

# **A Killing Before Sunset**

Eli Cole had lost his religion long before he came to Sunset and yet people liked to say it was the town turned him godless. In their minds he'd wore his cassock coming up Oalapa Road all those years ago when in fact it had lain folded in a suitcase – neatly, granted, befitting a good man of the lord. He'd folded it once more after that and looked at it for some time and then he'd stashed it on the upper shelf of his cupboard and never looked at it again.

There'd been a chapel at one time in the town of Sunset and it stood beside the jailhouse so even thieves and killers, should the wind blow from the east, might hear the holy word. When it burned, the ashes smoldered for six days and on the seventh day the people of Sunset came together and said, 'It's God made us godless' and they never built another church again.

And so in some way it was no surprise that the cruelest man west of the Ouachitas had decided to make the town his home, even if it was an unwelcome one. Eli Cole was sat on his porch the day Cassius Bronze rode into Sunset. The man looked old and grey and so did his appaloosa and he wore a dusty gambler hat and tipped it at him, his eyes veiled in its shadow. Eli watched him ride the length of Main Street and so did many folk as they felt a cold creeping through their town and rushed to their porches and their balconies. There was wind and there were hoofbeats

and the whirring of dry cottonwoods and a store bell chimed softly and all else was quiet 'cause even the land held its breath.

Sheriff Andersson paced along the oakwood bar of the Accidental and Eli told him to sit down like the rest of them.

'I suppose I oughta shoot him,' he said. 'Save a lot of trouble.'

The townspeople whispered amongst themselves and butcher Dremond Clay stood up and said, 'You ain't shot nothin' in three decades,' and the townspeople agreed by ways of nods and sounds. They sat in rows of eight and there were forty of them.

They'd learned Cassius Bronze had purchased Vandyke's old homestead. Only a year ago they'd found the old man in a progressed stage of decay and they'd figured that rickety shack of his would never see another owner again. It stood half a mile out in the country amidst a thicket of mesquites and brambles. Eli had passed it a hundred times and never paid it mind and he'd not once spoken to old Vandyke but then again none of them had. He was the kind of man you left alone, lest you find yourself on the wrong end of a scattergun.

Lily Margaret sat beside Eli and shifted in her seat and then she stood up and said, 'It's just an old man. What harm's he gonna do?' She was young, at least she was to Eli and she took good care of her appearance.

Sheriff Andersson laughed nervously and said, 'Woman, there's little harm he ain't done' and the rest of them agreed.

‘Man like that don’t go anywhere without bringing trouble with him,’ said Dremond Clay. ‘Man like that needs dealin’ with.’

Some of the men looked at one another and no one spoke and then young Levy Jake stood up and said, ‘I’ll do it’ and his father pushed him down and smacked him on the head. Eli stifled a laugh – he’d always thought the boy was dull. Sheriff Andersson shook his head. ‘Shootin’ is my business,’ he said and a couple of them snickered.

‘Then make it your business,’ said James Barnes who owned the general store and the sheriff sighed. ‘I suppose I can’t kill a man for breathin’.’

‘Lucky for you he done a lot more than breathin’,’ said James and the townsfolk agreed.

Eli sat in the back row and he rolled a smoke and listened with a half interest. Folks stood up and spoke their mind and some of them cried and some of them raged and most of them sat in quiet same as him, waiting for a braver man to make this trouble his own.

Eli didn’t know much of Cassius Bronze. He knew the man was a thief and a killer but then he’d never stolen from him or put a bullet in his chest and how bad could a man be tipped his hat at a stranger. When a quiet fell over the room Eli spoke up and said, ‘Even killers kill with reason and ain’t nothin’ in this town worth killin’ for.’

Some of them agreed but most of them didn’t and Gutsy Gregory who lived at the edge of town and could see a man coming from two miles across the bajada stood up and told them he’d be waiting with his rifle and if he saw the man so much as look at a holster he’d shoot him clean through the eye.

Two shots were heard in Sunset that week. The first came from Gregory's home and so they figured the man had made true of his promise. When Sheriff Andersson came around to inquire it turned out he'd shot a rabbit and in his testimony he declared he was sorry for it but also that the animal had looked awfully tasty and by god he'd shoot it again.

The second shot came from Vandyke's old homestead or the Bronze place as folks began to call it. Eli was in talks with James Barnes when it happened, debating the price of canned beans and then the windows trembled and the storekeeper dropped the jar of pickles he was holding and it broke into a hundred pieces on the hardwood floor.

