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Satan, Your Kingdom Must Come Down

There was a break in the trees where the old foot bridge used to be, and that's where William Cody Holzheimer, his hair short, colorless, and sparse like the reaped corn field he was standing in, shivered in the bitter air as he fixed his gaze on the small wooden building between two piles of trash. An indistinguishable heap of black sat on top of the corrugated tin roof. A gust of wind came off the Missouri River, just to the north, across the dump, past the wooden building and hit William Cody with its rotten egg stench. The heap of black shot to life, pointing a rifle towards the mounds of trash and fired a single bullet.

"Get your ass on in here," William Cody's father called from the door of a grayed, pre-fabricated house in the middle of the field.

The black mass leapt from the tin roof, disappearing into the mounds of refuse. William Cody ran to the house. "Just what in the hell you s'pect you doin'?" his father asked when William Cody reached the porch.

"I was just watchin' Earl Fink the Man Who Stinks," William Cody answered.

"Chrissakes, boy, he ain't one that's just to be watched. I'll knock you ass over teakettle next time I see you over there. Now get in here and clean up. It's supper time."

The house was cold and gray. The uninsulated aluminum walls creaked under the strengthening North wind. The rusting metal roof clapped against its trusses. His dad stood over the rusting iron stove. He had a skillet with a lump of lard sizzling. He added evaporated milk, water, and flour. He added squirrel parts--bones still in--and salt and pepper. The two huddled next to the stove, the only source of heat in the house, dipping biscuits directly into the skillet and forking out chunks of the squirrel, careful not to swallow any of the soft, minute bones.

William Cody slept on the floor next to the stove in an old army sleeping bag, aching for residual heat from supper. His father slept in the only other room of the house. William Cody never went into the room. He never remembered his mother, but the room still had her imprint. It smelled different from the rest of the house. It smelled colder. A single picture of her was propped up against a lamp on the bedside table. It didn't have a frame and was bowed in the middle. He never saw the picture up close, so his mother remained a blur.

William Cody woke up the next morning and his father wasn't there. Probably out in the field, out on the river, or in town at the co-op. William Cody walked over barren corn fields and newly sown winter wheat fields toward the brass-colored highway lights of town and Crittendon's Hardware and General Store. The old man was in the back. William Cody snuck over to the women's section and pocketed one of the plastic eggs of pantyhose in the bib of his overalls. He went over to the gun cases. Crittendon appeared. He asked him if he shouldn't be in school right now. William Cody had no idea. He asked him about his dad. William Cody said he was fine. William Cody eyed the Smith and Wessons and the Colts. Crittendon said they were the Devil's right hand. William Cody shuffled across the dirty linoleum tiles and out the door.

William Cody trekked back to the spot at Peters Creek a bit east from Earl Fink the Man Who Stinks' house. He put two fingers to his mouth and watched the stream of breath as he exhaled his imaginary cigarette. The air smelled sour and the wind fought a losing battle with the cold lingering mist. All was turning colorless. He set the panty hose egg on the ground and stomped it open and unrolled the nylon. He pulled a plastic bag from his pocket. The plastic bag contained the still bloody entrails from the squirrel from last night's supper. He poured the contents of the plastic bag into the nylon, creating a viscous ball at the toe. He tore a small hole towards the front of the nylon. He tied bailing twine stolen from a barn through the hole and tossed the nylon in the water.

The greasy green water started to bubble and slosh, so William Cody lifted the nylon out of the water. He pulled a four-inch gar out of the toe, strings of squirrel intestine stuck in its alligator-like snout. He snapped off an inch of sturdy twig and pried the gar's jaws open, leaving the twig to keep them propped open. He tossed the fish back in the creek. The fish thrashed and gurgled in the water for a few moments then floated to the top belly up. William Cody repeated the procedure a dozen more times until he bored of it.

He heard a snap from the dump. A fallen elm lay in the middle of the creek a few feet from William Cody. The white trunk was splintered at the break and brown leaves still clung to a few branches. William Cody crawled out to where the trunk touched water. It was sturdy. There was flat dirt-mud and a series of tree roots that led up the bank on the opposite side. He stood up and got a running start on the trunk. He leapt right at the end of the trunk. He didn't make the ten-foot jump. He was able to toe the bottom of the creek and waded up the rest of the way. He pulled his feet out of the dense silt, his shoes encased in mud, and scrambled up the bank, his teeth chattering violently from the cold water.

