



Vengeance
of the
Lamb

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The silly lambs; pure thoughts are
Dead and still,
While lust and murder wakes to
Stain and kill.

from *The Rape of Lucrece*
by William Shakespeare





Chapter 1

The sun was bright and the land was green with splatters of yellow telling of the coming fall. The air smelled of plowed soil. It was August in East Texas and Sarah was enjoying the perfect day. She was happy.



She noticed the three shapes in her rear view mirror just after turning off the main highway. As they neared, she recognized the machines. *It's some creepy guys on motor bikes*, she thought. *What are they doin' way out here?*

Motorcycles on the road leading to her home irritated her for some vague reason. *Boy, that's really weird*, she thought. *They've got as much right to be here as I do, I guess. It's not really my very own road.*

Sarah's little sister Bonnie Lou fidgeted next to her. She was chattering away about a story from Bible school that morning. "An' Jesus, he just went right up on that ole' mountain, you know, an' he tells all them people to eat, you know, and they all said, 'but Jesus, we ain't got no fish or bread.' Well, they had just one loaf and one fish, of course. An' then Jesus..."

Sarah pretended to listen, but her mind was on finding her favorite Houston radio station. *I won't have to hunt for it in two more weeks*, she thought. *I'll be livin' right there in Houston!*

The flat city of Houston spreads its concrete across



the once green country a hundred miles distant and fifty cultural years away from the country people who live in Calab County.

Sarah was like all the kids with dreams of going to Houston to make a life far different from their parents. Houston is the place where people live and work in air-conditioned ease in buildings that soar into the sky like fairy-tale castles. It's a place where beautiful people drive sporty cars, go to chic restaurants and bars, and talk to each other about fashion, the best wines, money and cruises on love boats.

Calab County is old people with gray hair working in old buildings with gray windows and living with broken hearts in gray houses with broken porches. They stagger through life with worn-out memories of kids who have moved to Houston. Finally, they go into a hole and somebody covers them up.

Sarah would soon be on her way. *Like the old song says*, she thought, *I'll never be happier in my life to see Calab County in my rear view mirror.*

But as she drove toward home, a strange thought tugged at her. She suddenly knew that though she might wander far away from this place, her soul had long ago been nailed down in Calab County like Christ on the cross. She pushed the dour thought out of her mind and tapped the wheel, singing and keeping time with the music.

Sarah glanced in the mirror again. The sight of the rough men plucked the song from her lips. They were enormous men on glittering machines with arms cooked brown by the sun. They began to pass very close to the side of the car. A redheaded man with a tattoo of a grinning skull and dagger was close enough for her to touch. They all gawked as if she and Bonnie were animals in a zoo. A thunderstorm of noise filled the car.

"Oh, yuck, Sissy!" Bonnie squeaked, "they're *gross*!"

Sarah agreed but said nothing. The intrusion of sullen eyes behind dark sunglasses angered her. *You don't belong here, you big hulks*, she thought. *You don't belong on my road!*

The men lurched the machines forward as if they had heard Sarah's rage. Sarah felt better, even triumphant, as she watched the men go down the gentle road that wound its way through a community of gentle people.

If it were April instead of August, Sarah thought, pushing the men out of her mind, *the bluebonnets would fill the ditches along the road as far as you can see. I love the bluebonnets...*

Then she saw them. They had stopped at the crest of a hill. The machines rumbled as the men waited for the girls in the old car. Then, as if impatient, the men turned the machines toward Sarah. Sarah's dark eyes narrowed to slits. She heard herself whisper, "Oh God, no!"

"Oh God," Sarah whispered again as the men raced at them.

Bonnie's face flashed white. Sarah shielded her as the screaming machines swept by. Then the machines spun around again, throwing dust in the air and grating loudly as rubber and gravel meshed.

They're comin' back again! Sarah thought. *Oh my God!*

"What are those big jerks doin', Sissy? I mean Sarah," Bonnie whimpered, peeking over the seat. "They gonna pass us *again?*"

Sarah tried to swallow the lump in her throat. She tried to convince herself that there was nothing to be afraid of. *It's all just a coincidence*, she thought lamely. *These jerks ain't gonna do anythin' to us. They're just a bunch of creeps!*

"Don't...don't worry about it, Bonnie Lou," Sarah said finally. The fierce looking men again pulled near

pushing her heart towards her mouth.

It's only three miles to home, Sarah thought. But the Dalrymple place is just beyond the next rise, just before Spirit Bridge. The panic subsided.

"I...I think we'll stop at the Dalrymple's place," she said. Her words tumbled out as one of the motorcycles began to pass. Sarah defiantly jammed the accelerator to the floorboard as the motorcycle drew even with the window. The rider sped up immediately. Sarah intended to send a scowl like a fist at that grinning mouth, but the malevolent eyes paralyzed her.

