

## Simple Folk

It was a hot and cold day. It was a very strange day, as if the very air was holding its breath. Abraham sat on the porch thinking about nothing. He was thinking about nothing because there wasn't much to think about anymore. His gaze rested blandly on the old white pickup parked in the gravel drive. It was mid-afternoon and the flies circled his head like a wreath. Or a halo. Suzanne called him from inside.

"Abe! Get in here and fix me a drink. I'm dyin' over here. *Shit.*"

Abraham rose from his plastic lawn chair and, because he was a kind person, decided he would oblige.

Suzanne was lazy. She was also fat, which led her to frequently overheat. Abraham could never understand how a person could just squander the miracle of creation like she did-- letting it pass by without so much as a wave—and this had always been a jumping off point for their arguments. But that was when Abraham first moved in with Suzanne. At the time, he had felt it was his moral responsibility to keep the remainder of their family together after their last parent passed. And, as a retired military chaplain, deep down he couldn't help but anticipate the move as an opportunity to edify Suzanne into an upstanding Christian.

But they didn't argue anymore. Abraham had long ago exhausted himself with trying to shape his sister up. It wasn't long before his motivational sermons were extinguished to a quiet resignation. It was easier that way.

He laid down the glass on the floor by Suzanne's fat head, which rested on the arm of the couch. Her face--reddish, plump, and permanently screwed in a distasteful sneer--didn't so much as flinch at the favor.

"And what in the *hell* 've you been doin' all day?" She demanded of Abraham, still not turning her head from where it lolled on the couch, eyes fixed to the television screen. "I know you sure as hell hain't been goin' in to claim them food stamps. These here chips is the only thing I've had all day! It's a damn wonder I hain't *starved* to death bah now. And this here TV keeps cuttin' *out*. *Why* haven't you fixed this damn piece of shit yet? Ain't I asked you near on a dang *week* ago..."

Abraham was standing behind the couch. He knew Suzanne, and he knew that she could continue on like this for a good while. So the combination of factors allowed him to about-face and pad across the floor out the screen door, quietly guiding it to its rest on its hinges. Back on the porch, hands in overall pockets, he found himself staring at the strangest sight he'd ever seen. The sky, previously filled with blue atmosphere and friendly puffs of cumulus, had spun itself into a whirling green vortex. A low growl could be heard around the desert valley, vibrating the dry, sandy earth as the heavens expressed their displeasure. He let out a low whistle. It was a very strange day, indeed.

Suddenly, the sound of fifty trains ripped through the air. The wind swiftly picked up pace, snatching Abraham's straw hat clean off his head, and a furious funnel of twisting cloud came sprinting over the dusty desert mountain occupying the horizon in front of the house--straight towards the front porch.

“Lord Jesus Christ it’s a tornado!”

Suzanne never moved much, if at all, but evidently imminent doom was enough to stir even her. She sprang from where she lounged, knocking over her glass, and charged out the back door. Abraham was now close behind her, but not close enough. “Suzanne, wait up with the shelter!” The swinging screen door smacked back into its frame like a mouse trap before his nose. As he fumbled to prop the door back open, he caught a glimpse of Suzanne yanking the heavy doors of the tornado shelter taut behind her as she dove to safety. “*Wait for me!*” Before his disbelief could turn to rage, his insides were slammed into his spine and the wind sucked from his chest. He had a sensation of weightlessness for a moment, as if suspended in purgatory, and then there was nothing.

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Abraham had had a very strange dream. The kind that teases and tugs at you for the next few days. The kind that changes things. There was blood—a lot of it. He was in golden robes, so elaborate they could only have belonged to an angel. Or were those his old chaplain robes?

His brow furrowed as he groped for the details. He was on top of a mountain, a knife in his hand. There had been words like thunder, human only in language, superhuman in conviction. Its speech was everywhere, enveloping his mind, resonating in his very bones. It could have been nothing other than the voice of God Himself, and he lifted his face skyward to accept its commandment. *Abraham. Abraham, Bringer of Light. Abraham, the Shepherd.*

*Abraham.*

And then he knew what to do, and with God's permission, he had done it. There were two screams. Or was it one? Had he been screaming, too?

Now he was alone, ready to ascend to meet his King and assume his place alongside Him. He felt blissful and calm and good as he let the golden light soak into him.

