

MOSES

THE CROSS AND THE GUN



MICHAEL ELGAMAL



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CREATIVE ORTHODOX

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First edition

Part One: The Fall

The sin of all sins—the truly “original sin”—is not transgression of rules, but the deviation of man’s love and his alienation from God.

FR. ALEXANDER SCHMEMANN

01

CRIME & PUNISHMENT

The low, rhythmic hum of the club's muffled bass pulsates like a starved, sickly heart, steadily pumping rot.

The backroom is lit by one struggling bulb, drowning in dense smoke. In the middle sits a dark mahogany table littered with everything illicit the city has to offer. Sloppily scraped powder, tightly rolled blunts, and pill-laced drinks.

Moe sits dead center. His inner circle flanks him on either side like a sick parody of *The Last Supper*, if it starred murderers, thugs, and their call girls.

More gargoyle than man, Moe's broad frame dwarfs the chair he's on. A hand-rolled cigar smolders between his fingers, casting a glow over the green, yellow, and red beads on his bracelet. He twitches a finger. Moe's right-hand man, TJ, opens the door.

A fresh-faced initiate strides in. He hefts a duffel bag onto the table.

Moe leans forward, and his necklace falls into the light—a silver head of a pharaoh, slender, there for power projection, not style. Even in the light, his deep onyx skin keeps its secrets. Ink sprawls on it like markings on an ancient wall, telling now-lost stories of gang ties and half-buried credos on life and loyalty. His eyes are large but guarded. Seeing first, saying nothing. He nudges an ashtray aside and drags the duffel's zipper open, strangling the room in silence. His entourage is now frozen, with the occasional shuffle or cough.

“Check this out!” the younger man blurts, voice high, trying to cut the tension. “Over twelve Gs in there, Moe. Clean in and out too, no altercation.”

Moe doesn't react. Stone-still.

“No chase either!” the young man says.

TJ gives a subtle nod, arms crossed.

“Cameron, right?” Moe asks.

“Yes, sir.”

“That all?” Moe says, his voice low.

“Uh, no, not all. We also...” Cameron blurts, “We grabbed pills too.” He grins, waiting for someone to join him. No one bites, and his smile fades. He tugs at the side of the bag to expose a box of pills.

“That all?” Moe asks again.

“Well...yeah, that's all we got. Was just one pharmacy, Moe,” Cameron responds.

Moe stares at the table, his cigar smoke outlining his stillness.

“Solid,” he says, then rises with the force of a strung bow snapping forward. His chair scrapes back, causing a handful of flinches in the room. His Afro, an inverted halo, dense and round, adds to his size, absorbing light. He lumbers toward Cameron, moving like an ancient beast.

He puts his hulky hands on Cameron's left shoulder.

“Sit,” Moe says in a gentle tone, letting the weight of his wrist shove Cameron down into his chair. He takes out a cellphone, swipes, taps, and then lowers it onto the table.

Cameron's chin drops. His eyes search for sympathy in the room, but everyone he looks to shifts their gaze away. “What's...um...what's this?” he asks.

“You tell me,” Moe says, his voice calm.

“It's...a photo of some building.” His smile flips. Color fades from his face, and his lips quiver before he purses them closed.

“That's the daycare on Mayfield Court. Nice place. Decent-sized playground. Familiar?”

Cameron opens his mouth to respond, but he gulps. A bead of sweat breaks loose and tumbles down his temples.

“I’ll help. Your girl’s daycare. They take good care of the kids there. She’ll need that when her old man gets capped for trying to steal from me.” Moe speaks with a calmness that doesn’t match the severity of his words.

“I’m sorry. I’m so sorry, Moe,” stammers Cameron, talking at the table as Moe looms over him. “I wouldn’t have done it if I didn’t have to. I’m in a hole, Moe. I’ll put it all back. With extra. All of it. On my mother’s grave, Moe.” He puts his hand in his pocket and extracts a stack of bills. He throws them onto the table like they’re about to blow.

Moe moves the stack to the side and leans closer to Cameron, his voice down to a whisper. “Do you know why the money comes to me first?” he says, gripping the back of Cameron’s head. Cameron pushes back, but Moe tightens his hold.

