

And God Shall Smite Thee

By

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“God is righteous. God is love. God is the truth. I do not tell you that. I just send you His message.” James Hopkins preached to his captivated audience crammed in his small church, hanging on every word he cried out, “Let no one here become enraptured by the evil around us. Love your neighbour. Love your religion. Love your God.” Though his words were powerful and effective, they were also forgettable. The crowd would have forgotten all his inspirational lines by the time they reached the rusting gate on the perimeter of the church grounds – except one. He was the youngest of four. The mistake. The unwanted. Matthew. His eyes pierced through the sore skin circling them, which he constantly rubbed, making them raw. His pale complexion stood him out from his family sitting next to him. He looked a far cry from them, particularly the woman sitting next to him; his weary mother.

“We have all sinned, yet if we all cleanse ourselves at the mercy of God, we are forgiven.” Matthew didn’t move nor blink, missing nothing. He was consumed by his father’s words. The

village believed Matthew would become a fine vicar like his father. His family just prayed the Lord's words would eventually cleanse Matthew of the erratic evil inside him.

Matthew and his estranged family occupied the front row of pews. They always had and they always would. Matthew would have it no other way. This way, he felt closer to his father - closer to God.

The service ended and the obeying crowd filtered out down the stone isle towards the blustering English wind. The Hopkins family stood outside the heavy wooden doors of the church. The wind whistled through the holes in the surrounding gravestones as Mrs Hopkins waved everybody off. Two locals stepped through the swaying grass to say hello. Matthew stood frozen, yet desperate to escape.

“How are the Hopkins?”

“We're well thank you. And you ladies, how are you on our Lord's day?” Mrs Hopkins was being courteous. A false smile, which she had taught herself to wear, developed across her tired face.

“Oh, we’re very well. A wonderful service as always don’t you agree?”

“Quite. Thank you ever so much.” The evident silence turned their attention to Matthew.

“And how is young Master Hopkins?”

“He has been well of late.” Mother quickly retorted. She could hear Matthew’s breathing getting shorter and faster. She knew he didn’t like them. She knew him that well at least. “Well, we must be off ladies.”

“We are heading into town later today. Join us?” She knew she’d have to ask James.

“That would be lovely. Until then ladies.” Mother ushered him away. His mother immediately looked at her youngest. She had no answer for her son’s problem. She felt helpless. Her aging face frowned at him. She didn’t know him. Her husband had taken it upon himself to cast out the evil they thought Matthew possessed. She wasn’t allowed a say in the matter. James believed he had the power to extract any evil from his son’s body using the power of faith. His faith blinded his rational thought; much like his son was coming to be.

Late, dark, bitterly cold and Matthew couldn't sleep. The images of those evil faces outside his father's homely church lingered in his confused mind. He sat up trying to extract the images but a silhouette by his window caught his pupil-blitzed eye. He rubbed them, loose crust from the sore rings flaked off onto his hands and bed sheets. The silhouette remained. The ice-cold current whitened Matthew's skin to a deathly pale.

"Father?" Matthew knew the shadow took the shape of James, though his father's head didn't turn around. No reaction. "Father?" He tried again. Nothing. Then slowly, yet firmly, his hand rose to usher Matthew towards the window.

"Come here." Matthew did as he was told. His father's head still rigidly motionless, staring at something through the blistering wind; Matthew didn't know what. "You see that?" Matthew squinted through the window whistling as cold air squeezed through the holes. He couldn't see a thing.

"Yes," too scared to answer otherwise.

"That house son," Matthew could just about make out a decrepit building with a light flickering through the weak windows

accompanied with small cracks all over the walls. "That house is full of sin." The windows were smudged with muck, outside and in. The rotting wood was sprayed with mud, flicked on by passing horse and carts. The house was literally falling apart. The thatched roof had patchy holes letting in the crisp, flowing air. The candles could be seen flickering frantically through the windows. It appeared inhospitable, but everyone, particularly James, knew it was occupied. "That house is cast with wrong-doers son; people of evil, people who honour the devil's spirit. You are old enough now to understand that not everyone in this world honours our Lord like you and I. Some people have no love for God. They are beyond saving." He lowered his head, in resentment at the grave situation. It made him angry. "I dread to tell you this son, but the house has been stained by Lucifer himself. Those hags, those..." He glared directly into Matthew's eyes, "Witches..."

