

## Lori's Song

by Rich Logsdon

Either the cross or death.--St. Theresa of Avila

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I. *It is the last day of my captivity.* You think this as you awaken in the bed of an ice-cold second story room.

As you pull the sheets closer, you hear rain drumming on the roof and window; rain reminds you of God's steady grace. Grace sustains you when your mind replays the events culminating in your conversion. Grace will give you peace when you take the needle.

Joints aching from the walking you did yesterday, you sit up in bed. Shivering slightly, you remember that you're in Seattle and wonder what the weather is like in sunny Las Vegas, where you lived five years ago. You finger the large silver cross dangling from your neck and glance at your watch. It's six in the morning, too early to shower and risk waking the Lutheran pastor and his wife, who took you in and sleep soundly two rooms down the hall.

After breakfasting around nine, you'll walk two blocks, hop on the bus, and, big floppy Bible in hand, ride to city center where you'll share the Gospel with anyone who will listen. Often, small crowds gather. It is then that the Holy Ghost will demand that you publicly tell, certainly for the last time during this period of earthly bondage, your exceedingly gruesome tale. Your story is your cross, every detail a nail.

II. Standing on wet pavement under the low gray Seattle sky, you'll begin with, "Her name was Lori."

That was the name on the website depicting the wavy-haired redhead with the gorgeous body. Her bio said she lived in Henderson, Nevada, and wanted a "sensitive man to love me body and soul." Crazy with desire, predatory as a mountain lion, you found her late one stormy night in January 1999 while surfing the net in your house's second story guestroom. At the time, your family had just moved to Las Vegas, the tenth move in twenty years.

You remember that you were studying her homepage--she was pictured in a thin white negligee--when an image of the Savior blew into your mind, and He stood between you and the object of your depravity. Silently, you bid Him go away--He always frightened you. You reminded Him that you had angrily sworn off the Christian faith years before, just after your beautiful mother Esther shot your father to death in their bed twenty feet down the hall from your room. Esther had found Darrin putting it to the wife of the neighbor who had headed up a local satanic cult. You were ten at the time.

Heart racing, Jesus' image still nailed in your thoughts, you sat back in your soft, high-backed chair and pushed away from the computer table. Sweat dotted your brow and moistened your palms. You gritted your teeth and you forced your mind onto your last victim--also a redhead, also lonely, also gorgeous. It was somewhere outside Laramie, and she had squirmed and run; in the end, had submitted and taken the rope. Her soul had leapt from her body after you cut it from sternum to pubis.

As innocent blood soaked your mind and the wind shrieked your name outside the window, the image of the Savior faded, and you waited several minutes to regain wholeness. Finally, you returned to Lori's homepage, studied her face, and knew that she was consumed by a sorrow so crippling that she would be quite ripe for your plucking.

You clicked upon page one; the pictures there were mostly "boob shots." On page two, Lori was smiling while spreading wide, front and back, and you felt magic connection.

Then, like a hammer striking the side of your head, it hit you that you had seen this girl recently. "Oh, my God above," you whispered. You believed in sign and were now certain that some dark design was at work here. "Oh, my God; Oh, my God."

Your mind scampered in circles; you could not place her. Then memory cells ignited: this one, you remembered, worked at the nearby Wal-mart, just off Rampart. Several times in the past six months, she had checked you out, once even exclaiming, "God bless!" as you headed for the door. Tangible sorrow had saturated her voice.

Blinking and glancing at the screen, you remembered that she generally wore a sweater containing a message like "Redeemed by the Blood" or "By his Stripes." Though you had been raised Baptist, these messages sent the sickening chill of judgment to the marrow of your bones. The last time she'd checked you through, she had worn a black sweater with "God of Fire" printed in red over a golden cross. "God of Fire" had conjured such a dreadful image of damnation that you hadn't slept that night.

Pushing away fear and driving your thoughts back to the screen, you smiled; because she had already spoken to you, because she was drawn to smut, it should be quite possible to break beyond the "Savior barrier" and make her acquaintance. That done, you would move towards the cutting ritual that would free her soul and feed your own.

When you returned to her home page, you clicked the arrow on "Contact." That brought up a letter ready to be sent to her email address. This night, because you really didn't know her yet, you wrote nothing.

The next day after work, a prowling soul, you went to Wal-mart. You parked as close to the store and, because it was cold, ran to the main door. Heart racing, feet freezing, you walked to the homeowners' section where you picked up three bottles of stain. It was as you were standing in line that you saw her five check-stands away. Craving eye contact, you moved to her cue. After fifteen minutes, you found yourself face to face with Lori.

