Hollow

My name is Gregory, but everyone just calls me Father. I’ve lived here in my Church, as did my father before me, and my grandfather who built it. Like some holy dynasty, we’ve served the folk of Falls Hollow since Grandfather first moved into town. Grandfather was a man who could see necessity when others rarely could. Most settlers in this area had come for the quality of the lumber. The hickory, the maple, the walnut. The oaks and the mahogany. Most settlers were content with having a solid smithy to sharpen their axes, cast their cookware, and forge them nails. Grandfather knew these men needed to sharpen their spirits, so he built his church.

His mother taught him to read early on, so he might be her bible boy as her eyesight left her. He was some miracle baby she had well into her late ages, often calling him her “little Isaac”. His father had passed on before he reached ten, and with that passing Grandfather became the man of his house. He grew to love that bible as he found God within its pages. Sharing that God he found was his life’s work, and he did a damn fine job of it.

Things started slow at first, religion hadn’t been at the forefront of anyone’s mind in the Hollow for years. As he integrated himself into the community, reminding everyone what a man somebody so God fearing could be, his church boomed with all the blessings of heaven as the folk of the Hollow flocked to him. Congregating to meet this God that he so loved and finding Him in those little details of their tawdry lives. Pretty soon, there was little room to spare in his quaint log chapel, so with the help of most of the town, Grandfather expanded. Confident the space would always remain full, Grandfather forgot the town was named hollow, for his church never was.

As was customary in our family, Grandfather died before my father reached adulthood. A parent should never have to see their child buried, so luckily the mother he left behind had already lost most of her sight, and only had to hear the scrape of the shovels as they piled dirt over his rich Mahogany coffin, buried right in the church’s backyard. She followed him to those gates less than a year later. My own mother died giving life to me. A sweep of the Fever did the town in when she was pregnant with me, and she fell victim to that destroying angel. From then on it was just me and my father, who also went by Father. I know I was blamed for killing my mother, well, God and I shared that blame Father held onto so tightly. He would remind me quite often, giving me whole new meaning to what a bible thumper could be. The bruises he left were never visible or apparent, I know he would’ve loved to strike my face, close my eyes that everyone said I got from her. He hated looking at them, but in this he actually exercised temperance, and I have to give thanks his beatings were tolerable.

When the fear of man wasn’t being instilled into me, the fear of God took its place. I was told that there was good reason for my suffering, and I know he believed that.

“God is testing us Greg” Father would tell me. “He needs to see if we’ll live what we teach, even through our trials.”

I remember disagreeing with him, but I’d never do so aloud. I harbored my rebellions and disagreements close to my heart, not knowing why it grew to beat with the same tempo as the smithy’s hammer that rang throughout town.

The church still had most of the seats filled every Sunday. Not as many as Grandfather could, but enough to keep the smile on Father’s face until the next Sunday rolled around, and renewed that smile once again. It was the only time he ever smiled, when someone else was watching. Oh, how the folk of town grew to love him, oh, how I grew to hate. To the townsfolk, the smile he showed was like that of God himself, bathing the congregation in a golden splendor. I could smile too on Sundays, those were the day of rest, and having toiled and labored so violently against me most of the week, we both found a break on that hallowed day.

He would forget I existed for times, I cared little to remind him I did. So much time I spent in the lush verdant forests, just forgetting about the home I needed to return to every night. I saw more of God in the leaves and the ferns, the pine needles and the flowing streams, than I ever did in the pages of a book. My time away, moments alone, were the only sacred escape I could find, the only escape from Father. I would sometimes help out at the forge; the smithy liked the tempo of the hammer that my heart beat to. I could never stay and help for long, but I was grateful somebody saw use and value for me. I’d have to wash off in the creek afterwards, if the smell of smoke lingered on me, Father’s fury would blaze like the hellfire he vehemently warned everyone about.

