was young, with negro lips and dark skin at war with his hooked nose and straight hair. Though a black bastard unacknowledged by his white father, he still had a birthright to money. But he was a man out of time with neither wife nor peer. His large red house, built like a plantation's Great House, stood at the top of Brillo Road and stank of death. With a cut-stone ground floor and a wooden floor on top, the house was crowned with an arch roof and garnished with astrological fretwork. French windows held dark curtains that revealed no secrets. In time and with grime, people forgot that the house was red and called it black. There was a rumor that he was a sodomite and there was the matter of his several light-skinned nephews, but word was wind in Gibbeah.

Mr. Aloysius Garvey, being the owner of the village, declared how he wanted Gibbeah to look. In 1928, he made all houses face the street and painted them rusty red. During Lent when there was drought, dirt would stick to the walls and the village would seem as if trapped in the eye of a dust storm. The houses were all alike, with creaky verandahs and double doors that opened into a small living room with bedrooms flanking both sides. The living room, which was really a hallway, led into the dining room, which some used as the living room. To the left of the dining room was the kitchen. Piped water came twenty-three years later when Bligh did in 1951. There were only two roads in Gibbeah. Mr. Garvey had the

idea to build the houses along the pattern of the crossroads, but he could not stop the others, the squatters, from building rickety shacks as they saw fit. Still, when the new houses popped up, they took on the colors of the old ones. Gibbeah was bordered by a river, which swung around the village in a circle like a moat. The bridge was the only way in or out.



Ash Wednesday morning had come and the crows were gone. This was one of five mornings when Mr. Garvey went out in public, except for the funerals of those of stature or those who died under tragic circumstances. Funeral was spectacle in Gibbeah. Black clothing was foreign and expensive, sent over to the village in barrels from relatives living in America, England, or Panama. They were winter clothes, velvets, corduroys, denims, and wools that would conspire with the sun to bake the wearer while sucking his sweat. But there was no spectacle like the Garvey procession. Marching in slow step like pallbearers without a coffin, Mr. Garvey with his nephews in one line behind him would take the left row at the front of the church. He would sit near the window, not bothering to take off his maroon hat with pink trim even in church, and his nephews would fill out the row in descending order of height. Some would gossip that they sat in descending order of color, with the lightest child beside Mr. Garvey and the darkest by the aisle, so that he could be the closest to black people. Before the service was over, he would rise, run his thin fingers over his black pin-striped suit, and his nephews would rise as well. In a line they would leave, the youngest nephew in front and Mr. Garvey in the back, who would toss some money at the altar and march through the door, his coattails flapping in the breeze. But this Ash Wednesday, as church was about to start, there was no sign of Mr. Garvey. Many were curious, but most were like Lucinda, who dismissed such things. Naturally, a man who was so rich that he made black white, would sooner or later stop coming to black people church. Especially a sodomite who was on his way to Hell. Country people took his absence as they took everything else.

But this morning the Rum Preacher was sober. Many forgot how tall he actually was, so like Gregory Peck midway between *Roman Holiday* and *Moby Dick*, which were still shown as a double feature at the Majestic. Pastor Bligh was wiry, a giant in the village. But disgrace diminished him. Guilt threw a curve in his back and a hunch in his stance. He had a square jaw with thick eyebrows over thin eyes and short, graying hair that was white at the temples. He was not a dark man, but not light either. His color was a nebulous thing, so like his voice, which was too low to be weak but too reedy to be commanding. In a town that preferred things black or white, grayness such as his was not welcome.

Bligh refused friendship. His sermons even when he was sober rocked with the terror and uncertainty of a man not in control. When the spirit came over him, he was racked without mercy, and left with sweat and tremors. Outside church they avoided him, lest the spirit assail him at that very moment and God punish them too. Sin, guilt, conviction, and redemption: things he may have spoke of, but always carried in the shakiness of his voice.

