

The Good Times Are Killing Me

To kill a man at the end of the world...

They gave him Executioner because he had no baggage. Hal Latimer hadn't known the rest like they'd known each other. Said it wouldn't be fair to make kin kill kin. Or friends or neighbors or lovers.

It had only been a year since the ground fell. But when you strip the world down to nothin but three-quarters of a rural Indiana town, time don't play out like the rules say it should.

There was once a time when Burcliff, IN had approximately zero cliffs - a fact they often celebrated. The eastbound truck stop greeted you with a sign that proudly read:

"Welcome to Burcliff - We Ain't Got No Cliffs"

There'd been a limestone quarry that you wouldn't want to stumble into and the old timers'd tell you that the local ill-maintained golf course had some divots so bad you could even dispose of a body. But no cliffs. The origin of the name remains a mystery. Considerin' the state of the world around Burcliff these days, it's fair to say that the truth shall remain a mystery. To put it bluntly, now cliffs are all they got.

A single pillar is what was left of their world. Up top - the

only remaining vestige of civilization - approximately seventy-five percent of their quaint farmin' town. And surroundin' its crumblin' edges was a bottomless pit of an empty void with a circumference of about twenty-five million miles, give or take a few.

The strangest part - or at least one of the stranger parts amongst a sea of strange parts - was that nobody seemed to remember just how it all happened. Folks just went to bed one night with a world intact and woke up with it all to hell. Even the ne'er-do-wells who don't sleep don't remember nothin' about that night. Say they got a hole in their memory - like it'd all been carved out or they'd had some sorta collective time-travelin' glitch.

Some folks got theories. Some say we died and went to heaven. Some say we died and went to hell. Others wanna talk about aliens or alternate dimensions or government experiments. There'd been a predictable wave of faith crises. Folks are awfully fragile when things get uncomfortable.

They did eventually come together for a short while. A bit of harmony proved more useful than fighting with the few they had left. And, you know what? They did pretty good. There ain't never been a decent utopia, but even Burcliffe came close for a while. 'Cept now it's all coming to a bit of a head for ol' Hal Latimer and his apocalypse buddies.

To paint the picture of the dilemma that they found themselves faced up against, let's lay out some basic recent history -

A year back, the ground fell. When the dust and hysteria settled, a few self-important fellas assembled and made some laws- even potential utopias need rules. They looked somethin' like this -

Law ONE: You better not steal nothin. Cause if you want something we'll prolly just give it to ya. And if you do steal, we'll make you farm or sumthin because we definitely gotta do a lotta farmin now.

Law TWO: Don't get too drunk cause drinks are in limited supply and that means you're takin away the drinks from other folks who also wanna get drunk and it ain't fair if they wanna get drunk and they cant cause you got drunk. Punishment's farmin.

Next, one fella proposed a law against stealin' somebody's wife. That one got shot down pretty quick by the wives.

There were a couple other basic livin' laws, with the punishment usually limited to farm-related activity. But the most important one - the cardinal one, if you will, was thus -

Law THREE: Don't kill nobody.

They all agreed on that one. Hard to disagree.

It was Hal Latimer, the stranger who'd only just recently stumbled into the town through sheer ironic fate, who asked the next important question...

"And what if you do?" Lots of murmurin' followed that one.

"Farm twice as much!" shouted Tom Skudder, the town's mostly useless Sheriff's deputy. They all laughed at that one. Hal, however, did not. Neither did the sheriff.

Nobody quite remembers who yelled out the next comment, but stories often attribute it to Keith MacCreedy, the former youth pastor who'd been forced to resign a few years back after he admitted to his middle schoolers on a campin' trip that he thought religion was a crock o' shit and he'd only taken the job 'cause it was the only one in town where he could get paid to play his Gibson guitar on the regular.

"THEY WALK THE PLANK!" said MacCreedy, supposedly. That one drew a whole lotta laughter. And rightfully so. It was a joke after all. But when all was said and done, it was really

the only solution that made any damn sense. So they went with this-

Law THREE: Don't kill nobody. If you do, you gotta walk off a plank over the edge of town. And if you won't, we'll push you.

That last part - that would be the job of the Executioner. That would be Hal.

Surely though - surely they'd never need that plank. Surely Hal would never have to wear that hat. 'Cause who would kill a man at the end of the world?

