

Going to See the Beast

by William Sanders

It was along about nine in the morning when Boss Lady called me in to tell me we were going to go see the Antichrist tomorrow.

"Make sure your best suit is clean and pressed," she said, "and tell Joe Bob to wash and wax the car."

"The big car?" I said. She's got like half a dozen of them. "The limo?"

"Of course," she said. She said it with that kind of a sharp voice that she gets when she thinks somebody is being dumb, which with her is most of the time. "See to it his uniform is presentable, too. I couldn't believe those boots, last time."

We were in her office up on the second floor of the big house. She was sitting at her desk with her back to the window. I think she does that so the light will hurt your eyes when she's talking to you. She had on a white silk shirt. She won't wear no other kind of a shirt but silk. Even with the light behind her you could see she wasn't wearing no brazeer.

She give me this little bitty smile, without showing no teeth. It made her look exactly like her picture in the newspapers that she used to write for. There was a big framed copy of that picture on the wall by her desk, next to the one of her with the President.

"I bet you never guessed," she said, "back a couple of years ago, that you would some day be meeting the Supreme Ruler of the World."

"No, ma'am," I said, "I sure never."

I still remember the day it all started. Me and my cousin Joe Bob was just walking down the street in Fort Worth when all of a sudden there was all these people flying up through the air. Just sailing straight up towards the sky, easy as you please, and ever single one of them buck bare ass naked. It was the prettiest sight I ever saw. Well, except for the men and some of the real old ones.

You could hear this music, too. Wasn't very good music, you couldn't boogie to it, mostly sounded like a bunch of horns blowing, but it was plenty loud. It kept playing while the people flew on up into the sky and then you couldn't see them no more and then it stopped.

Well, I don't mind telling you I just stood there on the sidewalk with my mouth hanging open through the whole thing and then some. I didn't know what to think. Then it hit me.

"Joe Bob," I said, "we been *left behind!*"

Joe Bob didn't say nothing. I don't think he heard me. He was walking around picking up and sniffing the underpants some of the ladies had left on the sidewalk when they flew away.

Me, I was just so shook I had to go over and set down on the hood of this Cadillac that was parked close by. I put my face in my hands for a minute, thinking Lord God, what's going to happen to me now?

I mean I knew what was going on. Mama always took me to church with her and I had heard the preacher talk about the Rapture and the End Times and all that stuff. And I *believed* it, you understand, he was reading it out of the Good Book so it had to be so. But I never thought I'd live to see it *personal*.

I set there a long time, feeling awful and even crying a little, wishing I'd lived a better life and not done all that drinking and card playing and looking at them magazines with the nasty pictures. Then I could have flew away too and be in Heaven now instead of being left behind where all kind of bad stuff was sure to happen.

But after a while it come to me that I didn't really feel no different from how I did before. Everything around me looked the same, too, except for the little piles of clothes laying around where the people used to be. I got to thinking maybe this might not be so bad after all.

I got up and had a look at that Cadillac I had been setting on. I seen now that the door was open and there was what looked like a pretty good suit laying on the street beside it. I picked up the pants - took me a minute before I could make myself do that - and went through the pockets and sure enough, there was the keys.

"Hey, Joe Bob," I said. "Let's go for a ride."

Joe Bob looked around and let out one of them yeehaw yells. "All *right!*" he hollered.

He came around and got in. "I bet we can get ourselves plenty of women with this baby," he said.

I thought about that. Joe Bob ain't too smart but sometimes he has some good ideas. After all, I thought, any women left now would just naturally have to be sinners, wouldn't they?

It was about a week later when we met Boss Lady.

We was setting on the hood of the Cadillac down by the rodeo grounds, drinking Coors and shooting at the cans with the new Glock pistol that I had just got in trade for some jewelry we found next to a lady's clothes that first day. Actually I was the one doing the shooting, doing some fancy tricks while Joe Bob finished up the last of the Coors.

Then we both noticed this nice black BMW car that had drove up. Setting behind the wheel looking at us was this blond headed lady who I felt sure I had seen before only I couldn't remember where.