The church service began at 8:15. The sun was subdued by a mob of reddish gray clouds. Wind slammed the church doors shut. She whispered and taunted through door spaces and half closed windows. Then the doors swung open and wind rushed in, knocking off hats and veils and sweeping up skirts and dresses. For a few seconds the church went to pieces. The wind forced herself all the way up to the altar and knocked over the Pastor's water glass, which fell on the purple carpet but did not break. Then she vanished.

The organist raised a hymn and within seconds the usual people were at the altar praying, praising, and yelling. Pastor Bligh had a word today. The word was flesh before he was flesh. Not his to claim, just to say. This was a burden he felt unfit for, but what right had he to the anguish of the major prophets? He was humbled that God had tolerated him for so long. But God was leading and he had to follow. Duty, then, not pleasure or purpose. He stood up, without having to correct his balance, and sung with the church.

It soon be done
All my trouble and trial
When I get home
On the other side
I'm gonna shake my hands with the elders
I'm gonna tell all the people good morning
I'm gonna sit down beside my Jesus
I'm gonna sit down and rest a little while!

The church was caught up in chorus singing and Hallelujah shouting. Women and men were dancing before the Lord and confessing his greatness. From the back of the half filled church came a sound like the crash of a tambourine. But from the front, the shattered stained glass window fell like rain. One of the John Crows from before had flown into the window, bursting through like a bullet, exploding in multicolored glass and blood. The organist saw nothing but the choir panicked. Lucinda screamed as the John Crow landed dead on the pulpit. Disgusted, those at the altar went back to their seats. Pastor Bligh instructed The Five to remove the vulture. They hesitated. John Crows were messengers of the Devil—everybody knew it. The Pastor kicked the vulture from the pulpit to the floor. One of The Five took the bird through the door, leaving a trail of blood spatter.

"Wickedness. God sent Jonah to warn Nineveh about wickedness," Hector Bligh said. "Elijah warned Ahab. John warned Herod. But nobody listens to the man of God. They burn him. They stab him, they whip him, and they chop off his head. They crucify him. They kill the messenger and spit out the message like a bitter orange seed. Everybody kills the messenger, nobody hears the message."

The congregation had been here before. When he was drunk, Bligh's sermon jumped from several points in the Bible at once and collapsed under convoluted scripture. When he was sober, he began in a sonorous mumble that grew to a sharp, bitter echo by the end. They had stopped listening to him, but he had stopped preaching to them. He spoke without pause for thought, preaching not to man or God or even himself. He ac-

cepted this as easily as he did all defeat. Bligh's eyes swept the room to see a congregation looking but not seeing, all but one.

"Something's coming. Something's coming. Coming on mighty wings. I'm sorry for who not ready. This is not what I came to preach. I came to preach about forgiveness. The Lord had other . . . This is what Jesus told me to tell you.

"There are those among you not ready. There are those among you, if you died right now, will roast in the lake of fire. If the rapture comes tonight you'll be swinging from a tree like Judas Iscariot. Satan coming like a roaring lion and he's going to devour you unless you let the Lord come dwell in you. Unless you come back the Lord. There are those among you grieving the Holy Spirit. You need to purify your heart before it's too late. Satan coming like a roaring lion.

"Whosoever want God healing stream, come to the altar. Tomorrow might be too late. God's vengeance is swift and brutal. Nobody will escape the white throne of Judgment."

Seven minutes later a man rose from his seat and went to the altar. His huge frame and squeaky army boots cut through the stillness of the church. The organist played "Closer Than a Brother My Jesus Is to Me." The choir hummed. Soon a girl rose, and another, a woman. The altar, easy to approach for praise, was difficult to approach for forgiveness. Church people, through their stares, created a boundary of shame that few climbed over. But then another man stood up, and three more women. Then a child. Lucinda had no choice. She missed her favorite spot, to the right of the podium, that bore the permanent dent of her knees. She scowled. Pastor Bligh prayed.

"Father, forgive our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us!"