'God damn it,' he said. 'What's that man shootin' at?' Eli threw him a nickel and said, 'If it was that jar of pickles, he's a damn good shot.'

They sat in rows of eight and there were thirty-nine of them. It was Jinny Bitters who was missing. She was an old woman and Eli had spoken to her once but she was bad of hearing and so he'd yelled more than he'd talked and Eli didn't like to yell and so he hadn't yelled at her since.

'Why on earth would someone shoot that old hag?' said Sheriff Andersson and he paced along the bar once more and wiped the sweat off his forehead with a black handkerchief.

'Will you go up there and shoot the man already?' said Dremond Clay. 'What kind of sheriff don't a shoot a man for killing an old woman?'

‘The kind aims to die of old age,’ said Andersson. He walked up to the window and stood before it and adjusted his hat. ‘I heard he killed more badges than buck.’

‘So take off your star.’

‘He seen me wear it.’

Then young Levy Jake stood up once more and said, ‘I heard he’s a Christian,’ and there was a loud creaking as thirty-eight bodies turned in their chairs.

‘Where’d you hear that?’ asked Andersson.

‘I don’t know. I heard it. Heard he says a prayer before he kills. And after it too.’

‘Where’d you hear that?’ said his father.

‘Man like that don’t believe in nothin’ but death,’ said Dremond Clay.

‘Heard he never killed a man of the lord,’ said Levy Jake and his father pushed him down and said, ‘Boy you done heard enough.’

Then Jinny Bitters came through the door and sat down and everyone looked at her and she yelled, ‘Hell, it’s like I’m twenty-five again.’

Sheriff Andersson came to Eli’s home the next evening carrying his hat in his hands and Eli knew he’d come asking for a favor. He sat him down at the dinner table and offered him some coffee but Andersson said, ‘No sir, I’d never sleep again.’ The sheriff shifted nervously for a minute and inquired about Eli’s woodworking and didn’t listen to his answers. Then he said, ‘Eli, I didn’t come here for small talk.’

‘You want me to go up to the Bronze place.’

The sheriff looked surprised for some time but then he put his hands together and straightened his back. 'It's just you're a decent man and you're a straight talker and if that boy is right he won't shoot you on the spot on account of you bein' a man of the lord.'

'Sheriff, it's been a long time since I said a prayer.'

The sheriff nodded slowly. 'You still got that cassock?'

'Yes I do.'

'You think he'd know the difference?'

'I think he'll wonder what the hell a priest is doing in a churchless town.'

'Well,' said the sheriff and he thought a while. 'Would you talk to him anyway? Welcome him to the town of sorts, ask about his business here? You can tell him we want no trouble.'

'I'll lend you the damn robe, you can tell him yourself.'

'I never said no prayer in my life.'

'I'll teach you one,' Eli smiled and he lit a cigarette and offered the sheriff one but he refused and looked out the window to the north.

'Do you believe in evil, Eli?' he asked after a while.

'Yes I do.'

'Do you believe it's our job to stop it?'

'I believe it's yours, sheriff.'

'I mean us as a people,' said Andersson and he looked at him and then at the ceiling and he cursed and said, 'Hell, you're right. I know you're right.' He stood up and walked to the window and removed his star and looked at it. 'I'm not right for it, Eli. I guess it's finally caught up with me.'

'Least you can put it down to bad luck, friend,' said Eli.

‘I don’t much believe in luck.’

‘Then you’d better start.’

The sheriff forced a smile and put his star in his pocket. ‘I’m gone tomorrow. Trudy’s already packin’ up.’

‘Good luck to ya,’ said Eli and he blew a cloud of smoke and sheriff Andersson stood there for some time and then he put on his hat and walked out the door.

Another shot sounded from the Bronze place the next day and again upon careful inspection they counted thirty-nine of them cause the sheriff had kept his word and rode off before the rooster’s call. The people of Sunset spoke not of his departure – they treated it much like a changing of seasons in the way it was always goin’ to happen and to mourn it would be to mourn the sun’s descent.

Andersson’s deputy was a scrawny boy by the name of Thomas Joe and if Andersson was an oaf then by god Thomas Joe was a spud. He’d once shot a chicken through the head and if not for the fact it was its thief he’d aimed at it would’ve been an impressive feat of gunmanship. He was only twenty-two years of age and had the authority of a kitten on the savanna and yet he called the town together and told ‘em ‘I’ll go up there and show that fella who’s the damn king of Sunset.’

