

Ain't That Just Like Family?

It was like any other October night in the South. Warm. Humid. The pungent reek of harvest, Halloween and Fall permeating everything, creating a sensation ensconced nicely between pleasant and somewhat irritating. You just couldn't escape it that was all. Pumpkins stood sentry at nearly every door, porch step or column. Children went around town (supervised these days) dressed as goblins, pirates or Spiderman. And a hell of a lot of Pokemon. Anyone doubting the power of oddly named Japanese characters turned marketing goldmine needed only look around.

Luke drove home on the back road, was it county road 18 or 55? Hell, he could never remember and it didn't much matter. One of four brothers, Matthew (older), Mark (older) and John (younger) (yes, ladies and gentlemen, we're in the Bible Belt, land of Fundamentalists, tee-totallers and a few just plain liars, too), Luke was the last one left. There's no point in boring you with their stories, seeing as to how Luke's the last one left, and he'll be the one we're following around for a bit.

When Luke bought his parent's house from the state (something weird happened when his folks died, and so Luke ended up having to up and buy it from the state), he wasn't exactly certain why he'd done it. It was where he'd grown up, and he supposed that was just about enough. And even if that wasn't enough, he owned it now. No sense overanalyzing things.

Everybody picked on Luke for driving that old IROC Camaro. Not that he much cared. One day, he just knew, this thing would be a classic. Still, his friends often teased him about perhaps growing a mullet and buying an Iron Maiden tee shirt to go with the car. Fine by him. He'd be laughing all the way to the bank one day. Which was why he kept it pristine, the three hundred and fifty cubic-inch engine roaring when commanded, purring when idling. Change the oil every three or so thousand, run good fuel and, once in a while, put the hammer to the floor to blow the soot out. It probably dyno'd at four hundred horses, what with all Luke'd added to the engine. Wasn't a 'Vette older than a C-5 within a hundred miles that could touch him.

He passed the old Baptist church a couple of miles from his house. Kids and parents everywhere. No doubt a Harvest festival of some kind in lieu of that devil's work out there known as Halloween.

In the rearview mirror, he saw something move behind him. At seventy-five miles per hour (Johnny Law didn't patrol much out in these parts), he couldn't risk turning around.

"Luke..."

The whisper came from behind him and scared the ever-loving hell out of him. He slammed on the brakes just as a pale hand jutted out beside him in the darkness. Luke screamed.

“Luke,” louder this time, “I am...your father.”
What the hell?

A face appeared beside him with a very loud, “BOO!”

“JESUS CHRIST, Bobby! What the fuck are you doing in here?”

Bobby was too busy laughing. In fact, he could barely breathe from laughing.

“Oh...my...GOD! Oh (breathe) God, dude! (breathe) I SO got you (breathe) good!”

“I could have killed us both, Bobby! Aren’t you a little old for this shit?”

“Never get too old for this shit, Luke! Never!”

Luke realized he’d stopped the car dead in the middle of the road. Not much traffic out here. Still, best to get moving.

“How long have you been in here, Bobby?”

Bobby scooted and pulled himself into the front passenger’s seat of the Camaro. “Since you went into the package store in town, man. Dude, need to start locking the doors, brother!”

No shit, Luke thought.

The remaining miles of the trip home were uneventful, other than Bobby’s ridiculously embellished tale of how he’d finally gotten Helen from the bank to sleep with him. The embellished part was his retelling of his performance. Luke would bet the value of everything he owned against Helen telling a completely different sort of tale.

The two men sat on the front porch of Luke’s home. Each had a beer. Luke, a Corona, Bobby a Yuengling.

“Here’s to no trick-or-treaters,” Bobby said, raising his beer.

“Here’s to them,” Luke replied.

After a long draw, Bobby said, “So what in the hell keeps you out here, man? I don’t get it. You’ve got talent. You’re only mostly ugly, and most every woman in town pays at least a little attention to you. Seems to me you could do something for yourself.”

“I am doing something for myself,” Luke said. “I’m drinking a beer.”

Bobby sighed. “Can’t you be serious for, you know, maybe a minute or two?”

“Not about this. Not as many times as we’ve had this conversation. How the hell many times can you ask me the same question?”

“As many times as it takes for your answer to make sense.”

