

Eyes of the Prophets

By Hugh Lessig

I found Devon Ledbetter in a corner booth down at Hippo's. He was braced tight against the wall - stuck there with nails maybe. He asked to see my driver's license and tilted it through the hanging smoke.

"Number one: You a bit old for this line of work? Number two: This is some lousy picture, ain't it?"

"I'm young enough and my picture's better than yours."

"You seen my picture Mista . . .? Winston?"

I slid in across from him and unfolded the printed Web page. "Devon Ledbetter. Carnal knowledge of a minor - 1990. Felony four. Two to ten. Conspiracy to escape from prison. Tack on six. Caucasian. Eyes brown. Hair brown. Sentencing court: Richmond city. Home address and work address listed and current."

He smiled. "You been to the sex offender registry?"

"Wonderful thing, the Internet. You pop up like a weasel."

"That information is my problem. Any numb nuts whacking off and typing with one hand can find it. Now someone's harassing me. Me!"

"Golly. There goes my night's sleep. You're not a victim, Mr. Ledbetter. You like little girls. At least I assume it was a girl."

"I look like a fag?"

"You look like a pervert, but let's not split hairs. How are you being harassed?"

He pushed a piece of paper at me. "Someone stuck this on my door two days ago. Piece 'a duck tape."

Ezekiel 7:3

The end is now upon you and I will unleash my anger against you.

I will judge you according to your conduct and repay you for all your detestable practices.

The paper was white and glossy, heavy stock, something for a fax machine or printer.

"You can't be serious," I offered.

"Fuck I'm not. Jehovah's Witnesses leave pamphlets."

"Maybe these were Shiite Jehovah's Witnesses."

He hunkered forward on his elbows, what elbows he had. "You're A-straight on providing protection for people. I'm told that. You have a certain sort of nasty streak. I'm told that, too.?"

"Both have been true at one time or another. Like you said, I'm a bit old for this line of work."

"What you doin' now?"

"I've been a hundred things - some worse than others. I came down because Sarah said someone was asking about a security job. I've worked in a security firm and I've done some bodyguard duty. But I don't track people. And truth be told, I'm not so hard up that I want to protect a child molester."

"You'd rather see me dead?"

“Some would consider it culling the herd.”

Sarah caught my eye from behind the bar. Her bullshit detector redlined the moment Ledbetter had opened his yap, asking about bouncers or tough guys. She called me against her better judgment and said so up front. I came anyway, but not for the money.

You OK? She cocked her head like the RCA dog.

I shrugged and mouthed, *only for now*.

She scolded me with a smile. That was a bad joke and she knew it.

When I turned back, Devon Ledbetter was holding a gun. Just like that. Hidden in the folds of his jacket, it was little twenty-five slide action - small enough to fit in a breast pocket.

“I don’t talk to people at gunpoint, Mr. Ledbetter.”

“This ain’t pointed at you. I’m showing... this is serious. I shall and will defend myself against this person.”

“I know when a gun is being pointed at me. This is one of those times.”

Sarah paced behind the bar like a caged leopard.

“The person doing this to me,” he said, “I know her. Her name is Melissa Reade and she works for the state.”

The name rolled off his lips like a memorized prayer. “The girl you molested?”

“It was consensual. Carnal knowledge ain’t rape. Look it up.”

“Fine. What makes you think it’s her?”

“She’s very religious, for one thing. Comes from a very Catholic family. Goes to church twice a week. Our Lady of Board Up Her Ass. Number two: I e-mailed her a couple of days ago. I’ve been out of jail for two months, but I wanted to get established before I tried to call her. Wanted to reconnect. Get her out of that church.

“Did she reply?”

“Nothing.”

“That’s hardly grounds for suspicion. More likely, she wants you to leave her alone.”

“I’m fine with that. I’m not fine with getting killed.”

Sarah appeared at our table. “You need anything, Cleat?”

I pointed with my head. “This man here has a gun.”

In a frozen moment of time, Sarah reached out and plucked it from his hand. It happened too fast to get scared.

“You got a permit, Sluggo?” She asked.

“He can’t have one,” I said. “He’s a felon. Anyway, isn’t there some law about guns in bars?”

