

## Pay to Pray

by Keith Gilman

There was nothing on the radio, nothing worth listening to, not on a Sunday morning. There never was. It was too early for the ball game and none of the radio stations wanted to play any good old southern-fried rock & roll to compete with those damn church shows going since the crack of dawn. Nothing to listen to but evangelicals, fancy preachers spewing their holier than thou crap, scaring the hell out of regular people, having them believe they're headed straight to hell.

Lincoln Green steered the car with his knee. He lit a cigarette with his left hand and turned the radio dial with his right. He was driving a 1987 Pontiac Grand Prix and had it up over sixty-five miles an hour as he crossed the city limits. There wasn't another car on the road.

"Liars. That's all they are. And ripoffs. If I had their money, I wouldn't be begg'in for no more."

He passed through the center of town, past the Oreville City Hall, with the American flag waving at the top of a teetering metal pole like the big red tongue of his old coon hound after a run down to the river. He sped past the police station and the fire company, where a couple of firemen were sitting on a bench outside. One was smoking a cigarette and the other looked half-asleep.

Little Johnny Rogers was selling newspapers on the corner. Little Johnny Rogers wasn't that little and he wasn't that young either. Everyone just called him Little Johnny because his old man hustled papers on that exact same corner before he got sick and passed on. Little Johnny would stand right next to him, no higher than his waist, and collect dollar bills and make change.

Now, Johnny worked the same corner. Not much else he could do since he'd come back from the war with only one arm. He got shot up real bad and his left arm had been amputated just below the elbow. Folks would come out of church, feeling good, wanting to do something good, and there'd be Johnny, ready to sell them a paper. They'd put a dollar in his basket, take a paper and let him keep the change. Nobody could bear to watch him fumbling for coins in that basket with his one good arm. It was kind of like charity.

Link was moving pretty good when he crossed over the railroad tracks that paralleled the river and circled behind the Oreville Lace Factory. He knew the suspension was shot but he kept his foot pressed hard on the pedal and the car bounced and he almost banged his head off the ceiling. He adjusted the tuner until another preacher came on, praying aloud with a tremor in his voice and a rasp in his throat. Link could just picture him, looking up toward heaven with his hand out.

"It's steal'in. That's what it is. Taking money from people that ain't got enough for themselves. I can't stand to listen to them. It makes me sick."

Jeanine sat in the seat next to Link. She had her shoes off, one foot dangling out the window. Her red hair splashed around in the wind like a horse's fiery tail. Her face was dotted with freckles and glowed red where the sun caught it.

"Will you stop your complaining? I don't know who's worse, them or you. At least they have money in their pocket."

“That ain’t honest money. You don’t think I could have money if I wanted to?”

“Not the way you’re going.”

“I suppose you expect me to get a job like that old husband of yours. Doing what? Working for Charlie Williams in that bubble gum factory of his. I don’t think so.”

“You could do something.”

“Who’s gonna hire a con like me anyway, especially in this town? All these holy-rollers got me pegged. Ain’t no Christian charity when it comes to criminals. Hey, wasn’t Jesus a criminal?”

“No, that was the other guy.”

“What other guy?”

“The other guy. The one they let go.”

“Why’d they let him go? They never let me go.”

“That’s because you’re a god-damn moron. Now, shut up and drive.”

Link pulled into Weller’s on Route 1. It was a good thing he pulled over when he did. His old gray Pontiac was starting to throw smoke, hissing like a snake. When that thing heated up, it could melt the primer right off the hood.

Weller’s was mostly a hardware store, sold just about every tool known to man. Larry Weller fixed tractors in the back and a line of them sat beside the building, the sun baking the rust right on them. Weller’s sold food too, freshly made sandwiches and Mrs. Weller’s homemade venison. Weller’s sold liquors as well.

Link’s car wasn’t the only car in the lot. A shiny, white police car sat there with the sun reflecting off the tinted windshield in a beam of white light. Jeanine jumped out of the car and skipped toward the store. She walked right past Officer Lee Stillwell, almost knocked into him coming out. He turned and took a good long look at Jeanine’s backside, couldn’t help but notice the little bit of skin showing under her shirt. Stillwell saw Link and came up alongside his car, have a few words.

