He Speaks Fear Not

When he speaks, he speaks, “Fear not.”

“Fear not the ignorance in your icons,”

His clear, grey eyes gleam as he captivates the crowd.

“Nor your icons made of mud,”

The cross around his neck bounces in and out of his shirt with his big gestures and theatrical body language.

“Fear not the muddiness of justice,”

He is tall and charismatic with a rugged handsomeness on the upside of middle aged, though he moves around effortlessly.

“Nor the justice in your violence,”

His voice, commanding and confident, rolls across the open field to the crowd in front of him.

“Nor the violence so sweet,”

As David speaks to them, the ugly, black dog at his feet thrashes against its short chain, spiked to the ground.

“Fear not the sweetness in your poisons,”

The slow drop sunset hangs above the brown and red tree line behind David, silhouetting him in a haze of orange light as the crowd squints and covers their eyes to catch a better glimpse of him.

“Nor the poisons in your blood,”

Except for Michael. The teenager stands off to the side of the crowd, slightly behind the giant oak tree. The oak tree’s largest low branch cuts into the sky in front of Michael, just blocking out the sun, giving him a clearer view of David spewing his sermon.

“Nor the blood in your streets,”

Haggadoren stands with the crowd, but on the far side, away from Michael’s end. He is a solidly built, aging man with a cross around his neck that does not shift as he nods along with each line David speaks.

“Fear not your streets paved in hate,”

Uri, like Michael, not quite old enough to be a man, stands at the end of the group, opposite Haggadoren and closest to the gap between Michael and the crowd. He just stands there with his usual odd demeanor with the sun in his blank eyes and a slight smile on his face, almost like he finds the whole world amusing, but only a little bit, and not worth his full attention.

“Nor the hate in other’s eyes,”

A group of butterflies is called a kaleidoscope.

Little Bobby Watts watches through the slits in his fingers, barely seeing anything from the center of the crowd. His mother tries to put her hand on his chest and pull him to her thigh, but he shrugs her off and strains to see better. Little Bobby Watts watches quietly and intently, which are two words rarely associated with him. He usually is bouncing around, chattering about whatever floats in and out of his mind. Just this week every time he saw Michael, he would shout out names of animal groups he has been learning. A group of geese is a called a gaggle. Michael enjoyed these little facts. But he didn’t tell Bobby since he normally found Bobby very annoying.

It's a cloud of grasshoppers.

A kaleidoscope of butterflies.

“Nor the fear in those eyes’ wake,”

The dog at David’s feet barks and growls as it tries to free itself. Michael sees its misshapen ear, burned horribly long ago. He sees its oddly twisted tail, caked at the base in dried feces. As it thrashes and the light catches it just right, he sees through the matted, patchy fur to the scars underneath. Scars of slices and chunks, punctures and tears. It lets loose a barrage of barks toward Michael, as if to defend itself from his close inspection. There’s anger in the barks . . . fear and shame.

“Fear not the wake of one’s anger,”

Michael looks away, ashamed of himself for studying its scars, probably the worst moments of the dog’s life, road mapped on display across its body.

“Nor the sleep of peace,”

He looks to the crowd and finds Laura bundled a little too tightly for the weather. She stands with her father, holding her hand just above her eyes like most everybody else, but instead looks at the ground.

“Nor that peace’s quiet sorrow,”

It’s a pride of lions.

They follow David for his faith. They follow him for his gift of sight. They follow him because they know God whispers in his ear. They are here today because he wished it. They did as they were told.

The crowd gathered an hour before sunset.

“Fear not a little sorrow,”

Haggadoren brought the dog,

“For those fearless . . . “

and Michael brought the stones.

". . . a better tomorrow."

Three hundred or so stones, David had said, about the size of apples. He told Michael to make the pile by the oak tree and wait. Stones the size of apples are not easy to find. He went through the woods. Around the houses in the community. The parks. The playgrounds. Even down by the river on the opposite side of town. The river David would do the baptisms in. The river David baptized him in. The river where Carly's body was found just before Mother's Day.

It's a flock of birds, but also a flock of bats.

Three hundred or so stones are heavy. Michael had to make several trips to lay the pile in front of the oak tree. He would pack his backpack with as many as he could fit, ride his bike over to the oak tree, dump them off and go back to collecting. It was taking hours. But finally, after liberating a few last rocks from behind the gas station he thought he had enough. 309. That was his count. That should do it.