“I make sure everyone eats. All I ask for in return...”

The sudden and savage slam of Cameron’s head into the table sends several drinks flying. Moe descends with unrelenting fury. His fists beat down, forceful and explosive. Unhinged. Even the hardened thugs around him gasp in shock and shift in discomfort. Cameron’s face swells, growing more malleable with every punch. It’s less a beating than a brutal rearranging of his features.

Moe pauses, as if it’s not too late for mercy, then he keeps going. The outburst lasts longer than anyone in the room expected. Blood shimmers in a dark red puddle under the table.

“...is loyalty.”

Moe lets go of Cameron’s limp body as he picks up the stack of cash and his gun off the table.

“Someone move this imbecile off my floor.”

Two of the thugs spring up and haul the battered body outside, and another man enters with a mop to scrub the pool of blood. Just another night at Club 75.

* * *

Moe and TJ exit the backroom. As the door creaks open, the bass thumps sharpen into a discernible rhythm, and a swell of voices envelops them as they step out. The dance floor is a mosh pit. A sea of joyless faces bounces about with the promise of satiated hunger and an eventual sense of belonging. Eyes lock on Moe as he makes his way through the crowd.

A slender hand with pink manicured nails grips Moe's right arm. He whips around to see a girl, smiling, eyeliner crisply drawn yet cracked just enough to betray the faintest tinge of desperation.

"Moe, baby. Call me back when you can. Or text."

He looks at her with dead eyes.

"It's Stefani," she says.

Moe nods as he darts past her, already forgetting her name.

As they walk past the bar, Moe offers a fist without breaking stride. The bartender meets it.

"Good lookin' out, Tommy," Moe says.

"Always, boss," Tommy says, voice gruff, hitting each letter like it wronged him. "He skim off the top?"

"Tried to." Moe doesn't slow.

TJ swings the back door open as they step out. Cameron's nearly lifeless body sprawls on a nearby pile of garbage, his blood drying crimson. Foot traffic from the bodega down the street speeds past, smearing the blood thin on the asphalt. Across the street, a pink neon sign flickers "Paradise Lost." It hisses. Hums. Stains the sidewalk in cheap magenta.

Moe leans on the rusted railing. He works a paper towel over his hands, Cameron's blood firmly sunk in the creases of his skin. Old ink shows through the blood in patches, like a mural partly painted over. *754LIFE* still bold on his wrist. A faded bullet tattooed just under his left thumb. A dollar sign on his right wrist. An Amharic glyph on his left, ድል ወይም ሞት, victory or death.

Moe keeps scrubbing. "I need people I can trust, T. Now more than ever."

TJ nods as he extracts a cigarette from its box but doesn't light it. "I'm with you till the end. You know that."

"Another man would've let it slide, right? Take the apology, give him another shot? Nah. Not me. Not right now." He straightens up. "People don't change, T. Only seasons."

Moe breaks from scrubbing to inspect his progress, almost none. He attacks the spot harder than before. Still there. A stubborn, scarlet reminder of his most recent outburst.

"Lately feels like a noose tightening around my neck," Moe mutters, voice strained. He nods at the unlit cigarette in TJ's hand. "You gonna smoke that?"

"What? Oh, no. Tryna quit. Promised Ravene." He holds it out. "Here."

Moe takes it with a smirk, sparking the lighter and puffing. Smoke curls out as he grins through his teeth. "She got you good."

TJ looks away. "She's a good woman, Moe. Smart. Loyal. Need to find you one."

"One? Man, I could bed every broad in the city and still be hungry by night." Moe elbows him as he pushes off the railing, walking toward his car. "Come with me."

"Where to?"

"A quick job."

"Another stickup? Why not send the boys?"

"Nah." Moe pulls open the driver's side door. "This one's mine."

02

BEST SERVED COLD

Like panthers on the prowl, they roll slow and silent.

