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Exodus in Kansas

“My girl is a witch,” Tom moaned.

Several men were sitting in Alf’s Café in Elmwood, Kansas, drinking “frappes”—root beers with scoops of vanilla ice cream in them. “These things used to cost a nickel,” Zeke complained. “Now they’re seventy-five cents, and next week maybe they’ll be a dollar.”

“It’s the economy here in Elmwood that’s bothering you,” said Bill. “In Manhattan—not the one here in Kansas, but the one in New York, where women walk with poodles trimmed like hedges, they’d charge six dollars. But nobody complains because they have piles of money.”

“We could bring plenty of money into Elmwood if we showed some imagination,” said Zeke. “Why don’t we start something like Disneyland to bring people here?”

“You’d need millions of dollars just to get started,” Hank objected. “Now they’re advertising the state as ‘Kansas, Land of Oz,’ but I don’t see any tourists coming.”

“Sure lots of them have seen *The Wizard of Oz* and heard Judy Garland sing ‘Somewhere over the Rainbow,’” said Jeff. “But nobody cares about wizards.”

“My girl is a witch,” Tom moaned again. Oblivious of the other men’s talk, overcome with grief, and sunk in his frappe as if it had been a fourth bourbon on the rocks, he nevertheless managed slowly to lift himself from his chair, and then staggered out of the café.

“Who’s his girl friend?” asked Bill, taking notice of the departing figure.

“That’s Brenda,” Hank said. “She had a baby with somebody else and now tells people that the devil is the father and she’s a witch.”

“Tom ought to warn Brenda to shut up,” George said. “Someone will kill her. Most of the people in this county swear by the scriptures. I know my ma and pa do. They drilled me on lots of the parts, so I can quote text and give chapter and verse. Exodus says: “Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live.”

“Yeah, my parents did the same,” said Bill. “They once thrashed me good for telling them that Exodus says: “Whoever lies with an animal shall surely be put to death.” I reminded them that our little mutt Duke lived with us in the house and even climbed into their bed. They sure didn’t think it was funny.”

Suddenly Bill said, “A witch burning would bring hordes of tourists into town, and we could build a theme park around it.”

“The courts wouldn’t allow witch burning,” Jeff objected. “The Constitution doesn’t permit cruel and unusual punishment.”

“Not now,” Hank answered. “But we’ve been getting a different breed of judges in the U.S. Supreme Court, thank God! By next year they’ll interpret the Constitution so that burning a witch won’t be cruel and unusual punishment.”

Jeff spoke up: “Anyway lots of people wouldn’t come because the sight and smell of a witch burning would turn their stomachs.”

“You don’t need everybody coming—just lots and lots of people,” said Bill. “Most will want to go along with the crowd, not stand out and be considered cranks and oddballs. They’d be afraid they wouldn’t get jobs they wanted or they’d lose customers in their businesses.”

Remember, some of the condemned would be confessed witches, like Brenda. A theme park built around a witch-burning every week would be a windfall for Elmwood.

Tom's sister, a local high-school history teacher, had come into the café searching for her brother, and caught the drift of the conversation. "You men are disgusting," she screamed. "Hitler had nothing on you. Thanks to creeps like you, witch burnings—by one name or another—are happening all over the world right now." She strode out of the café in fury.

"There's another goddamn witch for burning," Bill said.

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