Jaw set, she was wearing a blue sweater with the words "Stream of Living Waters" written in white.

"What does 'Stream of Living Waters' mean?" you asked as she processed your order.

"It's the name of a church," she mumbled, not giving you a glance.

"Also, I think it's what Jesus called the Holy Ghost."

The name of Jesus made your face twitch.

"Not many people believe in Him anymore." You almost stuttered as you spoke.

She looked at you, into your eyes, and sighed, brushing a strand of hair out of her face. "Not many people do anymore, I guess. Getting harder and harder to know God every day."

Eye contact always started it, and suddenly your heartbeat was a thin, rapid palpitation.

"But I guess you do, huh?" You had to force the words out.

"I surely try," she responded. "I was raised on Jesus though He hasn't been with me recently."

You cringed.

"Hasn't been with anyone recently," you snorted as you picked up your bag and headed for the door.

"God bless you, sir!" she said, her tone almost a plea.

Hating the expression, you nodded but did not glance back.

All through the next day, you couldn't stop thinking of Lori. During one your breaks at work, you even used your work computer to check her site. Then, after work, you phoned Kitty on your cell and told her you needed to pick up "one more thing" at Wal-mart.

It was after five when you moved through the sliding glass doors and pushed through the people milling around the counters near the entrance. Again, the store was frigid with late January cold as you walked to the pharmacy area and bought several packets of sinus medication. Hurrying to the front, your heart beating with coyote-rapidity, you saw her in the very last check-stand.

"Hey, I remember you," she said as you reached the front of the line. You put your meds on the counter, smiled, and briefly locked into her glacial blue eyes. This time, she wore a white sweater bearing the red letters "By the Blood of the Lamb." Under the words was a

picture of a glaring Christ, face bloodied from the crown of thorns. Slight sickness shot through you, you could feel the blood drain from your face, and you wondered if you were going to faint.

*The eyes are just pictures, you silently reassured yourself; they can't hurt me.*

"Can never have too much of this stuff," you said, sniffing and nodding toward your medication.

"Got a cold today?"

You looked toward the doors to avoid the face on the sweater.

"Just stuffed up from the wind. It's that time of year."

"My husband gets it real bad, too."

You glanced at her face, briefly locked your eyes with hers, and imagined running your fingers through her long tangle of red hair and then gracefully slicing her throat and tasting her blood.

When you left, she yelled, "God bless!" You cringed as if whipped. Her tone was pathetic, pleading, and everyone heard her.

That night, over dinner, as your daughters rambled on about boy friends and school, you found that you couldn't erase Lori's face from your mind. It was attached to your brain by an invisible nail.

When Kitty asked, "Anything wrong, Carl?" you replied, "Oh, nothing. You know. Hard day at work."

That night, you dreamt about Lori, naked, sitting on your lap in the car, your fingers slowly wrapping themselves around her beautiful neck. Panting like a beast, you were reaching for the knife when, right in the middle of the dream, the Son of God appeared in a blaze of glory, His eyes riveting you and causing Lori to fade. You woke with a jolt and slept fitfully for the rest of the night.

All the next day, on edge, you thought about her. That night, after everyone else had gone to bed, you clicked the arrow on "Contact" and wrote her the letter that you'd spent all day composing. It was an inspired effort, and you told her that she was beautiful as the desert sunset. Then, you asked her why she had so given herself over to the devil.

"Pornography is of Satan, dear child," you wrote and went on to explain that, for the past six years, your mission had been to search the net and reclaim the lost sheep of God.

"And now, even now, the Lord has called me to bring you back into the fold, dear sweet Lori," you added, feeling a familiar tightness around your own neck.

The next day, as you worked through computer files in your small cold office, you upbraided yourself for having written this letter.

"She'll never buy the evangelical bit," you fumed as you completed work on one of your company's biggest accounts.

"What's that you say, Carl?" came the voice from the next cubicle.

"Evangelical now, are we?" It was Ralph Cummings, the freckled, redheaded lightweight that had joined the company two months after you were hired.

"Mind your own goddamned business, Ralphy," you retorted.

"Touchy-touchy," Ralph clucked. Had you been violent, you would have stepped around the corner, seized the little man's throat, and choked him to death.

