

## Jesus of Goodloam

They started to call him the One-Armed Jesus mostly cause they didn't know what to call him, I figure. And once a feller goes about making his presence known to folks while lettin' on darn near nothin' about him and his other'n that he's a mystery – well, people get to saying all sorta crazy things, calling him all sorta crazy names.

Now here in Goodloam, we live in a small town a ways off the main highway that goes straight on up and down to all the major cities of the West a guy like me could list ya. All the way from Vancouver on down into the San Francisco Bay. If it runs clean through Frisco and past it I sure wouldn't doubt it, but that's as far as me and that road has gone. We're a good, oh, forty fifty miles east from that highway there. Ain't much good reason to take you out thisaway unless you got good reason to already. Sure, we get folks passing through time and again, 'taking the scenic routes,' they say. Lotsa earthy, hippie folks lookin' for hikes and exotic animals, my guess, though what any of 'em find out there beats me. They stop in at Lou's for a bite and a round and all friendly-like ask about the place, the people, like we're the Indians of this town, what with some of us having folks been 'round here for one or two hundred years. Ain't that special! It is though, in a way, I suppose. Now and again though we'll drive by and see a tent pitched off the side of county road. This one time I even seen two fellers at night sleepin' right there on the road there, right on the ground! Musta figured they were closer than they thought to anywhere but they didn't stay not past dawn before getting back on the road to wherever.

Then every so often there's folks like the Watterson's who got hung up by their camper putterin' out on them one day right outsid a town. Took 'em three weeks to order, ship, and receive the part they needed which they couldn't get from nowhere closer than Seattle and by the time they did they got themselves so settled into the park off Canary Road they just as soon stick

around. And stick they did, like a girly's thigh to the side of a saddle on a hot summer's day. In fact, they came in here but the five of them – Mr. and Mrs. James Eric Watterson and their three boys – and in under a year the middle found himself hitched up pretty with one of the Townsend girls. Pretty soon they were all hitchin' up and sproutin' out, the boys' new families nestin' up like Russian dolls. Well, people of the town didn't much mind their staying; they came clear on as being good kinda folks and we all kinda took to one another. (Aside from some of the boys in town that is, seeing as they found themselves with three more young bucks to scrap amongst. But even that only lasted but a short while and the Watterson boys weren't much for startin' trouble none neither.)

But this feller – this One-Armed Jesus – he up and came to Lou's and, far as most could tell, hardly ever left. Now I figure people 'round here didn't take to him 'cause they don't take to folks not from here that don't take to them, if you know what I mean. He wouldn't cuase no trouble out loud nor outright. He'd just sit there, real quiet-like, drinkin' his whiskey, smokin' his cigarettes, mindin' his own or perhaps not mindin' nothin' at all. Now this ain't the kinda bar that's hoity-toity and clean cut or nothin' but it ain't no flap house neither. He'd come in with his scruffy shadow on followin' his jaw there, his eyes dark like he's only got pupils so's to see it all, and half the time he'd just be sittin' there in an ol' beater, his left arm workin' between his drink and his smoke (if it ever left his mouth, that is) and his stump just a sittin' there bare right below his shoulder.

There ain't but a couple thousand of us callin' Goodloam home, but for us that do, we got ourselves a pretty mixed bag. We got loggers and we got farmers; hunters and vets. Doctors, teachers, and preachers, too, sure. And like any town, we got some scrappy fellers who get hung up and rowdy time to time, some who ain't much to look upon and, if your gut sits you right, are

better off not lookin' at at all. But they's all known by somebody in town, if not by everybody. A decades old blind date gone sour; an apology with a promised lickin' after a house gettin' ransacked by the better part of a dozen eggs; hell, even havin' a drink or few some particular night. But not this feller. And I tell you, we got some folks who ain't much to look at around here, but none that gave the stomach such a turn just lookin' at the back of him.

