

# Preacher's Boys

A Short Story  
by  
Jim Michie

## **Introduction to the Electronic Version**

The original version of this short story is in Microsoft Publisher, which many people do not have on their computer. I have therefore modified the format slightly to suit the more universally acceptable Portable Document Format. Only the page breaks are affected. As you can see from the bottom of this page, the short story is protected by copyright, but feel free to disseminate this story in its printed or electronic form to others as long as it is given freely, which was the spirit in which it was written.

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**Door Into Summer Press**

The air conditioning was working only at half-mast, as usual, and it was sticky hot in the New Baptist Church of the Savior. Otis Redmond was working his way to the end of the morning's sermon. As the intensity of his oratory was growing with each carefully selected phrase, the volume of sweat running visibly down his cheeks and invisibly down his back and in his armpits grew in a matching tempo. The congregation was rousing from their sermon-induced stupor in response to his rising volume and increased agitation.

Behind him, the double-sized plastic statue of Jesus Christ of Nazareth on the cross was beginning to glow as the organist ran up the rheostat mounted to the right of her keyboard. The wound in the left side of the Christ statue began to turn red and blood ran out of the gash, down the length of the leg, and off the toe onto the floor. The faithful in the first few rows saw the blood as soon as it started flowing. The people in the middle and back rows were not certain what they saw, if they saw it at all. A buzz of whispers started and grew louder until the Head Deacon seated on the first row slowly stood up and pointed over the shoulder of Otis Redmond.

The preacher paused and turned to look in the indicated direction. At first he was stunned speechless. Then he shouted, "alleluia, it's a miracle." Otis wasn't too well educated, but he was quick on his feet when it came to capitalizing on a situation. However, almost immediately after his apparently spontaneous "alleluia", he began to wonder if he was being set-up by one of his rivals. Paranoia was always close to the surface of Otis Redmond.

The congregation responded in kind with its own "alleluias", "praise be to Gods", and a few "what miracles He works." The sermon was over and the congregation filed up to the front of the church where they could get a closer view of the "miracle."

The two youngest sons of the preacher stood up and filed out of the pew with everyone else, but instead of going up to the front, they turned and went toward the exit at the back of the church. Luke was holding the arm of his twin brother John as if steadying him as they walked up the aisle. If you looked closely, you could see a suppressed smirk on Luke's face. John just looked sick as he usually did.

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Andrew Bates Cannon sat down without care for his fresh lab coat, as usual, which scrunched up under and behind him in his desk chair. He dropped the coffee and three doughnuts he had juggled down the long hall from the coffee mess to his office. The morning paper was still under his arm where he had stuck it when he first got out of his car in the parking lot behind the public health building.

He opened the paper over top of the normal desk clutter and reached for his first doughnut. In twenty seconds he had determined that there was nothing of interest on the first page, only homicides, which he knew more about than the papers, and politics which interested him not a whit. He flipped through the pages scanning each one for articles of interest. He slowed his scan to read about a local conservation group in Wyoming that was suing a timber company, and then on page seven found an article about a miracle in Daltonville, about seventy miles south of the city.

According to the reporter, the event took place two days ago, on Sunday, at the New Baptist Church of the Savior. His interviews with various members of the congregation and the Reverend Otis Redmond indicated that the event was witnessed by everyone in the church during the morning sermon. Reverend Redmond clearly saw it as God's blessing of his ministry and perhaps a call for the widening of that ministry in a statewide or nationwide crusade. The rest of the article gave a detailed description of the "miracle" as reconstructed through the interviews.

Andy looked at his watch. It was eight forty-five, and he had already put in more than five hours since his arrival for the autopsy on last night's homicide. He decided to

indulge his hobby for the next few hours and check back in the afternoon on the lab work in process. He punched the intercom button on his phone and told Janet the receptionist and switchboard operator at the front of the building that he would be back sometime around mid-afternoon. Taking a last sip of coffee, he picked up doughnut number three and headed for his car, munching his way down the hall and trailing small flakes of sugar.

Andy had always been interested in the inexplicable. As a kid, he was addicted to science fiction and fantasy, and as an adult it hadn't changed very much. He just didn't seem to have as much time for reading fiction of any type. That was particularly true during his college and medical school years, but he still managed to read enough to keep up with the new writers. About seven years ago when he and his wife called it quits after only two years of marriage, he suddenly found himself with a lot of time on his hands. He was three years out of med school and six months into his decision to go into pathology rather than private practice.

While Linda never said that his decision was a factor in their breakup, he felt it was the largest. Linda was a nurse and an incurable yuppie and was planning on life as a doctor's wife. Andy's take on the situation was that she concluded if she got out quick, she still had time to land another resident with the good sense to take a career path that would allow her to achieve the social and financial position she craved. After about a year of soul searching, that is, searching within himself for the inadequacy that caused the divorce, he decided he liked who he was, he was better off, and good luck to Linda.

Getting out of town had taken about forty-five minutes, but he found himself slowing at the outskirts of Daltonville with only another hour having passed. There was a convenience store on the edge of town, and he stopped to ask directions to the church. The clerk indicated he was one of many that had come in the last two days to see the "bleeding Christ", as it was apparently known around town.

The church was on the other side of town, along a shady street of maples and poplars. The white painted concrete-block building with a short steeple and arched but clear windows was unremarkable, but the crowd standing around the WZZW News truck made it clear that something unusual was going on. Andy parked, got his black leather medical examination bag off the passenger's seat, and walked up to the dozen people standing with and talking to the television reporter. Standing on the edge of the crowd, he heard several recitations of the Sunday sermon events, and they added nothing to the newspaper account he had read that morning.

