

Can't Choose to be Blind

by Spader Volsung

I

The summer heat felt like a hand on her throat.

She was hardly dressed for the sweltering weather bearing down on the whole of the city, but then, it was hard to wear anything that would not be soaked by the time you had spent an hour outside. The pavement, broken though it was, only reflected the heat right back onto anyone walking by. *I don't even have a car.*

She turned, and stopped before a large building with a spire protruding out of the top of it. There were large laminated banners which read, 'All persons welcome, Evangelical Lutheran Crutch of America'. She ascended the few steps to the oak doors. *It's so...like home.* Her hand trembled slightly. She tried the doors, and to her surprise they gave way.

A cold blast of air greeted her lungs, flushing the heat out and acting like a cool drink. She stepped inside, conscious of the dull clap her shoes made on the brick interior. It was as she imagined—candles and stained glass windows illuminating the otherwise dark and open space, pews flanking a podium down at the end. *A pulpit.* Wood pillars flanked the center row of pews, reaching up to a wood ceiling. It was like being transported back in time, before...before everything. She blinked.

But where is he? She began to feel the hot feeling on her neck return, and felt her hands shaking again. She tried to press them against her sundress but to not avail. Her resolve, shaky when she determined to seek it out, was waning fast.

She would have missed him completely, having heard nothing, if not for her desperate glances all over the sanctuary. But her glistening green eyes caught movement in the corner, near what must have been the church office. Her heart skipped a beat. He had clearly noticed her, and his eyes met hers with a terrible resolve. She let out a slight breath.

He was unlike any priest she ever remembered seeing, certainly nothing like her uncle. He had fierce grey eyes, furrowed black brows, and long, straight blonde hair. It was longer than the hair of many girls she saw everyday. His vestments were comically big for him. His face softened holding her gaze, and something passed over it she could not divine.

"I..." It was barely a whimper. "I've...I've come for confession." The word felt dirty in her mouth and she wished she could take it back.

No more passed over his face. She noticed for the first time a backpack slung over his shoulder. Her face fell and she said in that same lily soft voice, "I'm sorry, I didn't mean..." She broke, collapsing on a pew next to her. She fought back the tears that were coming, but they still managed to break through slowly.

She never noticed him walk up beside her, and kneel. His warm hand touched her cold one, and she felt something pass between. It felt good, so very good, warmth she hadn't felt since...

"My child," he felt sick saying it. "I am not ordained, I cannot offer you absolution." *No man can offer absolution, certainly not a pastor*, he thought angrily. *Seminaries are nothing but the domain of weak nerds*. "But it would be my pleasure to hear your confession."

She stood up. "I..." she trailed off, realizing her left hand was shaking again, while he held her right steady. He let go, and shifted back. *What sort of priest says my pleasure*, he kicked himself mentally. *Really, what sort of insane LARPing are you doing?*

She looked up into his eyes, hers still wet. "Can...can I come back tomorrow?"

Get it done, get out. Wasting time as is, making yourself a target. How stupid are you? "Of course, I'll be here at the same time." **WHAT ARE YOU SAYING YOU MORON?**

She offered a wan smile. "Same time then." He could barely hear her say it, but in the solitude of the sanctuary it was easier.

She turned, softly, and he heard the small clap of her shoes on the brick as she left. He watched her go, feeling rage well up again. *It's done. You owe no one anything. Debts are paid, get the fuck out*

of dodge. But he knew the rage wasn't purely at himself. *You know what you saw.*

Maybe others don't have the balls to see it, don't have the stomach to see it. You see it. That's a gift you are commanded to use.

Not this again. You owe her nothing.

That's right, you don't. You owe it to yourself.

He slung the backpack over his shoulder, and marched to the doors. As his hands grasped the handle, he let them go, and turned back toward the altar. "Qui diligitis Dominum, odite malum."

He flung the doors open.

* * *

She hadn't gotten far, he determined after doubling back in his car. It was a 2009 Honda Civic, the same car he drove everywhere. It was shitty opsec but the Honda Civic was what he grew up on and he was loath to change. In any case it wasn't like he had the money for a new car. She continued to walk the sun baked streets a block ahead of him, her golden blonde hair making her an easy mark. *Which is probably why...*

There were needles lying all over, as well as just general trash. *What a shithole.* Homeless people wandered the streets, with tents occasionally coming into view wherever there was a park or some shade. *Fucking pathetic.* Seeing one particular sign he broke into laughter.