300 or so stones by 3pm and wait. 3pm was hours ago. Michael sat with his stones; unsure what David had wanted with them. David's plans were always a mystery. So he sat. And waited.

The shadows stretched out as the sun slipped down more, coloring the field in a warmer, oranger light. Michael laid on the grass and fashioned a pillow out of his empty backpack and let thoughts float in and out of his mind as he lay back. A few flies buzzed around but he paid no attention to them.

A group of Oysters is called a bed.

He drifted in and out of sleep. Science homework still not done. Driver's Ed class tomorrow should be fun. Maura is in his Driver's Ed class. Maura. That day at the mall.

"God doesn't want your soul in a cage!" Michael was maybe 100 feet away from Carly when she screamed that to her friends in the mall just after Easter. She screamed it a few times. Maura and Leanne were with her that day and they immediately distanced themselves from her. They looked genuinely scared to be associated with the outburst. Then she yelled to Maura and Leanne they were sheep and weak and God's plan doesn't have to always be David's plan. By this time, the whole mall was watching her screaming at them. To this day he doesn't know what they were talking about that started the whole scene up. He just heard the end of it. Carly probably didn't even know he was there.

It's a watch of nightingales.

David finally showed up alone just after dinner walking up with a chain and spike and mallet. Dinner would have been nice, Michael thought. He said hi to him, but David just waved him off as if this was not the time for small talk. A hello would have been nice, too. But David was all business right now. Focused. On a mission. Michael watched him hammer the spike into the ground through the short, maybe three foot chain. He watched Haggadoren get out of his

pickup truck and lumber over bringing a large black dog, growling and biting at his legs, as he kicked it off him with every step. Then, putting his full weight on it, he pinned the dog to the ground making the flies on it leap off and buzz around as David attached the chain to its leash.

After attaching the chain, he swatted a few flies away and walked over to Michael and told him thank you for this. Thank you for your faith. Tonight will be a night to be remembered and he's glad Michael is a part of this. He talked about how proud he was of him and how far he thinks Michael could take the church. How he held a special place in the church. David has repeatedly told him how bright a light he was, and God had immense plans for him. Where once it had exhilarated Michael, now it felt like a script Davd was reading from. A script Michael had memorized.

David stood in the warm light with the dog practically at his feet as he went on about Michael's prophetic future. Then out of nowhere, one of the words Carly used to joke about kept popping in his head,

propaGodnda,

-was that it? Something like that. Then Haggadoren walked back to the pick up truck and David said a quick "See you soon" to Michael and simply turned and walked into the tree line, leaving him with a kind of crazy dog and a giant pile of stones.

What's going on here?

PropaGodnda. He didn't like Carly's know it all attitude and the condescending looks she would give off. But she was creative and also a gifted artist. Whatever she drew showed off her brilliance in balancing light and shadows so perfectly but never overpowering in her work. All of her work seemed to always have a deep sun in the sky which accented the shadows, though Michael was never really sure if it was supposed to be sunset or sunrise. Knowing Carly's lack of optimism, he assumed sunset. Even her second-place-in-the-county self portrait was amazing yet still had the underlying sadness most of her artwork had. But Michael did find that self portrait pretty much perfect, from her straining under the weight, to the light shadow her headphones gave at her temples, to the cross cracking into pieces on her back with the splinters forming a trail behind her. And the sunset-probably-not-sunrise in the sky.

People started to come. They walked up having their everyday conversations. Shaking hands. Hugging. A few had coffees and sodas. David was still out of sight as the people came together to form a crowd. Curious looks at the dog put a bit of restraint on the usual congenial attitude. Haggedoren positioned them in a wide arc about twenty feet in front of the dog.

Michael stayed to the right of the crowd, by the tree. He got a few waves hello but didn't go over to them. Uri walked up alone, no handshakes or hugs, and took a spot on the edge of the crowd. He nodded a hello to Michael who nodded back.

The crowd quieted quickly as David came walking out of the woods. It was a good entrance.

David bathed in the silence for a moment until a low growl came from the dog.

Then David spoke “fear not.”

During David’s “fear not” the dog would thrash and pull tight on its short chain tethering it to the ground as it struggled to break free. Occasionally it would lunge for David’s leg but its neck gets snapped back violently by the collar. Falling back on the ground, it would roll frantically in frustration. The chain seems a little too short, Michael thought. When the dog tries to run, it pulls it parallel to the ground, so the spike stays solid. But when the dog lunges up, and the dog’s body is longer than the chain, the chain pulls up, and in doing so, pulls directly up on the spike. Michael notices this but decides it’s best not to interrupt David in moment’s like this. David probably drove the spike deep enough to keep it in place. It’s probably fine.