Three nights later you received her response. "For a dear man of God," she wrote, "you seem attracted to my devilish beauty. Do you want a part of me? You can have me, you know, all things being permissible--God willing, of course :)"

"Bingo," you chuckled. You logged onto a Bible website and copied some Old Testament verses into your reply, in which you gently touched upon the sin of adultery. Blood pumping at a feverish pitch, you ended by telling her that you lived in Las Vegas, considered yourself an apostle, and asked if she would meet you to discuss matters of the Christian faith.

Outside, the wind battered your house, stars glimmered like little eyes, and the pain shooting through your head meant your sinuses would clog.

"This is a stupid thing to do," you scolded yourself as you signed the letter "Love, Apostle Carl," and pressed "Send." This time, you feared, you had gone too far with the evangelical pitch. For an instant, you wondered if your wife was awake and listening in the next room and decided that you didn't care.

One week later, just when you were ready to begin searching for another victim, an email from Lori arrived. It was early evening during the first week of February. The sunset had been a spectacular display of yellow, orange, and red, and Kitty and the kids were attending classical music concert across town.

"My dearest Apostle Carl," her letter began, "I appreciate the verses, and what you wrote about staying on the pathway to righteousness struck a chord in this witch's heart. (I'm not really a witch, but I think my sister Naomi is.)Just thinking about you makes me wet." At the end, she had written, "As I think of you, I sit naked in front of my computer, dream about sucking your cock, and touch myself;)" She had signed it, "All my love, Lori." She said nothing about meeting you.

Euphoric, you sent her more Bible verses, reminding her to be careful about the occult and telling her that God loved her gorgeous body. "Why else would He have made you beautiful?" you asked. You added that you liked thinking about her naked and that the good Lord never looked with disfavor upon His followers for indulging in an occasional sin; "The Old Testament is filled with scoundrels blessed by the Almighty," you wrote.

The next night, well past twelve, you logged on, opened your email, and read: "You gotta know I grew up in the Pentecostal church, and lost my virginity by fourteen and by the age of eighteen had my fill of holy-roller, gospel people." She ended, "I think I've lost my salvation, dear Apostle, and it's because I like to take on older men. (How can that be a sin?) You're an 'older man,' aren't you? Can we meet some time? Someone once told me that a child of God can never lose their salvation." Her P. S. went, "I live in Henderson ;)."

You wrote back immediately, suggesting that she meet you three afternoons later at 3:30 at The Lamb's Grill, a restaurant just off the Strip. Five minutes after you sent this email, you had your reply. "Lamb's Grill it is, sweet boy," she wrote; "I'll be there at 3:30."

Barely able to contain yourself, you risked one last message: "Be sure to wear something revealing. I wouldn't mind seeing your bosoms." "Tits" would be out of character for an apostle.

You waited, wondering if she was still on the line, and thirty minutes later you had your answer: "Carl, my sweet lamb. If I could, I'd be wearing nothing at all. Of course you can see my bosoms, as you call them. See you there. Now, go to sleep." She had not signed this one "Lori" or "Love, Lori," but that didn't bother you. That night, next to your wife, you slept like a baby.

The next cold, drizzly morning over breakfast you told Kitty that in two days you had to drive to Kingman, Arizona, for a business meeting.

"That's sudden," she said, sipping black coffee and looking across the table at you.

"That's what I told them," you mumbled, chewing your scrambled eggs and bacon in tiny rapid bites. You picked up the paper and scanned the front page of section B.

"What's it about?" she asked.

"Oh, same old shit." You kept your eyes on the paper.

"Same old shit.' I just love it when you talk that way," she sighed, setting down her coffee and rising from the table.

"Sorry, pumpkin," you said, looking up. "Pumpkin" was the name you'd called her when you first met years ago at frat party. A member of a coven at the time, she had since lived her life in a Lutheran church you refused to attend.

"Guess I'm pissed," you continued. "It's with that group from Phoenix I've been talking about. They want to finalize some kind of deal. Herb needs me to go." Herb Spence was your boss.

"I don't remember you ever talking about any Phoenix deal," Kitty said from the kitchen. The running sink water told you that she was washing something.

You forced a laugh. "I think that's because you never listen."

"Oh, I listen," she replied in the bored voice that she had been using in the past six years. "But, for me, I guess things go in one ear and out the other."

"Guess they do with most of us," you answered, taking an enormous gulp of coffee and rising from your chair.

Two days later, suitcase and other items in your trunk, you drove into the parking lot behind Lamb's, a dinghy '50's style restaurant. The day had been cloudy and chilly. That bothered you because on the evenings devoted to your deadly ritual, you preferred the clear blue sky because that always meant a beautiful to spectacular sunset. As you eased your blue Honda into a space facing the door, your heart thudded with bestial anticipation as you thought of taking her to the desert.