The next morning he rode north on his brown-coated morgan and by afternoon the horse rode back alone, Thomas Joe dragging ten feet behind.

They sang two songs and lowered his casket into the dirt and then they sang another song and that was that. Eli stood in the back of the crowd and thought about death

and how pointless it was for a young man to die and the rest of the day he smoked and drank and at the end of it he emptied his stomach against the northwestern leg of his dinner table.

The next morning there sounded a yelp from Gutsy Gregory's place and soon the people of Sunset once more stood on their porches and balconies and watched a shadow ride in from the north beneath a cover of clay pall and they watched until they were sure it was Cassius Bronze came riding into town.

No one dared reach for a gun cause Bronze himself held in his left hand a rifle, its barrel aimed at the cloud cover. Eli stood smoking outside the general store and watched the man ride by within a couple yards and then down main street and towards the cemetery. His beard was long and wild and his eyes tired and mournful. He stood by Thomas Joe's grave for some time and took off his hat and made a prayer and then he saddled up and rode back north.

Eli sat alone at the bar of the Accidental at three in the afternoon when Lily Margaret came up to him and took a stool.

'What are you drinking?' she asked and Eli told her 'Nothin', I just enjoy the smells.'

'I haven't drank in fifteen years,' she said. 'But I'm inclined to.' Eli nodded and looked at her and said, 'Speak your mind.'

'How come there's no men anymore?'

'Come again?'



‘Real men, I mean. Ones we got here are either scared or dying.’

‘Sounds like men to me.’

Lily Margaret looked at him a while and sighed and said, ‘I know Andersson came to you.’

‘How you know that?’

‘Cause I told him to.’

Eli smiled and shook his head.

‘You’re a decent man, Eli Cole. As much as you try to hide it. And decent men know right from wrong and decent men do what decent men are supposed to do.’

‘I ain’t afraid of the man.’

Lily Margaret sighed and said, ‘I’m sure there’s some kindness in his heart’ and Eli smiled and said, ‘I’m not sure I’ll find it.’

‘Just talk to the man,’ she told him and then she looked at the barkeep who stood silently by with his rag in a glass and told him, ‘Give that man a drink’ and threw a dime on the counter. Then she rose up and walked off and in the doorway she stopped and looked to wanna say something but then she didn’t and left Eli Cole to drink alone.

That night Eli didn’t sleep and he lit a candle threw his room in orange glow and then he thought about Winona. He imagined his fingers running through her soft obsidian hair and it smelled like pine and sagebrush and he imagined them whispering sweet nothings to each other ‘til they both fell asleep and yet it was him and only him in that dark room that kindled like bushfire. He lay until the wick fell over and then he took to his closet and in the absence of light where even God couldn’t bear witness to his acts

he took his cassock from the top shelf and lay it out flat on the bed covers.

It was some sight seeing a priest ride through the town of Sunset even if it was one with ungodly motives and so the townspeople stood by in quiet awe as Eli rode north along Oalapa Road. They watched his departure long after he left the town's confines, until the cloud of dust swept up in his wake settled in the dry soil.

Eli had forgotten just how much heat crept between the folds of holy robes and his sweat was like glue the way it merged skin and fabric. The sun stood tall above the bajada and a faint wind tugged gently at the scattered brittle-bush. On the horizon stood the Bronze place and even from a distance it looked like little more than a blocky hovel stood beneath two old mesquites and save its persistence it was deserving of no praise. Retired hardware lay scattered around the plottage like animal carcasses and the home's siding curled and warped and gleamed grey on account of its weather.

Eli rode slow and careful and neared the place within two hundred yards when a man walked out the door and stood in the road carrying a rifle over his left shoulder. Cassius Bronze remained still like a scarecrow save the occasional tug of his cigarette but when Eli got close he flicked it on the ground and took his rifle and aimed it at his skull.

'You lookin' to join that deputy?' he said and Eli Cole said, 'Easy' and the horse halted and whinnied nervously. He dismounted and patted his steed on her neck and then once on her rear and she pranced and bolted off towards Sunset.

‘Are you goin’ to shoot me?’ said Eli once they stood twenty feet apart like it was a duel except only one of their guns was plain in sight.