'Starving, anything helps'. *The five of you all have BMIs over thirty and you want me to believe you're starving, holy shit, how stupid can you be.*

He watched her slowly walk past all these mystery meat sapiens without raising her head. She walked into the parking lot of a cheap sandwich chain, and instead of walking inside...

"Fucking hell." *Still time to walk away.* He sped up, and parked his car in the adjacent parking lot. Turning it off, he opened the door, and dropped a small paper bag in a stormdrain next to his

parking spot, pulled off his gloves, tossed them back in the car, and marched towards the back of the sandwich parking lot.

Apparently I'm not the only one who noticed she's going fucking dumpster diving, he thought savagely, seeing an obese woman amble out of the store toward the dumpster. He quickened his pace to intercept her.

"Listen ma'am I'm so sorry, I don't know what gets into her." The sandwich shop employee stopped waddling, to turn and regard him. He made his face as apologetic as he could manage. "I'm sorry you have to deal with all the crazies."

She put her hands on her hips and sighed. "You ain't got no idea, just ax' her not to do 'dat again."

Promising that he would, he advanced rapidly on the dumpster. He saw bits of mud on her dress as she tried to pull something out that must have been stuck under some disgusting brown boxes. He pulled her away, harder than he meant to.

She drew breath sharply as he pulled her out. "What the fuck are you doing?"

He saw confusion pass over her face. He made a mental note to try and swear less, it undermined the priest bit. *Granted that bit is getting burned one way or another if I keep this up*. "What are you looking for in there?"

"Food." If her voice wasn't so angelic he reasoned he would probably have called her an idiot. *I still might*.

"Listen, that's no place for you to be. They'll call the cops on you." *That at least got a reaction from her*. She looked like she had been hit. *So I was right. Pigs are, as usual, working for the other fucking team*. Not knowing what to say, he said, "I'll take you somewhere to get some food."

She felt fear pulse through her veins. She studied his face intently, looking hard into those crystal blue eyes. *They look so cold, and lonely*. "I will go with you."

She followed him back to the car. He got in, and tossed his gym bags in the backseat. She opened the door, and got in, her tall, slender frame taking up about half the actual seat. Turning the keys, he threw it in reverse and sped out of the parking lot.

The car was cooler than the outside by at least ten degrees, and the air conditioning blew out very crisp. *Where to go, where to go, where to go.* He was started out of his thoughts.

“You’re not wearing a seatbelt.” It wasn’t accusatory, it was in that same melodic voice she used for everything. It was sweet, like a whiff of vanilla.

A few retorts sprung to his mind immediately, but instead he reached over with one hand and dragged the seat belt across his frame. Given his earlier performance, he reasoned, best not to answer any questions you don’t have to.

“What’s your name?”

“Rosemund.” *Lying. Not that I blame her exactly.*

“Mine is Elias Bader.”

He’s lying, she thought. But he had no way of knowing I knew that. That’s not a name you hear around here. “You’re not a priest, are you?”

He felt something hot under his collar. “We’ll talk about it at dinner.” *She knows. Should have known better than to pick the name from a fucking book I own.*

The rest of the car ride was silent, except for the soft music he always had playing in the background. Her suspicion of what it was when she heard music she hadn’t heard since watching some film about the American war in Vietnam, vaguely rock ‘n’ roll but without lyrics. Memories of home were coming back more and more now, and like a scab torn off, they hurt. She hated crying in front of this stranger, but couldn’t help it. She cried in silence, wondering if he even noticed. Suddenly, the car stopped.

“We’re here,” he said.

Here was a small strip mall, with a bank, a chiropractor, a karate club, and an Italian restaurant nestled in the corner. They got out, and walked in. She realized Elias, not a priest, was still carrying his backpack with him.

“Booth for two please.” The waitress was very pregnant, which he thought was a little bizarre, but then it wasn’t like he’d been here before. They sat down, and they ordered sodas.

“You’re not a priest.” It was not a question.

“Rosemund, you are deeply troubled. Maybe it would be better if we left our identities and their baggage to themselves.”

She studied him, and nodded. Her face was beautiful, naturally beautiful. He knew why they’d taken her. It made his blood boil.

“Where are you going?”

“Nowhere.”

Might as well bite the bullet. “No passport?”

Her face turned ashen. “How did you...?”

“You don’t want to know.”