They’d known each other from way back, lived about two blocks apart, two long blocks that made a difference whether you grew up to become a cop or a crook. They were about the same age. They’d both known Jeanine since before she’d been old enough to care which side of the tracks they’d come from.

“Where you coming from, Link?”

“From back in town, Lee.”

“What you been doing?”

“Not much. Why you ask?”

“Didn’t you hear? Little Johnny Rogers got robbed, just a little while ago, got beat pretty bad.”

“Shit. We just seen him on the corner, sell’in papers.”

“Must have happened right after that.”

“Sorry Lee, I don’t know noth’in about it.”

“You better step out of the car, Link. I’m going to have to search you, the car too.”

Jeanine came strolling out of the store, grinning at Officer Stillwell, carrying a shopping bag full of Riunite Wine and red-hot chips. She watched Stillwell kick Link’s legs apart, run his hand up the inside of Link’s leg and pat the pockets of his jeans.

“Am I next, Officer Stillwell?”

Stillwell turned and smiled at Jeanine, who had her hands on the car now, spreading her legs apart and shaking her ass in the air. Her hair had fallen down around her face but her green eyes peered out from behind the tangled mass of red hair.

Link spun and hit Stillwell right in the teeth. Stillwell fell backwards and Link was on him like a wild animal, kicking him in the ribs and in the head, swirls of dust rising off the ground and floating in the air like tree pollen on a dry spring day. Stillwell wasn't moving and Link was still kicking when Jeanine pushed him off. They jumped in the car and sped away, leaving Stillwell unconscious in Weller's lot.

"You are dumber than I thought."

"Stillwell was going to arrest us."

"For what?"

"For robbing Little Johnny Rogers."

"We didn't rob Johnny Rogers."

"I know. But he thinks we did."

"You are one hell of an asshole."

They drove the next three miles without saying much. Jeanine broke out the bottles of wine and tore open a bag of chips. Link held the bottle between his legs, unscrewed the top, and lifted it to his lips. He tilted his head back and gulped the wine, spilling it over his chin and down his shirt.

"Have you been thinking about what I said?"

"About what?"

"About *what*? About getting rid of that fool husband of mine, collect on that fifty-thousand dollar policy. The man's worth more dead than alive. I don't know what you're waiting for."

"I been think'in it over."

"You ain't goin' soft on me now. Are ya?"

"Robbery is one thing, Jeanine. Murder is another. I don't mind putt'in my hands on someth'in if I can get it, maybe even rough'in someone up a bit, but I don't necessarily go in for kill'in. I don't know I got it in me."

"I knew you'd turn out to be a coward. You were born stupid and poor and it's all you'll ever be. I don't know why I waste my time."

They were outside the city limits, speeding past cornfields in neatly planted rows, flat farmland for as far as the eye could see. The sun was rising ahead of them and not a cloud in the sky. Link pulled the car over onto a narrow dirt road and stopped, the grinding back wheels kicking up the dust behind them.

"Who do you think robbed Little Johnny Rogers?"

"How the hell should I know? And why would I care?"

"I just don't see how anyone could rob a one-armed man, a war veteran too."

"Someone stole that arm off him. Didn't they?"

"That's different. What's the matter with you?"

"Would you rather have fifty thousand dollars or your arm?"

"My arm. I guess."

"Really? You think you need both arms to spend that kind of money?"

"All I know is, the cops think I robbed Little Johnny Rogers. If they catch me, after what I did to Lee, they'll kill me for sure."

“Why do you keep saying that? You know Johnny. Don’t you think he would have told the cops if it was you that robbed him? But that’s impossible because you were with me the whole time. I’m your alibi. You dumb shit.”

“Well, if I could just find out who did rob Little Johnny.”

“That’s the cop’s job.”

“Don’t you see? The cops don’t care who robbed Johnny. They want me.”

They finished off the bag of chips and washed it down with the last swig of wine. The heat inside the car was becoming unbearable. Jeanine licked the salt and red pepper from her fingers, sucking on them one at a time and smacking her lips. Link grabbed her by the hair, tried to pull her closer. Jeanine punched him in the chest and he let go, but it wasn’t enough to stop him. He lunged across the seat and tried to wedge himself between her legs. She lifted her knees and got hold of the empty wine bottle rolling around on the floor. She swung it wildly and caught him just under the jaw.