After his “fear not,” David takes a step farther away and asks Haggadoren to lead them all in a prayer of life, thanks and praise. The adults bow their heads and the children kneel in the grass. Some of the teenagers take a knee; some bow their heads as well. Michael and Uri bow their heads. Laura kneels.

As the prayer ends and the “amens” ricochet through the group, David is now standing with them, shaking hands with the men and hugging the women and children.

“Thank you for coming.”

“I’m sorry you had to come out tonight.”

“The Lord appreciates your faith.”

His salutations are more reserved than usual and there is a somber look in his eye. But he still radiates that unquestionable confidence and strength and charisma. He moves through the crowd with an electricity, making a point to touch every person there. While the crowd’s eyes dart between the dog and David, Michael notices Laura put her hand out to David, stopping his hug. He awkwardly shakes her hand and, as he moves on to Laura’s father, “always good to see you, Frank,” she wraps her arms around herself and slinks to the back of the crowd.

A group of seals is called a harem.

David knelt down to Bobby Watts’ level and patted him on the head, telling him how glad he his here with them tonight.

With the attention off it for a moment, the dog just lies on the ground and stares off toward the forest watching the orange of the sun slip down slow as the shadow from the tree line inches closer.

“I appreciate all your hard work,” he tells Michael as he pats him on the back, and then tells him a little quieter, “you’re the brightest star in our sky.”

Michael nodded with the same smile he gives every time he hears that now. But his thoughts weren’t of his place in the church’s sky. It was how hungry he was. And the dog. And

these stupid flies.

A group of dogs is a pack.

But a single dog . . . just a dog.

David then takes his place next to the animal and it springs back to life in a volley of rapid barks and desperate, empty bites.

“Thank you all for coming out tonight. I wish with all my heart you didn’t have to be here.”

He pauses for a moment for the tension.

“We stand out in this world because of how close we stand to God. Our good hearts, our good deeds put us there. But it is because of our good standing with God . . . that Satan walks with us tonight.”

Then he pauses again to heighten the drama.

He sees the questions in their eyes.

David tells them he knows it’s hard to hear. Hard to believe, even. But he speaks every Sunday morning about the devil and his tricks and temptations. How their church, their special, special church is a target for Satan and his demons. How the brightest spot on earth would attract the darkest beasts. And through their prayers of faith and sacrifice, they had remained safe for so long. Until four days ago.

He pauses again and watches the question in their eyes turn to concern.

He tells them of how he dreamt a week ago of the eye of the Beast shifting its gaze across the world to find them. How a few days later this thing at his feet began coming out of the woods and into their community. It stalked them and howled in the night. One night he and Haggadoren trapped it, at first to just be rid of it. But then the truth was revealed to him in a divine moment of clarity. This dog like animal is an agent of Satan himself. David tells them how he and Haggadoren prayed and meditated on what to do with this thing. As they did it was more and more clear that this demon from Hell itself had a mission. To hurt and spy and corrupt. To spread Satan’s foulness with his soulless monster. He tells them of the sounds it made when they captured it, sounds he’s never heard an animal make.

“This is a beast from the Beast.”

He pauses again and watches the concern in their eyes turn to fear.

“Now . . . fear not. Tonight, we will rebuke the Beast.”

David tells them how in a war of pure good and pure evil there is no clemency. This creature has a black void for its soul, and it has to be destroyed. But this thing that came to strike at their community, must be sent back to Hell by that same community.

He didn’t come for just me. He came for us. Our families. Our church. He tells them that together they must show Lucifer that they will send back each of his agents of evil, one at a time if need be.

Rebuke the Beast.

He goes on about hope and life, dark and light, strength and right.

Rebuke the Beast.

He tells them to resist Satan’s grasp.

Rebuke the Beast.

Destroy the Devil’s puppets.

Rebuke the Beast.

We pray as one. We stand as one. We will vanquish the evil in front of us as one!

Rebuke the Beast!

“Together!”

They cheer as one.

Haggadoren yells out how the devil will not take what they have spent so long building.

They applaud.

He yells how the devil won’t taint their good souls.

The crowd begins to shout out to the dog,

“Go burn in Hell!”

“How dare you come here!”

“Go back to the devil!”

David claps his hands above his heads, driving them into even more of a frenzy of clapping and cheering and shouting.

Michael takes a few steps back, not wanting to be between them and the stones.