They stop at a red light and glance at an oversized billboard blaring a soulless ad. A model's over-manufactured, underdressed form pierces the night. Her parted lips are frozen in a fake smile, promising luxury almost no one can afford. A city rotted beyond redemption. If fire were to rain down this second and burn it to ash, not even Lot's wife would bother looking back.

TJ shifts in the seat, knee bouncing, like he's perched on hot coals.

"Someone dealin' on our turf? A rival club? What we doin'?" TJ asks.

"Reporter. Rob Zancanelli," Moe says.

"That's new. How'd he get on your hit list?"

"Put us on blast in the paper. Name and all."

"Damn. Brave."

"Stupid," Moe cuts in. "I gotta pay him a visit. Talk boundaries."

TJ lets out a dry laugh. "You're one vindictive bastard, Moe."

They drive into a decaying apartment complex and head for the entrance, lit by the amber haze of sodium vapor. The buzzer panel is a graveyard of missing buttons, half the names scrawled on yellowed paper, the rest blank. They take the elevator up.

"You gotta sniff their trail, T." Moe turns to him. "They only call your name when they think they've got you."

The doors glide open. Dim hallway, urine-tinged walls, carpet the color of old coffee.

"Here. 2C."

Moe slips two fingers, the most he can fit, into his front pocket. He takes out a small leather pouch with frayed and discolored edges. Unfolding it with the care of a surgeon preparing his instruments, he selects a few picks and compares them to the keyhole. Satisfied, he slides one into the lock with practiced ease, looking away to let his other senses guide him.

As the pins click, Moe burns with excitement for revenge. He could send any of his thugs to do this, but there is something to be said for applying swift, direct force to a problem.

“One...last...one,” he whispers as he turns the tension wrench.

The lock finally lets out a satisfying click as Moe rotates the pick and unlocks the door. The door swings open as TJ’s hand hovers over the gun tucked in his waistband.

The apartment is rundown and filthy. The carpet reeks of cigarette smoke, caked on from generations of careless tenants. Walls hold more grease stains than paint. The floorboards creak as Moe walks deeper into the apartment. An open laptop, stacks of paper, and four half-drunk cups of cheap coffee sit on a square dinner table. One of the cups is still steaming. Bills line the table’s edge. Rent. Childcare. Electricity. All overdue.

Moe flips through news clippings and scattered notes.

“Popular Nightclub Changes Ownership Amid Financial Trouble.”

“Rising Tensions Between Local Crews Spark Concern.”

“Two Arrested in Drug Bust Outside Club 75.”

The laptop screen, not yet asleep, confirms Moe’s suspicion. Photos of his dealings in and around the club. Shots of his lieutenants and associates, blurry and zoomed in, taken discreetly.

The reporter. He was working a web around Moe.

He can’t be far away.

Three doors. One to the right. One wide open on the left, master bedroom. The third, across from the table, shut tight.

Plink plonk plink tonk

A hollow sound stops Moe and TJ dead in their tracks.

Plink plonk plink tonk

It repeats.

“The hell is that?” whispers TJ, who by this point has his gun drawn and is looking around more frequently than he needs to.

Moe ignores the question. He steps further into the apartment, careful not to trip on the tiny pair of sky blue shoes on the floor. His gaze catches on the yellow dinosaur decal on the side of one shoe.

Plink plonk plink tonk

The sound drags them forward. Moe stops at the closed door, his massive hand gripping the knob.

“Wait here,” he says, drawing his gun.

Plink plonk plink tonk

Up close, the noise is worse. Thin, mechanical, tinny.

Moe swings the door open. Gun up.

Plink plonk plink tonk

The sound: a child’s toy, grinding through its final notes, warped, nightmarish, and broken. The way only cheap plastic and dying batteries can sound.

Otherwise?

Nothing.

Empty.

His eyes sweep the room: wooden crib, scattered toys, peeling walls.

Movement in his peripheral vision, figures clearing the window frame. A woman. A child. Target’s just ahead. A hard thud below—the fire escape. Moe doesn’t pursue. Behind him, TJ exhales hard.

“We’ll swing by another time,” Moe says, standing up straight like they just finished a regular errand.

“All right. Let’s go.”