But through it all, there was a sharp pain erupting deep inside him, growing more palpable by the moment. Knowing it was God's love piercing his very soul, he tried to lose himself to the numbness and ecstasy washing over him. The source of the light drew nearer, blinding him. His eyes squeezed shut against the brilliance as he extended his fingers, stretching towards it. If he could hold on just a little longer, he would be able to reach—

Something snapped. Abraham was pulled back to his waking senses, his surroundings. There was a pulsing in his jaw, his shoulder, deep in his abdomen. His skin felt raw. The air smelled of sawdust. And clarity. He opened his eyes, and there was Suzanne: still fat, clammy, blanched, terribly shaken up, but otherwise unscathed. A spot of wet had seeped through the crotch of her grey sweatpants, but she didn't appear to have noticed as she wobbled there before him. She held a snapped plank of wood, the pieces in each hand.

"This plank...it broke when I stepped on it." She stuttered, wide-eyed. She swept her gaze across the ruins. "Everything's broke."

Abraham sat up. He realized the pulsing was actually an excruciating pain. He realized a lot of things. His shoulder was already swelling. His palms were bloody.

There was nothing much left of anything. The back wall had completely caved in. The roof had blown off. Cans and shards of glass were scattered everywhere. Both screen doors were missing. The refrigerator remained, as did the couch. That was about it. The sky above, now clearly visible from indoors with the gaping new sun roof, was completely clear. It was blue and, Abraham thought, full of promise.

“Suzanne, we’re gittin’ outta here.” Abraham shakily rose to his feet. Everything ached, but he knew what he needed to do, and he wasn’t about to let anything impede him, pain included. His head was clear. “Grab anything you can find. Food, water, blankets, matches. We gotta git up the mountain. There’s other folk that live up there. They’ll help us. There’s nothin’ for us here. No use. We’re gittin’ outta here.”

Abraham hadn’t spoken firmly to Suzanne in at least ten years, hadn’t spoken much at all, and Suzanne was taken aback. She remained where she stood for a beat, then turned, speechless for perhaps the first time in her life, and began assembling their scarce remaining necessities in a pile at the center of the dilapidated wooden skeleton of their former inhabitation.

Abraham went out to the backyard. There was nothing there. And yet he felt the richness of the desert landscape around him. He felt full of light, his soul refreshed despite the haggardness of his body. He saw that the doors to the tornado shelter lay open like the pages of a blank book. He thought it was high time to fill those pages. With a great deal of difficulty, he descended the stairs and, using the light from outside, grabbed a duffel bag, a hunting knife, a few cans of food, toilet paper, and an old fifth of whisky Suzanne had deemed necessary to

stash in the shelter assuming the worst happened and she was stuck liquor-less until the Second Coming. *Liquor-less she shall not be*, thought Abraham, as he shoved it into the bag and made for the stairs.

Back in the house, Abraham grabbed the few belongings Suzanne had conjured, and made for the pickup, which had skidded around backwards during the storm. He paused to wait for Suzanne. She fidgeted in place, looking about, scratching her backside. “Abe, I’m stayin,’” she finally mustered. “I got everything I need down in that shelter, and I’ll be jist fine out here ‘til you go git help.”

Abraham felt something bubble inside him. It felt like rage—something he hadn’t felt in a long while. He recognized the old fire from his younger days, and savored how powerful it made him feel. “Suzanne, we are not discussin’ this. I am *not* comin’ back here *ever* again. I’ve given up the last fifteen years of my life to be with you, and I ain’t lettin’ it all be for nothin’ ‘cause you’re stubborn and lazy!” He heard his voice rise steadily, until he was shouting the words at her. “Now, you’ll come with me and git in this here truck now because there won’t be no one comin’ to save you this time. This time, we’re doin’ it my way!” With that, he turned from her, struggling to maintain an air of authority as he limped towards the truck. As he fought to hoist himself into the driver’s seat, he heard the passenger door creak open as Suzanne complied with his demands. He couldn’t help but smile smugly to himself.

Abraham drew the keys from the glove box and jammed them into the ignition. The car shuttered to life. He pulled the truck onto the road leading to the mountain, an unfurling stretch

of brown gravel distinguished from the rest of the desert only by its lack of the otherwise scant desert flora. It would be about half an hour until they reached the top of the mountain.

