

Old Testament Wisdom

By Frank Bill

If men strive, and hurt a woman or child, so that their fruit depart from them, and yet no mischief follow: he shall be surely punished, according as the woman's keeper will lay upon him; and he shall pay as the judges determine.

*And if any mischief follow, then thou shalt give life for life,
Eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot,
Burning for burning, wound for wound, stripe for stripe.*

Exodus 21:22-25

In ten years bruises would heal externally. Not internally. Knuckles would flatten from not wearing hand wraps or bag gloves. Scabs would become scars from beating the same army green bag that a man hung from a dusty basement rafter for the girl. But now, the girl sat within the darkness glancing out the bug-spattered windshield at the rusted tin building across the road. While those same knuckles double-checked the bullet-filled clip of the .45 Caliber Colt.

But the man who'd hung the army green bag was the one who'd raised her. Taught her how to twist punches into the bag with her hips at an early age. Taught her how to site, load and shoot a gun. The man taught her about Old Testament Wisdom. It was something that the outline seated next to her in the darkness was never accepted into. The Wisdom. Cause that week in late September when the man who'd raised her, after his flesh went from sun-beat leather to looking like a two-gallon plastic milk container pulled from a fire. After his wounds healed and he was released from the hospital, he had time to serve.

Her family lost everything except that army green bag. They moved in with her great-uncle. But during that week, men were beat and disfigured while others lost their lives. And this is how it all started. Ten years ago with a touch.

Jacque's heart pumped blood black as a dead opossum bloated by the sun on back-road pavement when Abbey rolled up her sleeves. Offering the bruises that finger-printed her arms of buttermilk flesh like rotted plums.

His flat-knuckled fist vibrated the table as his eyes carved into Abbey's like a Case XX knife gutting a deer spread from a barn's rafter.

"Who did this?"

Abbey's upper lip quivered as she sat with the memory of hands forcing bruises onto her flesh. Of panting breath scented like hog manure warming the side of her neck with lips pleading, STOP! She sat with that memory ingrained behind her moss-green eyes as they bubbled with the fear that it was her fault. Chewed fingernails pushed her

fudge-colored locks over her ear and said, “Hersey did it. I’m sorry grandpa Bocart. He said it was a game. I didn’t mean to-”

Anna May grasped Abbey’s shoulders from behind as Jacque bent forward, holding Abbey’s hands within the grit of his trembling lifeline.

“You got nothing to be sorry for.”

Jacque inhaled the secondhand smoke from his daughter Avis’s coffin nail. His mind exploded with buckshot imagining Abbey’s stolen innocence. Avis sat at the kitchen table rolling her fogged-over eyes within the oval shapes of running mascara as if to say ‘the hell you looking at?’

Reminded of how many times he’d warned Avis about taking Abbey around Medford’s place, Jacque released Abbey’s cotton hands. Stood and turned to Avis. No words. Just his flat- knuckled fist planted into her remorseless features. Knocking her against the wall and she exploded, “Son of a bitch!”

Jacque scalded back, “That’s for taking my granddaughter around that crank head and his deviant son while you get blasted on that shit!”

He knelt back down to Abbey knowing he had to ask what he didn’t wanna know. Anna May felt Abbey shaking from what she’d just witnessed and told her, “It’s okay Abbey, grandpas just angry at who did this.”

Jacque’s gray slits burnt an unrecognized fear through Abbey. Charcoaled her insides as he gritted his teeth with, “What did he do to you?”

Hersey didn’t hear the black primered Chevy S10 with no muffler pull into the gravel lot. He just sat at the Old Leavenworth Bar. Lean and wired like an electric fence. Angus the bartender served him another Jack and Coke. Johnny Cash blared from the jukebox with “Folsom Prison Blues”. Hersey had his back to the entrance. Karl Bean sat scented like a peeled onion on one side of him, sprinkling salt into a Fall City beer. Hair-lipped Ty Wilkerson sat on the other sipping an Old Style. And like everyone else in Old Leavenworth they were two simple names associated with the Wisdom of the land; they knew when to mind their own.

Stale cigarette smoke greeted Jacque from the entrance to the bar stool where his flat knuckled left hand greeted Hersey’s right shoulder. Jacque offered no words. Just four fingers digging into lean tissue. His thumb guiding the turning around. His unflinching gray eyes burrowing into Hersey - who was all piss and vinegar, spouting, “Who the hell--?”

