

TRIBULATION HOUSE

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— 1 —

I might as well just tell you right now, I killed Reverend Daniel Glory. Back there at the church, in his study.

But this is my story. Don't let anyone tell you different. My dad always said we all write our own story. Of course, I guess that's why it worked out so well for him.

Why did I kill Reverend Daniel Glory? Sure, it was an accident. More or less. At least, I think it was.

I don't know, we were arguing about the Rapture and it kind of got out of hand and then I just—

Wait. Wait. I'm getting ahead of myself. Let me back up.

This all started about three months ago, when Reverend Daniel Glory told us we needed to do our Tribulation House earlier than—

Oh. Wait.

Okay, I guess this actually started last year when Marvin Dobbs left the church. Our church. The Last Church of God's Imminent Will.

A year ago last summer, Marvin left with some of the other families to start a new church, and he took his Armageddon House multimedia show with him.

You do know about Armageddon House, right? Every Halloween for the past three or four years, Marvin and our team put together a special multimedia presentation explaining the Great Tribulation, which ends with the Battle of Armageddon.

Wait—you don't know about the Great Tribulation? It's that seven-year period between the Rapture and the Triumphant Return of Jesus Christ, as described in the prophecies of Daniel and Ezekiel and the apostles Paul and John. After the Lord Jesus takes His Bride home, there are going to be seven years of horrible judgment inflicted on those who are left b—

What? The murder of Reverend Glory? I'm getting to that.

Well, anyway, when Marvin left to form his little offshoot splinter group, we discovered he had actually trademarked the name "Armageddon House." Imagine that.

When the board at church met to discuss the matter, we considered doing Armageddon House anyway without him. Just reconstruct it from memory and copy or use materials from previous years. Use the same name, business as usual. Just ignore the cease-and-desist letter, let God and His angels work that out.

But we decided we didn't want to be associated with Armageddon House anymore. I mean, if Marvin and his new "fellowship" planned to stage their own Armageddon House, the risk of confusion in the marketplace was enough to rebuild ours as a brand-new event.

Which is how we ended up with Tribulation House. It was an opportunity for a new beginning. We went through a whole list of possible names—I came up with Kingdom Come, but was voted down—before we settled on Tribulation House.

We sat down and worked through the whole grid. Instead of imagining how to simply explain or show a picture of each bowl of wrath and each trumpet of judgment, we created an entire theatrical event.

Yeah, we could have set up the charts and graphs and the overhead projector. But today's audience, this last generation, they're kind of jaded about flannelgraph presentations, know what I mean?

These kids today, with their *SpongeBob SquarePants* and their *American Bandstand* and their *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, they need the bells and whistles and the like.

They don't need a lot of explanation. They need a *demonstration*.

You see, that was the challenge, wasn't it? It's one thing to say

“the moon was blackened” or “the waters turned to blood” or “men were stung by enormous flying scorpions”—but how do you make it happen right *here*, right before their eyes?

In the end, we created Tribulation House: A full-sensory immersive interactive dramatic theatrical evangelistic event that simulates what it will actually be like to live through the events of the Great Tribulation. An entire full-service prophetic experience.

You’d be surprised how much of it we accomplished with sound and light. We developed the various rooms throughout the church basement. Some college kids created soundscapes for each event. We wrote up a full script for the actors; they played everything from people caught up in the events, to the world armies fighting the Most Holy, to the father of lies himself, bound and thrown into the pit for a millennium.

The murder of Reverend Glory? I’m getting to that.

So we were working out the blueprints for creating Tribulation House as a major theatrical evangelistic full-sensory ministry outreach. We had debated the merits of various slogans for the event—the leading contenders were *WE’LL SCARE THE HELL OUT OF YOU*; *GET RIGHT OR GET LEFT*; and *THE TIME IS CLOSER THAN YOU THINK*. While the first slogan was a favorite of several board members for its bracing, truthful stance, in the end we worried that the neighbors would misunderstand. So we went with the second slogan, for its simple, instructional message.

And I remember the meeting where our chief carpenter, Bill Broadstreet, was giving us his estimate for the physical construction to be done on the project. Suddenly, Reverend Daniel Glory burst in with some news.

“Friends!” There was a glow on the Reverend’s face unlike we had ever seen before. The man stood there in the doorway to the church basement, leaning against the door frame, wheezing to catch his breath. “Jesus is coming back!”