“Cool your jets, loverboy, and get me out of here. I’m burning up.”

Link backed the car out, rubbing his jaw and spinning his wheels, the car fishtailing until it faced back towards town. He slammed it into gear and the car jumped. They raced down the empty highway, past Weller’s, quiet now after all the commotion. Link kept his speed through the narrow main street, right through the center of Oreville like a runaway train.

Sunday church services were just letting out and half the congregation of Oreville Baptist mingled out front and in the parking lot. They heard the car coming down the street, its broken muffler spitting like a Tommy-gun, its tailpipe dragging. They saw it swerving from side to side. Link gunned it and half the incontinent old hags wet their diapers, fanning themselves in their Sunday best, sweating like pigs, swearing at Lincoln Green.

“Where the hell we going now, Link?”

“They probably took Little Johnny over the hospital. I want to talk to him.”

“The place will be crawling with cops.”

“Maybe, but that’s why I have you, baby.”

Jeanine grabbed both her breasts, hanging loose in a halter, one in each hand, and shook.

“Oh, I am a sight.”

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There was a patrol car in the lot at Brandywine Hospital and two cops in the lobby sipping coffee from the machine. They were done talking to Johnny. They were hanging around because Lee Stillwell was in a room right down the hall from Johnny, looked a lot worse too.

Jeanine went in first. Link watched her through the sliding glass doors. Lieutenant Jesse Walters, the highest ranking officer in the Orville Police Department other than the chief, spied her right off.

“Jeanine McFadden! My lord, Lee will be happy to see you. He knows you tried to help him, honey. You’re just the thing he needs to lift his spirits.”

She looked at the blue uniform, the gold badge, his big belly hanging over a thick black belt. She looked at the gun on his hip, at his red, conjunctive eyes that roamed over her body.

“Thanks Jess. Think one of you boys could buy a girl a cup of coffee before I go in? I could sure use one.”

“My pleasure, little lady. Let’s go on down to the cafeteria. This coffee tastes like shit.”

He threw the cup into a trash can. Some of the liquid splashed down the sides and onto the floor. Link watched them take a seat at the counter. He slid past the nurse’s station and down the hall.

He saw Little Johnny Rogers sitting up in bed, working a remote with his one good hand, trying to get the television to play anything but some Sunday school preacher, telling him the Good Lord needs his soul and his money, after he already took his god-damn arm.

“Hey, Johnny. What’s do’in?”

“What are you do’in here, Link?”

“Cops are say’in I’m the one ripped you off, put you in that bed.”

“That’s bullshit. They know what happened. They just ain’t gonna do nothing about it.”

“Who was it, Johnny?”

“You’ll never believe it.”

“Try me.”

“It was Bert Cole.”

“You’re kidding me.”

“No, I ain’t. He just come out of church. He walks right up with his money out, asks for a paper, and not the crumpled one on top, neither, the one underneath. I give it to him and you know what he says?”

“What?”

“He says, that me losing my arm was God’s way of punishing me for selling my soul to the devil, fight’in in what he called an unholy war. Do you believe it?”

“Shit!”

“Well, I give him the paper, and he’s gleaming at me, staring me down with those black, beady, eyes, all clean shaven and dressed up like a heel. So I hit him, right in the eye. I had to, Link, and it was a good shot too. But he stood up to it, and pretty soon we’re go’in at it.”

“That’s a sin, talking to a combat veteran like that.”

“He don’t see it that way. He thinks we’re evil, you and me, cause we don’t go to that fancy church of his, act all high and mighty. He’d see things a little different if it was his head gett’in chopped off.”

“You’re damn right, Johnny.”

“Hey, Link. You got a cigarette? I’m dying for a smoke.”

Link tossed him the pack. He caught it in his good hand, slid one out with his teeth. Link lit it for him. Link lit one for himself and the hospital room quickly filled with smoke.

“When you gett’in out a here, Johnny?”

“I can leave anytime. There’s nothing wrong with me. They’re keep’in me for observation, waiting to see if anything else falls off.”