After locking up your vehicle, you stood just outside the dark entrance and looked up. It was just then that the sunlight pierced the thinning cloud cover. Breathing deeply, you imagined the rays penetrating you and lifting the depression that had hung on you since yesterday afternoon. Always, late in the afternoon on the day before these little episodes, you were hit with what Uncle Ray the Preacher used to call "melancholia." It would last for about twenty-four hours, and always, the pall lifted when you met your next offering.

Now, as more sun broke through, you wondered how long you were going to be able to continue your "spree." This would be the seventeenth—that meant seventeen corpses, all mutilated, scattered around the country you love. The first was been a redheaded topless dancer who worked in New Jersey. You had difficulty remembering the others. And always, while the local police had put out a missing person's report, the bodies had never been found. Even more miraculous, you'd never been questioned.

On this afternoon, you saw only two other cars, both on the far side of the lot: a black Cadillac with tinted windows and, next to that, a green Toyota with paint chipping off the dented driver's door. Because she had mentioned it in one of her letters, you knew that the Toyota belonged to Lori.

In a dark rush, you pushed the black glass door open and entered Lamb's. The air inside smelled of burnt meat. Eyes quickly adjusting, you saw Lori. She sat across the room in a large, red wing-backed chair, smiling at you. You shoved your hands in your pockets and approached her.

"You must be Lori," you said with forced calm as she stood.

She wore a low-cut gray sweater that barely covered her nipples. A short black skirt hung on her so loosely that you knew she wore nothing underneath. Your manhood swelling, your depression lifted immediately.

"You must be dear Apostle Carl," she said, stepping forward, wrapping her arms around your neck, and pecking you on the lips. "You don't look like a Man of God."

"That's what they all say," you laughed.

She drew back to inspect you. Clearly, she didn't recognize you. Your immediate impression was that you slightly repelled her, possibly because you were overweight, wore dark, thick glasses, and had thick red hair. Your stained blue Hawaiian shirt probably didn't help. But you put these potentially crippling notions aside as the hostess, wearing a black gown, escorted you to a table on the far side of the restaurant. An older couple was seated at a table in the middle of the room.

"So, Apostle Carl, where do you go to church?" Lori asked, her voice somewhat strained, as she opened the menu and scanned the selections.

You shrugged. "Some Baptist church not far from where I live. It's not where you go, Lori; it's what you believe."

She looked up and gave a tight smile. "Which Baptist church? I've been to several here."

"Holy Oak Southern Baptist. Think that's the name. It's in North Las Vegas."

"Really? I don't know that one," she said.

"Not many people do," you responded. "It's new. We're meeting in a store."

"A mission church?"

"Yes. A mission church." You were lying but knew she couldn't tell.

"Cool," she said, returning to the menu.

You discussed food selections, praising the Italian cuisine. Then you decided to cut to the chase. "Churches aside, why are you posing on the web? Not that I mind but, still, one wonders why a child of God would do that. And I have to admit, some of those pictures are quite nice."

"Because God gave me a gorgeous body." Her eyes locked with yours.

"He did at that," you nodded, suddenly feeling blissful. "But still, I wonder."

You knew it was coming and, when it did, could feel the change in her mood; it was like the humidity before a storm. Slowly, she put down her menu. Color drained from her face, and her eyes widened. Hand slightly trembling, she reached for her water glass, brought it to her lips, and sipped, never taking her eyes off you.

You grinned--you knew what this was about--as she slowly set her glass down, her eyes still fixed on you. Temporarily, bliss gave way to fear.

"I've seen you somewhere, haven't I?" she asked.

You shrugged. "I dunno. Have you?"

"Oh, my God, I think I have. I know I have."

Your heart skipped several beats. The entire game hung on this moment.

"Might have," you answered, closing your menu and glancing toward the kitchen. You struggled to keep tension from your voice.

"My God above," she said, eyes still riveted on you, voice rising, "you're that guy that comes by the store. You're that guy. That guy. You asked me about one of my 'God sweaters,' as I call them. Didn't you?"

You wondered what she meant by the phrase "that guy."

"That was me," you chirped. "After one of my neighbors told me to look on the web, I couldn't resist."

"Your neighbor?"

"Yeah. Mike Hanson. He goes to Wal-mart every once in a while. I don't think it's that big a deal. It's kind of exciting, actually."