Leaving the interview crowd on the porch of the church, Andy moved into the church and down to the pulpit. Another reporter and cameraman were conducting an interview with a man of about forty in a dark, inexpensive suit. After listening to a few sentences of the man's responses to the reporter's questions, Andy knew he was looking at the Reverend Otis Redmond.

Andy stood quietly to the side until the interview was over and the crew was packing up the lights to leave. Apparently they had gotten their shots of the Christ statue earlier. Andy approached the preacher with his business card in hand. From experience, he knew it helped in most situations like this to immediately identify oneself as a professional.

Andy spoke as the Reverend was plucking the card from his fingers. "Hello, Reverend. I'm Andrew Cannon, Chief Medical Examiner, Little Rock. I wonder if you'd mind if I take a close look at the statue and maybe even a blood sample for analysis. Daltonville is outside of my jurisdiction, but I've found it pays to stay fully informed of events in the surrounding counties."

The preacher was reading Andy's card during this request and was impressed by the official stature of his visitor. "Why would a medical examiner be interested in this miracle at my church?"

Andy could answer this truthfully and tell the preacher that investigating the mysterious was a hobby of his or he could lie by inferring that it might preclude any trouble with the authorities to let him examine the scene. Since he wanted permission for a close examination, he decided, as usual, to lie, at least a little bit. "Well, Reverend, when there is any kind of incident involving strange blood, state health policies require official investigation. I'm surprised someone from the county hasn't been here already."

A look of quizzical concern gradually replaced the normally blank countenance of the Reverend. "No, I haven't seen or heard from the courthouse on this, but I guess it's all right if you take a closer look. I just don't want the government writin' reports that see this as anything other than the miracle it is—a simple sign of the strength of my ministry here in Daltonville."

Andy struggled hard with the ridiculous display of pomposity. He rapidly oscillated between a flare of temper and busting out laughing, but he managed to suppress both. "I assure you, Reverend, that I'll treat the entire event with the dignity it deserves."

Andy could tell by the slight upturn at the corners of the Reverend's mouth that he had struck the right chord. The statement managed to appeal to the preacher's inflated sense of importance even though it didn't really promise anything. He had learned how to make those kinds of statements over the years in dealing with the political pressures of his job. He didn't like double-speak, but after being burned enough times for his natural candor, he had learned to fight fire with fire.

Andy moved around the pulpit to the statue hung on the painted concrete block wall. It was roughly twice real-size and wasn't particularly well done. It was undoubtedly mass-produced with little artistry being exercised on the painting of the plastic shell. The sculpted wound in the side of the figure was stained a dark red-brown from what appeared to be dried blood. On the floor below the feet, a small pool of dried blood was still apparent.

Turning back toward the preacher, Andy asked if any of the blood had been removed since Sunday and was assured that no one had touched the blood or the statue until now. Andy took out his small notebook and wrote, "about 400 ml of blood total."

Reaching inside his bag, Andy removed a small ziplock bag, and a scalpel with a plastic sheath. With the scalpel, he neatly carved off a penny-sized hunk of the blood from the floor and put it into the bag, along with the re-sheathed scalpel. He zipped the seal shut with his thumb and forefinger, placed it in his examination bag, and stood up where he could again examine the blood on the side of the statue.

He reached again inside his examination bag and pulled out a xenon bulb flashlight and thin flexible strip of stainless steel about ten inches long and one inch wide. With the flashlight, he carefully examined the apparent blood in the sculpted wound. He was looking for some sign of a hole where the blood could have come from, but he couldn't see any sort of opening or crack. Moving so his body blocked the preacher's view, he took the stainless steel strip and ran it behind the figure, between the wall and the fiber glass shell. Nothing.

Well, that was about all he could do here. The next step was to examine the blood and determine the animal of origin. He needed the lab for that, so he closed his bag with the sample, thanked the preacher again, and headed back to the office.

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With the stereo on loud and the cruise control set about ten miles per hour faster than the speed limit, Andy ruminated about the New Baptist Church of the Savior and the Reverend Otis Redmond on his way back to Daltonville the next day. He concluded that the Reverend just didn't seem smart enough to even try a faked miracle, much less pull it off. It was perplexing.

He would have taken a bet and given odds that it was chicken, cow, or pig blood he had taken from the church, but surprisingly, the lab tests showed it was definitely human. The type, however, was a different matter. The type matching tests were inconclusive, showing some signs of being simultaneously A, B, and O, but not really any one type. But the strangest thing about the blood was the red and white cell count. The red cell count was extremely low and the white count extremely high. Whoever this blood came from was extremely sick. That is, of course, if you didn't count it as a miracle of some sort to begin with.

As a man of much science and little religion, Andy had a hard time accepting the blood as part of some miracle. However, he had been unable to detect any way that the blood could have been made to manifest itself during the sermon, right there in front of the whole congregation. A mystery he would concede, but not a miracle. He needed to talk to the town's general practitioner, and his appointment was in about fifteen minutes.

He entered Dr. Helman's office, attached to what was obviously his home, with about a minute to spare before his appointment. He was intercepted by a uniformed nurse sitting at a desk in front of about fifteen old oak filing cabinets. She appeared to be past retirement age, but was busy ripping across a keyboard apparently attached to the computer on the side of her desk. Her fingers worked more like they were thirty than sixty. She looked up over the top of her half-glasses. "Can I help you Mr.?"

Andy donned his best, hopefully-expectant expression and replied. "Cannon. Andrew Cannon. I have an appointment with the doctor."

Her eyes settled back down into the lower half-moons of her glasses and her fingers again started their rhythm on the keyboard. "Take a seat Mr. Cannon. The doctor will be with you in a few minutes."

The "few minutes" turned out to be about thirty-five, but eventually he was directed through the door on the right-hand side of the sitting room, at no apparent signal, into the office of Dr. Bryant Helman. The doctor was seated behind his desk and rose, extending his hand, as Andy entered the office. He was an obviously gentle man, with ramrod straight posture, even though he seemed well into his seventies, and his handshake was firm but quiet.