He’s seen David rev up a congregation to the yelling and screaming. But the quiet reflection will come any moment.

Haggadoren walks the back of the crowd like a coach, cheering them on, praising them and cursing the beast.

David stops clapping and watches as the fear in their eyes turns to hatred.

A group of raccoons is called a gaze.

The dog paws at the spike.

He lets them go on for a moment, and then waves his arms down to quiet them.

The dog gnaws at the chain.

Cue the quiet reflection, Michael thinks. For the first time, Michael finds him more theatrical than biblical. He's playing the crowd. Theocratic theatrics. Another of Carly's phrases.

Transfixed, they silently try to watch him with their pinprick pupils or turn quickly to blink the spots away.

"Though I know in my heart this is what must be done, we should not take this lightly. We are still taking a life today. It will be a strike at the heart of the devil himself, but it will still be taking a life. And this has weighed heavily on me the last two days."

Haggadoren says quietly with his head down, yet loud enough for all to hear that "it has, it has." Michael wonders if Haggedoren even realizes there is a giant fly on his shaved head. It seems almost comically out of place to him. He waits for it to fly off, but it just doesn't. He smirks as he tries to hold back a smile, then his eyes drop a bit and he sees Haggadoren staring back at him firmly and he looks away feeling caught. Back to the dog. Like everyone else.

"I want you all to know that I will be the first one to cast a stone. We must do this together, but I want the weight of this to fall on me as much as possible. May the Lord let the light of what we do here today shine on through the ages. And let Satan never forget this day. The day we vanquished his unholy brute from this world. From our world!"

In the middle of the cheers and applause, David told them to gather their stones.

A group of alligators is called a congregation.

The lower the sun sank, the closer the shadow of the trees came.

Haggadoren had two stones. Most people grabbed three or four. A few took more, like Bobby Watts and his mother. A few didn't grab any, like Laura. Michael took three, fearing any less would disappoint David on some level, but not really expecting to have to use them anyway. Uri took one.

The autumn trees rich in color seemed almost on fire when combined with the sunset's rich oranges and yellows and reds.

"This evil this Beast has let loose upon us. It is a cancer.

A cancer rampant throughout the world.

A cancer of evil.

I say tonight we have found a cure.

A cure with hope!

A cure with pride!

A cure with strength!

A cure with will!

We have found that cure!

And the cure . . . is kill."

David's stone flew with force, but it was not full power. He seemed to sacrifice power for accuracy, not wanting to miss the first shot. It collided with the creature's right side, and the beast spun to face David and bared its teeth. David's hand shot up in the air, cueing the crowd to wait, manifesting the moment's tension. He held life and death in the palm of his hand and squeezed out endless seconds, relishing in the power of the moment.

Michael was still unsure if this was a test or not. It was not uncommon for David to bring people right to the edge and then call off his orders, saying the orders were a simple test of faith, to see if his people would really carry them out and then Sunday morning he would retell the story of Abraham and Isaac. He had brought the crowd to their bloodlust, they had their stones in hand and the dog could not be more helpless. Surely any minute David would raise his hands and say "God bless us all" or something like that, and everyone would exhale and talk about what almost-

David dropped his arm and the first salvo of rocks began. A dozen or so rocks flew from all spots in the group. Some rocks missed completely, some bounced off the ground and over the beast, and some hit. They hit in the creature's ribs and shoulders and two bounced off its head. It howled in anger, frustration, pain. Bobby Watts' first stone came closer to Michael than it did the dog. Michael took another step away.

A group of woodpeckers is a descent.

More rocks came flying out of the crowd. They smashed into its chest and side as the dog spun around the leash, frantic for cover. A well-thrown rock left a gash on its forehead as the creature shook off the impact and barked in vain. Two more glancing stones tore open its left side. Another struck the demon's right front leg with an audible "snap" and the fiend clumsily collapsed on its hindquarters. It yelped in horror as the stones continued with a viciousness, tearing flesh, breaking bones and bursting organs. It rose up on its hind legs pulling wildly at the leash, yelping and barking in a panic.

Michael threw his first stone over the top of the dog, missing it. He thought he saw David cast a disapproving look his way, but he didn't return the gaze. He took his next rock and threw it intentionally at the ground just before the dog, expecting it to bounce up and over the dog. His stone bounced off the ground at a low angle and into the dog's face, popping out its eye in a gush

of clear fluid. The dog shrieked and leapt, pulling up on the spike. That wasn't . . . He didn't mean . . . the wave of guilt that washed over him immediately was almost paralyzing.