"Exciting...?" She forced a smile.

"I mean, if it bothers you...", you mumbled and forced a perplexed smile. You felt your heart was going to explode like a cannon.

"No," she shrugged, "I guess it's all right. I guess I should have listened to my sister. She said, sooner or later, I'd run into people who would recognize me."

The waiter was standing just off your right shoulder. "I think we need to order," you suggested.

Ordering brought a reprieve--you requested an expensive Riesling with dinner--but when you were finished, she picked up where she left off.

"OK, I remember you now," she said. "Bought all that sinus stuff last time, right? We wondered how you could use it all."

"That was me. Gotta have my sinus stuff."

*Who the hell are 'we'?* you wondered. You didn't like it when people talked about you behind your back.

"And so when I checked you out, at that time, you already knew about the site. Right? Well, hmmm," she said, pursing her lips, "I guess it's what I shoulda expected, huh?"

"Of course it is." You wondered when the waiter was going to bring the salads.

"Just the same, it kind of gives me the creeps. Almost feels like you're stalking me. But I know you're not. I guess that's part of the thrill."

"Just part of the thrill," you nodded.

She smiled grimly, and for several minutes neither one of you spoke.

"Lori, what we're talking about is coincidence, pure coincidence," you began again. You stirred your fork in your salad and searched for words. "But let me say," and here you gazed into her eyes, "that I find you stunningly beautiful. And, yes, I guess I should have said something. Anyway, recognizing the girl on the site as the woman at the store made, what, made our getting together all the more urgent. All the more special. God-ordained, if you like. I didn't say anything because I wasn't sure I wanted you to recognize me."

She took a bite of her salad, then smiled. "Well, what the hell, huh? You only live once. I'm sure I've run into other men at the store who've seen my site. Probably lots. Just didn't know it. Guess I should be flattered you asked me out. Guess I am." The tension was dissolving from her voice.

"Hope so," you responded.

"And, to answer your question honestly--and why shouldn't I be honest?--posing nude gives me a huge rush."

You wanted to say "Me, too" when the waiter brought your main courses along with your wine. You had ordered shrimp scaloppini, and she had gone for the chicken marsala.

Before taking her first bite, she made the sign of the cross over her plate.

Cold burned your neck and ears, and you almost choked. "Why'd you do that?" you asked.

"It's a blessing. When I was little, my priest used to do it."

"Well"--here you forced a giggle--"please don't do it again."

"It's just a habit."

You nodded and started in on your scaloppini.

"You're married, aren't you?" you asked.

"Unfortunately. And, on top of that, I got two kids. They're with my ex right now. How about you?"

"Divorced. Two daughters who live with the wife in Topeka." Years before, you and Kitty had lived in Topeka for a year and a half.

For a time, you talked about your children and said disparaging things about the woman you referred to as "the former Mrs. Carl." In her turn, between sips of wine, Lori said something about her present husband, a driver for a local delivery service, and mentioned her sister Naomi, a local dancer who had sworn since childhood to protect her.

Talking about family members was fine, but Lori didn't want to stay on that topic. Halfway through dinner, she began to talk about Jesus, Whom she had found as a child and subsequently lost. She said a few things about her struggles with the "condition of sin." Sin didn't interest you, and talk about Jesus made want to crawl into a dark hole somewhere inside your brain.

You drained your glass of Riesling and poured yourself another.

"The web site is my testimony to sin in my life, and right now," she laughed, "sin is clearly in control. The Devil, really. But you know what they say."

"What do they say?"

"Jesus saves. It's what my grandma always used to tell me. 'Lori, you just remember: Jesus is the rescuer.'"

Feeling a lump in your throat, you took an enormous gulp of wine and jumped right in, explaining your own job as an insurance adjuster and not giving her a chance to say another word.

During desert, she started up again, but this time, to your relief, she talked about growing up in Boise. You told her you'd been in Boise three or four times and liked the place very much. That seemed to please her, and when you walked out the front door, she took your hand.

It was cool and breezy in the parking lot, and as you stood next to your car, she shivered and leaned against you. That was when your bliss returned.

"Go away, winter," she groaned, burying her forehead into your shoulder. It was a sweet, almost endearing gesture.

"I agree," you murmured. "February can be a bitch."

"Can't wait for summer."

You turned, folded both arms around her, and said, "So, if you don't like to be cold, why not let big-dick Daddy warm you up?"