The room was silent. We all stared. At first, we wondered why he was saying this right then. After all, he preached on this topic every week. But then he dropped the bomb: “And I know when!”

Okay, that was a new one. Collectively, everyone in the room gasped. One of us, I don't even remember who it was, asked, "When, Reverend?"

"October 17."

Five months.

"5:51 AM." Reverend Glory waved the papers clutched in his hand. Later, I would wonder what he was waving at us. His Bible study? His calculations? All I know is he grinned from ear to ear and said, "The Rapture is going to happen at 5:51 AM on October 17."

Everyone around the meeting table reacted differently. Some were stunned into silence, others screamed with joy. One noisy woman loudly sobbed and clapped.

Reverend Glory came into the room, face aglow with thrill and exhaustion, and dragged a chair from the wall over to our table. He sat, waiting until everyone was silent again. "I now have incontrovertible proof that the Rapture takes place this coming October."

I'm sure I grinned bigger than anyone in the room. "What reason do you have to say that?"

Reverend Daniel Glory looked at me and winked. "Why stop with *one* reason, boy? I got one hundred and seven of 'em!"

Of course, you know what this meant. We were going to have to step up the production of Tribulation House.

(I still can't believe it's not Kingdom Come.)

— 2 —

Out in the car, Ross Cleaver was bored. He and associate Bill Lamb had been sitting for maybe forty minutes in the gravel lot across from Zykes Drugstore. They were new to the territory, just wanted to get to know their future "clients." This was the edge of the business on this street. Drugstore, barbershop, church. Then you hit the houses. In front of the church, the sign read *GET RIGHT*

OR GET LEFT. Underneath, in smaller letters, it read, *THE TIME IS CLOSER THAN YOU THINK.*

Cleaning his fingernails with his teeth, Cleaver once more thought over his mental to-do list: *towing operation, check; numbers-running, check; insurance cooperative, check.* (“Insurance cooperative” had a much better ring to it than “protection racket.”)

Cleaver turned and regarded the other man. Saw Lamb finish off yet another plastic bottle of water and drop it to the floor of the Pontiac with the other empties. Cleaver grunted. “Got a bladder problem?”

“Whut?”

“The water.” Cleaver, still trying to clean under his thumbnail with his bottom teeth, nodded toward the empties piled at the other man’s feet. “You drink a lot of water. Got a bladder problem?”

Lamb turned and stared with wide, glassy eyes. Twitched. “Why would drinking a lot of water mean I have a bladder problem?”

“Why not?”

“If I had a bladder problem, I would drink *less.*”

Cleaver grimaced, wishing he never brought it up. “I’m just saying, a person with a bladder problem might want to flush something out of his system.”

“If I had a bladder problem, I’d have no trouble flushing—”

Cleaver held up a flat hand. “Hold it.” He pointed to the windshield at the back exit of the drugstore across the street. The old man was closing up for the night. “There he is.”

Cleaver opened the driver side and exited the car, carefully—he really needed to lose that last thirty or fifty pounds (or think about a bigger car). As he rounded the front of the car, Lamb joined him. The man was a head taller and decidedly thinner.

He sometimes wondered how Lamb stayed so trim. After all, the two had about the same eating habits, got about the same amount of exercise. Give or take a shakedown or the odd beating of some welsher.

Maybe it was the nervous twitching. That had to burn off calories.

Cleaver and Lamb crossed the empty street, smelling fresh tar,

reached the drugstore exit just about the time the grizzled old man was locking up, fumbling with the key ring.

Cleaver glanced quickly at Lamb, hoping this time his associate kept his mouth shut. He turned eyes back to the old man locking up. “Evening, Padre.”

The old man jumped, whirled around. “Oh! You startled me!” He was on the frail side, Cleaver noticed. Should be no problem.

“Don’t worry, Padre,” Cleaver said. “You’re safe. We just—”

“Yeah,” Lamb snorted, rotating his shoulder blades. “Safe.”

Cleaver shot his associate a glare. “Do you mind?” He turned back to the old man with a forced smile. A little more predatory than he intended, but the only smile he had. “You’ll have to excuse him.” He started over. “Um...” He had lost his place. *Evening Padre don’t worry Padre you’re safe we just...* “We just wanted to express our concerns for you in this neighborhood.”

The old man stared back. Blankly. Serenely.