"Witches, father?"

"Yes. Witches." James switched to the resounding tone of a preacher. "They use the devil's familiars and spells to infiltrate the souls of innocents like us using. They use their night lights and spectres from the underworld." Matthew was listening just as, if

not more, intently to his father's words as he put his hand around the back of Matthew's neck, squeezing slightly. "What decent woman lives with two other women? They should be bearing children and keeping husbands. There's no righteousness, just sin. Someone will come, come rid us of this evil soon, boy. You mark my words. You mark the Lord's words. The streets will be cleansed of these sinners; someone will make this country pure again." He squeezed his son's neck firmer and stared deep into those black eyeballs with harsh intent. Matthew stood frozen, trying to take in his father's words and trying to resist the pain his father was placing upon him. Matthew tried to repel the rising goose bumps on his neck; he didn't want his father to know he was scared, though all to no avail. Matthew noticed the trembling bags under his father's eyes as he stared directly into his desperate pupils. Finally, he released and Matthew unloaded the clogged air in his chest. The tension was broken. "Go to bed, you're tired." James was tired. Tired of his aimless preaching, tired of a sinful state, tired of having an ill son in Matthew and knowing there was nothing he could do. Tired of himself, trying to convince himself things would get better.

“Yes father.”

“And remember boy, these aren’t my words. These are the words of the Lord.”

“I understand you father.” Matthew tucked himself in. His father turned to the window and continued to glare out.

It appeared that had re-inspired his beliefs. At the next mass he preached about equality, pure souls, working together, condemning people of evil. He preached about standing up as a community against the presence of the Devil. But, no matter how strongly James wanted change, he knew his words were all in vain, or so he thought. The townsfolk could tell it was another attempt at trying to convince them of its apparent evil and how it should be condemned. James had tried it dozens of times. The town’s people had heard it all before. Everyone knew who he was referring to, but nobody wanted to confront the ‘neighbours’ of the village, which angered James. But that was about to change; someone inside those holy walls *was* committed to ‘cleansing’ the town – once and for all. And James knew him very well. One



person in that hall was consuming all his words with true intent. James didn't recognise what he was doing, but by trying to banish evil, he was creating evil.

The night was as dark as Matthew's intentions. He sat up in his bed, with no one in sight. He slithered his skinny frame out of bed. He crept on the balls of his bony feet towards the door. He hadn't changed; his white smock made him look more ghostly than he already appeared to be. The door creaked as he left the warmth in his bare feet. Immediately the ice-cold air penetrated through him. He crunched leaves and twigs on the damp floor as he reached back in for the dim lamp on the window ledge, taking one last look behind him. His visible breath momentarily warmed his red eyes; sore and dry in the thin, lifeless air. Twigs scratched the skin on the ashen soles of his wet feet, though he didn't feel it, his hatred numbed him. He stepped onto the mud road – a winding road of cracked earth and sharp, sporadic stones that Matthew didn't care if he stood on. He held out the candle in front of him to use as a guide. The rustle of animals in the nearby wood didn't faze him one bit. He wasn't scared of anything, God was watching

him. His breathing was slow and controlled as he crept to his target. He walked with a purpose as sinister as the deep, glaring woods. He stopped and looked at the aged, unbefitting, pathetic building that looked as though it had been blemished by Satan himself. Matthew ground his teeth just thinking about it. The mud around the house wasn't as dry as the ground he stood on, it was sodden. The house tried nestling in the sludge. In fact, the building was almost slanting, trying to scurry away from its malevolent dwellers. Matthew's head dropped as the sight of the building, and what was inside, saddened him. He grieved at the thought of those three 'witches'. Matthew looked down at his wet feet as he replayed his father's words into the arctic air, 'Rid this town of evil. Rid this town of evil. In the name of the Lord, rid this town of evil'. The constant cracking of twigs on the soles of his feet had pierced his pasty skin. He lifted his feet and rubbed the blood onto his hand, just to see what the damage was. He was abruptly interrupted when he heard a noise and quickly turned to the woods. The eyes of the experienced trees were watching him. He foraged for logs as he kept one eye on his house.

