

Still avoiding the main roads, including the pragmatic Turnpike which teases them with occasional peeks at its elevated concrete lanes, Jesus drives the Dodge Caravan up and down the large western Pennsylvania hills where farmland fits like latex to the steep slopes, and barns jut toothily from the rocks. They pass a maroon shed with white block letters hammered into the roof: REPENT! JESUS IS NEAR!

“Is it any wonder these people have a passion for my father? You think of farmers and coal miners as rubes and mediocrities because they live off the land, but these people are wise in ways you will never know, for they appreciate daily the gifts my father has provided them. It’s easy for a careerist who relies on his own wit and education to forget about God.”

“I was going to be a songwriter,” Catherine confesses.

“And you would have been a good one, I’m sure.”

“Do you disapprove?”

He smiles. “For you? No. Because you have always believed.” He looks at the others through his rearview mirror. “Do not envy Catherine because I have preferred her company in the front seat. Catherine is your example.”

“Our *what?*” says Fern with swift indignation.

“Catherine believes in me. She prays to my father. She knows that God is actual, and not a symbol to be interpreted with philosophical convenience. He is not a fanciful yardstick to measure Man’s place in the universe. She has gone through one of the worst experiences a mother can know, and her faith remains unshaken.”

“So why the hell is she here?” asks Holland.

“Perhaps for this reason. Learn from Catherine. Know what she has endured and how it has not defeated her spirituality.”

Keith stage-whispers to Fern, “What happened to her?”

“Her kid died ten years ago,” Fern mutters grumpily.

Catherine turns to confront this. Beyond Fern’s wide angry face she sees Brooke sitting between Arthur and Holland, and the girl looks back at her, aghast. “Catherine, is that true?”

“Yes, Brooke.”

“Wow. Gee, that must’ve been tough, don’tcha think?” The girl looks at the

others, but they are less impressed.

“No one wants your opinion, whore,” snaps Fern, and Brooke shrinks into herself, stares at her lap with fingers tightly entwined. Fern turns to Catherine. “As for you, nobody wanted you on this trip anyway.”

“I did,” Jesus intercedes. “Or did you forget that?”

“Master, I realize you went and got her, but that doesn’t mean she can pass judgment and tell us all off, and flout the rules—”

“Wait a minute,” Catherine says. “I’ve never told anybody off in this group. And as for passing judgments, Fern, I think you’re a lousy one to talk!”

“Woo-hoo!” Holland laughs gleefully.

Fern bristles with rage. “So you think you’re the only one what’s got pain? That you’re the only one with a crappy life?”

“I never said my life was crappy. And I’m certainly not the only person in pain. Dammit, the whole world is in pain right now!”

“That’s right!” Fern crows triumphantly. “It’s not just you! Glad you realize it!”

Catherine faces front, seething. She wants to tell Fern to go to hell, but can’t really do so in this particular company. She stares forward, tries to calm herself, and reads OSAMA YOU WILL DIE finger-written in the dirt crusting the back window of a pickup truck. Four decals of American flags mark each corner of the window.

Petulantly she asks, “Why do you let everybody argue like this?”

Jesus’ brown eyes glint with amusement. “It brings out the honesty.”

“You think so?”

“Yes.”

Which makes her feel like she has no allies at all. She stares at the pickup in front of her so the others won’t see her distress.

The Caravan reaches the summit of a mountain’s large dome, and begins a speedy descent into a valley so vast its edges curl with the rims of the horizon, its walls covered by shaggy forest and its floor dotted with tiny ranch houses and a reflective sliver of highway. Jesus brakes gently, and steers the Caravan onto the highway’s shoulder. He sighs and closes his eyes. The car continues to roll downhill. Concerned, Catherine puts a hand on his arm.

“Master?”

Fern leans forward and swats her hand away. “Let him be!”

“What—”

“He’s praying, you fool!”

And apparently he is. Catherine sits back, ashamed. “Okay, I didn’t know.”

“Yeah,” mutters Fern.

No one dares move. The car rolls perilously close to the guard rail, and those with windows on the right side stare down into a glacially-cut canyon of pine trees and craggy rock walls. Jesus opens his eyes and taps the gas pedal. The Caravan kicks forward. He steers it back onto the road and drives as if there had been no interruption. At a deserted traffic light that blinks yellow one way, red the other, he turns left.

“We’re heading south?” Arthur asks.

“Kind of southwest,” Jesus says.

“This isn’t the way to Pittsburgh.”

“Do you think we won’t get there?”

The mountain road drops them into another dense forest. A few houses break through the trees, all of them old and dilapidated, the planking seedy and rotted under peeling paint, porch posts tilted, screens punctured. Plastic and metal debris fill most of the yards.

“How do people live in places like this?” Keith asks.

Fern grunts. “Lots of people live like this.”

“But there isn’t any farm or town. What do these people do for income?”

Holland speaks up. “You’re looking at one of welfare’s washed out pockets, preppie.”

“I was just asking.” Keith is annoyed.

Holland looks out his window. “It’s like living in the bottom of a dirty aquarium.”

In a few minutes they enter a town of streaked gray windows and sagging storefronts. The central street is all rotted tar, and cars parked by the curb look like they’ve sat there for years.

Arthur says, “This looks like the heart of a flood zone.”

“It can get bad,” Jesus acknowledges.

“Master, what are we doing here?”