He wore a jacket some of the time, but you'd only see him sportin' it the short walk from the lot into the bar. Still a little something on his face, in his demeanor, if you will. But once he sat down and got him his drink, it came on off and he don't do nothin' to hide he's an amputee. Matter of fact, he just about flaunts it, showin' it off in his tank all spotted with smudge just about the only thing I seen him wear. And it don't seem a thing to him – doesn't slow him down none. Now, we ain't winning any pageants with this town, and, all things told, I'm not the only one who'd like to say we're a pretty humble bunch. And me, I'm not much of the superstitious type neither, but some strange things got to goin' on once this feller started stickin' around and, like I said, when people get to talkin', it can't help but make a feller get to wonderin'.

The first just about anybody who ain't slitherin' their tongues about in a fever could dismiss. At least on its own, that is. About a day or two (depending on who you ask) after this guy bumbles on in to town mid-August, Old Henry DuPoint passed on; found him in bed stone cold dead as Charles Dickens with his eyes still half open. Now 'old' weren't just one of those funny nicknames a feller gets for hanging on to a thread 'til he can't no more. No, Old Henry's been around longer than four generations, around and boomin' that is. That man survived his wife (in more ways than one, mind you), two of his kids and a granddaughter miscarried; he survived and served in both World Wars and bullet in one. He saw the first Burger King come in and the last of the Henderick sons move out after three generations of holding mayor. He was

around when they raised hell to keep the colored folks from movin' in and that's a time nearly forgotten now. In short, Old Henry DuPoint was old, his death around the corner for upward of a decade despite his convincing everybody he weren't never goin' out. Likely, Old Henry's passing wouldn't never been tied to the One-Armed Jesus if it weren't for everything after.

A week passes, ten days to some, since the death of Old Henry, and the feller is still sittin' steady over in the corner at Lou's he's pretty much claimed his own. By this time, some folks were starting to get curious of him, though without the spook, so naturally they turn to ask Lou. Lou tells he asked him once when he walks in after a couple days in a row, "Say, might I ask your name?" and guy he says, "Sure," all uncaring as Lou pours him his drink. Well Lou says, according to Lou, "Well what is it then?" and guy puts some dollars and change up on the bar, says "Thanks," and takes his drink to his seat.

Most folks, however, were content to suppose amongst themselves. Way I see it, there's entertainment in the gossip that gets folks all jittery, fabricating what they know with a snicker and some friends; but when you don't know nothin', all you're doin' is makin' some dumb load up. I'm not sayin' that one way is better, nor that neither is good, but I figure if you're gonna go about changin' the story, might as well do it from scratch. Just don't forget you did.

Well anyway, he'd started to make himself a bit of a staple and a stir about town, but, like I said, real quiet-like, not causin' no trouble in words nor action. But folks got to gettin' real suspicious when, not ten days after Old Henry, a panic sweeps the small town and stays there about two weeks solid.

What exactly caused the closing of the water plant still weren't made exactly clear. Trevor Ampleton said he and some others went on strike – unionizing for better wages and holidays – but folks said all that started after it closed when they didn't have no wages at all for a

spell. Rita Nessbaum's sister up in Olympia got herself a bit on the news comin' down with real tough bout with E. coli. Clean water was comin' down from out that way, they said; said that the bug had flooded the Wicatchee watershed. Some blamed the damned dry winter past, the damned early spring. Some blamed the city-folk up in Seattle, down in Portland, and all over really, drainin' the waters so they could swim inside year 'round, hack golf balls in khakis, and flush their piss away.

But it weren't long before other's still got to thinkin' this new, dark-eyed feller with the one arm might somehow be tied into it. "Think about it..." they started to figure after the first week of drought had passed with no real explanation. And after another couple days of it, it didn't hardly require much thought. "It just mostly makes sense," they'd say.

But sure as they were, there weren't nothin' to prove nor nothin' much to really say beyond that even. Folks might cast a look across the bar or whisper amongst themselves when they walked by it outside as if he might hear from inside. A.R. Tilson said he even followed him out of Lou's one night but seeing as they were on foot, kept his distance and lost him around the corner at Magpie and Folsom. He said none of it seemed particular uncommon to him, aside from how straight he walked for how drunk he musta been. Some of the men would meet at one of their houses, load themselves up good on the booze and brews the could fit into their guts, spittin' snuff and talkin' mean. But truthfully I think none of 'em really knew why they were all worked up other than the drought itself.