Lucre never drove him, it was adoration. The control he had over the hearts of the townsfolk was worth more to him than any riches could have been. I think he thought he meant well, to the townsfolk at least. Felt that his feelings were a blessing from God himself, that he deserved to be loved and praised like he was when mother was alive. It was no surprise that a widower like him, might catch the eye of many a townswomen. His spirit was weak… as was his flesh, and my father found himself a Delilah.

That same smithy who found himself so busy praising the way I worked the bellows, teaching me to sharpen steel, body, and mind at the grindstone, was blinded by the sparks it threw off. The same way a spark of passion ignited something between Father and the smithy’s wife. I knew that she was never around, whenever I helped at the forge, but I was never suspicious as to why. Such an affair lasted longer than it should have, than it would have if I cared to ever be home, to ever pay attention to him. I suppose my father thought he was blessed by God with discretion as well, but the truth has a way of worming out of the woodwork, wanting to be free.

The seasons shifted and on a rare occasion, the smithy found himself with little to do as the weather turned cold. He told me there was little work for me, so I spent the day wandering the woods. Showered with Godly love in the form of tumbling leaves of Gold, Crimson, and Orange. I always loved the fall but hated what it meant. The swiftly approaching snow meant I’d be spending more and more time at home, but I felt that I was nearly strong enough to fight back now. The smithy returned home, expecting his wife he found the place empty. Knowing how much a God fearing women she had become these days, he figured she’d be at Grandfather’s church. He was right about where she’d be, but wrong about how much fear she held for deity.

It was there that he caught them, behind the same pulpit which Grandfather so masterfully gave his well-crafted sermons, speaking on sacrifice, divesting the desires of the flesh that so bind us, setting the good folk of the Hollow apart from the world, my father and his wife. A good shepherd knows his sheep, and likewise my father knew the smithy’s wife.

Rage bellowed out of that man, seeing his wife in the arms of this self-proclaimed holy man. The forges fires set the smithy apart as Man amongst men. The muscle required to strike hammer day in and out was now turned against my father. Steel struck flesh, as my father was beaten, the way he would always beat me. My prayers were answered by the smithy’s actions. Very well did Father earn his stripes.

The smithy dragged his wife back home, as I returned to find my father bruised and ragged. His swollen face puffed up like his heart. He looked at me and I found forgiveness that wasn’t his to give, as he realized the pain he had caused me all these years. I knew I was no longer to blame for the death of my mother, there was something in the one eye that wasn’t swollen shut that told me so. The tears he shed were the only apology I’d ever get. I couldn’t stand to see him so pathetic, was he always such an empty man? I fled the building that Grandfather crafted with such care, and wandered aimlessly through the woods, lost in my soul.

An instinct called me back, and so I made my way. Maybe with this we could see eye to eye, If I was forgiven, maybe I could learn to love my father for once. The dim glow of dusk robbed me of any hopes for reconciliation. As I entered Grandfathers church, I saw him, nearly in the same place I left him. The rapture that he spoke so fervently about seemed to have come for just him, as he floated there. It would be impossible to see eye to eye now, hanging from the rafters like he was. I cut him down, and dragged him out of the chapel. The fraying rope was coarse in my calloused hands as I pulled him to the yard like a dog on a leash. It was there, besides Grandfather and his mother, Beside my own mom that I buried him. No time for a coffin, I left him swaddled by the dirt. It wasn’t until the last shovel full of soil was emptied, laying him to rest, that I realized the eyes I inherited from mother were watering the fresh dug grave. They didn’t last long, they were all I could give him, but like the widow’s mite, I felt they were enough.

The smithy left town, and with no one else to sharpen axe heads, cast cookware, forge nails, the lumbermen followed him into the wilderness, his exodus. Word spread around, the church was hallowed no more, a preacher and adulterer had hanged himself there. I inherited nothing except for that Church. None of the smiles and adoration was left for me, none of the booming congregation. I wasn’t even afforded pity, nor did I want any. Sundays come and go, I pull the rope that rings the bells, a constant reminder of the rope that pulled my father upwards towards heaven. As the bells ring, they cast an empty reminder, that only those echoes fall in this hollow hall.