“Because I want to stay here.”

“Now, you see? That’s what I’m talking about. Why would you want to stay in this Podunk little circle of hell? There’s nothing here but churches, hicks and...”

“Shh.”

“I’m just say...”

“*Shut up.*”

Luke was staring out into the darkness a hundred or so feet from the front porch.

“Do you see that, Bobby?”

“What? I don’t see anything.”

“Keep looking.”

And so he did. A shape began to emerge. A dog. Loping along very slowly.

“Go get the shotgun, Bobby.”

“Hey, it’s just a dog, man.”

Luke shot Bobby a fierce look. “There’s something *wrong* with that dog. Get the gun.”

Luke's nerves were singing like sirens as Bobby went into the house and the dog drew closer. Dogs didn't walk like that. Dogs didn't just come loping up to a house in the dark. Rabies, maybe? Probably. Lots of it out here in the country.

Now he could see that it was a hound-mix. Someone's hunting dog. Probably treed a rabid raccoon and ended up meeting the business end of the animal. Best to shoot it. Hell, all the vet would do would be to behead the damned thing and send it to Auburn.

Hurry the hell up, Bobby.

"Still out there?" Bobby stood beside Luke with the shotgun.

"Yeah." He took the gun from Bobby. Put one in the chamber. And waited.

"Shit. Wish he'd hurry up and get here. I don't like this."

Makes two of us, Luke thought.

The dog stepped into the light from the porch.

"Jesus."

Haggard and worn, the dog looked too tall, too lean and too, what, dead? Yes. The damned thing looked dead.

"What do you want, boy?" Luke said to the dog.

With nothing but its eyes turned upward, the dog began to bare its teeth. A holy hell lot of teeth. A growl that sounded nothing like a dog began to cut the night air, slicing the little bit of composure the two men had left into bits.

And it charged. It didn't just move, it fairly leapt into the air, at least five feet off the ground. Straight toward Bobby.

"What the *fuck!*" Bobby screamed.

The shotgun blast nearly deafened both men. The snarling animal hit the ground.

And got back up.

"Oh God! Get in the house, Bobby! NOW!"

Bobby did. Inside, he ran to the bureau, opened the last drawer, and removed Luke's Glock, slapped a clip in and put a bullet in the chamber. He could hear the animal's hellish growl through the screen door.

He ran out as Luke chambered another shell and fired again, blowing off one of the dog's back legs. And it got back up, hobbling toward the men, snarling like some crazed demon.

"Dude, what the hell is that thing? Rabies don't do that shit!"

Drool ran from the animal's mouth. Pink drool. Viscous, not runny. *Oh hell yes*, Luke thought, *something really wrong with that dog*.

"Here it comes again." Both men were ready.

"Shoot the damned thing in the head, Bobby."

"Got it."

The animal leapt. The men fired. The animal's head flew apart, the combination of double-aught buckshot and hollow point nine millimeter rounds proving too much for even this creature from Hell.

Its body hit the ground with a slap, dust flying.

"Huh," Luke said.

"What?"

"No blood. Not a damned drop."

Luke went inside and came back out with two beers. Opened his and sat down on the rocker and drank nearly half the beer in one gulp.

"You okay, Luke?"

"Nope. Not by a damned long shot."

The sound woke Bobby at three a.m.

A faint sort of scratching noise at the window. He and Luke had gotten stoned drunk and so he'd stayed in one of the many rooms of Luke's parent's home— Luke's home now, he supposed.

He got up and stumbled over to the window, the beer still wreaking havoc on his motor functions. He reached and pulled the blinds up.

And dropped them right back down.

Sweet Jesus, am I ever wasted, he thought. Nothing there. Nothing there. Nothing...

Pulled the blinds back up.

Holy shit.

"Luke." He didn't want to scare Luke too much. That shotgun was in his friend's arms. "Luke. Hey man. Wake up."

Luke stirred. "Dude. What? Go back to bed."

"Naw, man. Something you need to come see. And I mean like *right now*, brother."

Luke came awake. "What? Something wrong?"

"Well hell yes, there's something wrong. It's three in the morning. Come on."

The two men walked to the room Bobby slept in.

"Over there. Open the blinds."

"Bobby, this ain't no time for some stupid game."

"Shutup and open the blinds."

