

## A CLASH OF VALUES

Rick, the narrator, is a young man who has gone through difficult times and now joins his brother Philip, a successful doctor at an abortion clinic in Detroit. Rick wants to work there as an unskilled labourer. They are on the point of arriving at the clinic where they are confronted with ant-abortionist demonstrators. The story reflects a social problem in the U.S. where so-called “pro life” – activists use non-violent and violent forms of protest against abortion clinics, i.e. protest marches and fire-bombings

[...] there were people there, a whole shadowy mass of shoulders and hats and steaming faces that converged on us with a shout.

At first I didn't know what was going on – I thought I was

trapped in a bad movie, *Night of the Living Dead* or *Zombies on*

5 *Parade*. The faces were barking at us, teeth bared, eyes sunk back in their heads, hot breath boiling from their throats.

“Murderers!” they were shouting. “Nazis!” “Baby-killers!”

We inched our way across the sidewalk and into the lot, working

through the mass of them as if we were on a narrow lane in a dense forest,

10 and Philip gave me a look that explained it all, from the lines in his face to

[...] the phone that rang in the middle of the night no matter how many times he changed the number. This was war. I climbed out of the car with

my heart hammering, and as the cold knife of the air cut into me I looked

back to where they stood clustered at the gate, lumpish and solid, people

15 you'd see anywhere. They were singing now. Some hymn, some self-righteous churchy Jesus-thumping<sup>1</sup> hymn that bludgeoned<sup>2</sup> the traffic

noise and the deep-frozen air with the force of a weapon. I didn't have

time to sort it out, but I could feel the slow burn of anger and humiliation

coming up in me. Philip's hand was on my arm. “Come on”, he said.

20 “we've got work to do, little brother.”

That day, the first day, was a real trial. [...] I had no illusions about the

job – I knew it would be dull and diminishing, and I knew life with Philip

and Denise<sup>3</sup> would be one long snooze – but I wasn't used to being called

a baby-killer. Liar, thief, crackhead<sup>4</sup> – those were names I'd answered to at one

25 time or another. Murderer was something else.

My brother wouldn't talk about it. He was busy. Wired. Hurtling<sup>5</sup>

around the clinic like a gymnast on the parallel bars. By nine I'd met his

two associates (another doctor and a counselor, both female, both

unattractive); his receptionist; Nurses Tsing and Hempfield; and Fred.

30 Fred was a big rabbit-looking<sup>6</sup> guy in his early thirties with a pale reddish  
 moustache and hair of the same color climbing out of his head in all  
 directions. He had the official title “technician”, though the most technical  
 things I saw him do were drawing blood and divining<sup>7</sup> urine for signs of  
 pregnancy, clap<sup>8</sup>, or worse. None of them – not my brother, the nurses, the  
 35 counselor, or even Fred – wanted to discuss what was going on at the far  
 end of the parking lot and on the sidewalk out front. The zombies with the  
 signs – yes signs, I could see the out the window, ABORTION KILLS and  
 SAVE THE PREBORNS and I WILL ADOPT YOUR BABY – were of no  
 more concern to them than mosquitoes in June or a snuffle in December. Or  
 40 at least that was how they reacted.

I tried to draw Fred out on the subject as we sat together at lunch in  
 the back room. We were surrounded by shadowy things in jars of  
 formalin, gleaming stainless-steel sinks, racks of test tubes, reference  
 books, cardboard boxes full of drug samples and syringes and gauze pads  
 45 and all the rest of the clinic’s paraphernalia. “So what do you think of all  
 this, Fred?” I said, gesturing toward the window with the ham-and-Swiss  
 on rye Denise had made me in the dark hours of the morning.

Fred was hunched over a newspaper, doing the acrostic puzzle<sup>9</sup> and  
 sucking on his teeth. His lunch consisted of a microwave chili-and-cheese  
 50 burrito and a quart of root beer<sup>10</sup>. He gave me a quizzical look.

“The protesters, I mean. The Jesus-thumpers out there. Is it like this all  
 the time?” And then I added a little joke, so he wouldn’t think I was  
 intimidated: “Or did I just get lucky?”

“Who, them?” Fred did something with his nose and his upper teeth,  
 55 something rabbity, as if he were tasting the air. “They’re nobody. They’re  
 nothing.”

“Yeah?” I said, hoping for more, hoping for some details, some  
 explanation, something to assuage<sup>11</sup> the creeping sense of guilt and shame  
 that had been building in me all morning. Those people had pigeonholed<sup>12</sup>  
 60 me before I’d even set foot in the door, and that hurt. They were wrong. I  
 was no baby-killer – I was just the little brother of a big brother, trying to  
 make a new start. And Philip was no baby-killer, either – he was a guy  
 doing his job, that was all. Shit, somebody had to do it. Up to this point I’d  
 never really given the issue much thought – my girlfriends, when there  
 65 where girlfriends, had taken care of the preventive end of things on their  
 own, and we never really discussed it – but my feeling was that there were  
 too many babies in the world already, too many adults, too many suet-

faced<sup>13</sup> Jesus-thumping jerks ready to point the finger, and didn't any of  
 these people have better things to do? Like a job, for instance? But Fred  
 70 wasn't much help. He just sighed, nibbled at the wilted stem of his burrito,  
 and said, "You get used to it."

(871 words)

*Source:*

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**Annotations:**

- 1 Jesus-thumping – christliche Ideale aggressive vertretend
- 2 to bludgeon – hier: übertönen
- 3 Denise – Philip's wife
- 4 crackhead – hier: person with strange/crazy ideas or drug users
- 5 to hurtle – move at a great or dangerous speed
- 6 rabbit-looking – looking like a rabbit
- 7 to divine – hier: untersuchen
- 8 clap (coll.) – Geschlechtskrankheit (Tripper)
- 9 acrostic puzzle – hier: anspruchsvolles Kreuzworträtsel
- 10 root beer – a sweet drink that does not contain alcohol
- 11 to assuage – to lessen, to reduce
- 12 pigeonhole – give sb. a label (German: einordnen)
- 13 suet-faced – hier: fettig, aufgedunsen