“Like yer dick?”

“Then I’d know Bert was right. Doomed to use my stump for rest of my natural life.”

He held up the broken end of his forearm. The skin was scarred and discolored, as if it’d been burned off. It looked like a chicken leg, fresh off the grill.

“What I don’t get, is I always figured them Bible thumpers was the fire and brimstone type, loved a good war, no matter who they was kill’in.”

“I guess it depends who starts it, our God or theirs.”

They finished the cigarettes and Link flushed them down the toilet.

“Hey, I got Jeanine here with me. She’s keep’in Jesse Walters busy.”

“You got Jeanine here with you?”

“Yeah. She’s trying to get me to knock off that old husband of hers for the insurance money. Takes me for some kind of fool. You know where I’d be while she’s spending the money? The fucking penitentiary. I been there once already and I ain’t go’in back.”

“Sound think’in, Link. Them cops’d like nothing better than to stick you back inside.”

“I got an idea of my own, Johnny, a way to get back at old Bert and make some money for ourselves.”

“What you got in mind?”

“Let’s get out of here and I’ll fill you in.”

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Jeanine had Jesse Armstrong positioned with his back to the door. The waitress tore up his bill, dropped it in the trash. She wiped the counter with a damp rag, anxious for them to leave. Cops don’t pay for coffee or cake, not anywhere in Knox County. Don’t leave a tip either.

Jeanine excused herself to the ladies room and slipped out the side door, one of those fire exits with the annoying buzzer. She met Link and Little Johnny at the car, slid in between them, left Jesse wiping the coffee from his face and wondering where that awful whine was coming from.

They drove toward Holyoke, where the likes of the three of them would cause quite a stir, raise the blessed dead from their graves. They passed by a line of three-story stone homes, mansions by their standards, with backyards that backed up to Holyoke Golf Course. It was the kind of neighborhood where you were judged by the model car you drove and where your kids went to school, a place where stoning was still an acceptable form of punishment. Bert Cole lived smack dab in the middle of the block.

Jeanine rang the doorbell and listened to the chimes ring like the church bells she’d been hearing all morning. She tucked in her shirt and hiked up her pants. She’d put on a little extra make-up in the car, painting her eyes with pink powder and her lips with a glossy red sheen. The door opened and Bert Cole stood there like he was guarding the gates of heaven.

Link and Little Johnny hid behind a row of hedges at the side of the property.

“What do you say, while she keeps him busy at the front door, we sneak in the back, see what he’s got in that liquor cabinet of his.”

“That’s small-time shit, Johnny. We’re gonna take Mr. Cole for some serious coin.”

They heard Bert Cole’s voice booming from the porch, reciting his words as if everything that came out of his mouth was a sermon. They watched Jeanine swivel her hips, tug on a loose strand of hair and fidget around like she already had Bert Cole’s hand down her pants.

“How ya figure?”

“Blackmail is some serious business, Johnny. But see’in as old Bert Cole is such a generous old soul, as the say’in goes, I don’t think he’d object to a small donation, alms for the poor you might say.”

“Link, you are a fucking genius. But what if he don’t fall for it?”

“Take a good look up there boy. He’s like a preacher on a pulpit and poor little Jeanine is tell’in him her sob story, how she broke down out on the road, how she got lost, could he help her, maybe let her use his phone.”

They saw Bert Cole leer at Jeanine. They saw Jeanine’s coy smile as he stepped aside and invited her in.

“He might get himself a little piece of ass, Link. But how do you know he’ll pay?”

“Bert Cole ain’t no different than any other man, got the same red blood in his veins. He just don’t want to admit it, not to you, not to me, not even to himself. Don’t worry. He’ll pay.”

*Keith Gilman is a cop that writes crime fiction. His first novel, “Father’s Day,” won the St. Martin’s Press/Private Eye Writers Novel Contest and is due out in 2009 by St. Martin’s Minotaur. His stories have appeared in a variety of crime fiction magazines including Thuglit, Demolition, Orchard Press Mysteries, Blazing Adventures Magazine, The PulpPusher, Mysterical-E, and Spinetingler Magazine. His flash fiction can be found in Muzzle Flash, MFOB and Out of the Gutter Magazine.*