If you, the men got a spook by their spooked wives and met in private so's not to let on to them while meanwhile the wives got a spook from meetin' with the other spooked women who got a spook from the kids running about talkin' on about Thanks, Stumper, Captain No-Hook

and so on, who weren't even spooked at all but just teasin' havin' fun with a man they ain't even seen.

Well eventually the water comes back, our own water that is, and what with him still bein' there, people finally start to quiet down. Like if the plague passes with the feller they thought accountable still around maybe – *maybe* – they didn't have it quite figured out right after all. And meanwhile, he hadn't said so much as peep, keepin' to his own, nor done nothin' different nor nothin' much at all, and people sorta started to take him in back in his corner of Lou's as they did the styrofoam bust of George Washington in his Sonics jersey and the mostly idle jukebox. Just a dumb sorta fly on the wall, mostly.

'Til two months later Ed Hamper drives in up from Portland callin' ahead sayin' we got to get together, he's got something we gotta see and skids out like a madman into River Tavern. But oh does he! See he was drivin' up from a job in Portland, he says, and drivin' up the Five he passes the ol' Gospodor Monument what with the statue of Jesus Christ Himself, arms spread good and holy, off the cross mind you, and what does he see but one of His arms is missin'! "I shit you not," he says and flips open his phone to pass around the evidence. And sure 'nuff, there He is, standin' there with his one arm out and the other nowhere to be seen. Now ain't nothin' happened to get to jitterin' the folks about none since the drought, but it didn't take Ed Hamper half a minute and the boys half a moment or less to connect the two missin' arms.

Once the picture'd been sent back 'round to Ed, everyone was astir, shoutin' to someone across the room who couldn't hear nothin' over the two fellers shoutin' next to him. This goes on for a bit when the name "One-Armed Jesus" gets thrown out from someone somewhere and a sort of echo rings with it, catchin' on real quick. As it's bouncin' 'round the room, a slight hush approaches from the back and some of the folks back there start to step to the side. Up steps

Sheriff Hank Ruspin, himself the leading contestant to the title of the late Henry DuPoint, and, real quiet but with that strong gruff he's got says real simple, "Now I don't like it none neither, but we all know this 'One-Armed Jesus' feller ain't hardly left Lou's let alone Goodloam. Sure I see the omen in the statue clear on as y'all, but there ain't no sense connectin' the one to the other." Now this gave a stillin' to the commotion, but it didn't much calm the fire in the gut for most of 'em, you could tell. Well Ed Hamper put his phone back in his pocket and eventually we all began to file out of the Tavern to Lou's or back home or wherever.

Me, I didn't know what to make of the statue of Christ out there on the highway, but I knew I didn't like it. At the same time, however, I felt I knowed same as the Sheriff that this feller had nothin' to do with it and that it had nothin' to do with him. Matter of fact, I started gettin' this crazy stir in me right about that night that somethin' bad might happen to him if he stuck around much longer – what with the word "omen" floatin' around now – and started to thinkin' that I might take it upon myself to see if I couldn't talk a word or two with him.

I didn't though – not yet anyhow. I let them all fume and cast their looks; I let him drink his, smoke his, and ignore 'em. I let the rumors spread and the fear grow and I laughed when I heard folks referring to him as the One-Armed Jesus. This man, mind you. But like I said, folks start to gettin' on all sorta craziness when they find they don't know.

But all this whisperin' and spookin' about was all another few weeks before Brick Brion's girl got knocked up at fourteen sayin' she's still a virgin. Some scandal. Now I'm no doctor and wouldn't never claim to be, and I am a Christian and would claim to be a good one at that, but I have a hard time figurin' how a virgin gets pregnant. Like I said, I'm no expert and, personally, I'm not lookin' to investigate the details, but I can say that the Bible sayin' the Virgin Mary has a baby in Bethlehem and he turns out to be Jesus, that's a little different than Brick

Brion's girl of fourteen in the town of Goodloam sayin' so. I guess we'll have to wait and see who the little one turns out to be though. I got word from Brick's cousin who he called first and lives next door to me. He came by sayin' there was goin' to be a meeting over at Brick's and then a move on over to Lou's to get the feller long n' gone. I said sure and stood stiff to hide my chill at the thought of what was comin' next. He offered me a ride and I said no, I'd meet him there.