“I’m not...but you’re not...” her voice was failing.

“No. Nothing like that. But some of us can’t turn away, can’t choose to be blind.” He wasn’t sure why he said it, why he was telling her things he wouldn’t tell his own kin. *Hell, I’m not sure why I bothered with her at all.* But he knew that was a lie. The second those green eyes had held his gaze...what was meant to be was meant to be. *Before the foundations of the earth, I knew you.*

“All too well,” he murmured. Seeing her expression he added, “Just talking to myself. Where are you from?”

“Canada.”

The waitress, having returned, took their orders, and predictably she ate everything in front of her, and some of his spaghetti and meatballs. *Not bad, and not sacrificed to corn demons unlike the rest of the slop in this hellhole.*

It was dark outside, and as they left together he felt his nerves start to go on edge. *Something is hunting.* Turning to her, he could tell she felt it too. Or maybe she was just cold. Or maybe she was just scared. *It’s not like you were ever a master at reading women.*

Driving a bit more carefully, they left the plaza, and turned north. *Only a few hours delay. Not the end of the world.*

II

The highway was strangely deserted, like an old video game. The sky was completely black, as though a fog hunt just beyond the orange streetlights, unable to be pierced.

“I miss the stars.”

Her voice surprised him, still light, but unexpected. Some of the tension was dissipating but he felt the grime his hands had made sweating on the steering wheel like an uncomfortable bug. *Not out of the woods yet.* He closed his eyes briefly, and sighed.

“Me too.”

The car raced along the highway. He was no longer sweating but despite the late hour and pleasant humm of the engine he was as alert as before. *Moreso, really. If I had been properly alert before none of this would have happened.* He expected she would fall asleep soon, most do. But stealing a glance over he saw her green eyes looking at him, *studying* him.

“He sent you, didn’t he?” Her voice, already quiet and soft, was now positively subservient.

“No one sent me.” He realized his voice carried more edge than he intended. “I’m not one who is sent. I go where I please.”

She was still looking at him, trying to divine what was behind the non answers she was receiving. “I don’t have a passport.”

Yeah, I suspected as much. If she’s telling me then she probably trusts me, or else just wants to see my reaction. He carried on this line a little further but let it go. *She seems guileless.* Well *that* couldn’t be true, he reasoned. “I wasn’t there for you.”

“You’re not a priest.” It was probably the third time she said it. He had never given an answer and wasn’t about to now.

It had started to rain in earnest, slowly at first and then in great torrents. His mind was slowly starting to unwind. The

desert rarely had rain like this, he couldn't help but see it as an omen. "I know what happened to you."

He stole a glance at her, and though there was fear in her face there was also genuine curiosity and hope. *They never really broke her.* Despite himself something he had not felt in years stirred within him. "Where are you taking me?"

"Somewhere safe." He hated saying it. It felt like a lie rolling off his tongue and if she was smart she'd know it was too. There was nowhere safe for people like her. "Did you have family back home?"

She slowly shook her head. He felt rage well up within him, the same rage that had driven him through the desert in the first place. *Of course you didn't. That's why they chose you.* But it was driven from his mind.

"Do you have family?" Her voice was so faint he suspected she was finally dozing off as he'd hoped she would. *Not that I mind the diversion exactly.*

He said nothing. He hadn't exactly planned to go back, but it was the only choice now. He hadn't exactly planned to make it out of the city in the first place. *It was all so easy, like nature itself reclaiming in months what had been industrial for decades.*

Suddenly he jerked the steering wheel, sending the car spinning on the flooded asphalt. The tires screeched, trying to regain control. In an instant he was back there. He held the wheel with an iron grip as the car finally came to a stop, some way into the desert shoulder.

He swore violently. He knew what he'd seen.

A red jeep was just a bit ahead of them, neatly positioned to block their reentry. "Wait here," he said, opening the door into the pouring rain.

A man in a raincoat was walking briskly towards him from the jeep. He had moppy hair, curly after a fashion, with a hooked nose and long black hair. "Hey partner, sorry about that."

"Step the fuck back." He hadn't even consciously thought about drawing his Glock but it was in his hand, pointed directly at the stranger.

She looked out the window, squinting through the rain rolling down off it. The stranger had nothing threatening, just a raincoat, and a lanyard saying “Bob”. *What is he doing?*

He felt his grip on the automatic tighten. The stranger, instead of putting his hands up and backing off, spoke. “There’s nothing to worry about William, I just want to—”

The Glock barked twice, and the stranger fell to the ground. Adrenaline was coursing through his veins, doubt and certainty running like race horses beside each other. He yanked the car door open, got in, and closed it.