He watched from the back of the church. The man had come with the night but darkness stayed with him in day. He was unnerved by all the excitement. The feeling was as strange as ecstasy or remorse. A fat day or a thin year carried the same weight if one had the same hate. He was taller than the Pastor, with black shoes, black suit, black shirt, black hair, and light skin that the sun had roasted. The altar called him and he made

his way. Behind bent knees and prostrate bodies, he stood. The Pastor did not see him at first, but then gaze met gaze and Hector Bligh blinked. Bligh looked away and continued to declare his flock free. But the man's eyes followed him. He stretched his arms wide and stepped toward the Pastor's podium. A space cleared as if the church had been waiting for him. The Pastor noticed. The man shut his eyes, but looked upward, as if to a Heaven higher than the Pastor's. Hector Bligh hesitated before approaching him; admonishing himself that fear was not of God. But surprise was to play no role in this incident. So when the Pastor laid hands on the man in black and he pushed them away, there was no aback to be taken. This was no conflicted soul whose path he would make straight. He knew this but felt compelled to be pastorly. Hector Bligh placed his hands on the man's head but the man grabbed both, squeezing them to the bone. He made little effort. Hector Bligh knew he was weak, but never before had his weakness been made so manifest.

"So who's going to forgive you? Who's going to forgive all of you?"

Bligh did not understand the intimacy. This demon had the wrong man. The man tightened the grip on his arms and agony shot through his shoulders.

"Who's going to forgive you, you ignorant son of a bitch?"

The man grabbed Pastor Bligh at the sides.

"Who's going to wash away *your* sin? Who's going to purify you of *your* unrighteousness? Who's going to make *you* as white as snow?"

He flung the Pastor into the wall behind him. As he slammed into the bricks, Bligh felt the wind forced out of his lungs. But the man in black was not done. The organist stopped and the congregation was still.

The Five stormed the pulpit, eager to unleash the violence that brimmed in church muscle. The man had gone over to the Pastor and grabbed him by his robes. The Five circled him, about to pounce, but then he raised his hand and pointed two fingers. The men stopped, lunging forward in momentum, but with their feet firm on the floor. They knew they were not frozen. They knew they could walk if they chose to. The Five thought it ridiculous, crazy that this strange man had commanded them without words like they were cows, but none dared move. Someone in the congre-

gation screamed. Another shouted. From the sea of grumbling rose curses and bellows, but then the man raised his hand again, pointed two fingers, and the congregation fell quiet.

Lawd a massy, you should a see it when all Hell break loose in the church!

Then pop story give we.

All we see is this man. First we think say is Devil. Then we think is Gabriel or Michael or one of them strong angel.

Tell we bout the Hell that break loose.

Yes me dear, the man set pon Pastor Bligh like when you a beat mangy dog.

Caca-fart!

You understand? This yah man just grab Pastor like him make out o paper and fling him clear cross the pulpit. Any higher and him would a crash in the stain glass.

Christmas!

If ever. Then next thing you know the man set pon Pastor like demon. Him slap him so, then so, then so, then so again. Before you know it, Pastor a spit blood.

Rahtid!

But him never done. Him thump Pastor in him head, him slap Pastor cross him back, then him kick Pastor in him seed bag. Pastor face mash up. To think just before that the Pastor warning we bout Satan the roaring lion.

Shithouse!

Then him call Pastor three thing.

Three thing? What three thing?

First him call him Disgrace.

Which him is, thank you Jesus.

Then him call him Abominational.

Oh babababa—lekim—shakam!

Then him call him Antichrist. And him say it like this: ANTICHRIST.

Lawd Puppa Jesus!

Eehi. Then the man start speak in tongue, but is no Abba babba tongue, and him still a drop lick pon the Pastor.

What is this pon we Puppa Jesus!

The man grab Pastor Bligh like him is garbage and drag him out of the church himself. We see it with we own eye.

Hataclaps! But hi, a who this man be?



