

Perdition

by Javed Hayat

Colton stands among the leaves in the quiet motion of their own, and looks deep into the bleak woods, in silent understanding of the invitation at hand; his only means for escape. With three days of running in the wild, somewhere by the river he has left behind hordes of huntsmen hard at work. God's hunters and lawmen with their badges shining from a distance, ravenous for all the stray souls of this world.

They have managed to overcome three uniformed enemies confronted in the course of the last three days, and the murder of three local police officials leading to a raised bounty on their heads and an intensified search. They are wanted: dead or alive.

Now, going back, all Colton can recall is a blind state of panic and the dance of the trigger back and forth.

"Rain is comin'," says the Old Man next to him, the fear in his voice pressing down on Colton, to convince him to take the way to the woods. "And it will be hard, it always is in the wild, and we will be nothin' but a couple of wasted rags with all that downpour."
"We go down them woods." Colt mutters. "We might survive."
Pauses. "Or we might not".

"It ain't the same if we stay. Ain't the same back where we runnin' from". Old Man replies. "Stayin' will do us no good, if you ask me".

"But once we are in that primate zone, there ain't no comin' back. If you get the hang of what I am sayin' here. No God whispering through those trees, no fallin' to your knees, souls ravin' and cryin' out loud to Heaven." He pauses. Then, adds, "You up for that?"

"You askin' too many questions then I can see to, Colton. I am done

bein' a preacher. I am done killin,' and am sure as hell done savin' souls."

The Old Man was a preacher of some sort in the days before the chain, and the sentence that came with it; the heavy laden metal on your conscience for that one moment of criminal intent punishable by life or noose.

Colton nods, without words, understanding the significance of every word that the Old Man has uttered, knowing that in the end, given enough time, we all go down that lonely corner, to embrace the darkness, wishing to be cured of our sentiments.

He looks deep into the fading eyes of his victims and wonders. Admitting little guilt to himself, or trying hard not to.

"So what happens now?" He asked the Old Man.

"When?"

"After you're dead." Colton said. "Now that these proud men have bitten the bullet." Not knowing where the question within him comes from. Not caring to. Colton just felt that he needs to talk, if only to keep his hold on sanity.

"Don't nothin' happen." Old Man said, giving him a deep thoughtful stare. "You're just dead I reckon."

"You ain't a believer no more, are you old man?" Colton asked, feeling the strength within his voice slowly leaving him.

"Maybe." The Old Man shrugged. "Maybe I am, or maybe I ain't. I

just can't put any part of myself together. Not anymore. And I just don't believe I have an answer." Pauses. "Sorry to disappoint you, but that is the plain truth. I got no answer for nobody".

"Any regrets?"

"Say again."

"You got any regrets in your life." Colton said. "You regret savin' them souls." Pauses, his voice now a whisper. "Regret takin' any of these men here."

"None I can remember". Old Man replied. "And I saved nothin' worth takin', or ever took nothin' worth savin'. Folks are either droppin' down in graves or cradles these days. The times we live in, and I ain't makin' it any worse then it already is".

"Is that so?"

"I'd like to believe that, yes." Old Man said. "Just puttin' in my two cents, that is all".

"Do you now regret not killin' that little nigga' as I told you". Colt squinted at him. "You old fool, what were you thinkin' back there? Fuckin' redemption!"

They ought to have killed that boy. Colton thought and felt miserable. Would have saved lives in the long run. And bullets too.

Back there, they left a shadow behind. The Old Man had made a mistake, letting that black kid go living the way he did. Though Colton wondered if he himself would have done any better than the old fool. Pulling a trigger didn't come naturally to them, and least of all when it comes down to blowing the brains of a twelve year old born special. A deaf and mute.

One act of righteousness. Colton thinks bitterly to himself. Is all it takes. And their world was no longer defined by mere black and white.

All around them, God's hunters and lawmen lay sprawled with their dust smacked boots against the horizon, the drowning sun, and the dying light of life's fire prematurely fading in their eyes. Bodies slowly growing motionless and their minds perhaps drawing the last mental images of how different their lives could have been. Useless analogues of dying men's hope.

In despair Colton and the Old Man had reached out for the only object of faith at their disposal, their .32 Winchesters. Turning ruthless against the shadowy lawmen chasing them down, shooting and killing men, men just like them and yet so different.

Neither of them ever had to kill before. Never was death so close, so personal in their lives. Till now, they were just couple of angry inmates wanting to escape the yard, and hopefully never look back.

The Old Man spoke, as if reading Colton's mind. "I was afraid I was goin' to die." The smoke whirling off the gun hung in his hand, facing down. "I reckon I was... just ain't easy to be so sure". Paused. "I guess I was just afraid."

Colton nods gravely, his finger pressed firmly still against the trigger. Realizing that if you keep the finger pressed for long, it doesn't feel so cold anymore.

"Them braggin' fools who follow the law". Colton whispers, shaking

his head slowly, as they walk away from the scene. "To stink in servitude and smell coffer and wormwood on their death. There ain't no sense in that, if you ask me".

The Old Man looks at him, in quiet before replying. "There ain't no answers. Colton, like I said. We all expect to be told some mystery. And there ain't none to speak of."

"I don't care, old man." Colton replied. "Men like me can't afford mystery. I ain't justifying nothin' because there ain't nothin' to justify." Pauses. "Them folks back there had it comin'."

The Old Man remains quiet.

Colton continues. "And I ain't goin' down that easy. Nay, not me. Ain't nobody to decide what happens to a man except the man himself. Let them call it the Law all they want, its tyranny pure and simple. I ain't lettin' myself be chained up for the next ten years of my life because some expensive lookin' God in a high chair says so. I say let no man be the judge of another. How can they judge a man like me, from so high up there? There is a context missin'. How can they accuse me of any wrong doin,' wearin those shiny glasses and a fancy cloak, and then call it justice? Show me the justice in that, and then you dare take me down that hole."

"I killed them folks to stay alive, Colton". Old Man replies. "Don't be fooled by the white hairs on an old head. I ain't ready for anythin' else except to go on livin' yet. And you are too much of a fool tryin' to justify killin' and all. It needs none of your reasonin'. It never did".

The Old Man and Colton have quietly walked into the woods sometime back, having finally divested themselves of that little thing called hope; the loneliest thing that a man can do, to no longer believe in the supernatural for help.

Deep in the woods they sense a mystery, a humming of the universe. Its inner darkness impeachable for thousand of years with blind trees masquerading the great god sun. Preserving life older than Colton, than the Old Man in constant fear of death, or the crazy huntsmen with shiny badges and dead eyes.

With each step they gave up the world they had learned to live in and understand, and entered the plain--not constrained by any human conception, with slowly dawning knowledge deep in their hearts that something within the woods knows of their existence. Something that can neither be escaped nor destroyed.

- Written more than a couple of years ago and originally published at Michael Brown's blogosphere.

