

A Good Boy

by Steven Gowin

The Old Man wins. The sanctimonious can't touch him.

I'd only brought him back to the Evangelical United Brethren because the church calmed him a little, settled the fidgeting and fear and dementia.

Used to be he couldn't tolerate the EUBs. I couldn't either, but Mother had made me go, and a string of attendance medals had knighted me a Sunday School warrior for Jesus Christ of Nazareth Our Load and Savior, by god. I'd hated it like the devil.

Up with them EUBs, you had the squalling choir, the rusty sopranos, the pinched women with thin brittle hair squeezed up in buns, dry. And they had their beat down farmers dragged along to witness with them. All in thick Estée Lauder haze, and baby shit, and old women stench, none of that odor right.

Immaculate conception, a father's giving up his boy, the sole begotten mind you, the Holy Ghost, Dolores Carter, the Reverend's wife going all weepy over Jesus Christ up in that Sunday School, up in them hot stuffy classrooms above the sanctuary, all of that was past me.

They needn't tell me, I already knew. I'd chosen the desert and wasteland and all them unholy places, wondering and wandering, lost from all the suffering and joy. But at least the old man travelled perdition with me; he had no use for them EUBs either. He wished he could get his mind around it. Gussed it would all be funny as Hell if he could. But he couldn't back then.

Said he couldn't support the sick sweet flowers, or stomach Little Dean Palmer in the front row come straight from whatever sad town wife he was doing out at the HiHo on Route 90. Said the chuchies had justified all manner of devilry and ill through the ages, and they'd probably get comeuppance some day although comeuppance probably wasn't his place.

When he'd been whole and still a man, last time he'd crossed the holy threshold was for marrying the old lady. I reckon she'd hoped a

hard dose of Calvin would immunize us from the evil visited on her before my Dad, that pregnancy and child she'd given up, illegitimate, bastard, a half sister I didn't know. But she didn't need religious grace. For the old man, it was bygones. We were already saved.

In the end, I got out from under her Puritan thumb and threw out my Jesus ribbons and only set foot at the EUBs when she kicked. And I never thought a thing about them holy rollers until one day after he'd lost his mind with age, and I was taking him somewhere, and we drove past their hideout, and he perked right up in his seat, mumbling and giggling.

Well, he'd wanted to try them, I guess. Now, I can't get him to give up his slippers or ball cap, but I dress him in clean slacks and his white shirt. "You dolling up, you wear a white shirt," he always said. I wedge him into the Bel Air and run him in on roads he'd driven ten thousand times, him asking "where're we now?" and "we there yet?"

In fact, we are there most Sundays now, and with church under way and father and son in the pews, he doesn't care if the congregation's on its feet or not, singing or praying, he stands and sits when he damned well pleases chattering and repeating words from the sermon.

He likes the apostles and enunciates their names over and over; Simon Peter, James, and Paul, and Paul, and Paul, and Paul. But mostly, he babbles in whispers, tiny echoes from his head.

The EUBs shush him and stare and have already mentioned his "behaviors," but they can't kick us out. Hell, they're Christians. When it's over and we're driving back to his nursing home, he laughs and tells me I'm a good boy.

And I know that somewhere deep, he knows what he's done. And at those moments, even if only at that thin place in his being, I see him whole again.