‘Thinkin’ about it.’

Cassius Bronze lowered his rifle and stuck it in the dirt and rested his elbow on its butt stock.

‘I seen you,’ he said.

‘You might.’

‘You weren’t in a coat then.’

‘Not wearin’ it much these days.’

‘So what do you do?’

‘I listen.’

‘What do you hear?’

‘Gunshots, lately.’

Cassius Bronze nodded and looked at the sky and squinted into the afternoon sun. ‘That boy didn’t need to die.’

‘You killed him real good.’

‘Lot of killers come my way. Better they don’t come by twice.’

‘Why’d you pray for him?’

Cassius Bronze smiled and slung his rifle over his shoulder and said, ‘How do you like your coffee?’

They sat in rocking chairs facing the outer ridges of the Ouachitas and looked out over flat and dry country where none was ever meant to thrive and yet man had built their towns and their roads in the dust like it was them ruled nature. Bronze swayed in his chair like a pendulum and looked at something beyond it all and took slow sips of his brew – the stuff was black to a fault.

'You ever go beyond them?' asked Bronze nodding at the mountains in the east.

'Never had business to.'

'No one got business bein' anywhere. That's what makes us Americans.'

'Here I am thinkin' it's our advanced sense of morality.'

Bronze stopped his rocking for a second and looked at him and asked, 'Are you a cynic, father?' and Eli smiled and said, 'No sir, I'm an American.'

Bronze nodded a while the way old men did like they were trapped in a thought that only death or a loud noise might awake them from and yet after some time he stopped and rubbed his beard instead.

'I suppose you ain't come here to give me a blessing.'

'No sir.'

'And you ain't come here to kill me.'

Eli didn't answer and Bronze looked his way and said, 'Oh' and Eli said, 'Settle down, I'd damn myself to hell.'

'But you're carryin'?'

'Nothing in the old book says I can't.'

Bronze nodded and looked at the mountains again.

'I can't remember the last time I spoke to an unarmed man. Truth be told, it puts me at ease knowing I wouldn't be killing no naked man, should this conversation turn.'

'Reason I'm here is we're worried about you. Not your health, mind you, just you bein' here and all.'

'I don't kill innocent folk.'

'Who you been shootin'?'

'Like I said, lot of killers come my way. You'd think an old man like me, they'd just wait 'til I drop in the dirt.'

‘What fun is there in that?’

‘Sure,’ Bronze smiled. ‘I suppose there’s no justice in a natural death.’

‘You make a lot of enemies, don’t you mister Bronze?’

‘Call me Cassius.’

‘I’ll call you mister Bronze.’

Bronze smiled.

‘Why did you come here?’ asked Eli and he looked Cassius Bronze in the eyes and they weren’t cold or evil but tired and wise.

‘Do you know when a cat knows it’s goin to die, it hides away in some dark corner so it can die alone?’

‘Are you dying, mister Bronze?’

‘I been dyin’ for seventy-four years, father.’

‘Some disease.’

‘If you call killin’ an illness. Hell, it probably is.’

‘So you’re hiding, is that it?’

‘I guess. I’m no good at it.’

‘Seems that way.’

Bronze laughed and said, ‘Hell, even in a churchless town God fixes to find me.’

‘There’s no hiding from him.’

‘Yeah,’ Bronze nodded. They sat in quiet for a while and Eli wondered if he was ready to die that day and when he got close to an answer Cassius Bronze opened his mouth again. ‘Do you think we all pray to the same God, father?’ he asked and he turned his head towards him and looked him in the eye.

‘In some way or another, I guess.’

Bronze turned back and leaned in his chair and sighed. ‘Myself, I pray to somethin’ more wicked.’

‘What’s more wicked than God?’

‘There’s few of us that ain’t.’

‘What about you?’

‘Hell, they say I’m the devil.’

‘Who does the devil pray to?’ asked Eli and Cassius Bronze smiled and took a pull from his smoke and then he stood up.

‘There’s a darkness comin’,’ he said. ‘You best close your doors and windows cause there’ll be hell and gunfire before they put me away.’

Eli stood up and reached out his hand and Bronze looked at it for some time and then he shook it. ‘I’ll say a prayer for you, father.’

‘Maybe I’ll say one for you.’