I was a little embarrassed because we both had our shirts off, it being a hot day and all, but then I remembered the Rapture was over so there wasn't no sense in being ashamed in front of somebody else who had been left behind. So I just looked back at her and when she rolled down her window I said, "Hi."

She said, "You're pretty good with that thing."

I saw she was talking about the Glock pistol. "Yes ma'am," I said, "I guess I am."

I looked closer at her. "Ain't I seen you on TV or somewheres?"

"It's possible," she said. "Do you read the newspapers?"

"Sure," I said. "Well, sometimes." To tell the truth mostly I just looked at the sports but sometimes when I had to wait a long time at the unemployment office or the rehab I would look through the papers that people had left laying around.

Then I remembered. "That's where I seen you before," I said. "You write all that stuff about the liberals and all."

She didn't really smile but she looked pleased. But she said, "I did. That's all over now. A lot of things are changing."

I said, "I never knowed you lived in Texas."

"I don't. Or I didn't. As I say, changes." She was looking me over and not bothering to be sneaky about it. "What's your name?"

"Bobby Joe," I said. "This here's my cousin Joe Bob."

She give Joe Bob the same kind of look-over. "Can you drive, Joe Bob?" she asked him.

"Sure," he said. He wasn't really paying attention because he was busy opening the last can of Coors. Joe Bob is a good old boy but he can't pee and blink at the same time.

I said, "I tell you what, ma'am, Joe Bob can drive anything with wheels. He's drove all kind of cars and trucks." I didn't mention that a whole lot of them belonged to other people. "He even raced stock cars once," I said. "Met Dale Earnhart his own self."

She went "Hmm," and looked us over some more. "Well, gentlemen," she said, her voice getting kind of funny on that last word, "I'm in urgent need of a couple of employees right now. Specifically a chauffeur and a bodyguard."

Joe Bob said, "You talking about a job?"

"We're not really looking for work right now," I told her.

"Listen," she said, "I don't know what kind of games you've been playing to support yourselves — probably living off the taxpayers' money on some socialist welfare program — but I can tell you that's something else that's over and done now. Along with soft-headed judges and lazy cops and the other people who have been letting your kind get away with your parasitic lifestyle."

Joe Bob said, "Hey," but she kept on talking. "For your information, within a few months anyone who can't show means of support is going to be taking up residence in a labor camp. You'd better take my offer," she said. "You'll never get a better one. And you really won't like it on a chain gang."

I said, "How much did you say you were paying?"

So that was how me and Joe Bob came to work for Boss Lady. She said later on she didn't expect we'd last more than a couple of weeks, she just hired us till she could get somebody steadier, but the way things turned out she was so happy with us she kept us on permanent.

It was a pretty good job, too, most of the time. Joe Bob drove her around places and I set next to her and guarded her body though to tell you the truth I never seen why she needed anybody to. Didn't nobody ever try to hurt her or nothing. And after the Antichrist appointed her to be the Minister of Truth she could of had all the guards she wanted if she'd of asked him. I think she just wanted her own private bodyguard for the style of it.

Of course there was other parts to the job too, that she hadn't said nothing about at the start. First time she ever called me up to her room and I found her standing there in nothing but them black stockings and them skimpy little drawers, I like to shit.

I got the idea pretty quick, though. It was the hardest I had worked in a long time but it was kind of fun

sometimes. I got to say, though, she did have some strange ideas.

Standing there in front of her now, I wondered what was on the program tonight. Maybe she would call Joe Bob in instead. I just hoped she wouldn't want both of us. She didn't do that very often but I really hated it when she did. Joe Bob hated it even worse because she always made him be the one on the bottom.

But she must of guessed what I was thinking because she said, "No, Bobby Joe, there won't be any extra activities tonight." She smiled that little smile again. "We all have to be at our best tomorrow, don't we?"