“Hold on. Grab some of this for the gang.” Moe stoops and grabs a colorful backpack. Bright blue, made of cheap plastic and adorned with knock-off cartoon characters. He flips the bag and empties its contents on the floor: stick figure drawings, markers, and a collection of rocks spill out. He slams the bag onto TJ’s chest and stomps into the kitchen.

“Are you for real?”

“We take care of the crew, always,” Moe says, opening the liquor cabinet.

“What’s going on, Moe? When does this stop?”

“The boys are gonna love this.” He pulls out a few bottles, studies the labels, and makes his pick, like a chef at a produce stand. Then sets them down, knowing they’re not enough to steer TJ off course.

“Is this about the kid?” Moe asks, his usual scarcity of words isn’t enough this time. “They’ll wheel him off to Saint Benny’s. He’ll be out in a week.”

“Nah, this isn’t about Cameron. It’s about you.” TJ takes a step closer. “You got all the girls, cash, and clout in the world. Yet... yet you still pull shit like this. What are you after?” TJ looks surprised at the words spilling out of his mouth, like he didn’t think they’d come out.

“I’m getting what I’m owed, playing the game,” Moe says, looking back at the bottles.

“There is no game. This is your life, man.” TJ softens his tone. “I can’t hold a job for my life, so I gotta do this shit. You put me on game, and I’m thankful for that. I really am, but you’re lost in it. Let’s chat another time, Moe. The police will be on our ass anytime now.”

“I don’t care about no police. Let’s talk. Right now. Say what you need to say, TJ.”

“You need a normal life, man. A home, a family.”

“Men like us don’t get a normal life. Trust me, I tried it. Worked security for some white dude and got fired for shit I didn’t do.”

TJ stands in silence, taking in this revelation. Closest thing Moe’s got to a friend, someone who knows him like tires know asphalt. But Moe’s past? A trunk locked in a trunk that’s rusted shut.

“Ain’t nobody give a shit about normal, T. No one cares if you’re on the straight and narrow. They’d knock you off the road and stomp you in the dirt for good measure. But now? I’m free to do whatever the hell I want.”

“How is this free?” TJ lifts a bottle of spirits for effect. “You have money. Leave. Start over in some other dump.”

“There is no starting over. I can’t just wake up and decide to have a normal life. Not with the shit I’ve done.”

Everyone on the street talks about getting out. That one last job, that one score they need to leave it all behind. Moe sees through it. He never dangled that carrot. The broken souls in the city might be addicted to product, but Moe and others like him are addicted to power and control. He knows the only way out is dead in a box.

Sirens wail in the distance.

“What’d I say? They only call your name...”

“When they think they’ve got you, I get it.” TJ picks up the backpack, and liquor bottles clink. “Let’s get outta here.”

Moe steps lightly toward the window, peering out for a vantage point. Sirens grow louder.

Down the road, the first wave of squad cars appears, their red and blue lights tinting the street. He studies the scene below, eyes tracking open shops, parked cars, and narrow alleys. There is no way out if they swarm.

He’s seen cracks in his men, sensed resistance within the Seven Fives. Still, the noose has tightened faster than he expected. Once he’s detained, the charges will stack higher than his reach: racketeering, drug trafficking, murder, money laundering, and tax evasion. More than enough to keep the courts busy long after his body rots in a cell.

The sirens reach a crescendo. And then—nothing. Instead of swarming, they drive right by.

Moe and TJ slide past the elevator, exit the dingy apartment building, and when they reach the curb, their phones buzz.

“The club,” says TJ, as Moe reads the same text he received.

A sea of revolving red and blue lights engulfs the line of buildings down the horizon to where Club 75 is. They turn to walk in the opposite direction, and just as they do, two police cruisers roll around the corner onto their street.

Moe doesn’t hesitate. “You’re going to run down the path into the bodega.” He points forcefully. “They won’t chase you. They’re here for me.”

“Come with me,” TJ snaps back.

“Go.”

“We’ll lose ’em together.”

“Not this time, T. Once I shake them, I’ll lie low for a bit.”