The man twisted his mouth into a pinch and then grinned. The car lurched off the road, but she regained control as Bonnie squealed, "Oh Sissy, Sissy! That horrible man! His face!"

The man heard Bonnie's cry and bellowed with laughter. Suddenly, he roared ahead, still laughing.

"Why did that horrible man make that ugly face at us, Sissy?"

Sarah struggled to breathe. "I don't...I don't know. Probably...probably just a bunch of smart-alecky guys from Houston." Sarah wanted to reassure Bonnie and comfort herself. "Don't let it worry you. We'll stop at the Dalrymples and visit for a spell."

Sarah felt better. Talking helped calm her.

"Anyway, didn't you say you were gonna stop callin' me Sissy and call me Sarah like everybody else?"

"I got sorta' excited, I guess," Bonnie answered anxiously. "But I ain't worried. I mean I ain't worried a whole lot, Sissy. I mean Sarah." Bonnie stared defiantly in the direction of the riders. "I don't like them guys. I think them guys are just assholes."

Sarah's mouth popped open. "Bonnie!" Sarah said, "What kinda' language is that? Where did you hear such a nasty word?"

"Well," Bonnie said sheepishly, "I think I heard you

call that guy that pulled out in front of us an asshole. It just means a bad man, right? And them guys really are assholes, ain't they, Sissy? I mean Sarah"

Sarah swallowed the urge to laugh and turned toward the window. *It'll never do for Bonnie to think she can make me laugh, she thought. I'll never hear the end of it.*

"Bonnie," Sarah said, "The word asshole is a nasty word. If I said it, I was wrong. Even if I did, which I can't really remember doin', you shouldn't say it. If Momma hears you say words like that, she'll skin you alive, and you know it. Okay?"

"Yeah, I guess so, Sissy. I mean Sarah." Bonnie said, unconvinced. "You won't tell Mom. Will ya', Sissy?"

"Don't worry about it," Sarah said smiling. "And by the way, you call me Sissy all you want."

Bonnie grinned shyly. "I know I can call you Sissy if I want. And you know what? I betcha' Mrs. Dalrymple's got some cold Dr. Peppers in that ole' 'frigerator of hers."

"She always does," Sarah said reaching over and tussling Bonnie's short-cropped hair. Bonnie grinned at her. Sarah had treated Bonnie badly before their father died. She seemed such a little pest always tagging after her or embarrassing her with her gawky manners. But grief made her realize that Bonnie was her *family* and the only sister she would ever have.

Sarah relaxed as she saw the familiar mailbox nailed to the gatepost of the Dalrymple place. *Maybe I should just go on home, Sarah thought. No, I better stop—just in case.*

Sarah beeped the horn as she drove up the driveway and stopped by the porch. She waved through the windshield at Mrs. Dalrymple standing behind the screen door smiling. Bonnie Lou scrambled out immediately. Mrs. Dalrymple held the door open.

"Ya'll hurry in," Mrs. Dalrymple said, her voice

lilting like a mockingbird's song. "Them ole' flies will eat us up if we let the screen door hang open!"

"Hi, Mrs. Dalrymple," Sarah said. Bonnie hugged the woman around her ample waist.

"Well, hi yourself, Sarah Lynn! I swan, you two are gettin' to be the prettiest girls in Calab County! If you get any prettier, all the girls will have to move to Houston to get boyfriends!"

As they went to the kitchen, Mrs. Dalrymple chatted idly. "Mr. Dalrymple built this ole' house long before you were born. 'Course it creaks at night when the heat of the day leaves it. And it trembles in the winter like an old woman. But, come to think of it, it always did creak and tremble. I reckon nothin' is really new under God's sun. But my goodness, how things do wear out!"

Sarah smelled baking bread and the sultry aroma of garden vegetables under steam. She had grown up in kitchens smelling of life close to nature. She idly wondered if she would miss such things living in Houston where nature had been severely modified by man.

"Looks to me like you're busy as a bee," Sarah said as the two girls followed Mrs. Dalrymple into the large kitchen.

"No more than usual, Sarah, just doin' a bit of cannin'. Got to get it done, you know. Beans and peaches don't jump in Mason jars without some help. Now you just sit easy for a spell and talk to me while I finish snapping this mess of string beans. Picked 'em early this morning and they are startin' to wilt just a mite. It's just too hot, too hot! Bonnie Lou, would you like a nice cold Dr. Pepper?"

"Yes ma'am! It got right warm drivin' back from town." Bonnie glanced at Sarah who signaled her to say nothing about the men. Bonnie grinned mischievously and mouthed the word *assholes*. Sarah scolded her with a stony glare, but her eyes flashed with laughter. Bonnie grinned wider, pleased with her wicked deception.

“Well, you help yourself. The coldest ones are in the very back, next to the ice cube trays. You been to Bible school today, Bonnie Lou?”

“Yes ma’am. Sissy took me every day this week. I got me a gold star for ‘tendance and a prize for memorizin’ the names’ of all the Gospels in the New Testament.”

