

The Apostate
and
Other Stories
of the
Contemporary Southwest

By J. B. Hogan

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The Apostate	I
Panhandle.....	89
Cowboy	153

The Apostate

Chapter 1

Michael Wright felt the cold metal against his left temple and closed his eyes. It was a .38 he guessed. A Saturday night special. The only kind the frantic boy beside him probably could afford, or get his hands on. Damn it, Michael cursed inwardly, feeling the short barrel of the pistol drift towards his forehead.

Irrational anger at his wife pulsed through his shocked system. The stupid ring could have been picked up any time. But Barbara had to have him go get it right then. And it wasn't even ready.

Very briefly, Michael considered jumping the boy – smelly and ragged as the kid was in his filthy jeans and threadbare, once-black Anthrax T-shirt – but the boy suddenly tensed up and Michael let that idea go as quickly as it had popped into his head.

Anthrax? What the hell was Anthrax, Michael wondered. Some kind of band? A heavy metal band? Of course. Carjacked by a head banger boy and his poor white trash girlfriend up front driving. How could this have happened? How was it possible? He figured he must have snapped, gone over the edge without realizing it. Or maybe it was an acid flashback. But when Michael looked out the window, barely moving his head so that the boy wouldn't go nuts and shoot him, he saw the swap meet go by and he knew he was really where he was. Kidnapped. Carjacked. Racing out of Tucson, presumably toward the interstate. To where? Old Mexico? New Mexico? Phoenix? God only knew.

This is karma, Michael thought bitterly. Karma. Cause and effect. This was the effect from a cause he, Michael, had

caused. Some time, somewhere. And the hammer had come down across the years. He knew he deserved this. He didn't want it anyway.

"Karma," he muttered, closing his eyes again.

"What?" the boy barked at him, jamming the pistol harder into Michael's temple.

"Nothing," Michael said quickly.

"What did he say, Bobby Earl?" the girl driving called back over her right shoulder.

"Nothin'," Bobby Earl told her, "he's just mumblin' crap."

"Don't you hurt him," the girl said. "You promised not to hurt him."

"He keeps his mouth shut, I won't," Bobby Earl said, grinding the .38 barrel into Michael's head.

"Take it easy," Michael dared to say.

"Shut up," Bobby Earl snarled.

"There's an overpass comin' up, Bobby," the girl said, "which way do I go? Do I take the interstate?"

"How the hell do I know, Mary Beth?" Bobby Earl yelled at the girl. "You gotta make some decisions on your own. I'm watchin' this dumb ass. Or I can shoot him and come up there and drive my ownself. Is that what you want me to do?"

"Don't you shoot him, Bobby Earl," Mary Beth cried. "Don't you do that."

"Then shut up and get us on the stupid interstate."

"I don't know which exit to take," Mary Beth said, nearly crying. "Which is it? Which way? El Paso or Phoenix? East or West?"

"Go west," Bobby Earl barked, "to El Paso."

"El Paso's east," Michael offered stupidly, unable to resist a teacher's urge to correct an error.

"What did he say?" Mary Beth asked.

"I don't know," Bobby Earl answered, "but he better shut his pie hole."

"I said El Paso is east," Michael repeated softly, unwisely.

"You dumb shit," Bobby Earl said with a nasty little laugh, "lights out."

"It doesn't matter," Barbara Wright had said in that way Michael knew it most assuredly did matter. "I'll go myself later. If you're too busy."

No, no," Michael told his wife as he downed his seventh and eighth Tylenols of the day with a swallow of nauseatingly warm tap water. Central Arizona Project water, he thought, lucky it wasn't brown and smelly. He massaged the bridge of his nose behind his heavy, plastic lens glasses and sighed. His head hurt all the time anymore. "I'll go. Do you want me to go now?"

"You don't have to go right now," Barbara said, Michael knowing from her tone that he had to.

If fifteen years of marriage had taught Michael anything about his wife, it was that when she locked onto a task she wanted done, that task was to be taken care of immediately. She would continue to discuss the lack of importance of the task and that there was no hurry in getting it done until Michael got up and did it. Simple as that.