Cleaver motioned to the buildings around them—the church, the gas station, the greasy diner, a row of houses. “This ain’t the safest area. Know what I mean?”

The old man’s eyes narrowed, his gaze sharpening to a point. Trembling, he raised a bony, misshapen finger at Cleaver. “You have no business here,” the man said in a trembling voice. The two mobsters stepped back. “Get thee behind me.”

What was with this guy? Cleaver forced a grin, held up conciliatory hands. “Hey, old-timer, you got this all wrong. We represent an insurance cooperative.”

“Sure,” Lamb tossed in, nodding like a jackrabbit with a neck problem. “An insurance racket.”

Cleaver shot Lamb angry eyes. “The grown-ups are talking here.”

The old man picked up steam. “In the name of our Lord Jesus, I cast you out!” Still pointing that skeleton finger. “I rebuke you!”

Cleaver waved his hands. “Okay, okay.” Turned to Lamb. “Let’s hit it.” To the old man, “We’re sorry to have troubled you, sir.”

As the two thugs walked, Lamb let out this sort of whine. A

signal he was about to make a comment that would endanger his quality of life right now.

Cleaver held up a hand. “Whatever it is, stifle it.”

“But—”

“I don’t wanna hear it.” Cleaver snorted and spat snot on the tar.

The two men were silent as they reached the car. Key in the ignition, hit the gas, tires spitting gravel as they drove away. Checking the rearview mirror, Cleaver punched the gas again and swerved out into the road. In seconds, they were back at the main drive.

He wasn’t sure what had happened back there. All he knew is he would never trouble the old man again.

— 3 —

Detective Charlie Pasch was assigned to clean the toilets.

The toilets. The public restrooms that every public person came and used when they forgot to go before they left home.

Of course, here, today, he was not “Detective Charlie Pasch, Kansas City Police.” Here he was just “Charlie,” one of the dozens of volunteers helping on the annual cleaning day at Mercy Street World Mission Church.

Back when he’d signed up to help, he had not expected to be cleaning toilets. In fact, that had been his one secret hope: that he not get stuck cleaning toilets.

Sure, there were no glamorous jobs when cleaning a major facility like the WMC. Some volunteers were sweeping the parking lot. Some were weeding the grounds. Some were repainting the gym.

Charlie was cleaning the toilets.

Not that he was alone: He and Grady Webb were the adults

supervising a gaggle of 12-year-olds also wishing they had been stuck with something else.

But Charlie was not going to let it get him down. He was here to *serve*. He would make sure the mirrors were cleaned, the commodes polished white, the tile along the walls mold- and mildew-free.

Occasionally, though, Charlie felt a gripe rising in his throat, and fought it. Down on hands and knees, polishing the base of the toilet, he searched his mind for an appropriate scripture. He couldn't think of anything related to cleaning toilets, so he grabbed hold of 2 Corinthians 10:5: *We are destroying speculations and every lofty thing raised up against the knowledge of God, and we are taking every thought captive to the obedience of Christ.*

Rubber gloves on hands, Charlie scrubbed the inside of the urinals. Fighting the urge to retch. Every time he felt the humiliation or anger rising, he reminded himself to “take every thought captive” and scrubbed harder.

Grady's voice echoed from over by the shower: “Hey, you hear about that Second Coming booklet?”

Charlie was thrilled to have something to take his mind off the job. “Which one is that?”

“*107 Reasons Jesus Is Coming Back in 2007.*”

“I saw something about it in the paper.”

“Pastor Mac talked about it Wednesday night.”

“I missed church Wednesday,” Charlie answered, squeezing his sponge into the bucket, then getting more liquid soap. Not sure whether he was doing this right. “I was on a stakeout.”

A younger voice asked from behind, “Where do you want these, Mr. Charlie?”

Charlie, wiping sweat off his forehead with the back of his arm, sat back on his heels and looked at the kid. Justin, he thought the name was. “What do you got?”

Justin held up a wrapped cylinder of paper towel in one hand, another in his other hand. Breathing hard from running back up the stairs.

Charlie nodded toward the front sink. “Set them over there. I guess you have the rest out in the hall?”

“These are all I could carry.”

“What do you mean?”

“You know, two hands, two rolls.”

“We need a whole case. Didn’t you take the cart?”

The kid shrugged. “No.”