The lack of humor in Bobby's voice scared Luke almost as much as that demon dog had. He went to the window and opened the blinds. If you could have seen color in the deep moonlight, you'd have seen all of it drain away from Luke's face.

He shut the blinds and leaned his head against them.

No. Not happening. Not happening. We're on the second story. And he's dead. Not. Happening.

But it was.

Luke raised the blinds again.

“For God’s sake, John. You’re dead.”

“Yeah,” Luke’s younger brother said, “I guess I am. But hell, man, is that anyway to greet your brother?”

“No. What the hell are you doing, John? I’m dreaming this, right? I’m asleep. Just tell me I’m asleep. Go back to the grave. Right now. Let me get back to whatever I was dreaming. Because it had to be better than this.”

John smiled. Luke shuddered.

“Hey, man. Far as I can tell, big brother, this ain’t no dream. I’m back! Let me in so we can have a beer or twelve. Just like old times.”

Luke shut the blinds. He turned to Bobby, who looked as though he’d just seen a ghost. Which wasn’t far from what was happening.

“Bobby. Go wake me up, man. I’m having the alcohol fits. Roll me over so I don’t die from asphyxiation when I vomit. You know, like a damned rock star or something.”

“Luke, you’re not sleeping.”

“THE HELL I’M NOT! That’s my DEAD BROTHER out there! Go wake me up!”

“Luke. Open the blinds.”

John was still out there. Just sort of floating. Hanging out in the air all wrong. Smiling. Good Lord, that smile. Luke found himself wanting to remove it with buckshot.

“Go away, John.”

“Come on, bro! Let me in! Let’s hang out like we used to, man! Listen to some Soundgarden and talk about trashy women in town we’d like to bonk!”

Luke stared at his younger brother out there. He wanted to scream. Or cry. Or something. All he could feel was numb.

“John, go away. Let’s say I’m dreaming. Let’s say I’m not. Either way, don’t you think I’ve read a Stephen King novel or two, dumbass? Ain’t no way I’m inviting you in. Get lost.”

The expression on his brother's face changed from mild amusement to something that could very well have peeled paint from a wall. His eyes changed. They went, Luke thought, sort of animal like. Everything about the benevolent brother changed into something, well, evil. If it hadn't been for that dog earlier, no way Luke would have believed he wasn't sleeping or tied up in a loony bin somewhere.

"Don't do this, Luke. Don't make this tougher than it's got to be. You either let me in the easy way, or, hey man, much worse is gonna happen."

Luke stiffened. "Shut your mouth, John. You didn't talk to me like that when you were alive. I'll be damned if you'll talk to me like that dead. Now get lost before I do something I'll regret."

And John was gone.

Luke sat down on the edge of the bed. "Bobby?"

"Yeah, Luke?"

"I hate family."

Luke didn't sleep a wink the rest of the night. All he could think about was his brother, John—his dead brother, John—just floating outside the second-story window, like some mad ghost. Some really bad memory come back thanks to way too much beer and that dog.

When the sun came up, he felt happier to see it than he perhaps ever had.

He went downstairs and found Bobby at the kitchen table, drinking coffee with a shaky hand.

"Sleep?"

"Not a wink."

"Me neither."

"Vampires?"

"Looks that way."

“Ain’t happening, is it?”

“Think it is.”

“Jesus Christ.”

“Reckon he’ll help?”

“Crosses?”

“Yep.”

“Holy water?”

“We’re Baptists, Bobby.”

“Right. Know any Catholics?”

“Helen.”

“My Helen?”

“Your Helen.”

“I’ll call her.”

“We go insane, Luke?”

“God, I hope so.”

“They spiked our beer.”

“Not likely.”

“Yeah. Too hard to put those tops back on.”

“Right.”

“You thinking what I’m thinking?”

“Nope. Too early for weed.”

“Not weed. Stakes.”

“You’re hungry?”

“No. Wooden stakes.”

“Oh. Right. Got some two by twos out back in the shed.”

“They’ll do.”

“I’m going to have to kill John, aren’t I?”

“Suppose so. Sorry.”

“It’s ok. He’s dead. Seems to have become a pain in the ass anyway.”

“Was that dog a...”

“Looks like it.”

“Who bites a dog?”