“What...?”

His foot hit the accelerator like a brick. The wheels screamed as they tried to grip the ground.

5000 rpm...6000 rpm...7000 rpm...finally the wheels caught and the car blazed by the red Jeep.

“Fucking hell I knew it.” His voice was steeled, she realized. He hadn’t made the shot in anger.

Is he...“They’re sending someone after you.”

“They can’t know I’m gone yet!” She protested, her voice already higher than his.

“Jesus Christ, give me patience with women.” He turned, looking her dead in the eye again. “Did you really imagine you could simply leave and there wouldn’t be entities sent out after you?”

She wanted to retort but stopped. “Entities?”

“You went to a church, you tell me. Do you really imagine the material is all there is?” His hands were sweating profusely, and he was stealing glances in the rearview mirror rather than at her. “You are trying to escape a portal to darkness that should never be opened, consecrated by acts that should never be committed. Do you really imagine it’s so easy to slip away from that?”

He could tell she was genuinely losing it now, tears were welling up in her eyes. “Then why did you try?!?”

“Damned if I know.” He sighed. “Look, whoever you were, whatever you did, that person is dead now. You understand me?”

They died and whatever I just shot killed them.” She looked confused.

“But...”

“I was there because of my sister. She’s in the ground now, but you can become her, at least as far as NWO is concerned. That’s where I’m taking you.”

She wondered if any of it was real. It had all felt like a dream, ever since she entered that church. Maybe she was going to wake up any minute, and be back there, back in that shitty town-home...

“I want to hear you say it.”

She looked at him, her mind racing and terribly confused. It didn’t make sense, it was all disjointed and out of place. She knew she must wake up soon, bringing it all crashing down, but maybe if she...

“What is your sister’s name?” She saw the pain cross his face.

“Liesle.”

“The old me is dead. Liesle lives.”

She saw some small measure of relief cross his face. “Good, then all we have is to get you home.”

I hope she understands the risk I’m taking, He thought. Then he laughed inwardly. *Of course she doesn’t. And that’s why I took it.*

* * *

He saw she had finally fallen asleep, much to his relief. *At least her mind has some peace for now, sure as hell mine isn’t going to get any.* He was playing it over in his mind, before it faded. *He was coming straight for me, on the wrong side of the highway. How the fuck does that even happen. There’s a giant divider on the highway. No Jeep is getting through it. Not without some other aid.* It didn’t make sense. His reactions, at least, were something that didn’t trouble him.

Glad it has new tires.

But tied in with the first question was the second. *Did I judge him properly? He could have been a complete stranger. Shedding innocent blood is no virtue.*

Innocent blood? Trust your instincts, you saw what he was immediately. Not that it will help. She still thinks you're a psycho.

So? She still trusts me. Chicks dig psychos, and in any case it's not like she's the judge of whether he deserved it or not. Assuming he's actually dead.

It was very rare for non law enforcement officers to wear body armor, but he reflected that his shots would all have been stopped by anything halfway decent under that raincoat. *Law enforcement officer?*

Seriously doubt that, what are the chances he is one and doesn't use it to try and get a white guy to suck him and his buddies off with muh thin blue line. Fucking pigs, no, he wasn't a cop.

Fed maybe? That was more likely, feds are far more cagey. And complete idiots half the time too, but not the type you want to be mixed up in. He reflected if it was a fed he was completely and utterly fucked and they'd have helicopters on him eventually. *Nah, if it was a fed they would have taken my plate first unless they were completely stupid.*

Which, granted, also possible. But unlikely. *No, the original guess, as much of a leap as it is, still fits the shoe best.* It was nonetheless a leap. To the bugman, maybe. *The forces we struggle with are always far older than we imagine.*

A road sign informed him he was entering an Indian reservation, which would probably have meant more to her than it meant to him.

"Never enter Indian country without a guide, paleface," he quoted. It sounded more glib than he intended, and he stole glances to his left and right.

Several miles into the reservation he spotted one of the only gas stations. The neon stood out like a stain on a white dress. *Might as well do it now, and I can get all the way without stopping again.* The rain had stopped, but the car still looked like it had been freshly washed. As he pulled into the station, she stirred. He debated just using the card. But he had the cash necessary, and he wanted no trace.