This news spread quick like spark on kerosene and there weren't no wisdom nor rationale Sheriff Ruspín was callin' on to put it out this time neither, if he even tried. Me, however, I don't like no trouble and I couldn't quite put all this together the way the others were seein' it. I started up my truck and skipped Brick's headin' straight to Lou's, wonderin' right outside in the lot if Lou might've got the call yet to keep an eye on the One-Armed Jesus. I shook it – no difference at this point – and rolled in, grabbed a beer tryin' to play cool, and took it with me to the bathroom. I was just actin' but turns out I had to pee and did so. On my way out, I sat two tables over from the One-Armed Jesus, him facin' the wall, me lookin' out at the bar on the bench and nobody at the two-top between us.

“You got a smoke, mister?” I asked, and thought to myself he don't have but more than a decade on me. He barely looked up from his ashtray, probably more surprised than anything, and nodded his head.

“Listen,” I said behind my beer, my eyes on Lou, “I got a strong reason to believe you might be in hellfire trouble real soon. Now I came here to let you know and see if I couldn't help you out none. I'm not sure – well I know why they're all worked up but I don't know why they think it's got to do with you. But that don't much matter now anyhow.”



He finally looked up at the wall straight on in front of him, but I felt he was checking me out the corner of his eye. I tried not to look at the stump of his right arm sittin' nearest me. He nodded again.

"Alright then. Then I'll go," he said softly, dabbin' out his cigarette and lookin' at his glass. He put his hand on it and paused for an instant, then pushed it away a few inches and stood from his chair.

"I'll meet you outside," I say to him, "let me get you a ride a ways out of here." I stole another look up at the bar behind my glass as I finished my beer but none of them seemed particular interested. I put my glass on the bar as I walked out and told Lou thanks. I looked around when I got out but I don't see him nowhere at first, then, down the road I saw his figure walkin' alongside it. I jumped in the car quick and drove after him, leaning across the passenger seat to crank down the window and yell out to him.

"Hey mister. I know you like to keep yourn to you, but you ain't makin' it out of Goodloam tonight your own. No sir. Certainly not walkin' neither. Let me get you a ride, man."

Meanwhile, he hadn't hardly put a thought's pause to his gait so I tell him they're out after him 'casue one of the girls in town got herself knocked up sayin' she's still a virgin. Don't know how they don't know no better but, I confess, looks to me like they've just been waiting on an excuse.

He stopped suddenly. I weren't goin' hardly fast enough but to get a little jolt as I hit the brakes and he gets in, what with a little hesitation. For the first time, probably of anyone in town aside from maybe Lou, I notice he's got these steel-cast irises that stand out like silver icicles in the middle of his bloodshot eyes. They had this thin film of water over 'em like he might cry but, red as they were, that heart of his was probably just pumpin' the whiskey out through his eyes.

“Sorry,” I said, realizin’ for all I know this silent fool might have kept on not knowin’ not a single soul wanted him around this town. He didn’t seem bothered much.

“Do you mind my askin’ your name, mister?” I ask.

“Nope. But it changes. How’s Abraham.” It was a stated question.

“Surely, Abe. Abraham. Mind my askin’ how you wound up out in nowheres Washington?” I had other questions on my mind other’n what in the world he meant by his name changin’ like it was his hairdo or drink preference.

“Nope. I couldn’t really tell you, though. I move around sometimes, stay where I can. I try not to cause trouble anywhere. People seem determined that I do, however. Can’t say why though. Maybe it’s my arm,” he said, not breakin’ his gaze from the road ahead.

I didn’t say nothin’ but figured I’d try and let on like I hadn’t noticed. He had this funny kinda accent – I couldn’t quite put my finger on it. Hints of this and that here and there in certain words, little expressions and the like. Like he weren’t from here, sure, but like he weren’t from any place in particular but every place.