“Seems like John. He’d do some shit like that.”

“Right. Bit a dog. Jesus.”

And the two men began to laugh. A little too hysterically for either of their liking.

Helen was glad Bobby called right up until the point he asked for holy water. What was the fool wanting with holy water? He was a Baptist. The only holy water a good Baptist knew was of the fire variety. Still, he was kind of nice. Not much of a lay, but kind of nice. She told him she’d get him the holy water, for him to come by her place later on.

Crazy. That’s what Luke thought. I’m flat fargin’ nuts. Bobby and me must have got a hold of a bad batch of brew or something. But both catching something from two types of beer on the same night, well, the chances were slim to none, none being the most likely. But the chances of his dead brother showing up floating outside a two story window were supposed to be absolute zero.

The world was going to Hell, it seemed. First stop, Luke’s place.

And still he continued to whittle away at the two by twos, making wooden stakes for his little brother. He'd also managed to beg off a few crosses from some of the local churches. He didn't mind them looking at him like he was crazy. He already knew that anyway.

At three a.m., on the nose, John showed up.

"Hey, Luke."

"Hey, John."

"Gonna let me in?"

"Yep. One question, though."

"Yeah?"

"Who did this to you?"

John screwed his face up (just like good ol' John. Seemed it hurt him to think) and then got a look on his face. A 'eureka!' moment if ever there were one.

"Lewis Roberts!"

Luke's jaw dropped. "Lewis Roberts? *Pastor* Lewis Roberts?"

John laughed. It was wrong. "Ain't that a kick in the head, bro? Reckon he's been at that church, what, twenty years? Not a soul there's the wiser."

"But I thought. Well, I thought vampires couldn't take crosses, churches, that whole kind of thing."

"Pastor Lewis ain't no vampire, Luke. He's something worse. Damn, he's something much worse."

Luke's throat tightened. "What is he? If he isn't a vampire, why are you?"

"Hell, I don't know. It's John, remember? I fix shit. I don't study it. Now, you gonna let me in or what?"

"Yeah. Guess I am."

Luke reached up, unlocked the window and began to slide it upward. Bobby was just out of John's sight below the window, on the right side.

John flew in and picked Luke up and hurled him across the room.

"I'm dead, bro! What kind of jerk is idiot enough to let his dead brother into his house, man? I'm supposed to be the dumb one, remember?"

Luke coughed. "Yeah. I remember. Still are."

Bobby jumped up and tossed the holy water on John. John screamed something so inhuman that both men flinched and put their hands over their ears. Luke jumped up from the floor and ran at his brother, a wooden stake in one hand, a hammer in the other.

He drove the stake into John's chest, pushed his dead brother against the wall and brought the hammer down. Blood as black as the shadows in the room flew from the wound. John writhed and screamed and beat his fists on the floor as smoke began to leak from his clothing.

And then he was no more.

"I'm sorry, Luke," Bobby said.

"Yeah."

Luke was past clear thinking. Way past it, matter of fact. He was on his way to Brotherhood Church of the Resurrection of Christ. Pastor Lewis Roberts manning the helm for the last twenty years.

He walked in and headed straight for the man's office. No one there. He opened a door that led into a hallway. Dark wainscoting from somewhere around 1975 gave the place a listless, dreary quality that matched Luke's mood. The off-white paint covering the top half of the walls just looked dirty.

In the fellowship hall stood the man (or whatever) himself.

"Pastor Roberts." Flat. Numb. He wondered if maybe it was better that he couldn't feel anything right now.

"I don't believe it. Luke Davis. Boy, the way that I hear it, you've not darkened a church door in more than a decade."

“You hear it right, sir.”

“What brings you here?”

“My brother.”

The preacher cocked an eyebrow upward. “Your brother. Really?”

“Really. I don’t know what you are, but I know what he was. And he says you made him that way.”

“And what was is that, son?”

“Not dead.”

“Not dead?”

“Vampire.”

The preacher reared his head back and laughed a great big belly laugh. Luke finally felt something. Anger.

“Vampire? Are you being serious, son? You can’t be. This is some sort of prank, right? You’re around that Bobby Pratchett a lot, aren’t you? That prankster must have talked you into this. Oh, this is good! I like this.”