Andy knew that Dr. Helman had to be a man of infinite patience to be a small town doctor, dealing with the pettiness of the patient for a disproportionate amount of time out of every day. It was that very necessity of dealing face-to-face with patients that had sent Andy seeking a medical specialty where patient communication was not a requirement.

"My appointment card tells me you're the Chief Medical Examiner for Little Rock, Dr. Cannon. What can I help you with?"

"Let me get right to it, sir. I was making an examination of some blood samples of unknown origin here in Daltonville and discovered that the red cell counts were very low and the white cell counts were very high. I was wondering if you were aware of any patients you are seeing that could fit this profile?"

Dr. Helman frowned. "This 'blood of unknown origin' have anything to do with the miracle at the Baptist church?"

Andy looked the doctor straight in the eyes thinking, "he might be in his seventies, but he's still sharp." Andy continued. "Well, yes. It was a sample I took from underneath the statue."

"What was the blood type?"

"Well, I was unable to get a definitive match from the sample."

"Got a partial match on all the types?"

Andy was at the end of his string. "Obviously, doctor, you have a good idea whose blood this is."

"Oh, I have more than a good idea. I know precisely whose blood it is, and I don't like it a bit. One of Otis Redmond's youngest sons has leukemia and a blood that they couldn't type at Johns Hopkins from the sample I sent them. If Otis is mistreating them again, I'll have the sheriff on him this time."

"One of the preacher's youngest sons?"

"Actually, he's the youngest son by about seven minutes. I delivered both of them. Luke and John, identical twins. It's still hard to tell them apart, even though John's lost a lot of weight over the last year. I couldn't believe it when John got sick. The only other times either of them had been sick was when I gave them immunization shots. The first time was the DPT shot. They both came down with a high fever and all the symptoms of diphtheria by evening. The next morning when I went out to see them, they looked like they had never been sick. The next time was when I gave them the polio vaccine. Same response; came down with the symptoms of polio by nightfall and the next morning - clean as a whistle. I gave up on trying to immunize them from anything after that; figured they were somehow already equipped to handle anything life would throw at 'em. I was right too, until John came down with leukemia, which I still don't understand."

Andy was thoroughly hooked now by the doctor's recitation. "Is there anything else unusual in these boys' medical history that you know about?"

Dr. Helman gave a short chuckle. "That I know about? Hell son, I know the medical history of everybody in this town and a lot of their other history as well. The answer is, yes. There's a lot of strange things in their medical history. In fact, all of their medical history is strange. Umm, let's see, like when Luke stepped on a nail in the barn, old piece of siding with a rusty nail, damn near went clean through his foot. I had the tetanus vaccine in my hand, ready to give it to him, before I remembered their early reactions to vaccines. I debated with myself for a long minute but decided not to give it. Needless to say, Luke didn't contract tetanus, but his foot was healed well enough that when I stopped off to see him the next day on my way home, he was running around in the front yard, barefoot, playing with his brother."

"The most memorable oddity though was when their mother was killed in the auto accident. Damn fool from the city; didn't slow down when he came into town and drunk as a lord. According to two witnesses, a dog ran out into the street and the guy jerked the wheel over, running right into the driver's door on Otis Redmond's pickup truck. Mary was driving to the hardware store with the boys, her boys, the twins, with her. Mary was killed, I'd say pretty instantly when her head hit the metal rim of the door, just above the window. The boys, they got a lot of cuts and bruises all over but nothing real serious. I can't remember how many stitches I put in them, but I found out it was probably a waste of effort. Three days later there wasn't a sign of a bruise and the cuts were healed. I even went ahead and took out the stitches. Three days after that, I couldn't even find the scars."

"You know this is pretty unbelievable, don't you?"

Dr. Helman replied with a crinkle in his voice if not on his face. "Sure I do, that's why I've never spoken to anyone about this before except my wife, and she doesn't believe half of what I tell her anyway. But you haven't asked me about their mother yet. Are you curious?"

Andy couldn't get his response out quick enough. "After what you've already told me, I'm curious about everything involving these boys. What do you know about the mother?"

"Now, the mother is even more interesting than the boys, but I don't know much in a medical way, but then, what I do know medically is also out of the ordinary. She never came to me during her pregnancy, which appears to have been normal, but Otis insisted that I be called for the delivery, since his first wife had died giving birth to his third child, Naomi. The birth of the twins was absolutely normal, but Mary's heartbeat was the strangest thing you ever heard. Sounded suspiciously like two hearts beating, instead of one. You had to listen close because most of the time they were beating together, but when she was having a contraction the beats seemed to get out of step. I was sorely tempted to have a look after the accident, but there was no real cause for an autopsy."

"Two hearts! You're not pulling my leg?"

"No son, I wouldn't do that, even to a city slicker." Dr. Helman was clearly enjoying this conversation.

"Was Mary Redmond a native of the area?"

"Well son, you've saved the best question for last. Not only was she not a native of the area, she was found collapsed on Mabel Jensen's porch in the middle of a thunderstorm. Mabel lives pretty far out of town and never remarried after her husband was killed in Vietnam. Mabel said she heard someone pounding on her door, and being alone, went to look out the window before going to the door. She said she saw Mary lying on her back, apparently collapsed after getting to the door. Mabel gave her that name when she didn't seem to know her own and it stuck. Anyway, Mabel got her raincoat and went out in the rain. Mary roused when she tried to get her in the house and was able to walk. Mabel said she appeared dazed and didn't respond to any questions; didn't make any sounds at all, in fact. Mabel gets a little vague with her story here and claims she doesn't know why she did it, but she just helped Mary up the stairs to her spare room. She helped her take off her wet clothes, which were like silk pajamas with no underclothes, put her to bed, and didn't call a soul to tell them about the stranger on her doorstep. Just went to bed. Next morning, Mary appeared physically fine, but she still appeared to be dazed. She appeared dazed or drugged or shocked or retarded or something similar all the rest of her life, which was only about four years."