“Did you come in on any business in particular?” I asked him, growin’ a bit wary, but no means threatened. I was truly curious of this mystery after several months and finally had as good a look as anyone in Goodloam ever would.

“I don’t have much business anywhere,” he said, “I just come when I can and go when I must.” I noticed I had been squeezin’ the life out of the steering wheel and eased up on it, double-checking my speed.

“Sure, sure,” I try, “the vagrant type. Well the world’s mighty large. There’s sure much to see. Hey,” I realized I was driving west for the highway without even considerin’ to ask, “do you

care in particular where I take ya? I was makin' for the Five." He seemed to think on it hard a moment before he spoke.

"Have you heard of Russian dolls?" he responded, catchin' me a bit off guard.

"Well, no. But I know Russia and I know dolls. What's different in puttin' 'em together?" I ask.

"They're wooden dolls, painted very meticulously, with great detail – some elegant, others more humble – and what they do is make a set of different sizes, each one hollowed out and cut in the middle so they all stack into one another. Can you picture that?"

He turned to me for the first time and I turn too and look into his face. He looked to have aged hugely since my stolen look at the bar, lookin' like he was carryin' the weight of the legend Goodloam had put on him. His face was lined deep with a tired sag to it and a few of the creases I found I couldn't make out to be wrinkles or scars in the dark of the truck at night. He still seemed like he might start to cry and I weren't so sure anymore. I'm sittin' there wonderin' now what in the hell but all I say is yes.

"Well, in each set, these nesting dolls all look darn near identical to one another, so you open up the biggest one and, within it, lies another one just like it, only smaller. And in that one another smaller one, and so on and on 'til the smallest of the set. You can stand them all in a row and see how similar they all look, except for their size and all. But they're all proportional to each other." He fished around the inside of his jacket pocket and pulled out a pack of cigarettes. "Fancy a smoke?" he asked, "Smoke in here?" I say sure and crack my window. He does the same and offers me his light.

"My mother used to have a set of these Russian dolls, lifetimes ago. I forgot all about them until I stumbled upon some one day at a Salvation Army store. I couldn't quite figure it out

for a while but something about them struck me hard and fast and left me wondering, seeing them again. After some time, I decided maybe they were symbols of the lives within our lives, the lives we carry out secretly and shield from others in hard cast shells of ourselves.” He takes a few drags of his cigarette and seemed to watch the smoke flutterin’ out the window. “But that didn’t sit right for me after a while – I tried to think big picture, you know, otherworldly. Maybe they were signs of past lives, like reincarnations as they believe in the East. But that seemed too spiritual for some Ruski dolls. Eventually, where I wound up and where I’m at now, is that they’re symbolic of the phases of our lives that we grow upon and into. But they remain with us. That no matter what nor how we try, we always have the same little boy within us, the same little girl. No phase leaves us, we just grow about it. And perhaps, when we die, we unfold in reverse ‘til all our phases stand beside one another simultaneously, suddenly seeing and realizing the oneness of ourselves.” He hadn’t turned from his window this whole time and, somehow, though he’d been the one talkin’ on, his cigarette was almost finished, mine still more than half-full. I took a drag to play catch-up and let that sink in. It seemed like he might’ve needed to let it sink in, too.

We weren’t but fifteen miles out of town when I looked up in my rearview to see a pair of headlights pop into frame. But they hit their brights when they seen my tails and I relaxed. I really wasn’t sure what to make of all his talk, not really surprised to hear this sorta craziness comin’ from him – the sorta craziness that just barely makes sense. Well, I got to feelin’ the sinkin’ had been soaked by now and felt a stir to say somethin’.

“Ya know,” I said, “I heard some say that lefties are more creative than us righties. I always thought that was somethin’ they said to kids to help along the bullyin’ and teasin’ kids put on one another and never thought much of it since.” I look back through my side mirror and

see that one car turned to two, then a few as they snake a turn and I see they're gainin' on us.

Lou musta let on at the bar, not that I didn't think he wouldn't. I stepped on it a little bit and went on, "You ever hear that? I bet you're one of them folks, huh?" my eyes flickerin' between all three of my mirrors and the road.