Another stone cracked into its broken front leg and the beast dropped and immediately put its paw to its empty eye socket. It barked and growled with audible hatred at the next flurry of rocks that carved gashes out of its side and head. Where there was once a dog, was now just fury and fear in a breaking body.

Michael, horrified, willed his attention away from the dog. Looking over the crowd, he saw Old Man Benson throw his last rock. He saw little Bobby Watts hurl another stone with the overreaching arm of a child. He saw mothers and grandmothers throwing stones. He saw Haggadoren smiling with his hands empty. He saw David looking at the dog, almost visibly willing the pain upon it. He saw Laura in the back, with her eyes bouncing from the ground to the dog. And he saw Uri, with his one stone still in his hand, just watching with a bit of curiosity. Uri may as well have been watching a bird nest.

Finally, he looked back at the dog... bleeding . . .broken. It's angry barks now just high-pitched yelps. Michael closed his eyes for a prayer of mercy for the dog, but then reopened them when he realized he didn't know what he was praying for. There is no coming back from a beating like this. Mercy for this animal would no longer be freedom, no longer be life. Mercy, now, could only be death. And Michael had one more stone.

As he took aim, another stone sailed flat into the nose of the creature, tearing it, and in an instant blood poured out. The dog wobbled on its broken front legs and pulled again with all of its hate and terror upward against the chain.

Michael aimed for its head and muttered quietly, "God forgive me," as he threw the stone with all his might. But Michael sacrificed accuracy for power and the stone bounced off the ground and hit the dog in the throat. It again thrashed straight up with a howl and in doing so pulled the spike out of the ground.

It was free.

For a moment, the stoning stopped, the crowd just as surprised as the dog that it was free. Michael's first thought was the exhilaration that it could now escape. His second thought was the worry that David saw who threw the stone that had inadvertently freed the beast.

It was free.

The beast lunged for David, but he was too far and after such a beating, it could only do so slowly and awkwardly. David, held his hands up to make sure no one threw anymore and waited for the lumbering, broken dog to make its way to him. Though it probably only took ten or fifteen seconds, it seemed like forever. It growled and tried to bite David's leg with its mangled jaw. David simply stepped back, but it kept coming. He tried to push it back with his foot on its snout, but the dog slipped past and sunk its teeth into David's calf. It was a half-hearted bite at most that barely drew blood. Before it could clamp down on him any more Haggadoren came out

of nowhere and kicked it hard in the ribs. The creature flopped down on the ground, defenseless and David scrambled up with a look of vengeance and kicked it twice in the side and a final kick into it mouth, exploding blood and teeth out the other side. Then David spit,

something, -was it a fly? - out of his mouth with disgust and anger. It wasn't often the crowd saw David out of control. But that fast moment, from the gentle bite on his leg to him spitting out whatever flew in his mouth, was one of those moments. David backed off to compose himself and let the crowd finish it.

Michael watched as what was a battle between good and evil just became a bunch of people torturing a dog. The final onslaught of stones began.

The dog tried one last time to stand and its left front leg, unable to support weight, broke and the bottom bone tore through the skin of its upper leg, sticking out, jagged and bloody.

A stone came lightly from the center of the crowd and Bobby Watts yelled out, "Go back to Hell!"

A group of crows is called a murder.

The dog just lay there now, it's will finally broken along with its body. Legs shattered, back fractured and its shoulders chipped away, it could no longer move. It simply lay there struggling to breath . . . waiting to die.

But when a group of crows are feeding, then they're called a wake.

A soft throw into the dog's side as it lay there and Bobby Watts yelled out,

"No Satan here!"

Little Bobby still had a small pile by his mother, and he would run back, pick one up and throw it at the dog, yelling at it.

He did these three more times and each time he moved closer to make a better hit. The dog, crushed and hopeless, just lay there, not even flinching with each of the child's weak blows.

"We're not evil!" he shouted with his next throw as everyone else looked on.

A few people began to clap.

"Bad dog!" and another stone.

That got some laughs and more clapping from everyone.

Bobby Watts, loving the attention, threw the next one harder and closer, yelling "Bad dog!" again.

A group of ravens is an unkindness.

The crowd just watched as the ten-year-old kept throwing his rocks and cursing the devil until finally David stepped between Bobby Watts and the wrecked beast. He raised his hands in

the air and told everyone how “Bobby Watts sure does hate Satan.”