Moe jumps in his car. "Run. You're good. They're only here for me. You're good," he says, slamming the door. "I'll hit you up in a few weeks." He guns the engine.

The two cruisers are already on his tail.

By the time he tears through a red light ahead, their sirens are blaring behind him. He drives on instinct, weaving through city streets. The highway on-ramp flashes ahead. He weighs the odds of losing them in a high-speed chase but blows past it. The side roads with their potholes and speed bumps are as familiar to him as the scars on his hands. Sharp turn right. He leads them into a dead-end alley. Still slamming gas. The car scrapes red brick on the right. A rusted dumpster slams his driver-side mirror shut. The cruisers close in. No way out.

Moe drives to the end and kills the engine. Flashlights click on and wave around. Officers move in. Light catches the front seat.

But he's already gone, slipping through a gap in the fence.

03

MIDIAN

Moe yanks his hood up and strides into the cold, his breath frosting the night air. Hands tucked in his hoodie, one grips a stack of money, the other his gun. Every step he takes feels numbered, like he's outrunning a fuse burning to its explosive end. He walks far beyond the series of blocks where his operation runs, or as of tonight, doesn't. Far past the corners where his dealers post up, past the trap houses melting into themselves, and the benches where initiates keep watch. Far beyond where his name means something.

He walks across the street to a rundown house, dimly lit and easy to miss. Moe takes his time searching for the right key as he surveys the street behind him. Aside from Homeless Hank with his three-wheeled cart and a heavily pregnant stray cat, nothing stirs. He looks at the front porch. A wooden rocking chair with a dusty cushion lies unused, moldy, and weathered.

Lightly, he steps in and guides the door shut. Behind the door, a sun-bleached "Save Our Streets" poster hangs alongside sepia-toned photos of a family long gone and a life once lived. The house smells of vapor rub and old records. Save for the occasional creak from ancient floorboards, the thick carpet muffles Moe's steps. Moe hopes he's entered quietly enough to regain composure and start the conversation right.

"Didn't think you'd come tonight."

Too late.

Uncle Troy turns in his well-worn leather recliner to face Moe. Round, tired eyes. Skin cracked like old concrete, and a sparse white beard. On the end table beside him sits a half-full pillbox, labeled by day, each compartment crammed with a riot of colors.

Moe meets a look that can only be described as tender disappointment, then turns away, scanning the room like he ain't been there before.

The walls are papered with newspaper clippings from a lifetime spent fighting to reclaim the block from the scars of gang violence. Snapshots of marches, neighborhood meets, pizza parties, and community outreach programs: Save Our Streets, The Hood for Good, Cease Fire, Urban Peace Circle. In a sense, Troy is everyone's uncle, but a combination of a bad back and his declining health has relegated him to his four-walled prison. Everyone and their mother calls him Uncle Troy. Now, nobody calls him.

"You good?" Moe says.

"I'm okay. You don't look it, though."

"Long day," Moe mumbles, rubbing the back of his neck, his shoulders radiating tension.

"Every day is twenty-four hours, Moe, no more, no less. No Mo," he chuckles, rocking his head as if delighted by his own wordplay.

"Some feel endless," Moe grumbles, making his way to the kitchen.

"Why don't you ever sit on that raggedy chair outside?"

He springs open the fridge and leans in, letting the cold air wash over him. Partly to escape the humid musk of the house but also to dig into the deep caverns of the fridge. "You're out of butter. I can't make my all-time classic Doro Wat without butter."

"All-time classic?"

"Award-winning. Bar none." Moe throws a smile in Uncle Troy's direction.

Moe lays out the ingredients: chicken thighs, berbere spice mix, ginger, garlic, and a handful of onions. He lines them up with needless precision, double-checking the lineup like he's planning a hit. His hands move methodically as he peels and slices the onions into thin, even strips. He pulls a pot from the cupboard, throws the onions in, and ignites the stove. He likes working with his hands. It gives him control, focus, and a goal.

After he slams a knife onto shriveled cloves of garlic, crushing them into a pungent paste, the words tumble out, unplanned: “I gotta go away. For a bit.”

“Traveling?”