Lily Margaret sat on the fourth step of the stairs to the Redwood Inn and Eli had never seen her smoke and yet she dragged like she’d never done nothing else. He stood leaning against the outside of Miller’s Carpentry where the wind was still and the sun warm and he closed his eyes and listened to the songs of distant mockingbirds.

Winona sat there once on the same step even if it was a different town and a different inn and she’d smoked just like Lily Margaret and looked off into the country and Eli had asked her, ‘What do you see?’ and she’d said, ‘Nothing, I just enjoy the smells.’ He’d come sit next to her and held her hand and kissed her below the ear cause that’s where she liked it and said, ‘It’ll be alright’ and she said, ‘No Eli, I don’t suppose it will.’

‘What does it mean?’ asked Lily Margaret and Eli told her, ‘I don’t know’ but that it didn’t mean nothing good and she sighed and rubbed her hand along her neck.

‘Do you know why I came to Sunset?’ she asked.

‘I imagine for the peace and quiet.’

‘Antonio was born here. Said he always wanted to go back.’

‘What for?’

‘To see it one more time’

‘Why?’

Lily Margaret thought for a while and then she sighed and said, ‘To know it’s still there, I suppose.’

‘It’s a strange thing,’ said Eli and Lily Margaret nodded and said, ‘We got no business here, you and I’ and Eli said, ‘Yeah.’

‘So why do we stay?’

‘Cause we got no business bein’ anywhere.’

Two men came riding into town three days after Eli’s meeting with Cassius Bronze and they were rough and unwashed and tired from their travels. They hitched their horses in front of the Accidental and drank four beers in quiet and then they took to a room and laid down for the night. The next morning they rode North and there sounded two gunshots and that was that.

From that day men continued to ride into Sunset and some of them were big and some of them small but all of them were mean and carried a rifle or revolver and Eli watched them ride north along Oalapa Road and counted down to their execution. After a week he’d tallied eleven shots and he began to wonder the sort of prize put on a

man's head to cause such a stampede of devils and brutes or maybe it weren't money they sought but honor and pride.

All of them came in couples or threesomes but after a week a man rode into Sunset alone. He was skinny and pale and yet he looked dangerous the way a coyote did. He didn't stop at the Accidental cause instead he stopped at the dark ashes of Sunset's chapel and walked among its ruins for some time. Eli sat with James Barnes on the porch of his general store on account of it being a slow day and they watched the man scour the cinders for God knows what.

'Poor fella,' said James Barnes and he shook his head like he was already stood by the man's grave and Eli could hardly disagree.

'What do you reckon his quarrel is?' asked James and Eli shrugged and said, 'Nothin' worth an early tombstone.'

'You reckon he killed his wife or children? Maybe his mother. Poor woman.'

'Do these men look like fathers to you?'

'Maybe not.'

'James, they hardly look like sons.'

'Sure.'

'They got no love in their hearts, these men.'

'What d'you reckon they got?'

'I don't know. But I know it's dark and ugly.'

After some time the pale man saddled up and rode southward out of town and they watched him ride until the horizon took him from their sight.

The next morning Eli found a letter on his doorstep bound by a black ribbon and upon opening it the paper



said *Meet me at sunset* and nothing more. And so come evening he saddled up and rode North once again and this time Cassius Bronze wasn't stood in the road but out in the heaths taking a shovel to the earth.

'Who you digging for?' asked Eli and Bronze didn't flinch upon hearing his voice and said, 'No one in particular.' He stuck his shovel in the dirt and leaned on it and took off his hat and wiped the sweat off his scalp.

'I didn't ask you to come so you'd pray with me,' he said.

'I know.'

'All right.'

'Why did you ask me to come, mister Bronze?'

'Some company, I suppose.'

'I find that hard to believe,' said Eli and Bronze smiled and then his face fell and looked tired again. 'Have you seen a skinny man come to Sunset, father? Skinny and pale.'

'You know him?'

'Sure.'

'Saw him looking around the church.'

'What church?'

'Who is he?' asked Eli and Cassius Bronze sighed and said, 'Bounty hunters are a funny kind, father. They're predictable cause they're stupid and they're stupid cause they're chasin' killers and who in their right mind does a thing like that for a livin?'

'He's a killer?'

'Of sorts.'

'Of sorts?'

'Is a man who kills to protect himself more of a killer than a man who wishes to kill but hasn't found the courage yet?'

'I'm not sure, mister Bronze.'