I kept my face as straight as I could. I didn't want her to see I was kind of relieved. A lot of people probably would of thought I was crazy but if you want to know the truth Boss Lady ain't as great as you might think. For one thing she's awful stringy and she ain't got hardly any ass or titties. And I know she looks real fine in the pictures and on TV but if you seen her up close like I have, with all that makeup off, you probably wouldn't even recognize her. On her neck and around her eyes it looks like an old saddle that got left out in the sun too long.

"All right, ma'am," I said, trying to look disappointed. "I'll go tell Joe Bob."

"Do that." She give me this kind of a look. "It's all right, Bobby Joe," she said. "We'll make it up afterwards."

That's what I was afraid of. Every time she meets with the Antichrist she comes home all hot and horny and that's when me and Joe Bob really earn our pay. The last couple of times I got to wondering if that chain gang would really of been that bad.

So next day we drove into town to the Palace and Boss Lady and I went in, while Joe Bob turned the car over to the parking attendants and went to wait with the other hired help. A man in a uniform led us down a bunch of hallways to this big room with a long wooden table and showed Boss Lady where to set, even though she already knew from being here so many times. I went over and stood behind her like I was supposed to, in this position like what they called Parade Rest when I was in the Corps. There wasn't no reason for me to be there since there was regular Palace guards standing around the room and anyway they had took my gun away back at the gate. But like I say I think it was just her way of putting on the dog.

Next to Boss Lady set Brother Apollyon, the High Priest, looking around from under his big old hairy eyebrows and grinning that goofy-ass grin of his. I always thought he looked weird even back when he had his TV preacher show that Mama used to watch and send money to. Now, with that red robe and that tall pointy hat shaped like a dick, he just looked like something that got loose from a nut house.

On the other side of the table was the Minister of Peace — the Pale Horse's Ass, Boss Lady called him behind his back — scratching his forehead, which was all red and spotty because he had had some kind of allergy reaction when he got the tattoo. You couldn't hardly make out the three sixes. The chair next to him was empty and I was starting to wonder about that but then the door opened again and Miz Babylon came in.

Miz Babylon — that's what I always call her, I know that ain't her right title but I just feel like she ought to get some respect — was wearing her full dress uniform today, with the little bobtail skirt and the boots and the fish net stockings and the red and gold jacket hanging open so her titties were showing. Boss Lady told me once she hadn't wanted to dress that way but the Antichrist told her if she was going to be the Whore of Babylon she was damn well going to look like it. Boss Lady was jealous of her because

she had wanted to be the Whore of Babylon her own self but the Antichrist never even asked her.

I thought she looked real pretty, myself, and I don't even usually go for colored ladies. She was kind of on the skinny side but it looked better on her than it did on Boss Lady and she had a nice tight looking little ass. I saw Brother Apollyon checking it out as she went by, too.

And it looked like that was it for this meeting. The other places around the table didn't have no name plates or water glasses or nothing in front of them. So it wasn't going to be a big meeting today.

All of a sudden the big doors opened at the end of the room and a couple of Palace guards came stomping in and stood at attention on either side of the doorway. There was a big honk of trumpets from the loudspeakers overhead and a voice hollered, "*All hail, the Antichrist!*"

I come to attention quick, while everybody around the table got up and stood — Brother Apollyon took his time about it, but he stood up too — and then there he was, coming through the big doors with that quick little walk of his, smiling at everybody and sort of bobbing his head. "Sit down, sit down," he said as he come up to the head of the table and set down in the big chair with the 666 on the back. "Make yourselves comfortable, ladies and gentlemen. This isn't going to take long. Just an informal meeting to discuss a few little problems that have come up."

They all set back down and I went back to Parade Rest. He looked at the Minister of Peace. "Rash still bothering you? You know, I'm real sorry about that. But everybody has to have the Mark. Can't make any exceptions. It's in the Prophecy."

He turned and give Boss Lady a long look. "My," he said. He had that funny grin on that always makes me think of one of them big monkeys in the zoo. "You're looking good today, Little Orphan Annie."

