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## ANYTHING FOR BLOOD

*By John J. Barnes*

I still remember the first time I ever saw Hell, and it was through the eyes of another.

From the dismal pits of the seventh circle to the icy entrenched fields of the sixth, I saw it as if I was actually there. This may seem like a wannabe philosopher's metaphorical jargon—I wish it was—but I mean that in the most literal way I know. What happened to me was merely an exercise in morality, a test handed down by the higher powers that be. I think, no, I know I could've done better. My love for my brother was the mainstay for my procrastination, but more on that later. I measure my life in moments now, and my penmanship isn't quite up to par with my typing.

My name is Jonah Kendrick Chapman the second, freelance writer for the *Heralded Script* and postman of Avilman City. I used to write a column called *Jonah's Parlor* for which I got paid twenty-five dollars an issue. It contained all the dirty laundry and new bits of gossip I could hope to scrounge up from the town. Sometimes it got me into a fair bit of trouble, too. And the postman gig, my primary source of income, wasn't too bad either. I sold stamps, weighed

packages, and even had to call in a couple of suspected Anthrax-infested envelopes and little brown boxes that ticked rather than tocked. The postmaster always said a ticking box was to be worried over and that a tocking box was just a running clock, maybe a gift.

“Tickers were sinners and tockers were paupers,” he would say. We didn’t know what that meant, but we guessed that traditional bombs were always designed to have a wristwatch for a timer, and anyone who’s heard a watch can say they’re too small to have a tock.

Anyhow, the pay was marginal and my personal life was the apotheosis of suburban mediocrity. You know the typical two-story country home on the outskirts of the city with my wife, Ellen, and two children, Simon and Whitney. Simon’s eight and Whitney’s twelve and both are very well-respected within the community. And I suppose they would be; Ellen and I did our best to raise them right, with discipline and an early bestowment of morals for guidance. Ellen was a different story all together. How she and I met was probably reminiscent to the typical teenage romance-turned-marriage. But this isn’t about me. It’s about my brother, Robert Garland Chapman. You see, we shared a very unique gift, Robert and I. And it is he and he alone that remains the reason why I sit here in my balsawood rocker in my attic. I write this as a memoir to him.

The time lapse between episodes is growing shorter and shorter, and certain surroundings are starting to look familiar, so I better hurry along. The rocking chair facing the attic window plays as a sort of lighthouse beacon for them, which is why I’m up here. I discovered this only a few days ago when I was cleaning out some of the clutter for a yard sale.

I'll start with the basics; the standard biographical interview of a no-namer who had just hit fame and fortune and who could no longer eat toast without someone inquiring about the type of jam he had with it.

Jonah senior, dad to us, was a well-to-do blue-collar man if ever there was one. He owned a small concrete business which specialized in cutting and demolition, and made a pretty generous chunk of change. It grew with the gray in his hair. First, it was just him and his trusty seventy-pound handsaw. Now he has ten people under him along with a small line of Backhoes, Bobcats, and one custom bright yellow dump-truck that people could spot coming a mile away. Marlene Amos (Chapman), our mother, was not your typical homebody of a housewife, either. She never punched an actual nine-to-five, but her days were filled nonetheless. She trained for yearly marathons five days a week with daunting six-milers in the morning, after which she would run the administration end of my dad's business until the time came to make dinner. And although she didn't act like your idyllic housewife, she sure could cook like one.

My brother and I were born on the same day, one hour apart, in Reed Regional Hospital, Indiana. I was named after my dad, Jonah senior, who in turn was named after the great biblical prophet who had withstood three days and three nights trapped in the belly of a great fish. Our mother was in labor for seven hours before the birthing, and was later told by the doctor that Robert was an "unexpected surprise".

We were what the professionals called *Monozygotic Twins*, which if I recall correctly means that our DNA was a perfect match, but traits can vary depending on different environmental exposures. We came out almost a mirror image of each other, that was, until the

patterns of speech had made their way into development. Robert had inherited a gene from our granddad on our father's side of the family. It was a mild stutter which sometimes skipped a generation or two. And Robert had drawn the unlucky straw this time. It was then that our psyche began to split—the initial mitosis of one brain to two you might say.

My brother and I were both honor-roll students straight through middle school, and were contented with our own hobbies. Mine were basketball and a pristine collection of Pulp Comics. Rob chose a much more creative route. He explored the woods around our home and drew sketches of fantastical creatures from folklore and little dystopian worlds. The worlds came later, after the cornfield. Around the time I was still in need of training wheels on my Huffy, I started to notice that something was happening to me. I felt not so myself. In my psyche skulked a craving for something I couldn't quite interpret.

