

## God-fearing Man

When Carlisle got to the job site, Ralph the Plumber was standing chest high in a sewage ditch, fitting pipe. Carlisle parked the van as close to the ditch as he could get it, the big Oxner Coring Co. sticker plastered to the side looming over the hole like a sore.

“Ox!” Ralph hollered as he pulled a heap of dirt down into the ditch. “What’s going on brother?” Carlisle lumbered around the side of the van and waved his cigar hand and opened up the back door and yanked the generator into life.

“What’s up bo?”

“Making a living, ain’t it?”

“Mmm,” he mumbled through a mouthful of stogie. He brought a lighter from his pocket and lit the soggy cigar sticking out of his mouth. “That your mark?” He pointed to a big black cross etched across the side of the manhole.

“Yeah.”

“Should’ve known that.”

Ralph laughed. “I knew you wadn’t gonna be happy about that angle. Soon as I drew it, I knew you wadn’t going to like it.”

Carlisle jumped into the hole, knocking chunks of dirt all around. He slipped a little and bumped into Ralph and jutted his shoulders around and then stepped towards the manhole and rubbed his hand over the side. “Hell no, I don’t like it. It’s on a con-cave. The core’s going to go in sideways.” He rubbed his hand over the cement.

“It’s a shit pipe, Ox. It’s dropping turds in a barrel.”

“You know that ain’t how I work,” Carlisle said.

“Well, I guess you’ve got a little bit of room if you need it, I can move the pipe over a little...”

“You’ll have plenty of room. I’ll make sure of that.”

“I can make it work.”

“Good man.” Carlisle slammed his boot into the edge of the ditch and hefted himself out. He found his level and brought it from the van with his core drill and his other materials. When he had his new mark, he bolted the drill up against the manhole and attached the handle, a big steel helm used to move the coring bit back and forth. He climbed out one last time muttering under his breath and fetched his hose. As he jumped back into the trench the seat of his pants caught on the driving spindle of his wheel and hooked him and held him up over the ground for a moment, little stubby legs kicking back and forth. Ralph stood by at the whelp of the hole and watched, trying not to laugh as the big, burly man squirmed like a child being baptized. After what seemed like an hour, Carlisle’s pants ripped and he fell face first into the ditch. He picked up his head and shot a mouth full of dirt out from around his cigar

“I’ll be god damned.” He struggled to his knees and wrenched the handle from the drill and hurled it across the job site. He stood up and spat his cigar into the ground and kicked it. Ralph laughed and leaned over the handle of his shovel.

“What in the devil’s wrong, Ox?”

“Damn thing done tried to fuck me!” He reached around and felt at his pants. “Showing my ass all day like a frigging hooligan!” He punched a dent in the side of the ditch and Ralph laughed beneath the gnarr of the generator.

When he finally got back to work, got the saw fired up and spinning, the handle reattached, Carlisle found his cigar and knocked the dirt from it and stuck it back in the side of

his mouth. He stood there working the helm of the drill back and forth slowly, just barely letting the teeth cut into the cement before easing it back out while Ralph stood above and watched.

“I’m gonna take my time here with this one now, being it on a con-cave and what not.”

“Mmhmm.”

“Ain’t no need to try and rush it, you’ll break up the core, send it spattering on down to the old hockie pond. Don’t want that.” Ralph smiled and shook his head.

As the saw began to cut deeper in, the concrete shavings would mix in with the steady flow of water from the hose and blow over Carlisle’s face like a viscous sea spray. He stood maneuvering the helm, his gut poked out proudly, his face and hair glimmering with sludge in the sunlight.

“No need to rush it, no need at all,” he said, more to himself than to Ralph.

“Nope, sure ain’t, Rome wadn’t built in a day.”

Carlisle nodded. “I take my time, you know, do things right. Heck, it took Noah some hundred and nineteen years to build that Ark. Man was two hundred years old and just decides to take off a hundred years or so to build an Ark? You believe that?” He let go of the handle and the drill pulled itself out from the hole.