Ty and Karl grabbed their beers. Swiveled their stools. Work boots met the scuffed hardwood floor and they separated like cockroaches, smelling the onslaught that was about to paint the bar’s interior.

Jacque’s right hand slapped Hersey’s lips into his yellow teeth, drawing first blood down his peach-pitted chin. Ty stood a few stools down. Watching and chugging his Old Style with his right workboot tapping to the strum of Johnny Cash’s voice. Bobbing his head. Watching Hersey’s features part from Jacque’s flow of violence. Jacque drove his left fist down onto Hersey’s nose, dissipating the cartilage. Then pounding Hersey’s left eye into an olive-textured slit. Hersey grunted. Pleaded with pain. Jacque spun him around on his stool to face the bar. Dug both hands into the rear

of Hersey's oil-thick locks. Ricocheted his face off the sticky stains and cigarette burns of the bar. While Johnny Cash sang of shooting a man in Reno just to watch him die.

Karl stood at the other end of the bar in his hole-worn bibs, grinding his bare gums. Watched Jacque Bocart exit the Old Leavenworth Bar the same way he'd entered; without a word. Karl walked over to where Hersey lay whimpering. The red of his insides dripped from the bar. Decorated the hardwood. His face blistered with abrasions. His teeth a shattered windshield. Scattered about his mouth in red-white shards. Karl shook his head. Behind the bar Angus talked on the phone to an operator about needing an ambulance. Ty walked over and said, "God almighty." Then chugged his Old Style and Karl said, "I didn't see anything, did you?"

And Ty replied, "Not a damn thing."

Jacque came out of the kitchen's screen door and onto the porch when he heard the cruiser's engine humming to a halt. Behind him in the house Anna May, Abbey and Avis sat at the kitchen table eating a late supper. Jacque stood with his tight salt and pepper stubble and leathery face hidden beneath the shadow of his worn John Deere cap watching the outline step from the cruiser.

Town Marshal Billy Hines dabbed his forehead with a sour-scented hanky and said, "Evening Jacque."

"Evening Billy."

"Hate to show up unannounced, but Medford Malone's boy Hersey got his self beat into stewed meat earlier today at the tavern. Seen you cruising out of town about the time I got the call. Thought I'd stop by. See if you seen anything?"

"Just a gas pump. Needed gas in the truck."

"So you didn't stop at the tavern?"

"Can't say that I did. Why? Don't you got no witnesses?"

"Funny you'd ask that, cause Angus, Karl nor Ty seen a thing even though Angus called it in while the others sat feeding their livers. Last thing Hersey remembers was sipping his Jack and Coke. Least that's what I think he stuttered."

Jacque laughed to his self internally. He knew regardless of who had been in the tavern when he touched Hersey for touching his ten-year-old granddaughter, that they'd not breathe a word to Hines. He was an outsider to their common Wisdom of the land; they kept their mouths shut when a conflict occurred between families. Let them settle it with equal scorn.

"Maybe he touched someone so they touched him back."

"You mean an eye for an eye. Tooth for a tooth."

"Old Testament Wisdom."

"Why you say that Jacque?"

"I know how young men are at that age. Do things without any regard to backlash. We were young once. Ignored the Wisdom of the land."

Marshal Hines leaned back against his cruiser's hood and fished a coffin nail from his shirt pocket. Flicked a flame and puckered a thick inhale of smoke. Blew it from his nose knowing Jacque was hiding something. He kept a stone face when Hines told him

what happened. Didn't even try to act surprised and Hines said, "We was damn good friends Jacque.

"Until you decided to become Johnny Law."

"It's just a job. And right now that job is finding out who did this to Hersey and why before Medford does. Cause Medford was a copperhead with monofilament wire tied to his tail. Attached to a stake in the ground unable to escape; pissed off. If you know something I suggest you cough it up."

Before going back into the house Jacque told Hines with a smirk, "I hear anything on the party line or otherwise, I know how to get in touch."

Rusted ringer washers. Gas stoves. Black dry-rotted tires and busted television sets decorated the flat rock hollers. The country yards of rusted trailers and broke down farmhouses with abandoned red clay tractors. Vehicles on cinder blocks. It was the poor man's fairy tale of rural survival. Hines could smell the survival's waste like the sweat that excreted from his pours as he sped down the valley road.

He'd been born and raised here. Knew Jacque was a farmer. That Medford ran a junkyard-salvage. He knew each man weren't to be crossed. He'd ran with each of them. They'd once accepted him as their own until he became an officer. Then Town Marshal. They'd considered him an outsider for nearly eighteen years. He knew the small population of families within Old Leavenworth were so tight with one another that when one of them pissed their eyes blinked.