"Born a righty," he said, unamused. He didn't so much as look in his side mirror let alone over his shoulder out back as I went on dartin' my eyes about 'til eventually the silent swirl of red and blue flicked on the front two cars.

"Shit," I slipped, and dragged my cigarette. "Well mister, I got some bad news on ya here." Only now did he bend forward to get an angle on his mirror but that was the extent of his response for a moment.

"You best pull over and let me out," he said. "I doubt if you'll find yourself in any trouble if you just hand me over. I recommend it. For both our sakes." I looked at him but he was back to starin' straight out ahead. I began to slow down, still unsure about givin' him over just yet. "You know," he said, "sometimes all I ever wanted was a smooth, gentle face, long grey hair, some round framed glasses, and two goddamned arms. But things don't always work out how you want them to, do they, Pat. You best pull me over."

Between the shock of his wishes and the sting of him sayin' my name, I'da done just about anything he said in that moment. I slowed and eased off onto the shoulder and eventually came to a stop. The squad cars pulled up and blocked the road, a wall of several trucks from town lined up behind them.

He turned to me. "Thanks for trying. So long, son," and stepped out the car. He started walking back toward the line of cars; me I stayed put. I watched him in my rearview once he was behind my truck, his one hand up, a blur of shoutin' comin' from the cops and, probably, mostly

the guys all pissed and fumin' havin' to chase him all the way out here. *I'm gonna have a hard time expla-* all sudden I hear a crack and see his head jolt left with a spray of skull, then the rest of him fall to the ground.

Back in town, Sheriff Ruspín asked me to come on in for questioning the next day after stayin' at the station overnight. I tell him the truth – that I didn't want to see nobody getting' hurt on superstition alone. The police all seemed to understand this right on but agree it's gonna take some time 'til the folks in town settle down. They asked me if we spoke at all and I tell 'em sure. They asked what about and I said not much, said his name was Abraham. Said he was mostly passin' through 'til he had to pass on. The vagrant type, they said. I tell them he mentioned some Russian dolls but nothin' I could really make sense of. I started to sense the edge of their bein' mostly relieved and wholly spooked and figured no point in worryin' them in how he knew my name. Weren't too hard to learn a feller's name in this town, even if you weren't interested in knowin' it in the first place. Besides, I kinda liked the idea of him maybe just knowin' mine somehow. And Lou's, I suppose.

They run me through more of the usual questions but there ain't much to offer and they know if so it don't last long. I ask if they knew who shot him yet and they said they didn't. Said they couldn't quite figure it out. None of the boys in their line had fired, they were sure of it by sound and by the wound. Bullet came in through the right side of his forehead and out the left. Looked like an execution. Point blank, even. Musta been someone off in the woods, they said. This gave me a real chill, seein' as there weren't no chance in hell anybody'd know that's where we'd stop miles outta town. And nobody'd walked from their line around side to him or they'd have been seen. I didn't know what to make of all this and was tired as all hell after such a

restless night. I asked if I could go, if there was anything else, and stood from my chair. Sheriff Ruspín stood as well and extended his hand which I took for a shaking.

As I made for the door, he stopped my leavin' with my name and I turned to see him walkin' over to the side of his office. He grabbed a bag off his shelf and held it up to me. Only thing he left behind, he said, nothin' but his ashes. I musta made some sorta face 'cause he went on sayin' he was usin' it at Lou's for an ashtray. I took the bag from him and took a closer look inside. It was a thin wooden bowl of sorts, only I know it weren't. The outside was painted red, green, yellow, blue, in little leaves and flowers. Pretty simple stuff. Right at the lip I made out what appears to be the lower half of a flower, though it's smudged, coated in all the ash been sloshin' around the bag now. I handed it back to Sheriff Ruspín, lookin' perplexed and shrug it off. Ashes to ashes, I said. He laughs a hearty laugh, finishing with a cough. He missed me entirely, sayin' surely the cigarettes will get ya if nothin' else. So long, Pat, he said as I walk out of there, his words triggerin' that of the One-Armed Jesus spinnin' 'round my head, feelin' strangely light, strangely wholesome like I hadn't felt nearly since being a kid.