Hal walked the boy toward the plank. Jeremy Elwood was his name - son of Claire and Hank, who once owned a whole lot of real estate in the before times. Older brother of David and Ruth. All of whom were long gone by now. Crumbled up in the void when the ground fell. Hal couldn't bear to look at the kid's face, who he just now noticed had on a pair of boat shoes that he was pretty sure belonged to him once. They did that now - traded shoes and clothes or whatever they had when they needed somethin' else. He remembers barterin' those loafers for a new pair of slacks when his own got too loose on account of the usual end o' the world weight loss. He spotted a yellow stain on the tip of the left one - a mark left behind from the mustard off his daughter's hot dog years back.

So they *were* his shoes. The ones he had come with. He thought about askin' if he could have them back before Jeremy had to go. But then he figured it'd be a nice little twist of fate for them to end up down below - where Hal probably should have been in the first place.

"Before you take the first step, Jeremy, we got a few things prepared for ya," said the voice of Sheriff Lew Crog from behind them. Hal turned to see Lew and just about the whole town

gathered up around the scene. No one looked too happy to be there.

Lew Crog stepped up to the boy and undid the cuffs around his wrists. “These’ll be of no use to you down there. And I’m supposin’ we’ll prolly need ‘em eventually here since they’re the only ones we got.”

Jeremy smiled at that - just a little one, but notable enough that Lew Crog and a few other folks in town picked up on it. Then Lew cracked a smirk of his own. “Alright, kid. In a bit, we’ll be askin’ if you got any last words. So if you wanna talk it’d be a good idea to start gatherin’ yer thoughts now.”

Jeremy nodded. Both their smiles were gone now. It was all sorta settlin’ back in what was about to go down.

Lew Crog took several steps back, then nodded to Hal. “Alright, Hal. We good.”

Hal took a deep breath. Then met eyes with Jeremy, who at that moment looked a lot younger than his already young age of twenty.

There’d been no script written for this event. They’d always spoken out loud that they’d eventually mock one up, but none of them ever dreamt up that they’d ever put one to use. So when the time came for Hal to officiate this whole thing, he sorta had to wing it. Right then, he was thinkin’ about a friend’s wedding he once officiated - how he’d gone to one of them sites that’ll ordain you for free if you let ‘em put you on an email list. He didn’t have a script for that neither and his friend ended up pretty disappointed in Hal’s predictable ill-preparedness. This wasn’t a weddin’ - but Hal started his speech the same way anyhow-

“We are gathered here today-” There was a well-timed “*Jesus*

Christ, Hal” from somewhere in the crowd. Hal swallowed somethin’ invisible in his throat. Then started over.

“Okay...There isn’t a good way to start what I assume we’re about to go through with here. Yet, we have to start it somehow.” Hal straightened himself up and gathered another thought or two. “A little over a year ago, we all lost just about everything. But then we started something new. And I think we’ve done pretty well. A bunch of us thought it wouldn’t be a bad idea to have a few laws. Not many. But enough to keep us sane. To keep us together. And then we decided that we’d hold pretty fast to these laws. And that turning a blind eye to them would chip away at what little stability we had left.”

Hal bowed his head for this next part. “Last month, Jeremy Elwood came forward and confessed to breaking the most important of these laws. According to Jeremy, on the evening of July 18th of last year, roughly twenty-four hours before the ground fell, he found himself in the middle of an altercation with one Nick Taverner-” Hal looked over to Jeremy, who himself now had his head bowed. “A person who, in Jeremy’s own words, was his oldest, closest friend. As a result of this altercation, Nick ended up dead by Jeremy’s own hands.”

The town was dead quiet by then. Hal continued on - “There’s no way to prove any of this - considering Nick had previously been thought to have fallen away with the rest of the world. But I suppose we’ll just have to go with Jeremy’s word. Since that’s just about all we have left to us.”

A buncha folks were cryin’ by this point - thinkin’ about how none of this made no sense. But then again, they did now live in a world *without* sense.

Jeremy, however, remained mostly composed. Head bowed. Quite still.

Hal motioned to someone through the crowd. “Father Rob from St. Thomas’ has been asked to say a prayer. Jeremy says his mother would have liked that had she been here.” Hal paused at the notion of Jeremy’s mother liking *anything* having to do with her son’s public execution but carried on anyway.

A shockingly thin man came forward. Hal found himself in a state of perplexity at the sight of the man - not because of his frail appearance, but because he wasn’t sure if he’d ever even seen this person before. He wondered how that would even be possible at this point. Judging by the confused mumblin’ in the crowd, he didn’t think he was the only one who felt this way.