They had their own Wisdom when dealing with one another that excluded the Law he was paid to enforce. He knew something had gone cross with Jacque and Medford. But with no one talking all he could do was wait for that Wisdom to rear its ugly head.

Oil-stained fingers decorated with skull rings grasped one of several mason jars from a worn rucksack. Each jar mixed with gasoline. Orange juice. Powdered laundry detergent and black gunpowder. Capped with a wick drilled into the golden lid. It was Medford's personal firebomb cocktail. He and his clan of crankheads had parked at the end of an old logging trail on Jacque Bocart's property. Tracked uphill damn near a mile. Baring gifts. Sawed off shotguns with the safety off. Fingers on the trigger. Buckshot in the chamber. Medford replayed how Hersey appeared in that hospital bed three days ago; eyes sewing-thread-thin outlined by the color of his meth-mouth complexion. Lips fragmented by ruts. Jagged marrow lined his gums like he'd tried to huff a stick of dynamite. But when he stuttered into Medford's ear he sounded like a drunk who'd Frenched a running chainsaw blade. "J-J-J-Jacque B-B-Bocart d-d-did t-t-this t-t-t-o me-e d-d-d-daddy."

Medford's black-braided hemp-hair bounced against his spine as damp briars and weeds painted his scuffed combat boots. His four crankheads, Swartz, Orange Peel, Spade and Toad followed behind with a full moon guiding them through the night.

They made it to the edge of a cornfield lined by three strands of braided barbed wire circling ceramic insulators connected to posts. Telling Medford they were electric. Up on a hill beyond the fields Medford could see the kitchen lights of the old farmhouse. Swartz pulled a pair of rubber-insulated wire snips from his rucksack. Everyone watched the electric currents flame blue as he severed the braided wire.

The men spread out like the wingspan of a vulture honing in on its prey. Started into the maze of cricket-chirping vegetation. A quarter of the way in, the thick-gummed inhale of cannabis burnt their nostrils like cayenne pepper. Orange Peel and Spade stepped toward the thick molded scent. Reached with their free hands. Medford huffed, "Wait, it might be booby trapped!"

A metal-toothed bear trap bit into the marrow of Orange Peel's shin. He screamed forward all the way to the ground. His index finger jerked. Buckshot from his 12 gauge peppered the darkness of vegetation. Silenced his pain.

Spade stepped down onto a two-by-six of rusted sixteen-penny nails that replaced the soles of his boots. Heated the insides of his socks with blood. He dropped his 12 gauge. Fell backwards into Medford's boxcar-graffiti arms. Medford reacted fast. Dropped his sawed off 12 gauge pump. Hefted Spade's outline while spitting, "Shit! Shit! Shit!"

Medford rode Spade to the ground in a bear hug from behind. Glanced over Spade's shaved skull at Swartz in the September moonlight as he told Spade, "This is gonna hurt." Swartz ripped the board from Spade's foot. Medford tightened his bear hug around the stiff-seizing tissue that was Spade's upper body.

Jacque knew he could've killed Medford's son Hersey if not for Abbey telling him, "But I got away from him, Grandpa. I punched him just like you taught me on the bag." He touched Hersey back. Gave him a beating. An eye for an eye. Old Testament wisdom.

But even after three days, everything still infected Jacque's mind. He sat at the kitchen table taking in the bruises that finger-printed the length of Abbey's arm guiding the red crayon. Filling in the empty space between the black outlines within the coloring book. Dock Boggs' banjo picked on the radio to the tune of "Oh, Death". Avis sat opposite Jacque chain-smoking coffin nails with her pencil-frame tinted by chigger bites. A head of unwashed maple-colored locks and mushroomed features. Jacque shook his head. He knew what his only child had caused to her own and it bothered her not one damn bit.

When the phone rang Jacque stood up from the table. Stepped to the wall from where it hung and answered, "Yeah?"

His brother-in-law Blaze told him, "Orange Pill's little brother told Cross-Eyed-Chucky that Medford and his crew are haulin' ass over to your place Jacque."

"Tonight?"

"As we speak. They're comin' for you cause of what you did to Hersey."

Jacque eyed the locked and loaded 30/30 over his kitchen door. The cabinet drawer that held one of his pistols; a loaded Smith & Wesson 9mm. So much for Old Testament Wisdom.

“It’ll be their funeral.”