"How in the hell did she become Otis Redmond's wife?"

"Well, even though she appeared a bit retarded, she was a strikingly good looking woman. Now, Otis is a bit raw-boned, but he's a strapping and handsome enough man. She was about five-nine or ten, white blond hair, just like her boys, big blue eyes, and fine-boned features. Also just a hint of an almond shape to her eyes, like an oriental without any epicanthan folds. As I said, Otis had lost his wife in childbirth about five years before, and he was having a devil of a time with the kids, particularly the young girl. Seems like he had no idea how to raise a girl.

"After a couple of months living with Mabel and helping around the farm, local people sort of got used to Mary as part of the community. When you have the ability to fix damn near anything that's broke, you find it easy to get along with people living out in the country, and she could do most anything that needed doing around the farm according to Mabel. One day, Otis just went to Mabel and asked if he could hire Mary as a live-in housekeeper. Mabel was taken aback by the preacher's asking her permission. She pointed out that Mary was obviously an adult and that Otis would have to speak with her about a job. Which he did, and took her to meet the kids.

"By this time Mary was speaking a little but not much, only short phrases and simple words, but she made herself clear that she would take the job and moved in with

Otis and his family. I'm not sure what happened between Otis and Mary after that. I suspect that having Mary in the house was more than Otis could stand as a man without a wife for five years, and he decided he needed to marry her. I didn't go to the wedding, but my wife went, and she swears that Mary had no idea what was going on. Mary was like that. If you watched her actions and responses to things going on around her, you would think she was retarded, but she was very very bright when it came to getting things done. Mabel said she fixed everything on the farm that had broken down since her husband had died."

Andy sat in the chair across from Dr. Helman, his mouth hanging slightly open in amazement at what he had just heard. "Doctor, I'm really happy you decided to talk to me about this. Do you think Mabel would be willing to talk to me?"

Dr. Helman grinned. "Well son, I expect she would if I gave her a call before you got there."

Andy couldn't contain his enthusiasm. "Would you do that, please?"

"Well, I might. What's your interest in all this?"

Andy had to decide again if he was going to tell the whole truth, a shade of the truth, or an outright lie. This time he decided on the whole truth, because he doubted this unsophisticated but wise old country doctor would be fooled by a simple or even a clever lie. "It has nothing to do with my official capacity as a medical examiner. It's sort of a hobby of mine to investigate strange events, particularly those that brush up against my professional acumen. I read about the bleeding statue in the paper yesterday and came out to take a look—or perhaps to debunk the "miracle."

"Uh huh. Looks like you might've gotten more than you can chew this time though. All right. I'll call Mabel for you, and you keep me informed about anything you find out."

"Uh, one more thing, doctor. You said something about Otis Redmond abusing his children. Did you observe this abuse or the results of it?"

The question brought a frown to Dr. Helman's face. "Yes, I did. Once, and the boys told me it went on all the time, and I believed them."

"What happened?"

"Otis brought Luke in to the office about four years ago with his thumb dislocated, told me Luke had done it falling down the cellar stairs. Otis was real agitated, like he was mad at the world for having to bring the boy to the doctor. Otis stayed in the reception room, and I took Luke in the back room and told him to sit in the chair while I fixed his thumb. I saw him wince when he sat in the chair, and I asked him what was wrong. He said he was all right, but after I got his thumb back in place and taped, I told him to take his pants off so I could take a look at that too. He didn't want to; said it would be all right by the afternoon, but I insisted. It was no wonder he winced. He had flaming red welts all over his bottom and upper legs, many of them severe enough along the edges to bleed. I asked him how this happened, but he said he did it falling down the cellar steps. I told him I knew that wasn't true, and I wouldn't ask about it again, but I wanted him to know he could always come and tell me about such things if he thought he needed to. The boy was only eight at the time, but he was already as bright as his mother without her worldly detachment. He understood me perfectly."

"Has he ever come to talk to you?"

"Not specifically for that purpose, but I've had quite a lot of time with them over the last year and a half, since John came down with leukemia. Otis doesn't have much money and not any insurance, so I've been doing all I could for John myself. The church did come up with money for one try at chemotherapy for John, but it didn't seem to help at all. While John was apparently compatible with any blood type, only his brother

Luke's blood seemed to help any. So as often as I can, I've been giving John a transfusion of Luke's blood right here in my office."

Andy sat quietly for a few seconds, trying to absorb the information he had just taken in. It was quite apparent that Dr Helman suspected the twin's mother had been something other than completely human. A strange position for a simple, country doctor.

Andy decided to probe just a little more before going to talk to Mabel Jensen. "So, how do you think they got John's blood to come out of the statue?"

Dr. Helman gave a short chuckle and a shrug of his shoulders. "Well, son, it seems to me like you're the expert in solving mysteries here. I'm just a simple country doctor with a young boy patient that has leukemia and no money for treatment."

He was right of course, and Andy had not been able to find any mechanism for delivering the blood to the statue. But aside from that, Andy's medical curiosity was bursting at the seams. "Is the disease progressing or have the transfusions arrested development?"

Dr. Helman twisted in his swivel chair, and the worried frown played over his face again. "It's still progressing. The transfusions seem only to slow the rate, so I've been looking at alternatives and Johns Hopkins says they'll take John as a possible bone marrow transplant candidate in return for a more thorough analysis of his unusual blood type. They were mightily stirred-up when I sent the original sample to them for typing. I can't get Otis to agree yet, but I'll keep chipping at him."