“No game. No prank. Don’t play stupid. I may not know exactly what you are, but I know one thing you aren’t, preacher. Dumb.”

“Fine then, boy.” And the preacher who was across the room was now directly in front of him.

“Which brother was it?”

“John.”

“Well then, looks like you’ve a long few days ahead of you.”

“If you’re about to give me that ‘I’m going to be visited by three spirits’ shit, save it. I hated Dickens.”

The preacher smiled. “Besides your mother, you were the only smart one in your family, Luke. It’s why you’re alive.”

Luke was now fuming with anger. He was drinking it in, savoring every drop.

“What are you, old man?”

“Oh, you’re smart, Luke. But you’re not *that* smart. I could explain what I am to you all day and still you wouldn’t quite get it. Let’s just say that I’m—*complicated.*”

“Not good enough.” Luke’s hands had formed fists.

“All right, then. I am what humanity could have been. I am perfection. I have walked this earth for eons. I was there when God created this world. And I was there when Adam was banished. I am the seventh descendant of the seventh leader of the seventh band of angels who disavowed God’s arrogance and were thrown from heaven. I was the one that convinced Lucifer to tempt Christ. I was there, in another form, in ancient Babylonia and Assyria. I am what they know as Lamastu. I am why the Greeks believed Hera had made Zeus’s lover completely insane. They called me Lamia.

“I have haunted the Russians, the Germans, the Japanese and I have had my own special sort of fun with the Slavic peoples. I whispered ideas into Stoker’s ear and gave him his one moment of fame.

“I am, in short, every legend you have ever known about the vampire.”

Luke’s head ached. This was madness. This man, this preacher, was so deluded in his own arrogance that he’d ceased to even be insane. Whatever had been there, whoever he had been, had checked out a long time ago. Even so. John.

“Why did my brother not become what you are?”

The preacher walked back to the counter and poured himself a glass of water.

“Because, Luke. Mankind has fallen too far. What you saw, your brother, is why vampire lore has been so easily spread. Why my existence has been so easy to gloss over and why it’s been so simple to point eyes in a different direction.

“Humans, once I feed on them, become the closest thing to me that is possible. Simply the dead reanimated. Hungry and cruel, they have only one desire. And that is, simply, to feed to remain reanimated. There is nothing glamorous or beautiful about it. Anne Rice’s fiction is wonderful prose, but she gives you humans far, far too much credit.”

Luke was confused. “But how can you be a preacher? If you are fallen, how can you be around the presence of God? Crosses? Bibles?”

The smile that crossed the preacher’s face curdled Luke’s blood.

“Why did you leave church, Luke?”

“What do you care, old man?”

“Humor me.”

“Because, most are places filled with platitudes, easy ways to escape life’s harsh problems. And because ritual has replaced whatever holiness was ever there in the first place.”

The preacher took a sip of the water. Paused for a moment.

“And, Luke, do you suppose God wishes to be present at these sorts of places anymore than you do?”

Luke’s heart sank.

“Go away now, Luke. There’s no point in your being here. You’re an intelligent man. There isn’t enough of that in this pitiful world of yours these days. I don’t want to kill you. Truly, I do not.”

Luke knew that he was defeated. What could he do? He didn’t even know what this man was, for all of his posturing and soliloquy.

“Goodbye, Luke. Say hello to the boys for me.”

“Bobby?”

“Yeah, Luke?”

“We’re in a lot of trouble.”

“I was afraid you might say that. What do we do?”

“Get ready for my brothers.”

“Oh hell.”

“Yeah. Precisely.”

Instead of Matthew or Mark reanimated, however, the two men got something that night they would never have suspected.

“What is that, Luke?”

“Man, I have no idea. You got that holy water?”

“Yeah. Diluted it down a bit and loaded up one of these giant super-soaker water cannons your nephew left over here.”

“Damn.”

“What?”

“Should have gotten silver. I knew I missed something.”

“Where you gonna get silver?”

“Grandma’s old silver. In the safety deposit locker at the bank.”

“Yeah man, but that was your grandmother’s silver.”

“She’s dead, Bobby.”

“Yeah. You’re right. Hope to God she stay’s that way.”

“Something’s coming this way.”

“I see it. God help me, it has horns, man.”

“I know.”