The inside of the gas station was just as offensive as the exterior to the senses. What was alleged to be sushi, hot dogs, and

burrITO wraps for the same price as could buy a hearty meal of real food back home.

Home. He hadn't really allowed himself to consider what it would be like, that he would ever see it again. But it all came flooding back, and he yearned for the warmth of the hearth, the old armchairs, a cool glass of milk.

The clerk was a subcontinental, which was interesting. So *even the red man cannot escape the rising tide of color.* "How much gas?"

"Station 14." He set the twin twenty dollar bills on the counter. *Funny how we call them Indians, and now India Indians have made it to their homelands, and to ours.*

And then, without hearing the door open, two red men shoved rifles at the clerk. They were retro, still adorned with wood furniture. One was clearly older, but both seemed to be on their game. *Hop to it gentlemen, not my quarrel.* He produced his wallet, happy to hand it over.

"Well gentlemen I'll be on my way." He said, grabbing a water bottle as he left. They nodded as he pushed the door open.

And then he turned, and blinked hard. The red men were completely gone. *Did I just imagine that?* The clerk was on his phone, still playing some game. He walked out of the station, back to the car, and pumped the gas.

As he got back in the car, she looked up at him, smiling, warmth he had never seen in her eyes. "Its not a dream, is it?"

He chuckled, after the daydream he had just had. "Just a few hours more."

* * *

The sun was just cresting over the horizon, as the cold of night began to turn into the cool of morning. She was still sleeping, he knew, hearing her steady breathing beside him.

Driving at this time of the morning was very relaxing, he reflected. It had been a long day, and a long night. He knew he was only a few miles away. He felt his eyes close briefly, then reopen,

looking back at the asphalt surrounded by brushland. *After all, it isn't far...*

He woke up with a sudden jolt. He realized his face was against the steering wheel, and she was awake now. *Fuck fuck fuck.* Suddenly there was a rap on his window. Still groggy, he rolled down the window.

“Well you had a little tumble.” The voice was foreign, but he couldn't place where. “Sorry officer, fell asleep, been a long drive.”

“Step out of the car.” *Now I'm in for it.* He noticed it was a state trooper, and another state trooper was pulling toward them. He looked back at her, and saw the fear in her eyes. He was roughly bent over the hood of the car, as the officer searched his pockets, pulling out the wallet he had dreamed he'd given to the gas station thieves.

And then he saw the face behind the second car.

He kicked the officer hard in the knee, twisting around and drawing his switchblade in one fluid motion. The officer put up a hand to shield himself but the knife found its target, as one body drove the other to the ground. *No flak jacket saving your buddy this time.* He turned, ready to face the real threat, but he heard glass break and felt something red hot punch him in the chest. He looked up, and felt a second punch, falling to the ground.

I'm bleeding. The warm liquid covering his chest was unmistakable. *I'm gonna die.* He looked up, and there the darkness was, standing over him, grinning.

In a raspy voice that sounded like death, he heard “Did you really imagine you could escape?” He saw the 1911 level at his head.

And then glass broke again.

He opened his eyes, and saw the man had fallen as well. Struggling to stand up as blood pumped out of him, he saw what had done it. His enemy had taken a direct shot to the face.

She was sitting there, holding his Glock, tears rolling down her face. The window only had a hole in it.

Stumbling towards the car, he got in, and pulled it out of park, once again pushing the accelerator to the floor. He felt the cold coming.

“I’m going to die.” He’d meant to think it rather than say it. He saw the fear in her eyes, but couldn’t manage a lie. “Listen to me,” he growled, over the engine’s roar. “Tell them who you are. Tell them what I told you to say.” He coughed. “They’re good...Christian folk...”

He stopped talking, blinking, holding onto consciousness. *Rage, rage against the dying of the light.*

Two more turns. The sagebrush was barely visible to him, as he swung onto the dirt road. One more turn.

He knew he was done. And yet he reflected, he wouldn’t have changed anything. *I hope...in the end...he can say...well done.*

The car turned sharply, and a farmhouse stood in the distance. The car began to slow, and stopped about halfway onto the long driveway. She was crying in earnest now, as she felt his neck and knew he was gone.

And she saw two old people, unmistakably husband and wife, run out towards the car, crying themselves.

She was sure he was gone. But she swore she heard someone say ‘It was worth it’.