There goes Earl Fink. Earl Fink the Man Who Stinks. They all called him this not because he lived in a wooden shack between mounds of trash at the county dump, though it did not detract from the overall effect of the refrain. He was called Earl Fink the Man Who Stinks because he only bathed once a year. At the end of each summer he walked downtown, bought a bottle of Old Jayhawk Bourbon, bought new overalls and white shirt, and took a bath in an old cow trough behind the VFW hall. It was sport for people inside the hall on how dark the water would be afterwards. His old tattered, mud stiffened, sweat stinking overalls were a prize to be won by the school aged child brave enough or harangued enough by dare to steal them from the dumpster. He would shave, talk to only the necessary people to achieve his aims, and walk back to the house. No one knew much about him aside from these facts. It was common practice to leave the man alone. He chose, after all, to live at the dump.

The dump was just beyond the tree line. William Cody stepped around old toilet seats and rusted, broken metal rods and broken chairs. He had never seen Earl Fink the Man Who Stinks or his house up close. It stood, barely, between two mounds of indefinable detritus dotted with mushrooms and shocks of grass. It looked to William Cody like an oversized outhouse, gaps in the planks and a pervading sour smell.

The shack was surrounded by planks sticking out the ground like grave markers. William Cody approached the circle of planks and found each held a rat crucified, a nail driven through the middle of its head. Half of the rats were missing their flesh from their necks down, the exposed muscle tissue turning green and jellied. William Cody struggled for a reason behind the macabre act, but stood befuddled.

William Cody didn't hear it or smell it. He just turned around and he had a gun barrel in his face. The dark blue metal was pitted. The stock looked like it came directly off a tree, still rough with bark in places.

"Just what do you think you're doin'?" Behind the gun and in front of the sun, Earl Fink appeared black, featureless.

"Mmm-mm," William Cody answered.

"What the hell language is that? I don't speak that gibberish."

"I was just lookin'."

"Well look elsewhere. Go on, get."

William Cody bound off toward the creek. After a few moments, blood pounding in his ears, he heard a loud pop. He stopped. His heart pounded in his chest, his ribs heaved against his skin. He turned around but saw nothing. Earl Fink the Man Who Stinks didn't shoot at him, not at that moment. He raced, once again, toward the creek.

There wasn't enough room to leap from the bank at the bottom to the tree trunk. He aimed a few feet upstream from the tree trunk and, with urgency, leapt into the creek. He relied on the current to take him to the partially submerged tree. He caught his face in a tangle of branches as he inched up the tree and to the safety of the other side.

His breathing slowed as he sat shivering, his wet skin and clothes collecting the earth's flecks, twigs, leaves, and mud.

William Cody wanted to sneak into his house, to avoid his father, to not let his father see him: shoes two bricks of mud, overalls soaked and speckled in all manner of debris, shirt equally sopped and torn in several places along the seams, and face and hands bloodied from scrambling along a fallen tree. William Cody wanted to sneak in. He entertained the idea of hiding for a bit or cleaning up somewhere, but tardiness would have gotten him in the same place. No. William Cody walked up the steps to the porch and walked, shivering, through the door.

His father didn't ask questions. Didn't make eye contact. He just stripped William Cody of his clothes--tore them off--and slashed at him with the leather belt until welts formed, bloomed and sticky black blood ran down his skin. It happened regularly enough that William Cody stuck pieces of paper towels to his skin and hoped for sleep as soon as possible.

William Cody, as part of his punishment, had to spend the day with his father. German Holzheimer, in the summer, farmed the twenty acres around the house for soybeans and corn. In the winter, though, he was a commercial fisherman, providing downtown St. Joe's restaurants with fish throughout the late fall and winter.

They left footprints in the four a.m. mist as though it were snow. The Holzheimer boat was anachronistic pristine aluminum pontoons astride a rotting wooden plank. Atop the plank in places was a layer of artificial turf. Metal drums half-filled with water checker-boarded the deck. The pilot's station sat in front of the aged outboard. German manned the wheel as William Cody stood out front sweeping the river with a flashlight.