“Sure don’t.”

“Imagine the kind of goddamned boat a man could build in a hundred years, Ralph. A hundred fucking years!”

“Must have been one hell of a boat.”

“One hell of a boat, for sure. It’d have to be.” He took back hold of his wheel and drove the core back into the manhole. “A hundred years would have to yield you a damn fine vessel,

ain't no wonder it held the storm." He shook the helm back and forth and a big puff of sludge flew up and coated his face. "You know I'm building myself an Ark, don't you?"

"Is that right?" the Plumber said.

"Damn Skippy. When the end comes, Carlisle is going to be the last son of a bitch standing."

The Plumber stood over the hole, looking down at the saw and the water for a moment, running his hands through his beard.

"You know, Ox," he finally said. "I think being the last man on Earth would be kind of lonely. I mean, I think I might rather just go on."

Carlisle dropped the wheel and looked up at the Plumber, his face covered in gray. "You are one crazy son of a bitch," he said.

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When Carlisle finally finished with the manhole he loaded up the van— put his drill back in the box, rolled up his hose and hung it from a rope hanging from the roof, then drove across the street to a bricked up McDonalds where he'd cut the slab some two years prior. He ordered four McDoubles and a box of McNuggets and a large tea and sat in the corner with his clipboard and his ancient cellphone and ate and waited on some contractor to call. When he took his first swig of tea he gagged and spit it back into the cup. It tasted like molasses.

When his mother was alive, she'd wake up early in the mornings and make Carlisle three big bologna sandwiches and bake him a pie in one of those little individual aluminum pans and pack it all in a grocery bag with a big milk jug full of tea. He didn't have to eat that shit back then, or choke down that sugar water, or sit in one of those too-small booths and listen to jackasses faking business calls on their cellphones. He would sit on the bumper of his van and

eat on the job site, or drive out to a boat landing if it was nearby and eat by the water. Everything was different then.

After he'd sat and waited on calls for as long as he could and phoned all of his contractors asking for work, Carlisle decided to call it a day and head home, but Perat River Road was a parking lot. Vehicles held in stagnant lines along the current of fumes and cones sat like buoys on the road— hundreds of them, an enormous fleet of cones laid out along the shoulders, in the median, everywhere. Carlisle couldn't believe it.

“Why in the *fuck* are there so many cones?” He sat in his van with his chest pushed up against the steering wheel, veins bulging beneath the skin of his sunburnt, sweating forehead. “Jackass liberals. I ain't never seen nothing like it.” He wiped his head and shouted something unintelligible out of the window. “It's a crying damn shame, wastefulness.” He spat in the floorboard. “They ain't got no clue what they're doing. They will just keep building it up until it crumbles.”

When Carlisle finally pulled into the trailer park some two hours later it was already dark. He drove over the gravel and through the jumble of mobile homes scattered around until he arrived at his own, a brand new single-wide; the pride of the neighborhood.

After his mother died, Carlisle had stayed at the old home place for sixteen months until he got tired of haunting the dark rooms and stepping holes through the termite eaten floors and paying to keep cool a house three times bigger than he needed. He sold the place to some yuppie from up north hunting plantation columns and had a new Fleetwood hauled out to Mr. O'Bryan's park off of Starline; his new home.

The inside of the trailer smelt like fiberglass and stale cigar smoke. There was a pot-holed lay-z-boy propped up in the corner and a little plastic looking nightstand the Ox himself had

ripped from the bedroom wall and lugged into the living room for a place to set his ashtray. Across from the chair there was an old console TV and above that hung an unreasonably large portrait of the late Mrs. Oxner, the Beloved Mother, which Carlisle had blown up and transposed onto canvas when he moved in.

When Carlisle came in sweating, trailer trembling, he went straight for the fridge and pulled out a big forty ounce bottle of Schlitz and rubbed the cold glass over his face. When he'd moved out of his mother's house and found all the empty mason jars and wine bottles and half-drunk pints of bourbon hidden in couch cushions and coat pockets and dresser drawers, he'd decided to cut back. So he allowed himself one forty a night, barring weekends and paydays and other special events.