In the pale light of the moon, as it breached the clouds, a deer stepped out. It actually growled at them.

“Oh *hell no*. Vampire deer? Shit, man. Now I’ve seen everything.”

Luke didn’t say anything. Just loaded up his compound bow with an arrow. He’d shortened the arrow a bit, bored a hole in the end of a four inch wooden stake and pushed the arrow up into the stake. He’d practiced a little earlier in the day. He had to up the poundage on the compound bow, and adjust his sights to compensate for the weight. But after fifty or so practice shots, he’d been able to pierce the center of a paper plate at a good bit of yardage away.

Bobby admitted to Luke when the deer got close enough to see clearly that seeing a whitetail buck with fargin' teeth like that scared him more than anything he'd ever known.

"Do you suppose if he gouges us with those antlers we'll turn?"

"Nah. But it'll hurt like hell. Steer clear of those things. And the front hooves. I'll need a side view. See if you can lure him to turn."

Bobby sighed and picked up the super soaker filled with holy water. The absolute absurdness was not lost on either man. He walked off the porch and the deer snarled at him.

"Hey, Luke?"

"Yeah, Bobby?"

"Is it deer season yet?"

"Don't know."

"Just checking."

As Bobby drew closer to the deer, Luke suddenly remembered two things. One, how that damn dog had jumped. Two, a deer could already clear that much ground without the aid of being reanimated by another vampire.

"Bobby! Don't get too close!"

"What? HOLY SHIT!"

The deer was airborne. At least fifteen feet between it and Bobby had been cleared in one leap. Bobby turned the water gun on the deer and pulled the trigger. "FUCK!"

You idiot. You have to pump the stupid thing first, Luke thought. He had a hard time stifling a laugh as Bobby pumped on the gun furiously, watching the deer the whole time. Finally, he pointed it back at the deer and fired. The water hit the deer and had no effect.

How could we be so stupid, Luke thought. *This is an animal. It's not going to be a Baptist or Lutheran. No faith there, stupid.*

"Bobby! Run!"

And so Bobby ran.

“Bring him around this way!”

“SHOOT IT! SHOOT IT! *SHOOT THE DAMN THING!*”

I'm trying.

The deer leaped again and cleared a good thirty feet this time. It would land maybe ten feet behind Bobby. Luke drew back the arrow as they both neared the porch.

How am I ever going to hit this thing?

The deer ran in front of the porch. He shot. The deer fell.

“Throw me a stake, Luke!”

Luke threw Bobby a stake. Just as the deer was getting back up, Bobby tackled it and pushed the stake as hard as he could into its heart. It, like John, began to smoke and then ceased to be anymore.

“I'm sorry, Bobby. I tried to hit its heart.”

Bobby was out of breath and drenched in sweat. “No...problem...man...under...standable.”

At around four p.m. the next day, Bobby and Luke sat on the front porch, sharing a couple of beers together.

“So, who do you think it'll be? Matthew or Mark first?”

“Matthew. He was always an asshole. I would bet money he sent John first, just to mess with my head. He knew how protective I was of John.”

“Yeah. I never liked Matthew. I ever tell you about the time he took Cynthia away from me?”

“No,” Luke said, taking another drink from the Corona.

“Yeah. I was in tenth grade. Matthew had just started community college. You remember, he had that sweet ’77 Chevrolet flareside pickup truck.”

“I remember.”

“Yeah. So I’m supposed to go out with Cynthia. God, she was so hot. Took me a month to get up the nerve to ask her out. Anyway, she calls me that day after school. Says she can’t make it. Some family shit going down. I’m like, ‘ok. Well, maybe next weekend,’ and she says, ‘yeah. Maybe’

“And so I go to Burger King that night, to get something for myself, and damned if I don’t see them there. Together.”

Luke smiled. “Did you say anything to them?”

“Well hell no, man. This was Matthew, remember? He would have humiliated me—probably said something about my penis in front of God and Cynthia and everyone—and then he would have beat the crap out of me.”

“Yeah,” Luke said. “Hey, Bobby?”

“Yeah, man.”

“Thanks.”

“What friends are for, brother. Always wanted to kill me some vampires anyway.”

“Yep. Me too. Always hoped the vampires wouldn’t be my brothers, though.”

The two men sat and waited for dark.

And Matthew.