It looked to Andy like he had gotten all he could out of Dr. Helman. He stood to leave and held out his hand. "Well, thank you for your candor, Dr. Helman. If you could make that call to Mabel Jensen and give me some directions, I would sure appreciate it."

Dr. Helman shook his hand with a wry smile. "But, son, you haven't asked me about the boys' hearts yet, and you the mystery sleuth."

Andy was speechless for a moment. By God, Helman was right. It had completely gotten by him. He hadn't even thought to ask about any of their other physical characteristics.

Observing the stunned look on Andy's face, Dr. Helman hurried on. "I'm just funnin' you, son. There isn't anything else to tell you. When I ordered John's x-rays I slipped in a few that would show me a good view of the heart and other internal organs. It all looked as normal as apple pie."

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Mabel Jensen did live a long way out of town, but there was only one road, so it was fairly easy not to get lost. Andy had spotted the name on the weathered, galvanized steel mailbox and turned up the lane to a simple frame house about a hundred yards off the road. The house sat in a small copse of thirty to forty-year-old oaks and walnuts, completely surrounded by alternating fields of corn and beans. There was a ten-year old, blue pickup jutting out of the front of a small barn-like structure to the right of the house itself. Someone was hanging clothes on a series of lines stretched out between the barn and the house. She turned to look as Andy came up the drive.

The woman Andy assumed was Mabel Jensen bent over and picked up the small sapling pole lying on the ground at her feet and caught the line in the notched V at one end. She pushed the foot of the pole away from her, driving the line higher off the ground. She took off her apron, which was filled with clothespins, folded it onto the top of the laundry basket now half-filled with wet clothes, and started toward Andy's car.

As Andy climbed out of the car, she started talking, even though she was still thirty feet away. "Dr. Cannon?"

Andy pulled up one of his glad to meet you smiles. "Yes, just Andy will do. I guess you must be Mabel Jensen. Dr. Helman said he'd call you. I guess he did."

Mabel closed the ground between them quickly, stopping just a few feet in front of Andy. She was short and chunky, but there didn't look like any fat on the bare arms sticking out of the short sleeved chambray shirt she was wearing.

"Oh yes. He called. Said you were the Medical Examiner in Little Rock and wanted to ask some questions about Mary Redmond. I told him that was fine, but after I hung up I wondered what kind of questions you might want to be asking about a woman that died ten years ago."

Andy quickly decided that partial truth was called for in this instance and replied, "I was inquiring primarily about the Redmond boy, John, that has leukemia, and Dr. Helman told me about the strange appearance of Mary Redmond on your doorstep. He also told me that Mary might have had some unusual physical traits that could have been passed to her boys, so I wanted to speak with you about Mary and find out first hand if you were aware of anything physically unusual about Mary."

Mabel looked a little taken aback, but recovered quickly. "Well, I never noticed much about her physically except she was darned pretty, almost exotic you might say. What I noticed most was her mental condition. She was plenty smart, don't get me wrong, but she didn't know her name when I brought her into the house, and as far as I know, never did remember it. Amnesia, I guess. She certainly seemed to have suffered some kind of trauma. She got better over the years, but she was always just slightly out of focus with what was going on around her. It was like she was listening to some other conversation, not yours, when you tried to talk to her. Not that she was much of a conversationalist anyway. She hardly ever had much to say, and at first she could hardly find the words to tell you what she wanted for breakfast. Sweet as a young child though. Do anything I asked her, once she understood me. Never complained. And she could fix anything that was broken: trucks, television, plumbing, anything at all. Oh yeah, she was real strong. I never saw her do anything out of the ordinary, but some of the things she did around the farm would have taken a very strong man to get them done. I don't know how she did them, and when I would ask her about it, she would just smile and say she was persistent and good at doing things different from most people. I never really figured out what that meant."

Andy was waiting to get a word in, and when Mabel paused, he jumped in. "Was she ever sick?"

"Not a day the whole time I knew her. She was in none too good a condition that first night on my porch, but that seemed more like being tired out than sick. Nope, she was never sick, and she always seemed to be in a good mood too. Never grumpy, even early in the morning or late at night. Otis Redmond got himself a better catch with her than he did the first time around, and she was better to the kids than their own mother had been. You could tell just by seeing the change in the kids once she started taking care of them."

Andy only had one more question, so he asked it. "Did she ever say anything about where she came from, or did she have any identification on her that night when she showed up on your porch?"

"Nope. Just had on that black jump-suit-like outfit, with no shoes. Made out of some kind of material that felt like silk. Real thin material, but it didn't stretch and didn't tear when I took it off of her, even though it was wet and tight, and I had to pull awful hard to get it down off her legs and over her feet. She never put it on again after that night. I left it on a hanger in her room that night so it could dry, but to tell you the truth, it seemed dry when I got it off her. I gave her some of my clothes to wear even though they were a mite short for her, and she wore those until we could buy her something in town. A few days later I noticed the jump suit or pajamas or whatever it was still hanging

in her room, folded it up, and put it in a drawer. They're still there. Only thing left of hers around here now."

God, what luck. Andy tried not to show too much excitement. "Do you think I could see the jump suit?"

"Sure. I guess it's still there. Come on in the house. I should have asked you in for a glass of tea on a day like this anyway. I don't get many visitors way out here as it is. I got to be more careful about running them off with bad manners. Come on."

Mabel turned on the ball of her foot and lit out for the house in a good country stride. Instead of heading in the front door, Mabel circled to the back of the house and went in through the kitchen door. Motioning for Andy to sit in one of the kitchen chairs, it took her about a minute to grab some glasses, retrieve some ice from the freezing compartment of the refrigerator, and pour some already sweetened tea from a ready pitcher on the top shelf of the refrigerator itself.