I seen the back of her neck go red when he said that. It really pisses her off when he calls her that. But of course she can't say nothing, seeing who he is. Her voice was pretty choked, though, when she said, "Thank you, Mr. Antichrist."

He looked at Miz Babylon. "And you too, of course." He kind of snickered. "Good enough to eat."

She blushed some — I never knew before that colored people can do that — but she didn't say nothing. I guess she knew that everybody there had heard the stories about how she got her job. Boss Lady claimed to have done a three-way with them once but I never was sure whether to believe it.

The Antichrist was looking sad now. "Course," he said, "there's somebody who isn't here. Still doesn't feel right without him. I guess the shock of the Rupture was just too much for that bad heart of his."

"It was ordained," Brother Apollyon said in his funny soft voice. "What is to be will be."

"You got that right, podner." The Antichrist shook his head. "Boy, I tell you, I don't mind admitting it was a shock to me too. I hadn't really expected the Rupture would happen in my lifetime but I always figured if it did I'd be one of the ones—" He jerked his thumb upwards toward the ceiling. "I mean after all I did for the church people and all."

He leaned back in his chair and spread his hands out on the table. "But you know, seeing how things turned out, I can't complain, can I? Oh, I know there's gonna be trouble one of these days, bottomless pit and all that, but that's a long time to come and I didn't get where I am today by worrying about the future."

He looked at the Minister of Peace. "So," he said, "first thing I wanted to ask you, how's the nuclear warhead supply holding up? We gotta have been going through those things like doodoo through a duck,

now we've got this new front in Indonesia."

The Minister of Peace took off his glasses and wiped them and put them back on. "Well, Mr. Antichrist," he said, "here's the situation on that—"

I quit listening along about then. It wasn't anything interesting, just a bunch of numbers and names of places I mostly never heard of. Instead I watched Miz Babylon's titties. The little ends always stood up and got hard when they started talking about dropping nuclear bombs on people. I seen Brother Apollyon looking at them too. His fingers were kind of twitching in his lap.

They talked for a pretty long time. Finally the Antichrist said, "All right, I guess that covers it. Well, then." He turned in his seat to face Boss Lady. "How are we doing on the information control front? Everybody falling into line?"

Boss Lady nodded. "The media never give us any trouble, of course. Still having some problems on the internet, sometimes it's hard to track down these unauthorized - "

The Antichrist was holding up his hand. "Wait, wait. Hang on there, honey. All this talking is dry work." He reached out and tapped on this silver button thing in front of him. "Let's take a little refreshment break."

This colored guy in a fancy uniform come in and everybody give him their orders. Boss Lady said she'd have a glass of white wine. Miz Babylon said she'd have the same. The Minister of Peace asked for a gin tonic. Brother Apollyon wrinkled up his nose and said nothing alcoholic for him, thanks, he'd have a Coke.

"Yeah," the Antichrist said, "I'm pretty fond of Coke myself." He grinned at everybody and they all kept their faces straight like they didn't know what he was talking about. Even from where I stood I could see the little bits of white powder on his nose.

"Well," he said to the waiter, "you know my usual. Just sparkling mineral water." He give the waiter a big wink. I wondered why he wanted to go through all that silliness. Shit, he's the Supreme Ruler of the World, he can do any damn thing he wants to, can't nobody say nothing less they're good and tired of living.

While they were waiting for their drinks him and Boss Lady talked a little bit about the movie she was going to make about him and how he got to be the Antichrist. *Triumph of the Right* was the name of it. It didn't sound like the kind of movie I'd want to see but I did like the idea of being around movie stars. There was sure plenty of big ones left, too. The Rapture hadn't got hardly any of them.

The colored guy came back carrying a silver tray balanced all neat and smooth in one hand, moving with that easy way colored guys can do, and set out the drinks. When he was gone the Antichrist said, "Now something else that's been bothering me." He picked up his glass and took a sip and set it back down on the table in front of him. "I'm disappointed in the level of cooperation we've been getting on the Mark program. Still got a lot of folks out there without the Mark."