"How are you this evening, mother?" Carlisle asked as he twisted the cap off of the Schlitz. "You doing alright? I'm doing much better about right now." He took a big long pull off of the bottle. "Much better. I'm going to outside for a while now Momma, going to poke around the Ark a little while. Don't go nowhere."

Carlisle had chosen Mr. O'Bryan's place because he had known the old man since he was a boy. He'd been a good friend of his mother's, so he'd talked to him about his little plan beforehand and Mr. O'Bryan had given him the okay. So Carlisle took the meager profit he'd gotten from the sale of his family home and bought his trailer and began shopping for his Ark.

The problem with bomb-shelters these days though, as Carlisle quickly discovered, is that they're all prefabbed out West by damn liberals looking for a place to hide their drugs or whatever else. So the Old Ox quickly gave up shopping and decided to build his own.

By this time though, most of the big work was done. The hole was dug, the concrete poured and set, the ventilation designed and cut. Carlisle was just waiting on the big wigs to

come down and set the special steel that really made the thing completely indestructible. To keep himself busy in the evenings he would go out and build storage shelves and rearrange the army surplus furniture and fire shotgun loads into the concrete to test its durability. He finished all of that on this night and grew bored so he sat down in the corner of the bunker and lit a kerosene lamp and began to read from his bible.

He sometimes liked to read Jonah when he sat in the shelter because he could feel for him, the poor old jackass. For Carlisle often felt, be it the bunker or the paludal ditches in which he worked, as if he himself were lodged in the throat of some giant leviathan, trying to drill his way out. He also liked his Psalms, the ones his mother would read him before bed, so on this night, he flipped to these and read.

*Remember, O Lord, the children of Edom in the day of Jerusalem; who said Rase it, rase it, even of the foundation thereof.*

*O daughter of Babylon, who art to be destroyed; happy shall he be, that rewardeth thee as thou hast served us.*

*Happy shall he be, that taketh and dasheth thy little ones against the stones.*

Carlisle slammed the book shut and wrinkled up his eyebrows. He reached over for his Schlitz and found the bottle empty.

“Well, I’ll be damned.” He tipped it up to his lips and let the little sour drops of fizz fall onto his tongue. “That just ain’t gonna do.”

He got up and left the bunker and padlocked it and then took the van to the end of Starline, where the road forked, then veered right down a dirt road overgrown and crowded by trees and thick grapevines. The tools in the back of the van bounced up and down, clattering over the ruts worn in the clay. When he reached the end he parked on the shoulder and got out and tore through the grapevines until he found the hidden path.

At the end of the path lived Joe, the Ancient Vintner. Joe stayed in an old hay shed that someone had abandoned long before, a tin roof mounted on twenty-foot wood columns where Joe pitched his hammock and made his wine. The yard was overgrown in saplings and tall fescue and mangling blackberry briars. From the branches of the little pine trees hung CD's that Joe had found along the roadsides, strung up by fishing line. On windy nights, like this one was, the discs would spin like little shards of glass and catch the stars or the moonlight and cast eerie spheres of light around the thicket and the place would seem almost to glow because of it. As Carlisle approached, Joe lay smoking in his hammock, his top-half exposed, little tufts of white hair sprouting out from his chest; the thin, bony brisket.

"Mister Oxner," he said from behind a soggy newspaper. "What a pleasure it is."

"Evening there, Joseph," Carlisle said, huffing his way under the shed. "How've you been?"

"Well I don't know bout no Joseph, but Old Joe been just fine." He scratched the top of his head. "How's your mother?"

"Dead, as you well know, sum-bitch."

"Easy cuzzie, easy now, I'm only messing with you."

"Ain't a damn thing funny."

"Oh you wanna call me Joseph, knowing that ain't my name, yet, you don't see nothing funny?"

Carlisle looked around and kicked the dirt and looked back up. "Oh knock it out you old jackass," he said.