“A prize? My goodness gracious! What kind of prize, little lamb?”

“It’s a ticket for a free cheeseburger at McDonalds. Mamma said I can use it Saturday when we go shoppin’.”

“Well, I’m proud of you, Bonnie Lou.”

Mrs. Dalrymple swatted a fly with a snap of her wrist. “Well, Sarah,” she said, “how’s that mother of yours? I talked with her after church ‘bout her sittin’ hen problem. She was still ailing from that fall at the cotton gin.”

“Mamma is doin’ a whole lot better now,” Sarah said as she began to snap green beans. Sarah hated snapping green beans, but to just sit in a neighbors kitchen without helping would be unthinkable.

The screen door banged as Bonnie darted outside in pursuit of a large yellow cat named Cat.

Mrs. Dalrymple chuckled as she watched Bonnie make the capture. “That ole’ cat is the best ratter ever to live on this place. That Bonnie Lou! Gracious me, Sarah, she’s growing like a weed. And the spittin’ image of her mother.”

“Yes ma’am, she surely is.” Sarah smiled. *How many zillion times have I heard that worn out ole’ expression,* she thought.

It seemed that every adult she had ever known described every child as *growing like a weed*, or being as *fat as a pig*, or as *cute as a bug*. To Sarah, an honors graduate of business school last spring, such expressions are like shorthand with a countrified twist.

Sarah Arlow was a tow headed little girl digging in

the dirt wearing nothing but cotton panties when her mother took a really good look at her dirty faced angel and realized that Sarah was the *spittin' image* of Aunt Laura. "Poor, poor Aunt Laura", her mother always said. "It must be God's way of keepin' poor Laura's memory goin' in the family for a little while longer."

After her mother announced Sarah's resemblance to Aunt Laura, Sarah had no choice but to accept her lot. It was not so bad once she understood that it was all a kind of ritual. All children are the spittin' image of someone, usually long dead. It is a way to honor a relative and give the child a place in the family.

On drippy Sunday afternoons, Sarah often traveled into the past with an album crammed full of family snapshots. In all the pictures of Aunt Laura, she was laughing *at* the camera. *I do look a little like Aunt Laura*, Sarah finally concluded.

But she resented Aunt Laura for not having blue eyes to pass on to her spittin' image. *Why should I have to suffer through my entire life with stupid cow eyes!* Then one day at the movies, her date whispered to her during Chinatown. "You know somethin', Sarah? You got real purdy eyes. An' you look mysterious, kinda' like her. But I'd never slap you around." Sarah liked her eyes from then on.

Like Aunt Laura, Sarah had a figure that boys stare at. Sometimes the wistful looks made her want to laugh at them. Sometimes the hunger in their eyes disturbed her in ways that she didn't understand.

The *cute as a bug* Sarah passed into history near her sixteenth birthday. The freckles disappeared and her blond hair darkened to a shade like wheat ready for harvest. She let it gather on her shoulders and curl around her face. The crinkle lines in the corners of her eyes made her seem always about to burst out laughing.

Unlike the sedentary Aunt Laura, Sarah was the

best captain the Calab Wildcats basketball team ever had. Her father was proud of her. “You’re the best, Sarah,” he told her. “But remember, when you’re the leader, it’s smarts that count. Winnin’ comes from thinkin’ ahead and makin’ plays work. Anybody can learn to shoot baskets. And you gotta play by the rules, or it won’t mean nothin’. And remember this too, cheaters lose their souls, and there ain’t nothin’ worth losin’ your soul fer.”

Sarah hungered to know what brought Aunt Laura to such a bad end. The subject of Aunt Laura’s death was only talked about behind closed doors in hushed tones. As she pondered the fading photographs, she wondered. *If I really am the image of Aunt Laura, will I too go mad someday, slit my wrists and bleed to death in the insane asylum?*

Sarah snapped string beans and listened to Mrs. Dalrymple politely, knowing that the endless stream of prattle about Bonnie, the weather and the farm was meant to fill space until Sarah told her why she really stopped by. Finally, Mrs. Dalrymple stopped and looked at Sarah. Sarah understood.

“We had a bit of a experience driving home,” Sarah said casually. “Probably sound plain silly now. But ‘bout two miles after we turned off the highway, three men on motorcycles passed us. They were really creepy lookin’ guys.”

Sarah snapped the beans more rapidly, remembering Bonnie squealing, “*That horrible man, Sissy!*” But now Bonnie is safe, dangling in an old tire hanging from a tree, sipping a Dr. Pepper and petting Cat. Sarah suddenly wanted to dangle in that old tire and daydream.

Mrs. Dalrymple noticed Sarah stare at Bonnie. She guessed at the concern in Sarah’s mind. “Bonnie Lou is much too young to understand the urges of men,” she said. “All children of God are to be spared knowledge of lust and wickedness of the flesh.”