That's when the *visions* started.

It was a fine Saturday afternoon on the latter end of our spring break in the sixth grade. The sun spread its warmth over the various patches of field in between the conventional constructs of our suburban neighborhood. Once in a while the shadow of a lone cloud would pass swiftly over the land like the silhouette of a shark below the surface of a deep ocean.

Robert and I had been involved in a rudimentary game of hide and seek with the other contemporaries of our childhood at that time. Rudy Baker was leading the hunt, as always. He was the oldest of us, a chubby red-haired boy who always wore the same pair of dungarees at least once a week (you could tell by the mustard stain on his left knee), and whose face was spackled with a surfeit of freckles over fair skin that would redden after an hour in the sunlight.

He was nice enough though, as long as no one got on his bad side. He was probably the closest Reed had ever come to having an official bully, but the worst I'd heard him do was to throw sand in some girl's face for calling him *Pippy Longstocking*.

"One, two, Baker's coming for you," he would say, eyes pinched shut in front of a large oak tree. His *Nightmare on Elm Street* plagiarisms were meant to be theatrical portends to the other children.

Of course, once the game had started, everyone bolted for the cornfields, the chosen hiding place for any Indiana adolescent. Even if you knew someone had "made for the maize", as we often called it, the fields were so large and elaborate that it could easily have taken hours to find someone inside. Often times, the seeker himself would get lost.

I ran right into the rows. The silk tickled my calves while tassels aimlessly blew low enough to skim the crown of my head. I took cover about a hundred yards or so in and crouched into the soft fertile soil.

There were random high-pitched screams every time Baker had successfully exposed someone's hiding spot. When I heard ruffling coming in my direction, I would shimmy a couple rows over, never appeased with sticking in one place. That was how the redskins did it. It was during one of these commando maneuvers that *it* came.

My eyes suddenly split images. Instead of me seeing in periscope, I now saw double, as if the lens of my eyes had just picked up another channel. I saw what was undoubtedly in front of me in the farthest left half while the right half had gone completely red, as if it was filled with blood. I rubbed them wholeheartedly in panic for a good two minutes, then the realization that it

wasn't going away was compounded by the fact that there was no pain. When the calm had taken effect, that's when I noticed the scenery. It was different.

The right halves of my eyes, which my wife would later tell me turned crimson red whenever I was having one of my occurrences, were oblivious to any color in the world except that of bright cherry, and showed what I immediately knew to be my brother's sight, but there was a catch.

He was hiding in the cornfield, squatting just as I'd been. I could hear the beat of his heart, the release of his breath and the movement of his hand as he went to wipe a snuffle from his nose. I was in total awe, completely engrossed as to how this could be, but then my head started to hurt. I later came to associate these headaches with the visions as they only came just before I watched Robert do something ruefully horrifying.

Through his eyes, I watched as he proceeded to flip out the Swiss army knife he'd won at a coin toss at last year's fair and started digging the tip of the blade into the palm of his hand, running it diagonally down one of the major creases.

That wasn't the worst of it. If it was, I wouldn't be writing this.

No, the worst part of that experience came with inexorable fright as I watched him drop the knife after I had gasped, as if he had heard me. He then picked it up, wiped it in the underside of his shirt and stowed it away in whichever pocket he retrieved it from. After that, it was gone, blanked out as if I had a television switch in my head, and so was the headache.

"Robert Chapman, what unholy mess is this?" our mom inquired, staring raptly at Robert's gashed hand.

"C-cut it on t-the barn plank, M-m-mom," he said, ashamed.

He looked at me with those muddy brown eyes and I knew he could see that his secrets were no longer his. That's when I knew that the visions weren't one-sided. They were a double-ended window.

Again, and I reiterate this because we've not even begun to scratch the surface of this, my overzealous friend. I have seen hell and what it does to the condemned through those eyes, but not before Robert's thirst for blood had increased almost indefinitely.

That night, when we both lay in our separate beds in our separate rooms, I heard shallow footsteps approaching my door. It cracked open slowly, emitting a low creaking sound like the mating call of a tree frog. It was Robert, standing idly in the hallway and staring at me as though I was his mortal enemy. His eyes were clearly visible in the tiny bar of light coming from his room.

"Y-you w-won't tell, w-will you," he asked solemnly.