"That's true," Boss Lady said. "And even worse, I'm hearing stories about people faking it, making phony tattoos with ink that they can wash off afterwards."

"There's a lot of resistance," Miz Babylon said. "It's not just the Christian Underground. Some people just don't like the way it looks. The ones that already have tattoos are the worst, too. They can't stand the thought of having one just like everybody else's."

I noticed Brother Apollyon was shifting around in his chair. He wasn't looking at Miz Babylon's boobies no more. He was staring straight at the Antichrist. The look on his face was weird even for him.

"It's all so inefficient," the Minister of Peace said. "I wish we could drop this whole six-sixty-six business and go over to bar codes. Or better yet, embedded chips - "

Brother Apollyon picked up his Coke. It looked like his hand shook or something. Anyway he spilled some of it on the table and on his red robe. "Oh," he said. "I'm sorry—"

He reached over to his left to grab a napkin. The Antichrist didn't even look at him. "Yes," he said to the Minister of Peace, "that would be nice. The chips especially. Normally I'd say that might be the nuchelus of a good idea."

I guess I was the only one that seen it, and I nearly missed it. Old Brother Apollyon had damn fast hands for a man his age. I've seen top card sharps and pickpockets that weren't any slicker.

"But we can't do it," the Antichrist was saying. "It wouldn't be allowed."

There wasn't no mistake about it, though. I couldn't actually see what it was he dropped into the Antichrist's drink, but I seen him do it.

"It's in the Prophecy," the Antichrist said. "'And he causeth all to receive his mark,' something like that. Anyway it doesn't say a thing about bar codes or embedded chips."

He shook his head and reached for his drink.

That was when I lost it. I let out a big yell and run around past Boss Lady's chair and jumped up on top of the table and made a wild dive, knocking the glass out of the Antichrist's hand. "No," I hollered. "Don't drink that!"

Well, naturally in about half a second I was flat on my ass on the floor with half a dozen Palace guards pointing guns in my face. I figured I was dead. If they didn't kill me Boss Lady would.

But the Antichrist said, "Wait," and everybody held still. "Let him up," he told them, and when I was on my feet he said, "What's this all about?"

I started to speak but before I could say anything there was this real high giggle, like a girl. Everybody turned and looked at Brother Apollyon.

He had his hands up to his cheeks. His face was the flat-ass craziest I ever seen on a human.

"The pellet with the poison," he said in this creepy whispery voice, "is in the Palace that's in Dallas."

The Antichrist's mouth was hanging open. He wasn't the only one.

"It was supposed to be me, you know," Brother Apollyon said. His eyes were all walled back like a spooked horse. "It was revealed to me long ago, in a vision. All I had to do was wait and do as Satan commanded, and one day I would be the Antichrist, the Great Beast that hath power over the kings of this world—"

He stuck out his hand, pointing at the Antichrist. "You robbed me," he screamed. "After all I did for you, you robbed me of that which was to be mine!"

"Barking mad," the Minister of Peace said. His voice was a little shaky.

"Out of his damn mind," Miz Babylon said. "Crazy as a two-dick dog."

By now the Palace guards had Brother Apollyon by the arms and were pushing him down on the floor and slapping the cuffs on him. They weren't being none too gentle about it. He didn't hardly seem to notice, though. He was carrying on now in what sounded like some foreign language or maybe that Unknown Tongue that they used to speak in Mama's church.

The Antichrist was still setting there, not moving. He had finally shut his mouth but his face was white as a Zig-Zag paper.

"I could have been," he said. His face worked some. "I could have been *killed*," he finally got out.

"Be sure and collect a sample of that drink," the officer in charge of the guards was saying. "It'll have to be analyzed."

The Antichrist was looking at me now. "You saved my life," he said. His voice was like somebody with a bad sore throat. "You saved my life," he said again, a little clearer. "Son, what's your name?"

And so that's how I got to be a big hero and got my picture in the papers and my face on TV and Boss Lady is even fixing it up for some people to make a movie about me.

Looks like the best thing that ever happened to me was getting left behind.