Father Rob approached Jeremy and Hal like a lost, nervous puppy. He made a motion to place a hand on the boy’s shoulder, but must have changed his mind at the last second. He reached into his robe instead and pulled out what looked like a script.

“We are gathered here...today-”

“*Jesus Christ*,” muttered Hal under his breath.

Jeremy was smilin’ again.

Father Rob continued “...on a day that none of us would ever dream of imagining up. I did not know Jeremy, but I know that Someone up there loves him. And I pray that whatever hole that exists in this boy’s heart may be filled by the grace of God above-”

“Nobody believes that stuff no more, Rob!” shouted a voice from the crowd. It was Keith MacCreedy, the disgraced Gibson playin’ atheist Youth Pastor.

Deputy Skudder butted in next. “We already know how you feel about the church, Keith. Let the poor man do his thing.”

“Father Rob doesn’t believe none of this shit neither, Tom.”

“Mr. MacCreedy, please!” scoffed Father Rob.

“What, man?! You told me so! When we was playin’ Euchre a

couple months back. Said you was just keepin' up appearances 'til your grandma died of her cancer. Last I checked, she's been dead a few weeks now! Just drop the act already!"

Sheriff Lew Crog was already makin' his way to quiet down MacCreedy when Hal noticed that Jeremy was standin' shoulder to shoulder with him now.

"I'll let you be in my dream if I can be in yours," muttered Jeremy, leanin' in close to Hal.

"Huh?" Hal kept calm. "What is that? Is that supposed to be from something?"

"I think it was Lincoln."

The crowd was hollerin' a bit more now. And Lew Crog tried his damndest to settle them down. Hal didn't pay no mind though. He was distracted by the smirk Jeremy kept on his face.

"You *are* an odd one, kid." Hal saw the mustard stain again. He really did want those shoes. Were they a present from somebody? He couldn't remember. "You're not gonna run again?"

"I ain't goin' nowhere."

"I'll turn a blind eye if you want. I can't see that well without my glasses these days."

"And where are they?"

"Somewhere near the Earth's core, I suppose."

"With the dinosaurs."

"Something like that."

"Jules Verne and shit."

The two of them watched as the chaos began to unfold before them. The cracks were showin' pretty strong that day.

Deputy Skudder threw the first punch.

Keith MacCreedy was already on the ground lookin' pretty

unconscious. Neither Hal nor Jeremy saw how that went down.

Father Rob's collar went flying through the air and soared straight on over the edge of the cliff. Then he ran off screamin' and cheerin' about freedom and family trauma or somethin' along those lines. Couple folks coulda sworn he was fully nekkid by the time he turned the corner - but that may just be a creative liberty they ran with.

Jeremy and Hal didn't have a whole lot to say about it. Call it *shock*, maybe. They supposed it was all bound to happen eventually.

Lew Crog, however, still managed to look pretty stoic amongst it all. The archetypal wise old wizard man, he was.

Jeremy looked over his shoulder toward the plank again. "So am I gonna jump or do you wanna push?"

Hal came back to reality. "Let's figure something out."

Jeremy didn't say nothin' for about a minute. Then he took a step back.

"Just hold up, Jeremy."

Jeremy's smirk faded. He looked at Hal and put one hand over his eye. "Argh, matey."

That was about when Hal got hit in the head with a rock.

Hal Latimer and Jeremy Elwood had crossed paths on three previous occasions.

The first time was four days after the ground fell. A crowd had gathered to move folks who lived near the edges of the cliff inward to vacant homes. Lew Crog had made the wise prediction that some dropoffs around the cliffs weren't quite done fallin' away. Thought it might be best to not hedge their bets and keep the survivors away from some of the more fragile zones.

Hal and Jeremy got paired up on a movin' crew for some

newlyweds with a baby. They shook hands. Hauled a couch across town. Rode the couple's bikes even. But never uttered a word.

At the end of the day, they drank stale soda on the porch while the sunset.

Jeremy exchanged the first words. "Can't tell if you're lucky or unlucky."

"How's that?" asked Hal.

"Stranger pulls up into town the day before the literal rest of the world collapses. Nobody knows you. You don't know nobody. Awful convenient."

"Suppose it is."

"You know somethin' we don't? You get a heads up about the whole thing?"

Hal took a final swig of his drink. "A bit of both."

"What?"

"A bit of both. Unlucky Luck."

"*Unlucky luck*. I like that. You got an air of mystery about you, mister."

The second time was out on the chicken farm six months later. You'd often find Jeremy out on the farm doin' some kinda work – whether by choice or punishment. Hal was pretty sure this time was punishment.