Michael figured it was some kind of misdirected energy related to their childless and, after all these years, passionless union. Michael couldn't blame Barbara for the way she felt. After all, he had saddled her with a life of boring mediocrity and had steadfastly refused to play the father to the mother role she had increasingly desired over the years, but he resented it anyway.

"Where's the store?" he asked, rubbing his neck and twisting it from side to side.

"It's in El Con," she said. "You remember. Next to the health food store. But you don't have to go now."

"I'm going," Michael nearly snapped back. His head hurt worse than before and when he closed his eyes everything was red and burning.

"You don't need to."

"I'm leaving. Which car should I take?"

"Take the Accord, your car is almost out of gas. And pick up some more Christmas paper, will you? I need to wrap the

dean's gift if we're going to his Godawful party tomorrow night."

"Okay," Michael said, heading out the front door.

He let the door slam shut over some last direction of Barbara's and hurried out to the Accord. At least it was nice and cool for a change, he thought, starting the car and pressing the button to automatically lower the driver's side window. The heat had lasted so far into the fall, Michael felt some internal thermostat had snapped and he would never be able to stand another Tucson summer. He craved cool air now like a fish craved water. Sucking air through his nose, he felt a lessening of the continual head pain.

By the time he got to El Con, avoiding the usual three to four attempts of fellow Tucsonans to kill or maim him with their automobiles, Michael was feeling halfway normal. He found a space in the crowded lot south of the main entrance to the mall and parked the Accord.

Damn, he complained silently, climbing out of the vehicle, did I forget the money? Speaking to himself, either in his own head or sometimes, embarrassingly, out loud, was a habit that had greatly increased over the last few deathly uninspiring years. Once a promising young academic, Michael's career in the University of Arizona English department had stalled at the Associate Professor level. He had been put on the back burner, both in terms of his career and the courses he taught, as the new young lions and lionesses bypassed him in position and tenure.

He closed the door of the Honda and checked his billfold. There was a hell of a lot of money in there, he realized with surprise, becoming aware that it was not too smart to flash big wads of cash like that anywhere in Tucson anymore. It wasn't LA by any stretch of the imagination, but Tucson wasn't the sleepy little stucco burg it had been years before either. Repocketing the billfold, he nearly ran into a young woman standing by the back fender of an old junker Chevy parked in the slot next to Michael's.

"Oh, I'm sorry," he mumbled, staggering to his left to avoid bumping into the girl. She held out a hand to steady him.

“It’s okay, mister,” the girl said, looking worried and apologetic herself. Michael focused on her, stared into a pair of the saddest, sweetest eyes he’d seen in years.

“Thank you,” he said, the girl letting her hand slip from his arm, “I’m just getting clumsy anymore.”

“That’s all right,” she said, Michael hearing for the first time a distinct southern accent.

He also noticed the girl was good looking in a plain, non-traditional way and that her light, cotton print dress revealed a lean, lanky body – raw-boned was the old term – highlighted by pronounced breasts and wide hips. A child bearing body. The phrase “barefoot and pregnant” popped into Michael’s head. The girl had long, stringy brown hair and her face was very white, but she had kind, green eyes, a thin nose, and lips not quite full enough to make her pretty by conventional standards. Michael liked her immediately.

“Pardon me,” he said, nodding to the girl, then walking on towards the mall.

As he passed the back of the girl’s vehicle, a young man got out of the driver’s seat. Michael glanced at him long enough to get a vague impression: tall, skinny, long dirty hair, dark clothing, some kind of testosterone-based smirk of disrespect. Michael averted his eyes and hustled on to the store.

Inside, the mall was so busy it could have served as a human version of an ant farm. People bustled in every direction, laughing, shouting, hurrying from one shop to the next in a frenzy of consumer activity. Michael reeled from the movement and sound. He hated malls. Hated the mindless consumerism they represented to him. Hated the sights and smells, the noise, of so much humanity in such close quarters, doing nothing but spending their hard-earned dollars on useless throwaway items.

Resting for a moment against the window of an antiseptically clean-smelling clothing store, Michael braced himself and then plunged through the crowd into what he hoped was the right jewelry store. A young sales clerk spoke to him from across the ring and necklace-filled glass counter.