The group laughed and clapped at that. The little boy stood with his stone in his hand and looked disappointed that his celebrity was over and trudged back to his mother.

“I cast the first stone and I will cast the last stone.”

David picked up a massive stone and began to carry it with both hands over to the dog.

Michael could only see the top of the dog, as it lay on its side, defeated in the field with a smear-trail of blood and gore between the dog and the spike. He could see its newly mangled ear and the cuts and gouges all over its skin. He was amazed at how much damage they had done in such a short time. The sun was now sinking over the trees and the long shadow was almost upon the dog as it panted puffs of crimson on the grass.

David spoke while carrying his large rock toward the creature, “We have done what God wished of us today. We have taken Hell’s creature and sent it back to the Devil himself. There will be no-“

One last stone sliced through the air and crashed into the top of the dog’s skull. The dog dropped limp instantly.

Everyone turned to look at Uri, who simply shrugged and said he hadn’t gotten his turn.

David opened his mouth but seemed not to be able to decide what to say. Then Haggadoren started laughing and the rest joined in, except for Uri, who had said it matter-of-factly and not meant it as a joke. David uncomfortably joined in the laughter and nodded a good-natured nod toward Uri, veiling his look of contempt.

Then David lifted the large stone he had above his head-

“The cure is kill”

-and crashed it down on the head of the already dead beast.

As David walks through the crowd congratulating them all, Haggadoren casually walks up to Michael and quietly tells him without looking, “Why don’t you go get something to eat. Then you need to come back. You’ll burn this thing tonight. I’ve got a bunch of firewood in my truck for you. Then bury its bones. I’ll leave a shovel. He thinks you did good today. I hope he’s right. Show me he’s right.”

It seemed almost surreal to go from that into the kitchen at his house. His mom as already asleep, so he moved quietly. There was pizza in the fridge still. He heated up two slices but he barely got through one.

He remembered a conversation with David where David had said the pizza place in the mall was a racket. It was months ago and they were in David’s office. His office door was always open, so Michael knocked and David waved him in. Laura coming out closed door Michael

started on his story and though David was shuffling papers and checking his phone but still found the time to tell Michael his thoughts on pizza from the mall.

“Pizza, the cheapest food in the world to make, and they charge like $8 a slice. It’s cheap dough, cheap sauce and some cheese. It’s like a 5,000 percent profit or something like that. Practically theft. I mean, come on, is the pizza really that good?”

Michael just shrugged.

“What did you need today Michael? I’m planning a lot for tomorrow’s sermon and I don’t think you want to tell me what you had for lunch yesterday. So, you were at the mall, having pizza, and what happened?”

“Well, it’s about Carly . . . “

Three weeks later Carly tried to swim across the river at night, alone, and drown.

It was spring and the water from the mountains that fed the river was very cold. She probably thought she could make it across. But it was too cold. Got the best of her.

The church counselors said it was an accident. But then they also said with no note, or previous suicide attempts, it had to be ruled an accident. And like that, Carly’s death was an accident with an asterisk in everyone’s head. That seed was planted. They said accident. But they whispered suicide.

Such a tragedy. But she was a troubled soul. She’s with God now. She’s at peace.

Michael went back to the oak tree.

Finally left alone with the carcass in the dark, Michael ran his hand over its body. It felt less like a dog and more like a thick, sticky bag of broken branches.

As stomach churning as it was to him, he ran his hand over it’s body. He let it tell its story to him one last time. In a tangible way. The flies were upon it. He felt the old scars and the new gashes. He felt the wetness of its bloodied fur stain his hand in the blackness. He felt its twisted, broken legs and its misaligned jaw moving loosely in his hand, like a door hanging by a single hinge. He ran his finger across the empty eye socket.

There was no coming back from a beating like this.

He dragged the dog on top of the wood pile. A fly bounced off of his eye and Michael jerked his head back from it.

He had set up the pyre with the paper and kindling on the bottom, the wood from Hagadoren’s truck next and now finally the dog atop of that. The flies were everywhere . . . in his hair . . . covering the dog.

Michael put a few more pieces of wood on the fire.

The flies kept buzzing. They were swarming around him and before he knew it, the flies, in a frenzy, were upon him as much as the dead dog.

He squirted lighter fluid around the funeral pyre and struck a match and backed off quickly smacking the flies off his head and face.

It burned blue at first but then quickly turned orange as the flame took hold. Michael just sat and stared into the flame of the fire with only blackness where the tree line should be.

A group of flies is called a business.