“Kinda. I need to borrow your ride.”

“Go ahead, ain’t like I’m driving that hunk of junk.” He pauses to consider the full repercussions of Moe’s request. “How long?”

“Dunno. Can’t say for sure. Work shit.”

“How long, Moe?” says Uncle Troy, with rising intensity and concern.

“Don’t worry.” Moe crushes another handful of cloves under the flat of his knife. “I’ll make damn sure you’re taken care of.”

“How? No one cares about Troy.” The old man looks away.

“Ah, don’t say that shit. I’ll figure it out.”

Moe takes out the cash in his right pocket, every last dollar. “Here, this should keep you going till I come back.”

“How long will that be, Moe?”

“I’m not sure. I have to handle some work complications first.” Moe winces at the words he’s picked.

“Issues at the warehouse?”

“You could say that.”

Troy believes Moe works for a shipping company. Whether that was an outright lie or he just never bothered to clarify, he can’t even remember. Either way, Moe keeps the details of his day-to-day to himself.

He goes back to the pot and keeps the onions moving in patient circles until they slump glossy. He scrapes in the garlic, grates the ginger, and dusts the heap with berbere, letting it toast in the pot. He nests the chicken thighs into the sauce and loosens everything with a splash of broth before clamping the lid down.

The chicken simmers with a low burble of broth and fat, filling the kitchen with an earthy scent. Moe barely registers it. In the bathroom, he cranks the faucet. Water roars through old pipes. Soap lathers thick between his fingers, foaming pink, then red. He scrubs harder, knuckles raw with friction, but Cameron’s blood clings.

He grips the sink and exhales hard. In the mirror: a harrowing vision, his own face staring back. A bear of a man, heavy-browed, eyes like open wounds, hair thick and wild. Shoulders hunched as if bracing for a blow.

He stews in self-loathing long enough for the wat to finish stewing. He gets back into the kitchen to serve a plate of deeply aromatic Doro Wat, thick with spice, the red sauce clinging to the chicken. He puts a plate on Uncle Troy's side table. "You ain't got Injera, old man." He shrugs. "Bread it is."

"Where's your plate?" Uncle Troy says.

"I ain't hungry."

"This looks delicious, Moe."

After a few spoonfuls, Uncle Troy says, "I know you don't like to talk about this work of yours, Moe. But... I worry about you. You seem stressed."

Moe reaches for the remote. He's covered most buttons in electrical tape, save for a few that guide Uncle Troy to find a movie or a show to watch. The tape isn't only a helpful aid for an old man navigating technology but a way for Moe to keep Uncle Troy away from the local news. This house, this sagging box of drywall and faded leather, is the only place of near-normalcy for Moe. Uncle Troy, slow-moving, half-blind, treats Moe like he's just another man, not a walking suspect.

Troy stops pressing for answers.

A few hours later, Uncle Troy falls asleep on the couch. The light dances on his face as scenes play by on the TV screen.

Phone in hand, Moe flicks through his feed in demented rhythm. Pixelated, near-naked bodies smear across the screen. First, girls he's known, then ones he doesn't. Something in him needs this, the detachment, the control. An open window into lives distant from his own, ready for him to pluck for a fleeting moment of pleasure. Another way to crawl out of his skin for a few minutes.

Articles about the raid pull him back. He can't outrun himself.

He doom-scrolls his downfall, one link at a time.

Swipe—overturned tables, glass shards, and streaks of blood inside his club.

Swipe—the neon sign sputtering, its tubes drained of color, flickering its last flashes of light.

Swipe—street corners where his men moved product are now abandoned posts, an act he would severely punish.

Swipe—raids on his trap houses. Hiding places? Dug up. Inner circle? Compromised.

City streets clogged with patrol cars and crowds finding entertainment in the chaos.

The worst part? Pushers will still sell, murderers will kill, and robbers will steal. His enemies are likely smug with joy, moving to fill in the power vacuum.

Moe sees enough to know that he has to leave the city. He springs up, lifts Uncle Troy with ease onto his wheelchair, and wheels him into his bedroom. “Better not get used to this,” he whispers. “Catch you later, old man.” Doubting he’ll ever see him again.