"I think I've finally found my purpose, Latimer."

"What'd you do this time?"

"Oh, they think I'm stealin' the chickens."

"Why would they think that?"

"Cause they keep findin' them at my house."

"Sounds like you're stealing the chickens, then."

"Nah, brother. They just like me a whole lot is all. Follow me

home. They got radar and everything, chickens. And besides, I ain't eatin' them or nothin'. Just teachin' them stuff."

"Like what?"

"Oh, you know - tricks and such. Sit. Roll over. Jumpin'. Flippin'. One big ol' fella does a full three-sixty spin."

Hal chuckled.

"It's true. It's true. Thing is though - they get nervous around other people. Won't do it unless it's just me and them. The chickens, I mean."

"Awful convenient."

"Like I said, Mr. Latimer. I think I found my purpose." And then Jeremy walked off. Three chickens followed him on his way out.

The third time was the day before Jeremy's execution day, or whatever we're callin' it- just yesterday, in the story's time. Jeremy'd run off for the fourth or fifth time since his confession and subsequent arrest. They didn't have no jail no more so he'd been holed up in Lew Crog's guest bed. No locks. No bars. Lew Crog just asked him real nice to *stay put and don't break nothin'*. Jeremy said *alright, old man* and they pretty much left it at that.

First time he run off he took a slow jog through town in the early morn. Waved at a few confused folk. Helped Sarah Nesbitt, his first grade teacher, with her groceries. Said *thank you for teaching me and all* then run back to Lew Crog's before he even woke up.

One of the other times he was spotted waterin' tomato plants and on another occasion he was seen walkin' down the street like a mother duck with a line o' chickens. He always found his way back to Lew Crog's before too long though.

The final time was the aforementioned third meetin' with Hal

Latimer. This time he left and didn't come back right away.

"Just wait," Lew Crog said. "He'll show." But after several hours, the worry set in.

Skudder chimed in, rather annoyingly, "You suppose he did us a favor and already jumped?"

"No. I don't suppose that."

So they assembled a search party. The whole town was invited to be a part of it.

It was Hal who found him. Inside an old barn they'd abandoned on account of its close proximity to one of the crumbling danger zones. The barn had already lost about a quarter of its structure. And a little bit more of it chipped away every week or so.

When he found Jeremy, he was perched up on the second-floor loft, watchin' the sun disappear into the everythin' and the nothin' below. You couldn't deny its beauty.

Hal set down next to him. He took in the scene, then the thought occurred to him that if this had been a movie or somethin', his character'd probably offer some piece of wisdom in this moment. He said the first thing that came to his mind.

"You didn't throw those chickens off the edge here, did you?" He wasn't much for wisdom.

"Even if I did, I taught 'em to fly. They'd just come right back."

Hal chuckled. But Jeremy kept on lookin' out ahead.

"Why do you keep running, kid?"

"It's *peculiar* ain't it?" Jeremy was lookin' straight down now. "What do you think's down there?"

"I don't hope to know."

"You hear what Randy Cartwright said?"

"Tell me."

"Said he strapped a rubber band around a walkie-talkie - so

it kept the talk button down - put the other to his ear, then dropped the rubber banded one off the cliff and listened for a while..."

He was looking at Hal now.

"You know what he heard?"

"What?"

"*Whispers.*"

"Really."

"People talkin'. Like in secret."

"You trying to say there's people down below?"

"And Mike Mageau says he found what looked like a grappling hook hangin' on the edge of the cliff. But when he reached down to grab it, the thing ripped right off - like it'd been yanked. It's *peculiar...ain't it?*"

"Peculiar."

"Whaddya think about all that?"

Hal took a beat to gather his thoughts, hopin' that he'd be able to muster up somethin' a little wiser than the chickens question this time.

"I think it's pretty hard to wrap our heads around us all being here. And everything else being down there. How it really really doesn't make any sense...and I think stories are important. Because sometimes they're the only things that *do* make sense. But..."

"But what?"

"But sometimes that's all they are."

"*Stories.*"

"*Stories.*"

Jeremy shook his head and chuckled a bit. "I suppose you may be on to something, Latimer."

"What do you think?"

“I think we live on a stick o’ dirt that’s like a million feet tall. And since no practical science answer could explain how or why – just about anything else could be possible. Don’t you find that kinda excitin’?”

“*Exciting* is a bit of a stretch.”