Anna May came into the kitchen from the dining room. A hornet’s nest of hair wrapped upon her head, knowing whoever was phoning this late had bad news.

And Blaze rattled, “Need me over there?”

The light above the stove blinked once. Twice. And didn’t stop. Jacque knew they was either cutting the north side of the barbed electric fence or they were using a barrier to get over it. He knew they were coming.

“They’re here. I’ll call when I’m done for help with getting rid of their remains.”

He slammed the phone down. Grabbed his 30/30 from over top the kitchen door. Pulled his 9mm from the cabinet drawer. Tucked it down his worn dungarees. Told Anna May, “Medford’s here. Grab the 16 gauge from above the living room entrance. Take Abbey and Avis to the basement. Lock the door. Don’t unlock it until I come back. Anyone else comes, fill them with buckshot.”

Shaking Anna May questioned Jacque with, “What about Billy? We can call him.”

Glancing at Abbey, Jacque tells Anna May, “This don’t concern Billy. Now get the shotgun and get downstairs.”

Jacque stepped out the back door and into the yard. Followed the shadow of a tree’s leafed branches for cover. Stepped over the roots. Turned. Pressed his back against the jagged-bark of the tree’s trunk. Stared out into the distance. Watching and listening for any sign of Medford and his crew. Then a shotgun blast sounded from his acreage of corn stalks. Followed by a familiar repeating voice from his past, “Shit shit shit!”

Jacque faced the direction from which the gunshot and cursing sounded. Smiled and kneeled to the damp ground. His heart pulsed in his fingertips as he thumbed the hammer of his 30/30 back. Fingered the trigger and scanned the edge of the field with four other eyes.

Hell came quick as a flame igniting dry pasture. Spade came jack-legged limping. Set off the motion lights that hung from the phone poles at the corners of the field. Jacque parted the silence of the night with an explosion of gunfire that lit up Spade’s side with an exploding flame. Jacque’d hit the rucksack storing Medford’s firebomb cocktail. Spade was a human torch screaming for his life. Jacque extinguished an empty shell. Rifled another round into Spade. He dropped to the ground. Rolled around like electricity trapped in a hamster wheel. His pleas smoldering like the flames that had ignited his body.

Swartz, Toad and Medford exploded from the field with Civil War battle cries, pumping buckshot that nicked Jacque’s left shoulder. Forcing him to drop his 30/30 to the earth mumbling, *son of a bitch*.

From the outer edges of darkness, behind the security lights, two cave-black cur hounds with scarred and severed vocal chords came like a whisper in hell; unheard. Clamping tines of marrow into Swartz and Toad’s calves. Stealing their wind. Sawed-offs were dropped. The curs rode Swartz and Toad into the ground fighting and

screaming. Worked their way up to their necks. Making their vocal chords equal with the curs.

Jacque stepped from the light with a soiled-left shoulder. Sprayed-lead had nicked and dug into the old leather above his right eyebrow. He blinked blood. Drew his 9mm. Aimed at Medford, whose boots tossed up earth behind him as he pulled his Walther P38 9mm handgun from his belt line. In his other hand, the firebomb cocktail. And each man came forward fighting the recoil of the trigger pull till their clips were empty.

Anna May locked the basement door. Followed the wooden steps to the bottom. Pulled the old rotary phone from the wall and dialed 9-1-1. Then the shooting started. Her heart exploded. She thumbed the safety of the 16 gauge into the unsafe position. And waited.

Into the house with firearm drawn. Lights above the stove like hazard lights. Marshal Hines' voice bounced throughout the house with rushed breathing.

"Anna May? It's Billy Hines."

At the top of the steps. Behind the locked basement door she hid the trembling in her tone, "I'm here."

"You alright?"

"I'm okay. I got Abbey and Avis."

"Where's Jacque?"

"Out in the back yard. I heard shooting. Men screaming."

"You stay put. Don't open that door till I come back."

Out the back door and into the yard, bright quartz lights lit up the lifeless outlines of the beat, bloody and aged gladiators. Billy IDed them as Medford's grease-wired cronies.

Swartz lay with his neck gaping. Mangled. Dark wounds up and down his outline mirroring Toads. Spade's frame lay smoking where the field met the grassy yard. Two dead curs lay with bullet holes parting their ribs. Billy nudged each with the toe of his boot. Shook his head.

"What a damn waste of two good hounds."

Billy hadn't IDed Medford, Orange Peel or Jacque. He scanned the field's edge. The yard. Boots caught his eyes at the edge of the quartz light. Approaching the boots. They were attached to a smoldering frame. The scent of another ignited by fuel. Jacque.