I laid there, ear against my pillow, watching the trace of his shadow and contemplating the question.

"No," I said, not entirely sure if that was the right answer.

If I'd known the consequences of my silence, I would've said different.

He left it at that, most likely too embarrassed to linger on the subject any longer, and so did I.

This went on for years. His stutter was an unforgiving burden during our childhood and it seemed no matter how often I'd come to his aid, it would only push him away farther. And the *episodes*, as I had dubbed them, became more frequent. Through the crimson veil came visions of him hanging lizards by their necks with shoestring, lighting firecrackers tied to the backs of

bullfrogs, and even one particularly disturbing playback of a wild rabbit he decapitated after shooting it several times with a pellet gun. I was at the pool with two of my friends when that happened. A chili dog and fries don't taste as good coming back up as they do going down. That was it for me. I finally stopped deluding myself and confronted him that very night.

“Robby, this has got to stop.” I said while we sat on the bank of Reed's only creek.

“I-I don't know what it is.” His voice was trembling as if he'd just done something far worse than just tearing the head off old *waskily wabbit*, but then his voice always sounded that way. “It's like I-I c-c-can't help it.”

The words came with hint of *déjà vu*. He didn't have to explain a thing. Robby had a penchant for killing, for blood. I knew this to be the craving I'd developed, though I never sought out to satisfy it. First, I think it was the pacification I'd received every time he did it, as though we shared the same nerve impulses for pleasure. Second, I believe with the gravest conviction that Robby needed a substitute for his lack of social outings.

“I-it's like a-a-a curse. I-I think i-i-it might g-get worse, t-too.”

As I sat there and watched his eye twitch to get the words out, I couldn't help but to feel certain sympathy for him. “Something has to be done,” I said as a large trout leaped from the stream and engulfed a dragonfly.

I don't know why I remember that. Maybe it was just the memory of my mother feeding me the biblical story of Jonah.

“The Great Fish swallowed him whole and there he sat for three days and three nights,” she said.

The setting sun started to slide streaks of glimmering orange across the fast-moving stream and the cornstalks wavered mellow in the wind like sea grass in a light current.

I hugged him with brotherly love, and rather than putting him at ease as I had suspected it would, he started to weep against my chest for a good five minutes.

“I’ll suffer with you brother,” I told him, but I didn’t think he heard me. “We won’t go to anyone about this. It’ll stay with us until we go to our graves.”

He ceased his sob just long enough for me to feel him nodding in my chest.

It stayed that way all through our teenage years. The episodes came and went. Sometimes they would blur away, the way bad memories always do when you occupy your mind with something else. It didn’t always work. At times the slayings would get so out of hand that I couldn’t help but to scold him. But it was always wild animals, never anything tame and most certainly no humans. That was the deal.

The first time he’d ever broken that rule was in the eleventh grade. It was over a girl named Thelma Bradshaw. She and my brother dated for the paltry span of two months before he found out she was cheating on him. She never admitted it, but he knew. He knew every time he opened his mouth to speak. She obviously was no good at withholding laughter.

One winter night, Robby killed two birds in one stone, and used the decapitated head of the Belgian malinois just down the road from Thelma’s house for a little revenge, concurrently calming his bloodlust at the same time. He stuck it on one of the lime green fence stakes at the entrance to her yard. I heard her mom was the first to see it and fainted. I don’t blame her. The way I saw it there, through Robby’s eyes, was enough to wake me from my bed screaming that

night. Its eyes half-open, ears drooped helter-skelter, and its tongue hung lucidly as a pink fleshy extension of its insides, was enough to almost make *me* faint. Robby thought it was funny as hell.

I thought of ways to try and deal with this a little better after that. We tried the military, the police force, and even hunting, anything in which he could kill. My efforts were futile. His speech made the military a no-go for combat-related jobs, same for the police force. They didn't want to risk the liability of something happening on account of slow radio communication. I thought it to be the pretentious assumptions of a taboo condition with which they weren't used to dealing.

To my amazement, Robby managed to keep his nose clean for the better part of a decade. He sure came close a couple times, though. Once he even had his hands up and ready to strangle a woman he'd been walking behind, but it'd dissipated just as fast as it came. To my observers, it'd looked like a moderate case of lightheadedness or mild hysteria.

They weren't all bad though. In fact I considered myself lucky in knowing that there are people out there who suffer from painful migraines on a daily basis. Though, there was no medication for my kind of headache.