“You *are* old, man. We’re livin’ in a magical fantasy story and all we do is farm and drink and play chess. Ya’ll are all so boring. Where’s the *Lord of the Flies* stuff? Warrin’ tribes and spears and arrows? Cannibals and shit.”

“Have you actually read *Lord of the Flies*?”

“We act like this is all so normal. Ignorin’ the fact that one day soon this barn’ll be gone. And everything behind it. Your clocks are tickin.’ What are you gonna do about it?”

“I’m gonna farm.” Hal thought Jeremy looked pretty disappointed in that answer. But it was all he could think up. “What are you gonna do, Jeremy?”

Jeremy stood up. Hal didn’t.

“I think you’re right about stories, Hal. I think people ‘round here are in need of a good one.” And then he walked off.

Hal was unsure of what had just gone down. But he followed him anyhow.

“Where are you going now?” he asked.

“To go play pirate.”

When Hal woke up from the blow to the head, he was layin’ in Lew Crog’s guest bed. The door was open. He could hear clankin’ in the next room over.

Lew Crog was eatin’ eggs and readin’ an old brown newspaper. “I’m expectin’ you to return them clothes before dark,” he said, without looking up.

Hal looked down at his garb to find that he was sportin’ a

whole different outfit than he was before he got knocked to hell with that rock.

“Your old clothes were covered in your head blood. Didn’t want to dirty up my sheets if I didn’t have to. We’re not expectin’ enough rain to wash ‘em any time soon.”

Hal furrowed his brow. It hurt. “Did you undress me?”

“That woulda been Miss Nesbitt. I thought you woulda been alright with that, considerin’ the way you look at her from time to time.”

“Did she volunteer to undress me?”

“Stepped right up to the plate. There weren’t nobody on deck though, hot shot.”

Hal sat down across from Lew Crog, takin’ his time before askin’ the question both of them knew was comin’.

“Jeremy?”

Lew Crog didn’t bat an eye. Didn’t even look up from the paper. “Ain’t nobody seen him.”

“Did he run?”

“Don’t know.”

“Did he jump?”

“Don’t know.”

“Then what?”

“*I don’t know.* Somewhere in the scuffle he just...up and vanished.”

“How?”

“He’ll turn up or he won’t.”

Hal gestured outside toward Lew Crog’s front door. “What about all of them? What are they sayin’?”

“Buncha nonsense.”

“Like what?”

“Oh, you know. Different things.”

“Spit it out, old man.”

“Whelp...” Lew Crog sighed from behind the paper. “Mary Lou Harvey says she saw him sneak off while we were scufflin’. Like he was army crawlin.’”

“Anybody back that up?”

“Nope. But Ed Tom says he seen him leap off the plank like a swimmin’ pool divin’ board. All graceful-like. Then another fellar says he seen him make a run for it, but as soon as he took a step he tripped on his shoelace and fell over the edge and died.”

Hal couldn’t help but chuckle at that one.

“Best one was from Martha Hoover, that poor lady with the crooked back and the bum leg – says she was makin’ direct eye contact with the boy as he “*blipped out of existence.*”

“Wait, what?”

“Her words. Like he’d gone invisible. Just *popped* away.” Lew Crog said, snappin’ his fingers. “Quite the storyteller, she is.”

“What’d you see?”

“Like I said...*I don’t know.*”

Hal didn’t quite know how to follow that up, so he elected to take in some silence for a beat. Then looked out the window. “My head hurts.”

“Mine too, kid. Best keep movin’ on ahead.”

Hal didn’t know if it was mornin’ or afternoon. Not that it mattered much. On the window sill, there was bloomin’ flowers, reachin’ for the sun beyond the glass.

“How do you keep those alive?”

Lew Crog set down his paper. “I water ‘em.” Then he took a bite from his plate. “You want some eggs?”

Hal’s stomach rumbled. Perhaps it was the afternoon, he thought. “I wouldn’t say no.”

Lew Crog grabbed a beat-up carton off his counter and

grabbed the last two eggs. "Cherish 'em while you can."

"How's that?"

"Apparently, a handful of the chickens ain't accounted for at the moment."

"Since when?"

"Since this mornin'. Just up and vanished. Ain't nobody can find them. Ain't that interestin'?"

Hal took another beat. Then a grin snuck up on him. And it was a pretty big one too. Big enough for Lew Crog to take note.

"What you on about now, Latimer?"

Hal looked at the old man, smilin' like the fool he was, and uttered some familiar words. "It's peculiar ain't it?"

"Peculiar."

After that, on a stick o' dirt about a million feet tall, Hal Latimer ate some eggs.