'I believe some men are born killers and even if they don't kill they're killers at heart.'

'Do you think God'll forgive you? Is that why you pray?'

'I don't pray for myself.'

'So you pray for them?'

'I ain't afraid of death. I never was afraid of it. That's what makes me a good shot. Fear makes a man impatient.'

'Why do you resist death if you ain't afraid of it?'

'Why do animals run from danger if they don't know they're goin' to die? It's a funny thing.'

'Sure.'

Cassius Bronze sighed. 'He's no bounty hunter, that man. He ain't in it for money. Or glory.'

'What's he in it for?'

'That's the thing, father. I don't know. Anywhere I go I see him and I know he's aimin' to kill me but he never does. Ain't that curious?'

'Are you afraid of him?'

Cassius Bronze didn't answer and took his shovel and started digging again and after a while he asked, 'Do you smoke?' and Eli said, 'Yes' and they smoked in quiet 'til the sun hid behind the mountains.

Eli saw the man again a couple days later. This time he weren't at the church but at the graveyard and he walked around same as the first time he saw him and then he rode

south again even if there weren't nothing south of Sunset save wild open country.

That night Eli awoke at an ungodly hour when the world was still dark and he left his home and walked south down Oalapa road. He walked until in the distance he saw an orange flame and then he turned around and walked back home.

Winona was too young when she died and yet people mourned her the same they did a woman died of old age. They cried the same number of tears and they wore the same black clothes and it seemed to Eli unfair but then so did her death.

'I never seen such a thing,' said the doctor upon his first visit and he'd come a hundred times more after that bringing all manner of meats and breads and strange fruits and plants from places Eli had only seen on old maps but Winona wouldn't have any of it and by each visit she got thinner and paler until one day she was nothing at all.

It wasn't melancholy that caused her inappetence cause 'til the day she died she had an eagerness for life and spoke of trifles and trivialities and yet she didn't eat no matter what they put in front of her. Eli prayed five times a day and at the end he prayed throughout the night until the candles died and then he'd pray some more.

The man didn't show his face in Sunset the next couple days and yet Eli couldn't get him out of his mind. He'd sit on his porch stalking the horizon for hours at a time waiting for the man to show but he didn't and so Eli took to the bottle and drank until he fell asleep.

From the day the skinny man came to Sunset there were no more bounty hunters and no more desperados and there came no sounds from the Bronze place and after some days the townspeople hardly spoke of the man anymore.

‘Do you think he left?’ asked Lily Margaret and Eli told her, ‘I don’t know he’s got any more leavin’ in him.’

‘What’s he like?’

‘He’s just a man.’

‘What does that mean?’

‘It means he’s no god. And he’s no devil.’

Lily Margaret thought about this for some time and then she said, ‘I heard too many stories to believe Cassius Bronze is just a man.’

‘Stories are only stories.’

‘Do you like him?’

‘No,’ said Eli and Lily Margaret said, ‘Alright’ but he knew she didn’t believe him.

He said, ‘That man deals in the business of lives just like god except he kills with intent and yet it’s god folks pray to and men like Cassius Bronze they call devils.’

Lily Margaret nodded and they sat in quiet together on the bedside and then Eli blew out the candle and kissed her and in the darkness she was just like her and in the quiet he was just like him.

A couple days went by and Eli woke up in the dead of night again and walked south down Oalapa Road. He walked until in the distance he saw an orange flame and this time he didn’t turn around but kept walking ‘til he was close enough to see the man’s face aglow in the curling

fire. He halted and stood in the field for some time. The man looked back at him but remained still and calm and sat cross-legged in the yellow grass and chipped away at a small stick. Then Eli continued his approach until he got so close the man had to look up at him and then he sat down across the fire and looked him in the eyes.

‘Is it Cassius Bronze you come for?’ he asked. The man looked back at him and his eyes were dull and his cheeks sunken and his black locks curled around his pale temples like dead leaves. He didn’t answer.

‘He seems to be afraid of you. Makes me wonder what kind of man is capable of putting fear in a creature like Cassius Bronze.’

Again the man didn’t answer and he continued to chip away at his stick with a steel knife with slowness and deliberation like he’d done it every day for a couple lifetimes. And then after some time he opened his mouth and asked ‘Why’d you keep it?’

His voice was soft and slow and unmelodic.

‘Keep what?’ said Eli.