As Andy took a slug of the heavily sweetened tea, Mabel took a sip of hers, set the glass on the kitchen table, and rushed into the interior of the house trailing words behind her. "I'll be right back. I know just where it is."

Andy looked around the kitchen. There were little plates with pictures on them hanging on every wall in groups of three, four, and five. Every surface had something decorative on it, but the clutter was carefully aligned and without a speck of dust he could detect. He could hear Mabel walking in the room over the kitchen. As his inspection of the kitchen was noticing the multi-layers of bright new paint on the cabinets and walls, Mabel popped back through the door with what looked like a black silk kerchief in her hand.

"It was right where I remember putting it all those years ago," she chuckled as she handed it to Andy. "It looks like it got squashed though from the old winter clothes that I'd put on top."

Andy could feel the almost weightless silkiness of the black material in his right hand and quickly brought his left hand up to feel its texture and thickness. It was so thin that it virtually had no substance, but it was totally opaque. He couldn't tell if it was woven or a film like a plastic wrap, but he noted with amazement that as he unfolded it, there were no wrinkles of any kind in the material. Each former fold was as flat and creaseless as if it had never been made. There was no trace of any form of joining or seaming, like it had been formed from some base material directly into its present shape. When he picked up a single layer of the material and tried to stretch it he detected a slight give, and he found that the material would stretch, but very slowly. In fact, as he continued to apply pressure, the material continued to stretch. With a little experimental effort, he was able to pull a portion of the material to about ten times its normal size over a period of about a minute of steady pressure. When he released the material, he watched as it flowed back to its original shape in about half the time it had taken to distort it.

He had forgotten about Mabel, and he was startled when she spoke. "Kind a spooky ain't it? I remember struggling to get that stuff off her that night, but I really haven't thought about it since then. I got no use for it, so you can take it with you if it will be of any use to you."

Andy looked up at Mabel standing over his chair. She was smiling. He was stunned. He shook his head up and down in lieu of trying to speak in this state and stood slowly, pushing his chair out behind him on the smooth vinyl floor as he did so.

He remembered mumbling profuse words of thanks as he stumbled out of Mabel Jensen's kitchen, but he was almost back to town before he really came to his senses. He dug in his glove box for the computer-generated map of Daltonville. He flipped it open with his right hand, his left on the steering wheel, and held it up where he could

take darting glances from the road to the map and back. He found the circled area where the Redmond house was located, noting that he would have to go back to the center of town to get there. He put the map on the seat beside him and slipped back into a reverie of wonder, only rousing himself occasionally to look at the map.

After a terrible egg salad sandwich and a coke from a service station along the way to make up for the lunch he had missed three hours ago, Andy found himself at the Redmond house. There were two pre-teen boys in the front yard in shorts and T-shirts kicking a soccer ball back and forth between them. The house behind them was a simple, two-story frame structure in bad need of paint. There was a rail-less porch running all the way across the front of the house that held a rusty steel glider and two equally rusty steel chairs. No cushions were in evidence.

There was no car in the driveway and no other place than the road for one to be parked, so Andy pulled in and stopped. The boys looked his way but kept kicking the ball. As Andy swiveled himself out and up, one of the boys picked up the ball and started towards the car. "You want something, Mister?"

"I wanted to talk with the Reverend Otis Redmond. Are you boys Luke and John?"

The boy holding the ball spoke up again. "I'm Luke. That's John over there. Papa ain't here. He and my sister Ruth went to DePaul's store for groceries. There's just John and me. Did you want something?"

Of course Andy wanted something. He wanted to talk to the boys not the Reverend anyway. Andy decided on a half-truth approach with the boys. "I wanted to talk to your Dad about the bleeding statue in the church last Sunday. Did you boys see that?"

Luke got a little grin on his face, and John, still standing over in front of the house studied the ground. "Yeah, we seen it. We gotta go to church every Sunday."

Andy considered his options and decided he might as well jump in. "Well, I was here yesterday and took a sample of the blood on the floor. I'm the Medical Examiner up in Little Rock, and I ran some tests on the blood. Turns out that whoever's blood it was has a blood disease called leukemia, so I came back to town today and talked with Dr. Helman. He tells me that John has leukemia."

Andy stopped there, waiting to see if he would get any response from one of the boys. John still studied the ground, and Luke's expression went from the grin to one of apprehension. Neither one said a word.

"Did you boys play some kind of joke on your Dad using John's blood?"

There was no response from either boy. "How did you get that much blood from John? In his condition, he needs to hold on to all the red blood cells he can get. It's dangerous for him to loose that much blood just for a joke."

Luke's expression lost its apprehension in anger. "We're not stupid mister. I'd never do anything to hurt John. He wasn't feeling very good last Sunday, so we decided to give him some more of my blood to make him feel better." As the angry blurb came ripping out, Luke appeared to catch himself and shut his mouth abruptly. His face clearly showed that he knew he had said too much. "We didn't hurt nobody. We were just makin' fun of Papa and the other people at church who are oh-so holy on Sunday and do whatever they want the rest of the time. We didn't mean nothin' by it."

Andy was stunned. Did Luke just say he gave John a blood transfusion to make him feel better? How the Hell did he do that? "Did Dr. Helman give you some of John's blood from the blood transfusion? What are you saying?"

Luke turned abruptly from Andy and walked back to his brother. John never took his eyes off the ground while Luke said something to him, and they both walked to the house, up the porch, and inside, letting the screen door bang behind them.

Andy was left standing dumb in the driveway. He shook himself a little and climbed back in the car. As he backed out of the driveway, he said aloud to himself and the otherwise empty car, "well, I'm glad I cleared that up." He shifted from reverse to drive and didn't stop until he got to the suburbs of Little Rock.

