

—THE HEALING HANDS OF REVEREND WAINWRIGHT

by Geoffrey L. Mudge

Another night, another show, another chorus of cheers and applause and unbridled joy that we will never hear. In the darkness and silence, only the rumble of the diesel engine roaring to life lets us know our part has been played for the evening. This night's showcase was relatively slow and tame. The only serious injury to come from the affair was a dislocated shoulder suffered by the blind kid, Augie. The sickening sound, somewhere between a pop and a crunch as muscle and bone tore apart, still echoes in my mind. There's not much to listen to in here, and the few sounds that aren't screams tend to linger a little longer than they should. The only other noise is the wet, hacking cough coming from Juliana's corner. I think she may have contracted emphysema or TB, but she won't live long enough to be bothered much by whichever.

However, experience, the harsh mistress that she is, has taught me that the good shows are tragedies in disguise. Having been here the longest, I've seen the patterns through a dozen of them. Through pure luck or divine intervention, I've survived longer than all those that were here when I joined. Most of the kids travelling with me now were picked up in Memphis and are generally unfamiliar with the ins and outs of the business. In my time with the Reverend I have found that slow nights are almost inevitably followed by horrendous ones. Those nights, the anguished cries reverberating in my skull make me long for the cavernous silence between one and another.

Joseph, chained closest to the heavy door, thinks he heard talk of moving to Wichita. Isn't that peachy? Kansas. The heart of the Dust Bowl. The land of polio and starvation. A visit to the festering wound spewing the misery that has been slowly eating America's soul may not end well for some of us. Frankly, I expect some deaths before we finish, and there are so few of us left. When I came in, there were a couple dozen of us, but now there are only six, and we all know the carnivorous tumor in Ralph's brain will soon finish him.

Though it's been quite awhile since we picked anyone up, I couldn't say just how long. Time is extremely subjective with no way to track night and day. The occasional feeding and the never ending shows are the only ways we have to measure the passage of time. In those terms, it's been twelve shows since Memphis, how long

GEOFFREY L. MUDGE

that is in normal people time, there's no way to know.

To be honest, the anticipation is almost worse than the performance. Almost. It's just so damn hard to sit in the hot darkness, afraid to speak to the only people who could ever understand this ordeal. But what would we say to each other? Speak words of hope that ring false and hollow the moment they leave one's lips? Talk of escape when metal and leather and mal-nutrition make it impossible? No, there are no words left in any of us. All the pleadings and prayers are spent. There is nothing for us but the sweltering silence of this dark oven.

And the show.

The goddamn show, it must go on.

* * *

The small fire spewed hot sparks and ash into the night sky as Abel hurled a fresh log into its embers.

"Hey! Watch out, you stupid bastard!" Lot yelled, beans and pork juice dribbling down his chin. Abel replied only by hanging his head and stumbling sullenly out of the weakening ring of light. Lot wiped his grimy mouth on his leather gloves. "Aw, hell," he muttered, "I guess I better go apologize to the big lout."

"Leave him be, Lot. He'll find a pile of dirt or a dead animal and he'll forget all about it." Adam's soft but powerful voice drew a hushed burst of laughter from the small group of shabby-looking men.

"Well, you're the boss," Lot sighed as he sat back down. "If you think he'll be ok, I'll get back to dinner."

"He'll be fine. Now finish that grub up quick, boys. We got a lot of work in front of us and you know the Rev hates to get behind schedule." Adam inhaled a last mouthful of beans and tossed the can toward the newly invigorated fire. The rest of the tired men quickly did the same. After much groaning and consternation, they eventually began to shamble toward the heavily loaded trucks.

"Where is the good Reverend this evening?" Jeremiah inquired as softly as he could without belying his utter dread of the holy man. "He didn't want to share in the vittles?"

"My sincere apologies for not joining in the sumptuous feast this evening. I acquired other accommodations and dined alone in the confines of my trailer." The reverend's deep, haunting voice and soft southern drawl crawled through the cool, dusty night air from behind the group of men. "Although, I must admit that I am slightly miffed that my presence was not inquired into until after the 'vittles' were no more than memories and grease stains." The last few words oozed from Wainwright's lips like a foul sludge and sent chills through the spines of every man who heard.

"Reverend! I . . . uh . . . that is . . . I mean . . ." Jeremiah tried to stammer some sort of coherent response, but as he turned to face the Reverend, their gazes locked and all his words seemed to slip away. Wainwright's eyes were all white with the exception of the pitch black pupils which pulsed and pinwheeled like a kaleidoscope. His direct stare was enough to make even the most resolute of men whimper, and Jeremiah involuntarily stumbled back a few steps.

The Reverend smiled coldly at his flock of miscreants. "Come now, dear Jeremiah, I merely sought to have a little jest at your expense. I am, all joking aside,