As they drove under the vast blue span of heaven, the two people said nothing. And yet Abraham's mind would not keep quiet. He struggled to shake the pain off long enough to remember the events of the day. The eerie stillness, the drink for Suzanne. Something about the TV. The sound, yes, he would never forget that sound. Like Hell itself ripping open its Vesuvian gates to engulf the world. And then he had run indoors, and there was fat Suzanne, sprinting like Satan was at her heels. He remembered calling to her in desperation, and her slamming shut those tornado doors anyway. His knuckles whitened as he tightened his grip on the steering wheel. *He could have died!* He felt his blood would boil out of him, and his foot instinctively pressed harder into the pedal.

Suzanne made a little noise as the car revved forward, but Abraham ignored her. His eyes flashed with rage as they accelerated forward.

Then, of course, there was the vision. The message from God! God! *The Chosen One!* Everything made so much more sense to him now. Armed with this God-given confidence, Abraham felt invincible. He would not fail. It was so plain to him now that he felt like laughing. All his life he had suffered. There was so much sadness. All his life he had been diligent, honest, patient, and good, giving up his whole life for the Cause, but always greeted by Suzanne's obstinacy to faith and righteousness. Always, greeted with unhappiness. But, he mused, there can be no redemption without suffering. God had made him His disciple. He would finally realize the glory he deserved after years in service of the Lord. He was to bring happiness to

himself and humanity at large. The Bringer of Light. And he would do that by removing all the sources of darkness in the world. And he would begin with Suzanne.

In this way, with the truck devouring the distance and spiritual revelation gracing his psyche like the kiss of an angel, Abraham's anger was gradually overcome by anticipation for the road that lay ahead. He felt giddy.

The truck wheezed its last breaths and spluttered to a stop. Abraham unhooked his seatbelt, grabbed the duffel, and squeaked open his door. Suzanne followed. She had not uttered a sound the whole trip. No doubt she had been upset by the prospect of leaving the lair in which she had dwelt in for the majority of her miserable years on this earth.

The two met in front of the truck, facing each other, still not speaking. Perhaps, Abe mused, she was afraid to speak out after he had decidedly put her in her place just minutes ago. Perhaps he had finally made clear to her she should have listened to him her whole life.

But how scared Suzanne looked now, Abraham observed. Like a lamb. She was looking to him to guide her to safety, out of this mess, open now to receive the comforting words of the Lord, to provide some explanation to the answerless questions.

Abraham tore his gaze away. The truck had taken them nearly to the summit. Just a few minutes' walk would bring them to the top. He placed a foot in front of the other. And then the other. Slower now; he felt heavier than when he started this journey. The reality of the task ahead loomed like a wall of water, making each step labored, as if he was walking against a



current. He stopped to look back. From where he stood, the orange sands looked like fire engulfing the entire desert. It might as well have been.

Suzanne was his sister. Growing up, they had been a team. For years, they had fought the same battle for a normal life, a sane life, against the staunch foe of neglectful, divorced, substance abusing parents. But despite Abraham's best efforts, this opponent had gotten the best of Suzanne in the end.

Suzanne followed behind her brother, listless, helpless, and unknowing. Abraham was the shepherd. He was to be the savior of humans. He was to end all suffering. God had *determined* this. This was a test to see if Abraham truly was capable of doing the Lord's service. He tried to summon the visions of his dream back to mind, but found the details eluding his invitation. This panicked him. He scratched his arm. Then he scratched the other. Suddenly, his whole body was rippling with itches. He scratched his head, his ears, the back of his neck, staggering forward, drowning in the sensations. His insides were churning. The wounds inflicted by the tornado's wrath began to rear their spiny heads. His abdomen throbbed. He was sweating. The day was too hot.

Then, in a moment of clarity, Suzanne snapped out of her daze, as if God Himself was addressing him through the dark chaos clouding Abraham's mind. "*Goddam*, it's hot as Hell out here. I could use me a *drink*. Did you remember that whisky?"

This final sign gave Abraham the last bit of strength he needed. He stopped, dropped the duffel. "I sure did." In a swift sequence of events enacted by what could only have been fate unfolding—or a rash consequence of shock--Abraham unzipped the duffel, drew out his hunting

knife, grabbed his sister, yanked her to the ground, peered into her soul. His head was filled with nothing as Suzanne's round, flushed face turned up to him, eyes bulging, words snatched from her. She looked like a grossly overweight child. Abraham's vision slurred to a blinding white. He raised the knife high above him, and the Lord's name was ripped from his lips in a final plea for the truth. As he screamed, she screamed, and he allowed his arm to fall.