‘Why didn’t you burn it like you burned that picture? Like you burned her clothes?’

They sat in quiet for some time and then Eli asked, ‘Who are you?’

‘You ask the wrong questions,’ said the man.

Eli looked at the flames and they looked back at him.

‘What am I meant to be askin’?’

‘You been talking to Bronze.’

‘Yeah.’

‘He been talking about me.’

‘Yeah.’

‘He thinks I’ll kill him.’

‘Will you?’

The pale man shook his head slowly. ‘I’m not about that business.’

‘What business are you about, mister?’

The man looked up from his carving and examined Eli’s eyes. ‘You really loved her, didn’t you? So why’d you let her die?’

Eli didn’t respond cause he felt a startle and then an anger rage in his stomach much like the fire before him and he hadn’t felt anger in many years and didn’t rightly know what to do with it.

‘Wasn’t life she lost her hunger for,’ the man continued. ‘Odds are it was you.’

‘Who are you?’ asked Eli again from between his teeth and it felt like the fire swelled with each of his breaths.

‘You got what you wanted,’ said the pale man. ‘Got her locked up where no one can get to her anymore. Isn’t that correct, Eli Cole?’

‘You got no right,’ said Eli with a weak voice and he wanted to say more but couldn’t find the words and so he stood up and walked back home through all that dark and all that quiet.

‘Do you love me?’ he asked and she didn’t say anything for a long while and then she said, ‘What difference does it make?’ and he looked her in the eyes and pressed her into his chest. He remembered them sitting there like that for hours even if it was only minutes.

‘There’s only so many of us,’ she’d said. ‘Even fewer on these awful plains. Best we can do is find is some comfort

in one another.' Eli asked, 'Is that enough for you?' and Winona nodded and said, 'It's what God allows me.'

She was ten years younger than him and cared about nothing save slow mornings and making love even if she was incapable of loving and whenever he spoke of the future she'd say the same thing and tell him, 'Tomorrow is another girl's worry' and it made him angry and sad but he never told her that it did.

Cassius Bronze sat in his rocking chair facing the outer ridges of the Ouachitas and he smoked and drank into the night. There was a fire in the distance and in its glow he saw a man and he waited for him to rise and approach him but not once did the man move. Bronze watched him until he fell asleep and when by morning he woke the fire was gone and so was the man.

Bronze stood up and grabbed his rifle and he walked across the bajada until he reached where the pale man had made his fire. The earth was clean and undisturbed and there were no scorch marks or chars. Cassius Bronze sat down in the dust and waited and in the end he roared and bellowed towards the mountains and after a quiet moment a lone coyote answered his call.

The day she died he sat by her bedside and looked at her pale skin in the window light and caressed her arm. Her skin was cold and gaunt and her breath slow and weak and she'd turned her face away from him.

'Won't you eat, love?' he said and she didn't answer like she hadn't for the past six days and nights. The doctor had left earlier that week cause he said there weren't noth-

ing left to be done and Eli had grabbed him by the coat and put him against the wall but in the end he'd let him go.

'I'm awfully sorry,' said the doctor and he'd put on his hat and scurried out the door.

When he got back to the bed Winona sat upright and looked out the window at the open country. Eli sat beside her and held her shoulders and asked her, 'What do you see?' She didn't answer for some time but then she turned to him and breathed slow and said, 'It's done, Eli. You've taken all of me.'

He held her until her breathing stopped and in quiet he wished he could take more and then he lay her down on the bed and covered her in black sheets.

Eli didn't sleep that night and stood by the window looking out over Oalapa Road when after some time Cas-sius Bronze came walking from the North holding a revolver in his left hand. He walked until he stood in the middle of the road before the general store and he wore a white union suit and nothing else and then he pointed his gun at the sky and fired it.

'I know you're hidin' here somewhere,' he yelled into the dark. 'Show your face or I'll shoot you like cattle.' Some lanterns moved and some windows opened but Eli stood unmoving and watched the old man stagger around in the dirt on his bare feet.

'Shoot me if you're so compelled,' he yelled. 'You'll get the first shot for free.'

Then came the quiet and it lasted a long time.



Cassius Bronze stood in the road and he waited. There was a whispering some houses away. A latch clicked and a store sign creaked. A coyote howled somewhere out in the country. Eli eyed the South and waited with steady breaths for the man to arrive cause he knew however far away he was he'd heard Bronze's cries. He waited for five minutes and then for ten and then for fifteen. The man didn't show.