But this is about my brother, and I have no intentions of boring you with the prosaic details of my life during the eye of the storm, as I call it. I heard that a hurricane worsens ten-fold once the eye has passed, which seemed at the time a good metaphor for what became of my brother.

To give you the wrap-up, I graduated, got married, decided college was for fools with a dream, and found a nice little niche in the prestigious confines of the Avilman suburbs. My job, my life, everything had settled into a cozy state of bliss which I presumed was everything the

American life should be. I developed a knack for writing and after having my first article published, was offered the chance to write regularly for the *Heralded Script*.

Mom and dad took their newfound freedom from daily parenthood and retired down in Florida. Sanibel Island is a nice place. Ellen and I take the kids to visit as often as we can.

Robby found another outlet for his homicidal inclinations through various forms of martial arts and boxing classes. He even purchased a large Desert Eagle Beretta that he took to the range twice a week for some much needed release. He was getting quite good from what I *saw*. He worked days as a janitor for the very same high school we graduated from in Reed and did nights as a line cook for a small diner we used to buy chocolate malts from.

Then, out of the blue, he dropped off the radar. The eye had passed.

It was a little over two years when it started again. They came in drastic fashion and without warning.

“Meatloaf is made from the privates of swine!” my son, Simon screamed out as he looked at his slab of meat from over the precipice of the dinner table.

“Simon Chapman,” Ellen said.

I was rolling in laughter. “Where’d you hear that little man?”

“Mike Bradshaw, from school. He said it one day when I had a hotdog for lunch.” He licked his lips impatiently the way kids always do when they’re anxious to tell something.

“Hotdogs, bologna, spam and meatloaf! I won’t eat it!”

“Simon,” Ellen said, tittering. “I don’t know where Mike gets his information from, but meatloaf is pure ground beef, not pork.”

“Don’t believe you,” he says, crossing his arms and pouting.

I tried to relieve some of the mealtime tension by giving him the option to eat his sides and he did. But young kids need their protein, so I reasoned a bit more with him.

“Son, you’ve had your mom’s meatloaf before and you liked it. Remember that warm ketchup and spice taste it has,” I said.

It worked splendidly. The succulent image I undoubtedly manifested in his head made that slab too tempting to resist. Then I thought, *hotdogs at school? The crap they feed these kids nowadays.*

And that’s when it came, flushed in crimson. And then the headaches, but they’d increased two fold. I’d forgotten how much they hurt.

“Jonah, oh god not again,” Ellen said. She got up from the dinner table, dabbed her napkin in a glass of ice water and placed it on my forehead.

I felt my head jerking side to side as the vision played before my eyes like a live feed from a camcorder.

It was a woman. That much I knew for sure. She looked blond, but it was hard to tell with all the red discoloration. She was on a sidewalk, hedges overgrown on a fence line. There was whistling, *do wah ditty ditty dum ditty do.* Not her, though. It was Robby who was whistling. She didn’t seem to notice, just strolled callously toward her destination. A knife emerged, big and broad, maybe a Bowie. Those are awfully big. Robby grabbed her hair. She screamed, but no one heard. Probably nighttime, but I couldn’t tell with all the red. Then he hacked at her jugular, not slit, hacked. He hacked until the crevice in her neck looked like it had been gnawed at by

rats. The woman fell limp on the sidewalk and a rich semicircle of molasses-rich fluid crept outward.

Robby was playing with it, lathering his hands in her as though it were an herbal soap. He was laughing hysterically, and I knew then that he'd gone off the bend.

Ellen comforted me that night, and I had to take two sedatives to fall asleep.

I was in a pickle you might say. The unyielding love I had for my brother had kept me from turning him in thus far. It was three days before the next episode came, this time in my sleep. And by then I'd made up my mind.

It doesn't look the same under closed eyelids. It was as if two paintbrushes had swept down and covered the right halves of my eyes in one shot. I believe my body thought I was dreaming because my muscles contracted into knots of high tension wire. I awoke gasping and devoid of breath. Ellen was startled out of her slumber almost as fast. Her hands ran the course of my chest with graceful rapport, but nothing could break me of my comatose state.

This time it was a family. Robby sought to indulge himself with an entire family. Even in my trance, I could feel the strips of tears running down my face, tickling me. And I watched, head throbbing numbingly, while my brother stalked them like a predator as they slept.

The father was first. Robby cleaved his head with an axe and quickly turned on the mother. The silver wedge skimmed her leg as she took evasive action. The woman looked like she worked out and was fairly limber. Robby was making a sound like sulking or laughter, and I knew he could see me watching him. But my love for him was no longer enough to hold him back. He was at his end.