A week later, Lucinda would say that the Holy Spirit was moving in a powerful way. But in that moment, another spirit seemed to be moving through the pews. The man grew taller in those few minutes, and his voice bounced from roof to floor with authority. He could have been Gabriel or Michael or the Avenging Angel sent by God to tell them that He was not pleased. This was judgment on their lying, thieving, and whoring generation. A good thing, then, that Lucinda's body was blameless. But the man moved with so much darkness that she wondered if his soul was just as black. She cringed as the near-unconscious body of the Pastor was dragged past her. Bligh was muttering to himself, his left hand trailing on the floor and his right in the mighty grip of the man in black. He took Bligh down the aisle and through the church door that nobody remembered opening.

A week later, Lucinda proclaimed his appearance the work of Jesus, but back then she feared the working of another spirit, the one whom preachers called in a hushed voice *The Enemy*. Back in the church, she clutched herself and whispered an intercessory prayer, dreading yet yearning for the man's return. Yearning? A long-dead emotion stirred itself, which she rebuked in a flurry of Yes Lords. The church waited. Then he returned, emerging from outside as if the sun had birthed him. He was ruddy and handsome, mixed of black and white, or maybe light Indian or Creole Chinaman. His long, curly hair was unruly from beating Bligh, but Lucinda imagined that it was always that way. She smelt his fire and quickly made for her seat. He saw her as she fled.

"But Lucinda. My sister. Isn't this what you've been praying for? Aren't your fingers tired from writing? Don't those knees ache from kneeling, waiting on God?"

He touched her face and whispered, "Didn't He see you mixing tea til He came?"

Convicted and blessed in one fell swoop, she fell to the ground praying and weeping. The man stepped up to the pulpit and waved away The Five, who had been still up to that point. The congregation felt free as well and raised a rumble of whispers and half-said words. He raised his hand again and the church fell silent, save for Lucinda who praised the Lord for His consuming fire yet wondered how much the man in black knew. She shivered. How could he have heard about the tea? Lucinda brewed hidden weeds whenever she wore her secret skin at night.

"Who knows what just happened here?"

Silence.

"Anybody wants try a guess. No? Speak up, you were all yapping just a minute ago."

"Consuming fiiiiire."

"Victory. My Lord has blessed you with victory! Scream it from the highest highs, shout it from the lowest lows, Gibbeah, the Lord has heard your cry. The Lord has seen your suffering. That the body could survive for so long with that abomination as a head is only because of the grace of the One who made you.

"This church is a disgrace, I tell you. Disgrace, and you're all accountable for it. Did I say all? I stand corrected. The church is half empty. Obviously, the ones with sense are finding God somewhere else. Where did they go? Are they at home? In bed? In somebody else's bed? Stealing? Sinning? Well speak up, you all had mouth before.

"This is what the body of Christ has come to? Maybe it's not your fault. Maybe congregations do get the Pastors they deserve. Maybe you and him have a good thing going, eh? He doesn't try to save you, you don't try to damn him—oh yes! I know what has been going on here. Things that would make a sodomite blush.

"But God sent me. And the first thing we're going to do? Clean out this temple.

"Listen to me, Gibbeah. I've come to bring back integrity and smash out iniquity, Hallelujah. I've come to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable. Gibbeah! I've come with a sword!"

He grabbed the podium and the congregation watched his face as the same lines that knotted in fury relaxed to warmth.

"When was the last time you saw God? Felt His presence? Heard His voice? When was the last time you entered His gates with thanksgiving and His courts with praise? You didn't see it, but I see it plainly. The Lord nearly packed his bags to quit this place.

"But God.

"Do you feel the spirit? Can you hear it? It's here. Revival. New vision. New revelation. I prophesy in His name. Can you feel it, my sister? Is it washing over you, my brother? I feel it. Everybody who is a child of the Lord should be feeling it right now. Right now!

"Yes church, this is a new day. A new era. You know what era means? It means something old gone and something new come. Oh yes.

"My name is York. Anybody knows the hymn, 'I'm So Glad?'"