Sarah rolled her eyes. “Virginia code eighteen-point-two, dash, three-oh-eight. ‘No person shall carry a concealed handgun onto the premises of any restaurant or club that serves alcohol’. Technically, you can open carry, but I don’t like it. In your case, it doesn’t matter.”

Devon Ledbetter buried his face in his hands. I stood up and kissed Sarah on the cheek. With a loving gesture, she popped out the clip and tucked it down my pants. “I’m sorry I called you out. Better keep this.”

I took one more look at Devon Ledbetter and prepared to forget him for the rest of my life.

Some kids found him later that night.

He lived on the Boulevard in a second-floor apartment. It had a balcony out front with a roof and a ceiling fan. You could sit out there and watch the traffic while grilling burgers on the hibachi.

Or you could hang yourself, which is what he did.

He strung some clothesline around the metal housing that secured the fan. The light stayed on, and this roving gang of mall rats - kids not more than fourteen - looked up and as he twitched jerked in that cone of light and made them the last thing he ever saw.

Newspapers don't report suicides unless it involves a famous person or happens in a public place. This qualified under the latter, and the editors tastefully buried Devon Ledbetter on page C-6 in a nice corner plot.

Two days later, Sarah called. "One of the girls stopped me just now. She works the afternoon shift. She says someone was in here asking about you."

"Male or female?"

"Male. He was asking about that Devon guy and you. In that order."

"He's dead, Sarah. I've forgotten him twice."

"Something about this guy creeped her out. They might have seen him before. I don't know."

"Who was the waitress?"

"Tamika. She doesn't scare. You still got that clip in your pants?"

"No. I'm just happy to see you."

"Funny. You do some checking, hear? I got bad feelings."

"I hear."

She coughed into the phone. "Um, how's the health?"

"Fine. I'm learning about Gleason scores and PSAs. All for a little prostate."

"Whatever you need, Cleat."

"I know."

Melissa Reade's name appeared on a database of state employees. She worked for something called the Aging Services Oversight Commission. It audited programs that serve old people and she was the assistant director.

The commission's web site had her photo. Brown, mousy hair. A thin nose. Freckles. Not unattractive, but a face not given to smiles. She figured to be twenty-nine by now.

Her office was squirreled away in a former hotel in downtown Richmond and I headed over there during lunch. She came out chatting with three other women, state IDs dangling from lanyards around their necks. They laughed like hyenas all the way to the lunch cart and got Thai, then ate on the lawn at Capitol Square.

When they finished and began walking back, I yelled her name from thirty yards away.

Waved. Yelled again.

Her friends separated and made for the office building, but she stayed. I had put on a dress shirt and chinos, and I looked just credible enough to be checked out.

“Can I help you?” She asked when she walked up.

“Maybe. My name is Cleatus Winston. I knew Devon Ledbetter.”

She stopped dead. “You’re from prison?”

“No. At least not recently.” I told her about myself, recounted the conversation in the bar, the Bible verse, how he thought it was her. She laughed at the last part.

“Please. He was yanking your chain.”

“How so?”

“He makes up the story. Gets you to believe him. Then he goes to the newspapers and cries about being a victim. And by then he’s even got a paid bodyguard to make it look credible.”

“That’s an interesting conspiracy theory. Funny how you thought it up so fast. Want to hear another one?”

She took a half-step backward, still trying to be brave. “Sure. Go ahead.”

“You didn’t want him around, so you tried to scare him away, Catholic style - which is fine. Suicide is the least of his sins. Except now someone is asking questions about me. They showed up at the same bar where Ledbetter and I talked. I don’t like being hunted. You need to stop or I’ll eventually wreck your life. That’s just how it is, and there’s no way to say it differently.”

Something broke her facade. I can’t imagine what.

“I don’t want to make trouble,” she said with a shaky voice.

“Of course you don’t. I didn’t mean anything by-”

“I’ve got to work tonight, a twelve-hour shift. I’ve got reports to do. I’m under lot of stress right now.” The tears began to drip from her cheeks.