German had a spider web of trot lines at inlets and cuts for several miles along the Missouri river. At that time of the morning, theirs was the only boat on the fast moving river. They stuck close to the banks as the engine struggled against the current. William Cody fought his eyes open to call out submerged tree limbs and re-bar.

At Peters Creek, German dropped the anchor and had William Cody pull up the trot line. The water was frigid, the line heavy, icy. William Cody gave the line a hard pull, but the line pulled back, causing William Cody to lose his footing and slip into the water. William Cody thrashed for a moment until the chill entered his marrow and stiffened his limbs, and he gave up. Before he sunk in the current, German

yanked the line and William Cody, as well as three, twenty pound catfish flopped on the artificial turf of the boat gasping for air.

The rest of the morning William Cody stood at the front of the boat, clothes frozen from the wind, assisting German with removing the fish from the hooks and putting the fish in different metal drums and with the anchor.

German dropped two catfish wrapped in newspaper onto William Cody's lap. William Cody looked up at German. The fish were heavy; the wet newspaper was disintegrating in different places.

"Is this mine?" William Cody asked.

"Nope. That's a delivery you need to make. I ain't got the time," German answered. William Cody looked down at the package.

"Who they for?"

"They go over to Earl Fink the Man Who Stinks for services rendered," German said.

"I can't take them over there. He'll kill me."

"He ain't going to do shit. You take them over there right now. And you better come back without any shuckin' and jivin' or I'll tan your hide. Go on."

The wind was blowing so hard he couldn't hear anymore. The crusted earth crunched with each of William Cody's steps. The fishes' eyes exploded under the pressure from his fingers; the stream of blood and pus stained his white shirt and overalls. He tried to scratch the material off, but only ground in the stain.

He had to walk all the way up to the road to cross at the bridge then walk all the way back down through the entrance to the dump. Blowing dust and grit forced his eyes closed and his chin down.

Earl Fink the Man Who Stinks stood in front of one of the boards, he had a knife and was skinning a newly dead rat. "The fuck do you want," he said. He moved aside; the crucified rat still had a fresh look of surprise as it splayed there now naked of its fur.

William Cody held the package out. He fought his bladder and mind to not betray him. One of the catfish's faces was fully exposed, smiling at Earl Fink the Man Who Stinks.

"My dad said to hand this over for services rendered, he said," William Cody offered.

"You're German's boy? I s'pect you ought to come in," Earl Fink the Man Who Stinks said.

His reaction was automatic. Fear didn't have time to take hold, and he was inside Earl Fink the Man Who Stink's house. It looked a lot like his own home. A collection of dusty, old furniture, overstuffed chairs. Very simple.

William Cody handed over the fish and sat on the old military style cot. "Yep, I welded up them pontoons for old German. Of course, I didn't expect anything like this in return," Earl Fink the Man Who Stinks said.

He set the fish on the counter. His hands moved deftly as he guillotined the heads and removed the spines. William Cody couldn't settle on looking at one thing; it was a funhouse collection of odd bits, garbage from who-knows-how-far-back. He paused at the corner directly across from him. A paper mâché mannequin head sat atop an iron frame. On the shoulders of the iron frame hung a great heap of fur. It had no definable shape, just a collection of scraps.

"What is that?" William Cody asked.

"What's it look like? It's a coat."

"You wear that thing?"

"No I don't. And it's not finished. It's not for me."

"Who's it for then?"

"None of your damn business."

"Why'd you stick that rifle in my face?"

Earl Fink the Man Who Stinks moved from the kitchen counter to a torn orange easy chair next to William Cody. His face was a series of deep crevices. His skin was so dark from dirt and grease in places, he could have been considered an Indian. He had only one front tooth, the color of candied corn. "Now I didn't know who you was. I didn't know what you planned on doing," he said, pointing the bloodied knife at William Cody.

"I'm just a kid. I ain't gonna do nothing. I ain't gonna tell nobody nothing."

"Shit," Earl Fink the Man Who Stinks looked around to avoid William Cody's eyes. "You seen that gal that lives up by the revival grounds? Name's Lucy."