Then Cassius Bronze knelt in the dirt and put the revolver to this temple and fired one more shot and fell sideways into the dirt and the dust.

There lay a man on the road in the town of Sunset dressed in nightwear and he was old and weary and in the crude daylight one wondered how a man so weak and pale could've done so much killing. They let him lay there for a whole morning before Gutsy Gregory approached the body and yelled, 'Yup, the man's dead alright.'

They stood in a circle around Cassius Bronze and Lily Margaret stood beside Eli and squeezed his hand. There was a tear in her eyes and when Eli asked her why she cried she told him, 'I know it's foolish, but he seems a kind man.'

They buried him the same they buried Thomas Joe and stood in quiet as the shovels covered his casket in dirt. In another town one might've made a prayer but in Sunset death was the final thing and to waste words on it was to waste fresh feed on a sick horse. But then Eli stepped forward and said, 'Mister Bronze was a man of God and he would've wanted a prayer and if no one opposes I'd like to say one.'

The townspeople looked at one another but said nothing and then James Barnes cleared his throat and said, 'Speak, Eli' and Eli put his hands together and prayed. He said, 'Father, it's been some time since last we spoke and here we are under strange circumstances cause a killer has been killed and even though the man was wicked he was a wicked man of God. Now I'm not sure what kind of fate befalls a man like Cassius Bronze but I'd like to think it ain't favorable or kind, but then maybe the men he killed deserved to be killed and the money he stole deserved to be stolen. Father, the truth is I don't know right from wrong and maybe if I did I'd be wearin' my cassock today. What I do know is death ain't a punishment on the dead cause it befalls the righteous as much as it befalls the wicked but it is a sentence exacted on the living cause they are left with its sorrows. And so today I pray not for Cassius Bronze but for those he's left behind, should there be such unfortunate souls. May they find some answers in his wake. Amen.'



There fell a quiet over the town of Sunset in the weeks that followed Cassius Bronze's death. It was the same quiet as the quiet that was before him and yet it weren't 'cause no two quiet's are quite alike.

Eli went back to his woodworking and to drinking and mourning and yet he kept thinking about the pale man sat by the fire carving his knife into that wooden stick. He

thought about him in the light and lay awake thinking about him in the dark.

During those days he lit the fireplace every night and held his cassock by the flames and wished to burn it but every night he didn't. Every night he folded it once more and put it back on the top shelf of his cupboard and looked at it for some time and the next night he'd do the same thing again.

Lily Margaret came by once more after that and she told him she'd be leaving and when Eli asked her where to she told him, 'I don't know' and when he asked her why she said the same but then she thought a while and said, 'He would've wanted me to.' Eli tried to kiss her but she hugged him instead and it made him angry but he didn't tell her that it did.

Some time after the death of Cassius Bronze Eli woke up during a sweltering night and felt inclined to saddle up and ride North. When he approached the Bronze place he saw a light burning behind a window and he knew the pale man was there and he kept riding 'til he could see the light move and then he dismounted and hitched his horse to a stranded plow.

The pale man sat in a chair by a growing fire and once again he carved his knife into a stick but Eli could tell it weren't the same one cause it was bigger and of a darker color. He took a chair from the dining table and put it next to the man and rested his elbows on his knees. The pale man didn't look up. They sat there in quiet the both of them for a good while and stared into the fire. Then Eli turned to him and said, 'Was it you killed him?'

‘I believe I told you, Eli. I’m not about that business.’

‘What is your business?’ said Eli.

The pale man interrupted his carving and looked at him.

‘Everyone’s two people, Eli. There’s one of us who acts and there’s one of us who judges and for some people one comes before the other and for some it’s the other comes first. And then there’s a wicked few for whom the judge comes too late. When all is set and done.’

‘And then what?’

The pale man smiled and said, ‘Then they shoot themselves.’

Eli nodded and then he stood up and walked up to the window and in the dark he saw nothing save his likeness in the dusty glass. He looked old and tired and nothing like that young kid who’d given his life to God all those years ago in a small church in the town of Antimony. The joy had left him and so had the sadness and all that was left was meat and bones and indifference.

He turned to the fire and asked, ‘Why ain’t you gone yet?’ and the pale man didn’t answer and then he took his knife and carved it into the mesquite wood.

**The End**