“I understand. I don’t want to hurt you. I want to get to the bottom of-”

She flipped open her cell phone, the closest thing she had to a weapon. “Please leave. I’ll call nine-one-one. It’s on speed dial.”

“Yeah. I’m sure it is.”

I took the long way home, stopping to see an old friend who runs a security business, then a deadhead bar on Foushee where they had Legend on tap. Somehow, I passed the entire afternoon.

When I finally got to my door, a note fluttered there, held with silver duct tape.

JOB 13:5

If only you would be altogether silent!

For you, that would be wisdom.

There was no Melissa Reade in the phone book. I tried her office and she answered on the first ring with a businesslike, “This is Melissa. Can I help you?”

“That was a good line about having to work tonight. You actually followed through.”

“Excuse me?”

“Meet me at Hippo’s as soon as you can. It’s a bar in The Fan. It’s a very public place. It’s where I talked to Devon. I go there all the time.”

“Who is..? Is this Mr. Winston? Look, I told you – “

“Lady, don’t talk to me like I’m a moron. You can call the police if you like. We can press harassment charges against each other.”

“I... You...”

“It’s on Main, between Boulevard and Robinson.”

She showed up around ten, still wearing proper work clothes and clutching a purse to her chest. She caught my wave and made a beeline for my booth.

“You took your time getting here.”

“I had to - take care of a few things. What’s this about? You talked about pressing charges. What kind of person are you?”

“I’ve lived here all my life. I played football in high school and you can even look up what I did, not that it matters. Sarah, who runs this place, has known me for twenty years. She taught me martial arts, except I’m not very good. That’s my thumbnail bio, minus what I do for a living, which you already know. Would you like a drink?”

“N-no. Nothing.”

“You want to comment about this?” I showed her the note from my door.

She read it, shook her head and gave it back too me. “What am I supposed to know about this?”

“Look, lady. Job had patience. Not me. Before Ledbetter killed himself, he got one of these letters. It came after he contacted you. Now I’m getting them. So what the hell?”

Her mouth moved, trying to form words.

“Please don’t start crying again.”

She shuddered, came up for air, opened her eyes. They seemed a paler shade of green, as if some mysterious force had just shaved a few days off her life.

Her shoulders sagged. “It’s all just tearing at me, Mr. Winston. You can’t imagine. I can see my future. It’s as plain as day. And there’s nothing I can do about it.”

“Look, I wasn’t raped or molested as a thirteen-year-old and I have no idea what you went through. But Ledbetter is gone now. I’m not going to the cops about what he told me. Whatever you did, it’s safe with me.”

Slowly, she shook her head from side to side. “I’m sorry, Mr. Winston. I don’t know who is posting these notes. I don’t know who is asking questions about you. If someone is harassing you, they’re doing it without my blessing.”

“Devon said you were a religious person.”

“I was raised Roman Catholic.”

“It all fits.”

She spread her hands in a gesture of surrender. “Was I here on the night you and Devon talked? How could I know he mentioned my name? How could I know you until today? Was I standing over your shoulder that night, taking notes?”

“You could have been here, sure. Or maybe friends were spying on Ledbetter for you. It sounds a little far-fetched, but I’ve seen worse in real life. You were scared after he e-mailed you. You needed to keep tabs on him.”

No tears now. She was beyond that. Her hands fell to either side and she slumped back in the booth. A woman of no hope and no redemption. I wondered what she meant about seeing her future and not liking it.

“You’re a nice kid, Miss Reade. I hope, for your sake, that you figure a way out of whatever mess you’re in. I wish I could help you. I’m at the stage of my life when things start to go downhill, you don’t mind helping people for a change.”

The last sentence caught in my throat as my cell phone buzzed. I had a text message.

*Eves Dropper.
Booth behind u.
danger, will Robinson.
-- S*

From behind the bar, Sarah grabbed a pot of hot coffee and began weaving toward me, gently pushing aside her customers. I slid from the booth and pretended to stretch.

Then I grabbed the man sitting behind me.

He wore an Army coat and a turtleneck sweater and blue jeans. A thick beard hid his face, but I had seen those eyes before.

“Ledbetter?”

He slipped from my grasp and tore from the bar, one step ahead of Sarah and a splash of black napalm.