"Yeah, warm me up, big-dick Daddy," she laughed, holding you around your waist and kissing you gently on the mouth. Warming to your cruel task, you reached down with one hand and right in the parking lot, you lifted her skirt and discovered that she was wearing nothing underneath.

"This is wonderful," you murmured, caressing her.

"It sure is," she purred.

You slid a hand between her cheeks, and she gave a slight gasp.

When you told her that you wanted to take her to a special place out in the desert, she agreed and again kissed you on the mouth. Releasing her hold and pushing her gently away, you turned and unlocked your car doors.

"Just wanna be with my Apostle," she said, sliding next to you in the front seat and putting a hand on your leg.

After backing out of the parking space and pointing your car to the exit, you noticed two men and one woman standing near the Cadillac. There was something strangely familiar about the woman, a raven-haired beauty who glared at you with cruel dark eyes.

On the drive toward Hoover Dam, she told about a trip she had taken with her parents, many years ago, through Arizona, New Mexico, and Utah. She'd loved the Indian ruins, she said. Once you were beyond Hoover Dam, she leaned over, unzipped your fly, and pulled you out of your pants.

"Easy there," you said. "I gotta drive."

"I'll be careful," she cooed.

After an hour of freeway, just on the edge of twilight, you said, "We're almost there." She'd zipped you back up just you congratulated yourself on your perfect timing. Gazing down the highway, you saw the sign indicating that the exit was three-quarters of a mile away.

After taking the exit, you drove the thin ribbon of road north, toward the mountains. "Up ahead," you told her, "just a mile or so, there's a place where you overlook this hidden valley and see a spectacular sunset."

"I love sunsets," she answered.

"That's what they all say," you quipped.

The road ended in a small parking lot slanted slightly so visitors could see into the river canyon below. As you stopped and shut off the engine, a windblast rocked the car.

"I love the wind," Lori said.

"I do, too," you replied.

"Wanna get out? I bet it's real pretty standing right over the canyon."

"Yeah, it is, especially with the sun playing off the rocks." *This is going to be perfect*, you told yourself.

You got out first, walked around to her side, and opened up her door. When she climbed out of the car, she took your extended hand, and like two newlyweds you walked the twenty or thirty feet to the cliff's edge. Glancing into the western sky, you figured the sun had fifteen, twenty minutes left.

"Ooooh, this place is absolutely heavenly, Carl," she said, letting the wind take her dress and pointing across the narrow valley to a big outcropping where the sun's rays brought out pinks, purples, and reds.

"Yeah, this place is fucking remarkable," you said in the subterranean voice that you always used just before a kill.

She laughed and, as the breeze buffeted you, she squeezed your hand and tried to imitate your low voice. "Carl, the man of God. Did he say 'fucking'?"

You glanced back and chuckled, almost guttural, "Fucking right he did. But he meant something else. Sorry."

For a few moments, you held her hand and gazed across the valley. It was almost romantic until she said, "Carl, your hands are getting cold and sweaty. You all right?"

Always, your hands got cold and sweaty at this point, for the thought of blood brought the temporary freezing that would culminate in fiery, crimson ecstasy. "I'm fine," you said, taking your hand away. "Just thrilled to be with you."

As she folded her arms and continued looking across the canyon, you excused yourself. "I need to get something from the car," you said.

"Hurry back."

"Oh, I shall," you assured her, backing away. "Gonna get my camera. Maybe you could slip off your clothes."

She turned to look at you. "Say, now that's an idea," she agreed. "I'll give you a shot of my boobs. How's that?"

"Might be too cold," you said, continuing to back up.

"Naw." She shook her head and pulled her sweater over her head.

Retreating, you reached the car and opened the trunk. Briefly, you took your eyes off her.

The first thing you saw was the thin leather case carrying the two recently sanitized knives; each had occult engravings on the blade. Next to the case was the rope. With your left hand, you reached in and gripped a coil, thinking, I'll be the last person she sees. Your heart beat wildly as the desert wind kicked up some dust nearby. In your mind's eye you saw Lori's soul leaping from her body just as the sun dipped beneath the horizon.

You were almost upon her when she turned and glanced down at the rope. Her look registered puzzlement and terror.

"God bless," you said, so excited that your hands trembled. "God bless, God bless, God bless."

"What the fuck's that?" she gasped. "That's not a camera. Jesus. That's sure as hell not something you take pictures with."

"Nope, it's rope," you smirked, sticking out your tongue and wiggling it at her.

Her eyes already bulging from their sockets, she didn't move, and it made you almost sad when you saw the tear run down her cheek. Arms dangling at her sides, she did not resist as you put the noose around her neck and slowly tightened it.