“I’m hoping you’ll know in a moment.” Jesus rolls down his window, the better to read the names of the side streets in the overcast light. He turns the Caravan down a narrow road lined on both sides with small mossy clapboard homes. Squares of cement that make up the sidewalks have split apart, and many tilt badly from overgrown tree roots burrowing underneath. The property yards are tiny and fenced with rusty metal mesh. A three-story dwelling appears on their left, its floors stacked on eaves of shedding shingles. A corner room on the second floor protrudes roundly from the body of the house like a turret, giving the place a shabby Victorian hint. The mailbox is dented and unreadable from generations of black rust. The yard is thick with dead weeds and colorless duff that curl three feet high. The porch looks like a crabby mouth, empty but for a tricycle without wheels and the plastic scraps of what might have once been a blue laundry basket. Jesus brakes the car by the curb and shifts into park. He leaves the motor running.

“Who lives here?” Arthur asks.

“In all honesty I don’t know.”

They scrutinize the property. There is no car in the drive, nothing to indicate that anyone has occupied the dwelling in a while. On the third floor a white rotted shutter hangs off a single hinge like a bad cliché from a haunted house movie.

Fern asks very slowly, “What is this place?”

Jesus looks at her through the rearview mirror.

Tucked in the back yard is a stand-alone garage that looks like the house’s forlorn child. Five glass windows in a horizontal row across its large door are impenetrable black lozenges. A yard tool, now nothing but a decapitated wooden handle, leans against the door with bent pieces of metal scattered in the grass.

“Master?” Fern asks slowly.

Still Jesus doesn’t answer. They can all feel each other’s heat and shift restlessly in the closed car, waiting for the revelation that must be coming. Arthur coughs, and Brooke bites her lower lip. Their driver watches the house with the passive serenity that is in every picture made of him, including the ones where he begs for his life in Gethsemane.

Keith leans forward. “Master, what is it?”

“Just a house, Keith. A very old house.”

“Does anyone live here?”

“I guess not. I wasn’t sure, though.”

Fern says suddenly, “Oh God! Oh Master! I gotta get out!”

Jesus immediately shuts off the motor. With a strange frenzy Fern pushes forward past Keith, yanks open the sliding door, and jumps out. She nearly falls into the road but rights herself, and strides swiftly to Jesus’ window. “Master, you brought me here!”

“What do you see?” he asks with a smile.

Her jaw flexes with confusion and even a little fear. She faces the house, then boldly pushes the wooden gate aside. This trespass causes no shouts from the black windows. No dogs bark, no shotguns go off. The tall house stands dead and indifferent.

Arthur calls out to her, “Do you know this place?”

“I think I do,” she answers, slow and wondering. “Oh Lord, this is it, isn’t it?” She looks back at Jesus, who watches her contentedly from the driver’s window. “Praise God in Heaven, this is really it! I grew up in this house!”

The other disciples are slow to catch the import. Catherine holds her breath, utterly absorbed by the animation bubbling in the large woman. Fern walks courageously up the steps of the long porch and affectionately stomps one foot on the floorboards.

“Careful!” Arthur shouts. “That old wood might not support you!”

“Nah, it’s safe enough.” Fern laughs and steps back into the yard, sizes up the house with her big hands planted on both hips. “Safer now than it ever was.” She looks at Jesus with wide grateful eyes. “How’d you know?”

“Why do you ask me things like that?”

“Because even I didn’t know! I couldn’t of found this house in a million years. I completely blocked it from memory. I can’t believe we’re here!”

“This is where you were a foster child?” Arthur asks.

“No. This is my *real* home. It’s where Papa beat the crap out of us. It’s where he killed my Mama.” She surveys the house again, seems compelled to count all the windows. “It’s the house the State took us from.”

Catherine asks, “Do you know where your father is now?”

Fern shakes her head. She gives Jesus an inquiring look, but he merely shrugs. “No. They took us from here when I was ten, and I never had contact with him again. Even if he’s alive he’s gotta be eighty-eight or something. I’d never recognize him.”

She points up. “That turret-shaped room up on the second floor? That was mine. I was the only girl, so I got a room of my own. We called that part The Castle.”

Keith asks, “How did he kill your mother?”

“He got pissed one night and gave her a backhand across the face that knocked her into the china hutch. The dishes, the hutch itself, everything came down on her. We all saw it, you know,” she adds a little too cheerfully, caught up in the magic of standing here. “My brothers and I, we were all sitting at the dinner table. When they pulled the hutch off her neck was broke. It happened...” She ponders a moment, then points to another dark window on the side of the house. “Happened right there.”

She walks around the van and pulls the side door open. As she climbs in Jesus says, “We can stay longer if you wish.”

“Master, there’s no need. It’s wonderful you showed me this, and I truly thank you. But I got taken from here a long time ago. I got no connection to the place.”

“As you wish.” He starts up the van, executes a halting K-turn, and rolls back toward Main Street.

Fern chuckles softly. “Now that I know where I am, this all looks familiar. This town hasn’t changed in fifty years. It was already dying when I was a kid.”

“I can’t imagine there’s any work around here,” Holland remarks.

“There was once. This was a steel town. Everyone worked for Pittsburgh steel. It paid well, and you didn’t need to be a high school grad. In fact, Papa dropped out of school at sixteen ’cause everyone knew it was stupid to stay. Course, we all believed the mills would run forever. Papa must of seen it coming. I was too young to worry about the layoffs, but I could sense a lot of angry vibes among Papa and my uncles. I think killing Mama and getting prison was some kind of strategy for him. Not like he planned it, see, but it sure worked in his favor. While everybody else was struggling on relief, he got himself sheltered and fed.”

She buckles her seat belt and faces forward, her face set with its characteristic hardness. “And it got him rid of us too.”