The guy ran down the street, cutting between alleys and vacant lots. I stayed with him until he reached the Boulevard, until he jogged to Ledbetter’s apartment. When I reached the building, the main door hung open. I ran up the stairs after him.

Ledbetter’s apartment was at the end of the hall and the man stood at his door. We were both huffing.

“All right,” I said. “Enough.”

The man turned and pulled off his jacket. Then he pulled off his whiskers.

It was Devon Ledbetter all right. Except he was sixteen years old and had Melissa’s nose.

“Dylan. The name’s Dylan.”

“Dylan Reade?”

“Yeah.?” He fell back against the door. As I moved forward, he eyed me sideways, a colorless gaze. “You leave me alone!”

“Just trying to figure out what’s going on, that’s all.”

He pointed to himself. “Me. I’m what’s going on.”

“Tell me about it.”

“I’m a sick fuck, mister.”

“Tell me about it anyway.”

He slid to the floor and began to cry in great ragged sobs. I pulled up a spot on the floor myself. Sometimes you get the feeling that a kid is used to crying - that they cry when the school bus leaves early. Dylan wasn’t like that. He held it in as a matter of habit, and when it came out, it came out hard.

He hiccupped a few more times before reining it in.

“I’m pretty good on the computer,” he said. “That’s what started this.”

“Of course. You read your mother’s e-mails.”

“Yep.”

“Then you found out about Devon Ledbetter. Even I could do that. You put the Bible verse on his door because you didn’t want him back in your mom’s life?”

“Something like that.”

“And because he reminded you of... You.”

He almost smiled as he pulled the gun from his coat. It was a revolver, a thirty-eight from the looks of it. “I followed him, staked out his house. There’s an alley behind the building. I could see his face through the windows. Eventually, I got online and figured out how to look up court documents. I went to the courthouse and read through it all. All the evaluations and shit. How he got kicked out of school, how he lived in his own world. He had this wasted potential. It was me all over.”

I rose to my feet. “Sorry, can’t sit like this. My legs are going numb.”

As I stood, I took a step toward him.

“I can’t say I like little girls,” he said. “That was part of his world. I’ve got parts to my world. You don’t even want to know. Got kicked out of school. My mom... M-mom can’t keep pets - no pets at all.”

“You looked at the court documents, but not right away.”

“First I did the Bible verse. Then I followed him to the bar when he met with you. Had my little disguise. I could stand against the wall and listen. Just be one of the invisibles.”

“You followed him home afterwards?”

“Yep. Right here.” He pointed to the floor. “We talked right on this spot. He didn’t know about me. Didn’t know that mom got pregnant sixteen years ago, let alone that she chose to keep it. Keep me.”

He eyed the gun barrel. I inched forward.

“I told him I wanted him dead. Lots of other things. Then he closed the door. Then I walked away. Then he killed himself. Then I read up on him. Kind of in the wrong order, huh?”

“And the Bible verse on my door?”

Mom came home and told me she talked to you. You’re on the Internet. Nice little home page advertising your security services. And you belong to a prostate cancer survivor’s group.”

“Excuse me?”

“You heard. A survivor’s group for prostate cancer. They got a newsletter and they welcomed you as a new member. Must’ve been last month or so.”

I remembered that day. It was sunny and warm and full of hope, and that image stayed strong as I tilted forward and tried to grab the gun, and God I was so close.

But he had watched me. He had watched me all the time.

Hippo’s was pretty much like I left it. Sarah stood behind the bar and Melissa was in the booth. I slid in opposite her. She had seen her son behind the whiskers and put it all together.

Eventually, she looked at my face.

“Where is he?”

I didn’t need to say a word. She saw it. She had seen it for some time, because there was Devon and there was Dylan, and how could she not know?

Her face twisted with grief, but some of the green returned to her pale, prophet's eyes.

Hugh Lessig is a newspaper reporter who lives in Richmond, Va., where he covers state politics. He is native of eastern Pennsylvania, land of slate quarries and blouse mills. His work has appeared previously in Plots With Guns, Thrilling Detective, Judas E-zine and Handheld Crime. He is currently at work on his first novel, but it's nowhere near done.