"On your knees, child of the Most High," you said. "Lucifer is waiting."

There was a pause as the wind blew mightily.

Then, as she dropped to her knees in the sand, she did something extraordinary, even absurd. Extending her arms upwards, throwing her head back, she began a lament, whispering at first, then almost shouting, and finally singing. The singing chilled you to your shriveling bone.

Long red hair blown by the wind, she sang, begging forgiveness, but not from you. "Turn me white as snow, O God of my soul," she sang. *Where the hell does this come from?* you wanted to ask. *You are beyond His reach, you internet whore,* you wanted to say and tried to laugh, finding that you couldn't because you knew no one, really, was beyond redemption. You'd known that for a long time.

And so as you listened, her song exploded into the evening air, the canyon echoing and the words enfolding you. You hadn't the strength to pull the rope tighter.

Your legs trembled and your heart quaked, and suddenly, as if pushed, you dropped to your knees just as she faced the sun. You were no more than a few feet from her, and her voice bounced off the mountain walls and filled the spaces around you.

Have mercy upon me, O God,  
according to thy loving kindness:  
according unto the multitude of thy tender mercies  
blot out my transgressions.  
Wash me thoroughly from mine iniquity,  
and cleanse me from my sin.  
For I acknowledge my transgressions:  
and my sin is ever before me.  
Against thee, the only,  
have I sinned and done this evil in thy sight....

It was the beginning of the end for you.

Like one obsessed, she sang this prayer over and over as the hand of fear clutched your frantically beating heart. You knew, somehow, that if she meant the words of her song, God would honor her. As she continued praying, your fear moved to revulsion and loathing, and you understood, as if a light had been cast upon your soul, that it was your hatred of God that had kept Him from you and made you hideous.

Then, as if two hands gripped your head, you turned and looked into the sunset. It was the sun as you'd never seen it before, five times its normal size, setting the horizon ablaze. In the web of Lori's prayer, fire seemed to explode from the ball and bleed purple, red, and pink across the evening sky. Knowing you would lose your sight, you looked into the burning star and saw something. What was it you saw? It was, you're sure, the shimmering silhouette of someone walking through blinding light.

You struggled to stand but had no strength to do so. As if nailed to the spot, you felt the sun burning into you. *Who is it that is there?* you silently asked. You recalled having read somewhere about similar encounters with something divine but had thought nothing of it; sheer logic ruled against a world that couldn't be explained in terms of scientific causality. Yet, in the blaze stood a figure robed in white, head crowned with thorns, hands bloodily pierced, arms extended toward you.

The thought that Lori was to be the seventeenth victim pierced your heart, and the faces of the others whirled in your mind's eye. Behind the faces faded, you saw your soul's black mass and were suddenly afraid of being snuffed out for all eternity. You pushed to the back of your mind the thought that you could be going completely insane and, desperate, reached toward the figure, David's words forming unbidden in your mind: *Purge me, O God for I was shaped in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me.*

You closed seared eyes, felt a gentle hand on your forehead, and heard the cries of a woman, praying that you be forgiven. In the steady breeze you said, aloud, "May God, forgive me. Cleanse me, oh Lord, of my iniquity and unrighteous." The response was immediate, and you felt as if someone had removed a ton of bricks from your back. Liberated, you opened your eyes and saw Lori standing before you. She was wearing her sweater and holding the rope.

Your eyes locked with hers, and as you stared you knew that Lori was forgiven.

But then something else. As a breeze blew against you, there came the whoosh of a car moving your way over the thin road. It did not strike you as miraculous that you still had your sight, and looking to the parking lot, you saw the black Cadillac from the parking lot behind Lamb's. When the car stopped, doors opened and three people--two men and a young woman--got out and slowly walked your way.

When you heard Lori breathe "Naomi," you knew it was your time. Closing your eyes, you dropped your head to your chest. You were not afraid and kept your eyes shut as footsteps drew near. You waited with bated breath, sensed someone standing over you, and felt the rope put round your neck and tightened. Then you felt a revolver's cold steel pressed against your forehead.

You awaited death.

"Please, please spare this man," said a soft, sweet voice you recognized as Lori's. *She has become a new creation*, you thought, remembering one of Uncle Ray's favorite phrases.

You felt like choking and waited for the crack of the pistol.

"Please, please, please," she pleaded.

There was the pause; everything hung in the balance.