Joe folded up his paper and looked around. "This man damn fool." He climbed from the hammock and placed the newspaper atop a stack of others, head-high, the last in a long line of



rows. His hair was long and matted and stuck up around the crown of his head like some profanatory halo. "So any way, besides being damn crazy, what old Carlisle been up to, eh? You been working?"

"I been working." Carlisle sat down on an overturned bucket.

"Never thought I'd see the day."

"Me neither, Joe. I'm too old for this shit."

"You boys all say the same damn thing." The old man walked around the shed, half-hunched, kicking the ground on every step with the back of his right-heel, a great Black Ibis.

"I reckon we do," Carlisle said. "But that's because we are. Can't everybody all go into early retirement like you, my friend, world would go to shit." He wiped a bead of sweat from his forehead. "More than it already has, anyways."

"Retirement, hell," the old man said. "Joe's work ain't never done." He struck something hollow with his foot, then reached down and opened a small wooden hatch and pulled out two old, blue bottles, capped on the ends with orange and white fishing corks. He carried them to Carlisle and sat them between his legs.

"Blackberry?"

"Hm." Carlisle uncorked one of the bottles and took a long pull from it and wiped the black juice from his lips with the palm of his hand. The old man watched and smiled. "Joe works at night, in the shadows of men." Carlisle offered him the bottle and he declined with a wave of his hand. "Joe's got plenty to do," he said. "Always will." Carlisle laughed and shook his head and took another slug from the bottle.

"Doing what?" he said. "Making wine? Picking up shit off the roads?" Joe smiled, toothless.

“You’d be surprised how those things can go hand in hand.” Ox snorted and stood up from off of the bucket.

“Better you than me.”

“That’s right, Mister Oxner,” Joe said. “Lord knows, that’s right.” The two stood, quiet for a moment.

“Well,” Carlisle said, “I reckon I ought to be heading back home.”

Joe chuckled and rubbed the back of his head. “Yessir, yessir, get on back home now, I don’t want to be keeping you from none of that important business you got going on.”

Carlisle nodded his big, bovine head sharply. “Thank you now Joe, I’ll be seeing you.”

“Mhmm,” Joe said. “I know that’s true.”

When Carlisle got home it was late and he went quietly inside and began tinkering around with an old boom-box, mashing down all the levers, twisting the knobs back and forth. The thing shuttered and wheezed and the cassette trays kept popping out unexpectedly, but somehow Carlisle finally got it to play and Waylon’s voice crooned through the trailer like a stench.

Carlisle sat down in the armchair, by now half-drunk, and fumbled with the handle on the side until the legs popped out. He nursed softly from the remaining bottle and pulled on his cigar like a pacifier, blowing broken smoke rings out of his nose. After some time he looked up to the portrait on the wall and spoke.

“It’s been a long one, Momma,” he said. “Too damn long.” He took a drink from the bottle and laid back and closed his eyes. “It’s getting hot again,” he said. “Too damn hot.” He rubbed the back of his hand over his mouth and wrinkled up his lips. “You know, I’m thinking about shaving this here moo-stache.”

The cassette crackled and then Waylon came moaning on again and Carlisle opened one eye. “Sing it to me, Waylon.” He sat silently for a moment again and then spoke, this time to the portrait. “The Ark’s almost done now Momma,” he said. “And not a minute too soon. You wouldn’t believe the kind of things that’s going on out here these days— jackasses, the lot of them.” He folded up the legs of his recliner and stood up. “They re-elected that goddamn liberal Matthan and you should see the damn ship he runs. Wasteful, that’s what he is.” He pulled the wine bottle out of the chair and tipped it to his lips. “After work today, the only little bit I could get, piddley crap to be quite honest, I rode down Perat River Road—that shit pot. You should’ve seen it, Momma, it’s a goddamn sin, cones piled up everywhere like we all got money just to throw away.” He sat down on the edge of the recliner and rustled the pile of black hair spiked up off the top of his head. “Fool thinks he’s some King Arthur, some kind of damn Emperor, ha. How’s he think that’s gonna work out for ‘em?”