He jumps in Uncle Troy’s 1999 red Chevy Silverado and leaves.

Moe starts driving past the broken chain-link fences, past the garbage-filled dumpsters, and past the neon hell he calls home. As he passes Mayfield Court, his grip tightens on the wheel. For a fleeting moment, he considers turning himself in. But to what end? No one finds redemption by lying in their grave.

A short, shallow beep interrupts Moe’s thoughts as the gas tank light turns on.

Moe steps into a gas station, the freezer hum barely louder than the clerk’s tired sighs. A short, gruff Italian man leans against the counter. His face is the definition of checked-out, eyes glazed, head down, counting the minutes till his shift ends.

“Anything else?” the clerk asks Moe.

Moe looks around, spotting the Arizona Iced Tea on the counter, the pale green can practically winks at him. “Yeah,” he says, reaching for it. “Why the hell not?”

The register beeps, the screen flashes: \$1.49.

Moe raises the can, squinting at the price printed on its side. “A dollar,” he states, then, “on the damn can.” He pulls another crumpled bill from his pocket and slams it on the counter.

“This is how it goes. More pricey for you, more pricey for me. Nobody wins.” The clerk rattles.

Behind the counter, the TV runs one news segment after another. Moe glances up, eyes dull and uncaring. But then his face changes.

The clerk clocks it. Looks at the image on the screen.

The image. Grainy. Unsaturated. Moe. His lips unsmiling, his eyes simmering with intensity. Manhunt.

Gas and iced tea be damned. Moe bolts out and slides into the car, knees gracelessly smacking the steering wheel. The Chevy coughs to life, howling like a pack-a-day smoker on his last breath.

His hood comes up, gaze drops low. He heads away from the city, toward the outskirts. He notes a cruiser tailing him a few cars back, driving too close for coincidence.

It’s there to do one thing: seal him off at a barricade.

He presses the gas just enough to get ahead without drawing attention. The fuel gauge dips further, the needle so far left it’s practically pointing down.

He feels like the car he’s driving—rundown, beat-up, running on fumes and borrowed time. Hunger churns in his gut, mixing with dread. *Should’ve eaten with Uncle Troy.*

Moe turns on the radio for distraction. Instead, the claws of life press harder on his neck.

“...historic raids targeting the infamous Seven Fives Gang, dismantling their operations across the city. Law enforcement officials confirm that multiple arrests have been made. Yet their notorious leader remains at large. A citywide manhunt is underway. Law enforcement urges anyone with information to come forward.”

The radio draws on, but the words hang heavy. Citywide manhunt. His right hand grips the wheel while his left rubs his neck, putting motion to the slow choke he feels. His eyes dart from one car to another in paranoid futility, trying to spot the end before it spots him.

His phone sits on the passenger seat. His thoughts race. They’ve got his number. They’re tracking towers, no doubt.

Window down. He chucks the phone. Watches it cartwheel and shatter on impact.

Connection severed. Alone, but harder to track.

If Moe believed God was there, he'd be praying. But he doesn't. Or maybe he does, and that's the problem. Because if He is, someone's keeping score.

The flickering red and blue lights on the horizon mark the end of the road for him. The next highway junction is where he's getting caught.

"God, I hope you're not out there," he mutters under his breath, "and if you are...well, shit, I'm sorry."

But then he sees it. A dark driveway, barely visible, a slim chance to slip away. If he can switch cars and lie low for a minute, he has a chance at survival. He turns sharply, tires squealing as he pulls in. The sign overhead catches his eye:

Saint Anthony's Coptic Orthodox Monastery

It barely registers, his mind focused on a lingering thought:

No one finds redemption lying in their grave.

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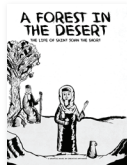
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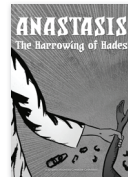
ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Michael Elgamal is a Canadian Egyptian writer and illustrator. He started Creative Orthodox to tell stories of ancient Christianity. Michael lives in Ontario, Canada with his wife and children.

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