"Give me the gun, Luke," came another voice, this one also female. You felt the gun's barrel taken from your forehead, the rope tightened just a bit. You opened your eyes.

Standing over you was a broad-shouldered man of medium height, his head silhouetted against the darkening sky. He stepped back, handed the weapon to a tall, thin woman with jet-black hair and blood-red lipstick. As Lori looked on, the woman smiled, studying you cruelly, and pointed the gun at your forehead, dead center.

Dizzy, your own eyes bulging, you whispered, "Do it."

"Oh, I plan to," she said, smiling. "Anyone fucks with my little sister, I'll blow their brains to kingdom come."

You were not afraid. You deserved this.

"Say your prayers, Jack," the woman said. You waited for Lori to say something.

And finally she did. "I prayed for his soul, Naomi," Lori said, "that it be released from Satan's hold. I even asked Jesus to bind evil from him from this moment forth."

"Sounds like you covered everything, little sister," the tall woman said, still aiming the gun at an invisible point on your forehead.

The light of day had almost completely faded, and a half-moon hung just over Naomi's left shoulder.

"Do it," you muttered, knowing even then that the darkness that had gnawed your innards was gone and in its place was a small glowing light. You silently vowed that, if you were spared, you would to submit the rest of your life to the Savior.

III. And now, here you are, four years later, in a bed five miles from the center of rainy Seattle, Washington. Today you will lead more stray lambs back into the fold and then, around seven in the evening, head over to the old warehouse that was converted into a church. It will be a revival service, and at some point you'll walk to the front. Now an evangelist, Lori will recognize you. Her ministry started four years ago, and while her sister and thuggish boyfriends stayed in Vegas, Lori has moved around the country, leading services of prayer, worship, and healing. A year after your own deliverance, you began reading about her in magazines.

Rain continues to drum on the roof.

Lying in bed, arms folded behind your head, you think of Kitty, certainly puzzled and possibly devastated by your disappearance, but what could you do? Again, you replay your near execution in the Arizona desert. After you saw Jesus in the sun, after the sparing of your own life, you drove all night and into the next day, stopping finally at a small town on the other side of Denver. There, you gave your car to an old farmer and his wife and, with several hundred dollars in your pocket, took the bus to the East Coast where you began your own small ministry.

Every day, since then, you have remembered your depravity; every week, you have asked forgiveness, lived hand-to-mouth, and wandered from city to city. Almost daily, you have told someone your incredible story. Today, of course, your story stops, because this evening you will give up your freedom and accept total bondage to Christ.

And so here you are, in a cozy two-story house just outside Seattle, city of rain. *The Lord's work must be done*, you tell yourself; *the spiritual battle must be waged even to the point of my own execution*. You rise, shower, dress, and go down to the kitchen downstairs. There you eat a large breakfast with the Lutheran pastor and his wife, thanking them once again for taking you in two nights before.

After finishing a second helping of French toast, after your fourth cup of straight black coffee, you rise from the table and thank the couple.

"Thanks for taking me in," you say, putting on your gray parka and picking up the Bible you had set on the kitchen counter.

"It's a pleasure, Carl," Pastor Dave says, escorting you to the door.

"We'll eat dinner when you get back." A short, stocky bespectacled man, the pastor's name is David. You haven't the heart to tell him you won't be back.

Standing at the door, shouting "Goodbye, Ann!" you almost weep for the kindness of this aging couple, their children grown and gone.

Outside, in steady rain, you open your umbrella and walk two blocks to the bus stop. The heavy smell of pine fills the air. With two other people, one a young redheaded woman with a bright smile and the other a stooped old man given to hacking and cursing, you climb aboard the dull green bus.

You like sitting in the bus, and moving through suburbs, you glance occasionally at your reflection in the window. Your dark glasses have been replaced by thin wire-rimmed spectacles; there's a touch of gray in your hair, and your cheeks are slightly sunken.

Once you're in the city, you will listen to for small silent voice of God. If you are told to go inside a 7-11 and witness to the lady wearing the red scarf and blue coat, you will do it. If God tells you to drop off tracts at a Laundromat, you'll do just that.

As the bus approaches your down-town stop, not far from the water, you think of Abraham and Isaac and know that if God asks you to throw yourself in front of an oncoming truck, you will do just that. Of course, He will not make that request. He will instead and most surely carry you forth by His grace, this day and every day for the rest of your life.

And now, stepping off the bus into steady, dreary rain, you're certain that Lori will recognize you. With a joyful heart, you begin your last day of captivity.