“Jonah, snap out of it,” Ellen said, patting me on the cheeks.

I wanted to break out of it so badly. I wanted to phone the police and let them know that there was a murder in progress, but I couldn't. The vision was so strong, so intensely powerful and paralyzing that I couldn't move.

It wasn't until afterward, after the parents and the two boys in bed were ended that I was able to move again. I got my yellow pages and wept as I flipped through, searching for the number to the Reed County Sherriff's office. They thought I was mad calling from another part of the country, but one thing I knew for sure was that they didn't take murders lightly there.

I knew it worked because later that evening came the red flash again. This time it was Robby, making a stand in the middle of a neighborhood lawn. I knew he'd linger to toy with the bodies. I was counting on it. There were three police cars in front of him, pistols and shotguns all at the ready. They warned him twice, but he didn't listen. He raised his knife with fortitude, not even getting above the crane of his neck before they opened fire. After a quick display of powdery fireworks, like footsteps in sand beneath the water, the red flickered out as if someone had just pulled the plug between us.

Robby's funeral was a week following the showdown in the front yard. I recall my dad saying something that stuck with me to this very day.

"Well, at least we know he was happy," dad said nonchalantly, then kissed Robby's forehead while placing a white rose on his lapel.

Mom never said a word. As a matter of fact, I think I cried more than her that day, though I never really showed it. I soaked the white collared shirt of my brother's burial uniform with my salty tears. "I'm sorry, Robby," I said, thinking things might've been different if only I'd just stuck by him.

I don't think it was until today, as I sit here in my balsawood rocker, staring at the little incandescent bit of moonlight shining through the steeple of my attic window, that I fully understood what my father meant. How in all that's holy could someone like Robby have been happy with what he was? But the answer was simple. He did what he loved, what he craved. What he loved was ending things; what he craved was blood. Even after his death he craves it. My parents knew it somehow. Maybe they've known all along.

I thought the episodes were over: severed the way a light separates itself from darkness. I was wrong. The red returned just a couple days after the burial, and what I saw was distilled horror in its bleakest form.

I was behind the white glow of my laptop screen, writing the opinionated rumors of Avilman's voice on underage tobacco and alcohol consumption for the *Heralded Script*, when in my head came the most painful twisting in my temples. I still bear the claw marks from my nails digging into my cheeks.

Apparently viewings of the afterlife come with due cost to one's health.

I saw a plain of deep cavernous canyons rising into tall, rigid plateaus. There were structures of gold which held engravings of some ancient lost language and that wound like a staircase around the eroded trunks of the highlands. Grand chamber doors opened and closed with nothing but shadows sifting through. Gargantuan leaflets of flame rose from the darkest pits of every valley and gorge.

A figure approached. He was like a man, only nude and lacking any endowments to render him officially of any particular sex. He was well-muscled. And when I noticed the thin

strips of fatty deposits between the thick strands of muscle fiber, I knew he was skinless. His eyes were two opaque marbles inside his head, lacking any humanistic quality with which to give them life. He spoke in tongues and seemed to be conversing with my brother. Then, he congenially held out a clawed hand to Robby's, as if to shake it, and that was it. I know now that it was a deal negotiating the conditions of my brother's return to the physical world. I came to, shaking and digging into my cheeks, drawing half-moon shapes of blood.

I suppose now I knew what was going on in that accursed place that could've only been Hell. Just a day later, I awoke from my lunchtime nap in the post office running through an endless plain of glacial hills. I saw faces, swollen and purple faces frozen in the snow. They littered the landscape like the interminable remains of a battlefield.

Religions differ, but I was certain that this was a different level of Hell, one meant for a distinguished band of sinners. It served only as a passage for my brother now.

He was on the move.

I believe he's coming for me now. I believed it the minute I saw him depart the underworld and take into a different body. Now the red veil comes through the eyes of a stranger. The thing that spoke to Robby was counting on his proclivity for blood to play in some sick manipulative game it had planned. I think it knew that it was me who ratted Robby out, and it used it to turn him against me.

The wife and kids are at a motel as I write this. I sit here now, in my balsawood rocker with my rifle on one side and a Bible on the other. I felt this was a good way to pass the time. For if I don't make it through this, at least there will be some kind of record. And I just want to

say *for* that record that I loved my brother Robby, have and always will. I would have done anything for him, anything for blood.

I think this is a good place to stop. I can see my house now, veiled in red.