He dropped a handful on the floor. He took the two thickest and crept to the front door. Then, as silent as the wintry sky, he lodged the log under the rusting, rickety latch – jamming it. He sneaked to the back door to do the same. He peered inside hunting for movement, but all was too dark. On his return, he clutched another log with his skinny blood-stained hands. Kneeling by the tallow-fuelled candle, he ripped off some of his sleeve and wrapped it around the log. He dipped it in the dim light. It instantly caught alight and as the fire began to spread, he stood and stared at his unknowing target.

“Lord, forgive me; I am your humble servant carrying out your wishes.”

With menace in his eyes, he launched the fiery log onto the crumbling, thatched roof and the flames instantaneously began to spread. As quickly as he could, he knelt, ripped another piece from his smock, wrapped it around the log and lit it. He threw it on the roof. He repeated his actions over and over: kneel, rip, wrap, light, throw. He threw some on the roof, some through the windows.

Then, when his smock was in pieces scattered all over the house, he stopped and watched, enjoying the view.

The screaming commenced. At first, they were screams of shock, then panic, then desperation. The door rattled as the 'witches' inside tried to break free. The log stuck firm. Matthew could see, through the small cracks in the front door, bodies frantically racing around the house. He just stared, half naked, with his blood on his bony hands. They kept screaming 'help us!' Begging for mercy. They were beyond mercy. The pitiless had become the pitiful. One of the women put her eye up to a crack in the door and saw Matthew standing, staring. She screamed to him for help as the flames expanded into the silent air. He smiled. Just smiled. Her stinging throat helplessly yelped as the roof caved in and the house became a fiery chasm. Matthew sadistically waved at her as he broadened his grin. Matthew was the happiest he'd ever been. He was complete. He spread his arms to feel the cleansing, comforting heat on his chalk, dry skin. Flames flickered in his black, possessed eyes. One of the women powerlessly watched him through terrified tears, doing nothing but grinning back at her.

Fire began to engross her as smoke swallowed her trembling body. Matthew saw the skin around her eyes begin to boil as the flames absorbed her. Matthew didn't realise until this point how much he craved this control, craved this power.

hearing shouting from afar, he was brought back to reality. Matthew knew people would come when the fire and the screaming started. He saw his father come sprinting towards him, scanning the blaze, shouting his name. Matthew dropped his arms and instantly grew cold. He was human again. Those frantic, boiled eyes had disappeared from the door. The screaming had ceased.

"What happened?" His father tried to shout over the noise whilst out of breath.

"It's over, father. We can live happily again."

"What?"

"Are you proud of me?" He gazed up at his father.

"What's happened?" His mother caught up soon after shouting the same question. James kept looking at his son. Matthew didn't even notice his mother's presence.

“Go home, woman.”

“But the house, we should get help...”

“I said be gone! We shall deal with this.” She had been spoken to like that before. She left knowing something dark was going to happen. Her weathered hand covered her trembling mouth as she backed away.

“Matthew, what have you done? What have you done?” A tear trickled through the lines under her eyes.

“What could have possibly led you to do this boy?” James grabbed his son by the arms. Matthew was completely confused.

“You, father.”

“Me? I never told...” Immediately James realised what he’d done. All those words, all those messages. *He* was the guilty one. Not Matthew. How could he be angry at something *he* was responsible for? “Son. It is ok. We’ll have to think of something. Though, you cannot be caught for this, they will kill you.”

“But I was helping. I will be a hero. You said yourself.” Matthew could not comprehend what his father was implying.

“I know. But some people won’t understand. They won’t see what you’ve done as an act of God.”

“Then what do I do?” James paused. He had to think on his feet.

“Run. Run back to the house. Stay there until I come back. I will calm the foray.”

“And the witches?” James was still unable to lie about his true feelings. He turned to look at the sizzling rubble.

“They are where they belong.” His father looked at the end of the path. The crowd were coming. “Go!”

Matthew ran and ran through the back gardens. The twigs cut in even deeper. The cold air bit through his skin. Everything was so real now, he was on his own again. He turned back to look at the fire. The house was unrecognisable. He could see his father standing by the flames with his head in his hands as locals came bounding towards him. Matthew turned to scurry back to the house but noticed a shape limp into the woods and out of sight. Matthew could not make out what it was but was unable have gone back to hunt it down.

Matthew's blood left a trail past his crying mother and straight into bed. He pulled the white covers and caught his breath. His stinging feet were the only part of his body that had feeling. Blood was soaking through the sheets. Then it hit him. He knew he was in trouble – only God could save him now.