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It had been two days since his last visit to Daltonville, and Andy still hadn't decided what to do with the less than an ounce of black jump suit that had been Mary Redmond's. His examination of the material had revealed nothing of its origin or composition. He could neither cut it nor pierce it. It didn't burn and it didn't melt. While it would slowly stretch to about 20 times its normal size before finally resisting further distortion, if struck rapidly, like trying to pierce it with a knife thrust, it gave not at all. The whole piece of material just seemed to grow absolutely rigid, like it had turned into armor plate.

The strongest acids available in his lab had shown no effect on the material, and examination under his scanning microscope showed the strangest mystery of all. The high-resolution screen of the microscope might as well have been black and white, since even the high magnification and the various-spectrum light sources he used failed to elicit anything but a uniform absence of color, or black. There was, however, a pattern to the material that could be perceived at the highest levels of magnification. It was a perfect filigree of linked triangles. The side of each open triangle was about three times as long as the thickness of material that surrounded it, and the linked strands appeared to be cylindrical along their lengths and filleted to each other at their intersections. It almost looked like crystal growth in its regularity of structure.

Whatever the material was and whatever its origin, it would be worth a fortune to the right company. Of course, the U. S. Government would snatch it up as soon as its existence became known, and it would probably never be seen or heard of again. The fact of its very existence would probably be denied vigorously. So Andy did nothing with it except examine it in every way he had at his disposal and think about it twenty hours a day, since he wasn't getting much sleep the last couple of days.

Still trying to wake up from the sleep he didn't get, Andy sat at his kitchen table drinking coffee and reading the newspaper before going to work. He had pushed his mostly empty bowl of granola-nut cereal and one-percent milk to the center of the table and had the paper spread out before him. About five pages into it he saw a small head, "Minister of Daltonville Miracle Church Disappears." He read the small box of text under the head, "The Sheriff of Belkington County reported Friday that his department was searching for the Reverend Otis Redmond who mysteriously disappeared from his residence on Thursday. The Reverend was reportedly in his home with his three children still living there when he abruptly left the house and never returned. His car was left in the driveway, and a search of the surrounding area has produced no hint of his whereabouts. The Sheriff's office said that the search was continued on Friday using the entire department and local volunteers, mostly from the Reverend's congregation. No clues were found.

"This is the same Reverend Otis Redmond that reported a miracle in his church last Sunday, where the statue of Christ in his church appeared to be bleeding from the area of the spear wound in his side. Paul Satterwhite of the Little Rock Tribune investigated that claim last Monday and found what appeared to be blood on the statue. Interviews with the members of the congregation appeared to confirm the Reverend's contention that the blood started flowing spontaneously, in the middle of his Sunday morning sermon.

"When asked, the Sheriff replied that it was not known if there was any connection between the "miracle" and the mysterious disappearance."

Andy left his half finished coffee on the table, grabbed his cell phone from the kitchen counter, plucked his sport coat from the back of a kitchen chair, and headed for his car. As he pulled out of his driveway, he punched the speed dial for his office and informed his secretary that he would be in later today and would get back with her when he had a more specific time. He was heading for Daltonville.

As he pulled into the driveway of the Redmond house, he could tell the place was shut up. It was a beautiful early May day and it was already getting hot. He guessed the boys were at school, and he wasn't sure about the age of the Reverend's daughter. As he gave a peremptory knock on the door and peered in the small windows at the top of it, it was apparent that whatever the other children's ages, they were not at the Redmond house.

He slid back into his car and started looking for the local police station, if there was one. As he found out from the small Mom and Pop store about a half-mile down the road, the sheriff's office was in Daltonville, since it was the county seat.

The sheriff's office was one of several offices arranged in a strip mall line of brick-fronted county offices, fronted by a narrow parking lot. Andy made his inquiry at the desk of a deputy who looked like he was not enjoying his turn at pulling the office duty. A secretary or clerk sat at another desk behind the deputy wearing a small telephone headset and boom mike with a radio microphone in front of her. She was reading a paperback book.

"You say you're the Medical Examiner in Little Rock? What does Little Rock have to do with the missing Reverend?"

Andy was getting tired of the verbal jousting already. "I told you. Little Rock has no official interest in the case. I was here Tuesday making a personal investigation of the supposed miracle at the Reverend's church, and I was concerned for the children when I saw that the Reverend had disappeared. Can you just tell me where the children are staying? I guess they're at school now, but where are they staying? Is there any family in the area that could take them in?"

The deputy still wasn't placated. "I still don't see what concern it is of yours, but I guess it's okay to tell you that they're staying with the sister of Reverend Redmond's first wife. It's Amy's aunt. That's the Reverend's daughter, and her aunt said she would look after the boys and Amy until we found Reverend Redmond. She lives just up the road from Redmond's house." The deputy pulled a sheet of paper off the pad in front of him and drew a crude but adequate map to the aunt's house. He pushed it across to Andy who mumbled a thanks and left.

The house came into view through a sketchy thicket of scrub pines on the left as Andy came around the turn. He was focused on the mailbox so he could read the name on it as soon as he was close enough, but his eyes caught the motion of someone going up the narrow wooden steps to the porch of the white frame house. He watched while they yanked open the screen door and slammed open the wooden front door of the house with their shoulder. He wasn't sure, but it looked like Otis Redmond.

Andy took the turn into the driveway with a slight skid and drove up to the side of the house. He snatched the keys out of the dash almost before the car had completely stopped and ran for the door of the house. The front door was still open and he could hear a loud voice that sounded like one of the twins. "It was me, Papa. John didn't do anything, Papa. It was just me. Don't hurt him, Papa."