"Yeah, I know who she is. You gonna give her that? It's made out of rats. Why didn't you make one out of coons?"

"Boy, coon fur coats were out of fashion even before I was born. And the county pays me to shoot them sons of bitches. I got to use them for something."

"She has a fella, doesn't she?"

"That don't matter much."

"I think he's supposed to be pretty wild."

"I said it don't matter much."

Earl Fink the Man Who Stinks got out of the chair to pack the catfish in ice. William Cody also stood and approached the great coat. It did, he found, have sleeves, though the left sleeve was noticeably longer than the right. The stitch work, though, was impeccable. Each hand-sized patch of fur was attached to the next with a straight line of thread. The fur chosen for the coat was also first rate; no sign of mange or filth, and the rich colors ranging from gray to brown to black to white created a pleasing tapestry.

"You're a pretty good sewer," William Cody said.

"Don't you touch that," Earl Fink the Man Who Stinks said. He had a filet knife in his hand gripped so tight that his knuckles turned white. "It's what you might call a labor of love."

William Cody lingered only a moment more before he walked out of the house without a word of good bye. Nothing was said by Earl Fink the Man Who Stinks. William Cody circled the collection of corpses who gave their lives for that thing of beauty that couldn't possibly be appreciated by its intended.

William Cody walked back the way he came: the long way. He stared at the hill where among its dense growth of trees, lived the object of Earl Fink the Man Who Stinks affections. He imagined himself inside the great coat. It was a cocoon of warmth. He could seal himself inside its blackness and be safe.

William Cody took the porch stairs two at a time and recklessly opened and slammed the door behind him.

"You better watch yourself, or I'll have to lay into you again," German said from the chair where he just woke up. "What took you so damned long?"

"I was just talking to Earl Fink the Man Who Stinks. He's got a strange house. All sorts of junk in it," William Cody answered.

"Well, that shouldn't surprise you considering where he lives."

"He seems like an okay guy. He smells pretty bad, but otherwise he's pretty nice."

"He's a damn fool, and if you don't see that, you're one too. And I thought I told you not to be harassing that man?"

"You sent me up there."

"To deliver fish and come right back. I don't want you around that man. I can already smell you."

"That's the fish."

German stood up, a scowl across his face. William Cody, deflated of all bravery, sat on the couch. He hugged his knees to his chest. German sat back down, closed his eyes.

"You know he's got for that girl up on the hill by the revival grounds?" William Cody asked.

"That ain't no surprise. Most fellas around here do fall in love with her at some point or another," German answered.

"You too?"

"Hell no. She'll end up just like your mother. You may not be old enough to understand it, but you need to know you can't trust no one like her. Nothing but a Jezebel addicted to wine and sin. Make you forget yourself and what you have to do. Probably why he don't take a regular bath. That ain't no kind of good woman. I tried to get your mother right, but it was too much of a job. Hell, those kind of women, they don't respond to correction, they just laugh at you. Just treachery of the first order."

"I need a new coat." His father never talked about his mother. William Cody never knew how to react to it except to change the subject.

"Toughen up. It ain't even begun to get cold yet."

William Cody woke up when German came back in the door from fishing, cursing the fish for not biting. William Cody went to the kitchen to find something to eat. Sifting through the shelves, he knocked more than one pan to the ground. German screamed from the bedroom for William Cody to leave the house until he awoke again.

William Cody saw the first snow of the season. It wasn't much. And what was there blew into drifts a foot high so that there were spots in the field still showing the black of the dirt interrupted by a few mounds of dirty white flakes. He immediately ran to one of the piles and made snowballs to pelt the house with.

Fingers frozen and wet, he walked toward town. He ended up in the direction of Hardy's Fruit and Vegetables. There weren't many there, but he saw who he was looking for right away. She was wearing the blue vinyl vest all the employees had on. She wasn't as drab-looking, though. She didn't look as angry as the others.

He circled Lucy, keeping at least one aisle between them. Looking over the bananas, he finally caught her glance. She smiled and winked at William Cody. He felt it burn in his stomach. He felt he did something wrong. But he kept circling.