Billy knelt down over him. Wrapped two fingers to the pulse of Jacque's greasy-black wrist chewed by buckshot and flame. What Billy felt was barely a beat. Fighting tears for a man he'd known his whole life. His gut knotted up like twine. Bubbled. Boiled over. And he hollered, "Oh, God!" He vomited on Jacque. Caused his flesh to sizzle.

Billy wiped the yellow bile from his lips onto his sleeve. Pulled and keyed the radio from his side, "Arlene, we got a bloodbath out here at Jacque Bocart's farm. Bocart's been grilled like sausage and onions at the county fair. Barely breathing. There are three dead. I repeat one barely breathing. Three dead. Gonna need an ambulance. Whatever reserve unit--"

Then it was as if the night smashed Marshal Billy Hines' skull. Combat boots stepped fast from behind the tree. An empty sawed-off swinging like a ball bat at the back of Billy's skull. The silhouette blended into the field. Disappeared into the September night. Billy lay on the cold earth and Arlene repeated, "Billy? Billy? Billy?-"

It had been ten years since the red and blue colored the long potholed drive with the lights of reserve units. The ambulance and state police. While the girl, her grandmother and mother watched from the basement window. Then they rushed up the stairs and into the unknown madness of bloodshed that decorated the backyard.

It had been ten years since Jacque had been released from the hospital's Burn Unit to the Spencer County Corrections. Since the State of Indiana had offered him a plea bargain in return for what had provoked the loss of life on his property. And who had disfigured him? He told them he had no recollection of that night or the events that unfolded. He served time but passed away before his sentence was fulfilled.

It had been ten years since Marshal Billy Hines had been forced out as Town Marshal. Replaced by a lawless marshal and deputy. Who turned a blind eye for cash from a father and son who were transporting meth throughout the poverty-stricken county's veins and the surrounding county's arteries.

But now, seated in the rusted Chevy 4x4, the girl nodded at the aged outline seated next to her and whispered, "It's time." She stepped from the Chevy with her fudge colored locks pulled tight into a ponytail. The .45 gripped in the gun-powdered burnt palm of her right hand. Busted soles of her boots cut through the knee-high weeds. Cross the chewed back road pavement. The outline sat in the 4x4 watching her walk through the gate of the rusted fence that housed the skeletal remains of vehicles decorating acres of red clay. To the outline she appeared like a King Cobra with her stitched softball shoulders, v-shaped back and hourglass waist beneath the full moon's glow.

She stopped in front of the rusted tin building. Listened to the sound of an air-powered drill zipping lug nuts from axles. The inhale of motor oil and gasoline fueled her bloodlust that had been circulating throughout her frame for the past ten years. She stood remembering all of the times the aged outline had picked her up from her great-uncle's with her family's consent to her Wisdom. They'd park across the road at the abandoned farm and sit studying the father and son.

Placing her eye to the crack of light in the tin door, she watched the son with a pearl white eye. Eightball head of blackish-gray locks. Oily and stringy. He zipped the air drill and she remembered the ten fingers. How they had forced bruises up and down her buttermilk flesh as she pleaded, STOP!

Behind the son sat the father on a bucket with gray locks braided down to the chain of his leather wallet. He'd taffy-stretched arms. Pitted and ripped by buckshot lifting a coffin nail to his lips.

The girl thumbed the hammer of the .45 Caliber Colt. Then the safety. He thought he'd gotten away with what he'd done ten years ago. He'd been questioned. Had an alibi. Then he was forgotten when her grandfather wouldn't talk.

But whenever the girl swung the tin door open none of that would matter. Cause the outline in the 4x4 could forgive himself and her grandfather could rest with his Old Testament Wisdom after his granddaughter pulled the trigger, just as he had that night ten years ago, until the clip was empty. And she'd have her Wisdom.

“This story is for my two late Uncles. Billy and Jacque Rainbolt and for my mother Alice S. Weaver (an inspiration to seek light when all seems dark) for sharing our family history and stories with me since birth. Also a big thanks to Lady Detroit for taking the time with me and helping me tone down Old Testament Wisdom. Thanks a lot.” *Stories forthcoming from Talking River Review, Hardboiled and Lunch Hour Stories (placed third in 2008 writing contest due out in April 09’). Frank Bill lives and writes out of southern Indiana with his wife Jenn and two dogs Jasmine and Malcolm.*