Just as Andy was getting to the door, he heard Otis Redmond's voice rising in all the fire-and-brimstone fury of a southern preacher. "Devil's spawn. That's what you are. Your mother was an incarnation of the devil that came to tempt me in the Garden, and I fell, just like Adam, but I'll end it now. I'll send you both back to Hell where you belong."

Andy could see Otis through the gray dimming of the screen door as he was reaching to open it. He had a fireplace poker in his hand, raised above his head. On the floor in front of him on his knees was one of the twins with his head down and his hands and arms in front of his face. Andy got the screen door open just as the poker was descending in its lethal arc, and then it was gone. The poker and Otis Redmond simply vanished, leaving a pop ringing in the room like someone had clapped their hands.

Andy's momentum took him into the center of the living room before he could catch himself, and when he did, it made a strange tableau. Over on the far side of the room, sitting on the floor with his knees drawn up and his back against the wall was Luke, blood on his lower lip and trickling down the left corner to his chin. His left eye was swollen and had the light blue-yellow of bad bruises a week old. John was still on his knees, just a few feet from Andy. He hadn't moved during the whole episode.

Finally, Andy gave motion to the strange scene as he reached down to take one of the hands covering John's head and face. "John, it's Dr. Cannon, I talked to you boys a couple of days ago. Are you all right?"

John dropped his other hand and turned his head up slowly to look at Andy. He shook his head, yes, but he didn't say anything. Luke interjected himself from across the room. "He's all right, Dr. Cannon. I didn't let Papa hit him."

Under different circumstances, Andy would have greeted Luke's words with the observation that that was the understatement of a lifetime, but his concern for the boys suppressed his normal wry humor. "What happened to your Father, Luke?"

Luke's eyes narrowed and his chin lifted slightly. "I sent him away again," he said defiantly.

"Again," Andy repeated. "You've done this before?"

"Yeah, I did it the other day when he took the strap to me and started to take it to John, who hadn't said anything to sass him. And I sent him without his clothes and shoes too, not like last year when he hitchhiked and came back in a few hours."

Andy felt a need to sit down. He gently lowered John's hand, patted him on the shoulder, and made his way to the battered sofa against the wall, roughly between Luke and John. The boys stayed where they were. "Luke, where did you 'send' your Father, and how did you do it?"

Luke shrugged his shoulders. "John and me, we could always send things from one place to the other. We used to throw a ball without touching it when Papa wasn't around, but he'd beat us if he caught us at it. John hasn't been as good at it since he's been sick, but he still helps when we do some things. Last summer I sent Papa up to our campsite on Potts' Creek when he started after John with a hickory stick. It's about twenty-five miles from here. We used to go there a lot with Papa to fish when we were smaller, but he hasn't taken us there in a lot of years, least not since John and me started 'moving' things. But I didn't send him to Potts' Creek this time. I just sent him away, like I do snakes and other things we don't want to see no more. I don't know where they go when I do that, but ain't nothin' ever come back when I did it."

"My God," thought Andy, "has he murdered his Father? Of course it would be self-defense. It was clear that Otis Redmond was going to kill his boys with that poker."

"Luke, can you tell me how you do this 'moving' and 'sending away'?"

"I don't know. We just do it, but it helps to know what things look like when we do something really hard like me giving John some of my blood."

Andy's mind jumped back to the "miracle" in the church. "So that was John's blood on the statue in the church?"

"Yeah, I was just trying to make Papa look silly to the people in the church. John wasn't feeling very good and it was another three weeks before Dr. Helman would let me give him any blood the way the doctor did it. So we did it right there in church like we

always do, except instead of just sending some of John's blood away to make room for mine, I sent it to the statue. We just thought it would embarrass Papa. We didn't know there'd be such a fuss about it."

Andy sat back on the sofa, trying to collect the multitude of thoughts spinning in his head. He needed to ask the right questions while Luke was still in an adrenaline induced, talkative mood. "You said it was easier to do this 'sending' when you knew what things looked like. What did you mean by that?"

"You know, like what your blood looks like. The red and white cells, how it moves through the heart and the veins and everything. I read about it and looked at the pictures in the encyclopedia and on the Internet in the school's library. When I knew better what it was supposed to look like, it was like I could 'see' it running through John's veins. It made it easier to move it."

"You've been giving John your blood on a regular basis?"

"It was after Dr. Helman started giving John the transfusions and they really made him feel better, but the doctor wouldn't give 'em to him but every eight weeks. He said it wouldn't be good for me, but since I figured out how to do it, I've been giving John some of my blood about every week now for the past year, and I ain't felt bad yet."

Andy thought, "Yeah, your metabolism probably isn't any more normal than your brain functions." He asked Luke, "So you're saying you can see the blood cells in your body and John's?"

A smile played at the corners of Luke's mouth. "I can see yours too."

"What about the bones and internal organs?"

The smile gave way to a perplexed look. "Well, I can see a little bit of that, but it really helps, like I told you, to be able to know what I'm looking for."

Andy sat back on the sofa again. The intensity of the moment seemed to keep bringing him to the edge of the cushions, and as he settled back, he had an idea. "So you could even 'move' bones if you wanted to?"

"I don't know, probably, but why would I want to move somebody's bones? Wouldn't that kill 'em?"

It was Andy's turn to smile. "Not if you were moving just a bit of bone marrow, Luke. I think I have an idea that will fix John's problem, not just make him feel better for a little while. You'll have to spend some time looking at medical texts and photographs taken through microscopes, but it might be possible for you to really cure your brother by clearing out the cancer in his bones and providing a little bit of your own bone marrow to get things back to the way they ought to be inside his bones. That's where your body makes red blood cells. Are you willing to do the studying and give it a try?"

"If it'll help John, I'll do it. I learn real quick."

Andy levered himself up from the sofa thinking, "I'll bet you do."

- END -