“May I help you, sir?” her friendly voice penetrated

Michael's foggy consciousness. He looked at the girl and smiled. She waited for him to speak.

"Oh . . . oh," he muttered, fumbling in his billfold for the ticket Barbara had given him. "I wanted to see if our ring is ready yet." He reached the ticket over to the girl.

"I'll be just a moment," she said.

Michael watched the girl walk to the back of the store. She was blonde and thin. Her pretty face was too made up and she looked out of place in the jewelry store somehow. A recent high school grad, he figured, somebody's darling daughter, treading water before college, or marriage to some boy next door type. Eighteen, he guessed, squeaky clean, perfectly normal, achingly cute to a worn out, middle-aged man. Michael wondered if he had properly appreciated young women her age when he had been young himself. He seriously doubted it. He knew he hadn't.

"I'm sorry, sir," the girl said, returning with the ticket. "It's not back yet. Maybe you can try again later? This time of year we're so busy, we might not get another delivery from our adjustment person until evening."

"Evening?" Michael asked, wanting to know what an "adjustment person" was. "Uh, when do you close?"

"Eight o'clock, sir."

"Okay, thanks. I'll try back later."

"Thank you, sir. Have a good day."

Michael put the ticket back in his billfold and re-entered the fair-like atmosphere of the mall corridors. He shook his head. He had really disliked it from the very first time a young woman had called him sir. What a drag it was to get old, he thought. What a drag indeed. Then, lowering his head as if steeling himself for a blast of cold Midwest winter wind, he headed for the exit.

He still had to pick up some Christmas paper. But he'd go to a smaller store for that. Some little mom and pop place. More expensive, but with a better atmosphere to it. A feeling of hominess and safety. With a marginally renewed sense of satisfaction, Michael walked out of the mall's main south exit and headed back to the car.

Michael opened his right eye first. Slowly, painfully. Then the left eye. He hadn't been out long; he saw the exit sign for Sixth Avenue go by. From the high pitch in her voice, the girl driving seemed to be losing it. The boy beside Michael was doing his usual cursing.

"Goddamn it, Mary Beth, you got us goin' the wrong way."

"The signs say Nogales one way or Phoenix the other," Mary Beth wailed, "what do I do? Where do I go?"

"You dumb ass," the boy yelled, "we're supposed to be going to El Paso, what are you doin'?"

"Stop yelling at me, Bobby Earl, stop cursing me," Mary Beth protested, "I don't know where we're at. I don't know where El Paso is."

"Don't hit me," Michael said, sitting up slowly beside Bobby Earl, "take it easy." Bobby Earl held the .38 threateningly above Michael's head. "El Paso is behind us. If you go to the right up here, towards Phoenix, you can get off at the first exit and then cross under the interstate and head back east."

"Why would we go east to El Paso?" Bobby Earl wanted to know. "It's out west."

"The west Texas town of El Paso," Mary Beth said.

"But it's east of here," Michael explained. "We're further west than El Paso."

"You better not be screwin' around," Bobby Earl growled.

"You got the gun," Michael said, "it wouldn't make any sense to screw around."

"Yeah," Bobby Earl allowed.

"Here, mister?" Mary Beth asked, getting in the exit lane.

"Yes," Michael said. "Take this one."

"You mess around with us," Bobby Earl told Michael, "I'll blow your rich butt away."

"Rich?" Michael asked, instinctively reaching back to check for his billfold. It was gone. Naturally.

"Lookin' for this?" Bobby Earl laughed, holding up the missing billfold. It looked completely empty to Michael. So much

for the four hundred he'd had.

"Now I cross under and go back to the left?" Mary Beth asked with a glance at Michael.

"Yes," he told her, taking the billfold from Bobby Earl. It was empty, except for a couple of pictures: one of Barbara's baby nephew, another of Michael and Barbara from an earlier, not so deadened time.

"It says El Paso to the left," Mary Beth called out happily.

"Whad'ya know, rich boy," Bobby Earl told Michael, "you got lucky."

"I'm a lucky kind of guy," Michael said.

"Shut up," Bobby Earl said.

"Yes," Michael agreed. "I will."