Carlisle stood again and downed the last swig of the wine-shine and looked around the trailer and laughed. “I’ll show you how it’s gonna work.” He tossed the bottle on the floor. “I’ll show you what a damn god-fearing American man’s got to say to that sinful sum-bitch.” He walked up to the portrait and pulled it off of the wall. “Come on Momma,” he said. Let’s go for a little ride.” He folded the big frame under his arm and lugged it out to the van and from the boom-box Waylon sang about mothers and cowboys and Carlisle drove off into the night.

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Cool air blustered in from the open window and blew Carlisle’s hair back over the top of his head as he raced down Highway 71. Mrs. Oxner sat beside him in the passenger seat, buckled down tight, but every now and then a big gust would blow in through the window or Carlisle would run off the road onto the shoulder and she would shudder.

When the van pulled up to the intersection at Perat River Road, all of the lights were red and the cones seemed to shimmer and melt in the glow. Carlisle pulled off to the side of the road, branches scraping against the side of the vehicle, and turned off the lights.

“Would you take a look at this Momma,” Carlisle said. “Would you look at the damn blaspheming what’s going on out here?” He took a big deep puff off of his cigar and blew it out the window. “I hope my never.” He flicked the cigar out of the window and slammed the van into gear and stomped on the gas. The back tires spun in the wet grass and rutted up the shoulder and the van twisted until one of the back tires caught on the asphalt and the whole thing launched forward, screeching. They hit the first horde of cones going about thirty miles an hour and they buckled under the van and cracked and shot out from under the tires in every direction like shrapnel. Once he got the van back straight, Carlisle lined up on the edge of the road and took out a whole row with his side-mirror until a hundred of them were lying in the ditch and the mirror was hanging on only by a couple of wires, then he slammed on the brakes and whipped the van around and went hurtling back towards the big throng at close to sixty. When he hit the bulk of them they seemed to explode from out of the van. They flew all across the road and up over the windshield like bodies and some of them stuck on the pipe rack and some of them got caught in the undercarriage and you could hear them grinding on the asphalt.

“Yee, Yee, Carlisle shouted out of the window. “How do you like me now?” Mrs. Oxner sat stone still beside him.

After a couple of donuts through the pile, Carlisle pulled out and righted the van and stopped beneath the traffic light to admire the scene. The place was flooded with cones lying shattered and mauled and tire tracked all over the road, on the shoulders like flotsam.

“That’ll teach ‘em, ain’t it Momma?” Carlisle said, forehead sweating. “That will teach them damn dirty dogs to waste my money, huh?” He hocked up a wad of phlegm and spat out of the window. “That damn Hammurabi, liberal-ass sum-bitch.”

Carlisle turned on the headlights and pulled the van back onto the road and angled it back towards home. He took one last look around and saw in the rearview mirror one solitary cone standing in the middle of the median like some lonely messiah or either devil waiting in the light. Carlisle turned the van around and pointed it towards the cone in some sort of bizarre standoff, then snorted loudly out of his nose and rutted the floorboard with his left foot and put the van into gear.

“Hear my prayer, O Lord” he said. “Do not enter into judgment with your servant, for in your sight no one living, and I mean ain’t *no one*, is righteous.” Then he stomped on the gas and went barreling towards the cone— mirror beating against the side of the van, rubble flopping on the roof, trash dragging like tin cans on the asphalt.

When the two collided, water erupted from the cone like a geyser and the front-end of the vehicle seemed to shatter. Water fell over the windshield and all over the road and pieces of bumper and fan and radiator and cone went flying in every direction. Mrs. Oxner was flung violently from her seat and hit the windshield and wrinkled on her backing and Carlisle howled.

“That son of a bitch,” he said. “That dirty son of a bitch.” Then he punched the steering wheel over and over until the covering was split and covered in blood and the horn got stuck and wailed like a crippled dogey in the midnight, through the glow of the traffic light and the wreckage and the smoke rising up from the van like in Rome, or in Babylon, or in America, all the same.