Charlie sighed, fighting to retain his patience. *Don’t lose it, Charlie.* “Take the cart to the elevator, go downstairs, and get a whole case of paper towels. I think there’s like a dozen rolls in each box.”

The kid nodded and ran for the hall. Charlie knew Justin would get a kick out of using the service elevator; it was normally off limits to the kids.

Charlie turned his attention back to the job. *Blech.* A few minutes passed before he thought of something. Yelled across the room, “What did he say?”

From around the corner came the echo of Grady’s voice. “Who?”

“Pastor Mac.”

“Oh. He was saying how this guy’s whole worldview is focused on the wrong thing. Instead of, you know, ‘Do the job, follow Jesus’ commands,’ this guy is telling people to put everything down and watch the skies. Pastor Mac calls it ‘X-Files theology.’”

“Wow.” Charlie nodded as he scrubbed. “That’s good.”

“And since the guy is telling people he knows when Jesus is coming back, that makes him a liar. Although I’m not sure why Pastor said that.”

“That’s easy.” Charlie dropped the sponge in the bucket, dragged the bucket to the sink. “Jesus said that even *He* doesn’t know the day or the hour He’s coming back.” He dumped dirty water down the drain. “Consequently, no mere mortal is going to have that answer.”

“Huh.”

Charlie glanced toward the showers at the far end of the men’s

room. From this angle he saw Grady and a couple of the kids sponging mildew off the walls. Charlie wondered how thick it had gotten.

The bucket filled with clean water, Charlie dragged it to the next urinal. He heard Grady continue the story: “So, apparently, this guy was here at church Wednesday.”

“What guy?”

“The *107 Reasons* guy.”

Charlie dropped the bucket, water sloshing around the edges. “He was *here*?”

“Apparently he’s got a local church. But for some reason he was here and he heard Pastor Mac say he was a liar.”

“What, did he stand up during the church service or something?”

“No, he came up after service and told Pastor Mac, ‘I’m the guy who wrote that book.’”

Charlie grabbed the sponge, started scrubbing again. “He said it like that?”

“Well, I don’t know *how* he said it, but the guy told Pastor Mac he wrote the book. And then he says he doesn’t appreciate being called a heretic. And Pastor Mac just keeps smiling and says, ‘One of us is a liar. And on October 17, everyone will know which of us it is.’”

Charlie stopped scrubbing. “He *said* that?”

“Yep.”

“Wow.”

The conversation soon turned to other topics—Grady wanted to talk about music and sports, Charlie wanted to talk about comic books. They split the difference and discussed rock songs about superheroes. Grady was surprised to learn there were more than 300 songs that referenced Superman alone.

By the end of the morning, the adults and their young helpers had finished: The trash cans were empty, all the porcelain polished, paper-towel dispensers reloaded, closet stocked with paper goods, and the shower sparkling clean.

Charlie and Grady stood at the front, admiring the group's handiwork. One of the boys gave Charlie a weary look. "Can we go to lunch now?"

Grady looked at Charlie. "What time is it?"

Charlie checked his wrist, remembered he left his watch in the car to keep it clean. "Wait, I'll check." He started to reach into his pocket for his cell phone, then remembered how filthy his hands must be. As he washed his hands—*thoroughly*—he asked, "Have they started setting up lunch downstairs yet?"

Another boy said brightly, "I think so."

Hands clean, Charlie reached an elbow toward the dispenser and pushed for a towel, then blotted his hands dry. He threw the crumpled towel in the trash and pulled out his cell phone. 11:47 AM. The box lunches would be available at noon.

Back aching, he said, "Go ahead." As the boys ran off, rubber soles squealing on tile floor, Charlie called after them. "After lunch, back here so we can clean the ladies' room!"

Which, of course, was something he'd hoped he would never have to yell in his life.

— 4 —

I remembered having a spirited discussion about a week later. I was at the office, Sherman's Realty. I work there as an agent.

The workday had barely started. I was in the kitchenette, getting the coffeemaker going, when I started talking with one of my co-workers, Helena Wheeler. She was a regular churchgoer, so she and I would sometimes discuss religious matters, but I often found her to be kind of loose in her eschatological leanings.

"I saw the story in the weekend paper," she said as she grabbed her coffee mug and poured from the decanter.

"Oh?" I was playing it cool. "Which story is that?"

"About the little nightclub y'all are putting on."