The door opened, making the bell ring, distracting William Cody. When he regained focus Lucy was standing in front of him. She had an apple she was polishing on her skirt. William Cody looked up at her. She winked at him. She smelled like the fruit she was stacking, exotic and clean, slightly earthy. She turned him around and led him toward the back door. She tapped a rhythm on his shoulder as she guided him out of the store. At the door, she put the apple in his hand, kissed his forehead, and pushed him out. He turned around, tried to hand the apple back to her. She breathed a laugh and shut the door.

He knew then he had to act before Earl Fink the Man Who Stinks acted. He ran to the dump, devouring the apple at the same time. The juices ran down his chin, the skin cut into his gums leaving red marks in the pulp. At the entrance he slowed. He moved stealthily from one piece of garbage to the next trying to find Earl Fink the Man Who Stinks without giving away his position.

He reached the house and the ring of dead rats. The wind wasn't blowing as loud and he didn't hear Earl Fink the Man Who Stinks. He tiptoed up to the house. He looked in the greasy window and saw no

one. He walked around the perimeter of the house and found nothing. He went back to the house and tried the door. It wasn't locked.

William Cody stepped inside the house. It was colder inside than it was out. He felt as though he were being watched. He went straight to the mannequin. He tried lifting the coat off but it was too heavy. He rocked the mannequin back and forth until it fell to the floor, knocking over an end table in the process, sending several pieces of glass crashing along with it. He pulled the coat off the metal frame and hefted it over his shoulders. He was instantly warmer. It was heavy, but without the chill, he felt stronger.

He heard a shot. It was close. He didn't think. He ran straight out the door and at the creek. He reached the tree line faster than he ever thought he could have. He didn't pause to look back; he leapt in the creek and floated downstream. Only his feet felt cold; the fur coat chased any chill from the rest of his body. He caught the fallen tree and hoisted himself out of the water. The coat was heavier now, ice matted in much of the fur, and William Cody finally felt the extra weight.

Another shot sounded. William Cody pumped his legs as hard as he could. There was no feeling in his feet any longer. He turned around, but saw nothing. His house was close.

He felt a sharp pain in between his shoulder blades. He collapsed face first to the ground, gasping for breath. He didn't remember hearing any noise, but there was a familiar smell. A boot turned him around so that he stared up into the sun. Earl Fink the Man Who Stinks eclipsed his view. He wasn't wet, wasn't breathing hard.

"You shot me?" William Cody asked.

"I didn't shoot you. I reckon you'll probably have quite a bruise, though."

William Cody's eyes darted from side to side hoping someone saw what was happening, hoping his father would emerge from the house. They were less than twenty feet away from it. William Cody wanted to yell, but he couldn't force more than a wheezing whisper.

"You're faster than a goddamned cat," William Cody said.

"Give it here," Earl Fink the Man Who Stinks said. "It don't belong to you. It ain't for you."

"She's just going to laugh at you, you give this to her."

"Boy, you don't know nothing."

"I know what I saw."

Earl Fink the Man Who Stinks unbuttoned the coat from William Cody. He moved William Cody back on his belly and ripped the coat off his body.

After a few moments William Cody turned himself around and Earl Fink the Man Who Stinks was already gone. William Cody stared into the sun. It made everything whiter, but it didn't give any warmth.

The front door of his house swung open with a loud creak and he saw German on the front porch, stretching his arms out. He saw German eye him in the field and walk out toward him.

"What in the hell are you doing out here in the damned mud?" German demanded.

"It was Earl Fink the Man Who Stinks. He shot me in the back."

German sat William Cody up, unbuckled his overalls, and lifted his shirt up. A blue black bruise in the perfect shape of the butt of the rifle rose off his skin.

"What'd you do to get this?" German asked.

"I told him about that lady," William Cody answered.

"Well, I'd say you got what you got, then," German said. "I'm gonna set a few lines in the creek over yonder. Get your ass up out of this mud."

German walked to the creek, disappeared behind the tree line. William Cody tried to force himself up, but his arms wouldn't work correctly. He fell back down into the mud, his clothes still half off. The wind died down to a breeze and brought the stench of the dump with it. He felt the cold mud on his skin. He worked the mud around his bruise. It soothed the burning skin.