

The Dios Trio

Three religious stories



by

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IF THY RIGHT HAND OFFEND THEE

Dr. Finley sat in the corner and watched Zeke step to the other counter in the examination room. He opened a drawer and took out a pair of shears. They were the heavy stainless ones, with short blades. Zeke snipped them once and then he cocked his head, as if he were listening to something.

Finley thought Zeke was probably twenty-eight or -nine, like himself, but he looked older. He was big and burly but there was some looseness in the flesh of his face that indicated he hadn't been eating lately. He hadn't been sleeping either. The overhead fluorescents made the circles around his eyes stand out.

Zeke's lips moved but Finley couldn't hear what he said.

"Pardon?"

Zeke looked at him. "I was just thanking the Lord, doctor. You should thank Him too. I don't have to kill you now."

Finley felt himself relax for the first time in more than an hour, since the incident began with a muffled shout in the hallway outside. There was the shout, a crash, and then Zeke (that's what the man's name turned out to be), Zeke threw the door open and stormed into the room brandishing a sawed-off shotgun. He shooed the nurse and patient away, slammed the door and turned to Finley. "You're the one I've come for," he snarled. "The abortion doctor."

His jeans and T-shirt were threadbare, Finley saw, and his work boots were scuffed. The only *new* article of clothing he had on was an oversized windbreaker. Probably bought for the occasion, to sneak the gun past security.

"I'm a gynecologist," Finley said. "Abortions are only a part of what I . . ."

"You're an *abortion doctor!*"

The gun was down at Zeke's side. He jerked it up and aimed at Finley from the hip. Finley stumbled back. The seat of the chair in the corner hit him behind a knee and he sat down with a grunt. Zeke pumped the gun's slide. It made a loud *clack-clack* sound. The examination room was soundproofed with thick walls and acoustical ceiling tile, and Finley wondered what the blast would sound like from outside. A whimsical thought. Odd that it should be one of his last before he died.

But Zeke hesitated. He held the gun leveled at Finley's head but didn't shoot. He fingered the trigger, and in the eternity of the next couple of seconds Finley recalled something from the hostage seminar they'd made him attend when he came to work at the clinic. That was only five months before, and he remembered one of the lecturers saying that a majority of the people who create problems at women's clinics are fun-damentalist Christians.

"Thou shall not kill!" Finley blurted, hoping that he was dealing with a Christian. The gamble paid off. Zeke's finger eased away from the trigger, the gun lowered and he said, "How *dare* you quote that Commandment."

For the next hour they debated. Zeke barricaded the door, and then he paced the linoleum and spouted Bible passages while Finley stayed put and responded. The seminar training no doubt saved his life. Zeke reeled off verse after verse that he claimed condemned abortion, but because of the training Finley was able to point out the flawed logic in each quotation. He did it carefully though, and he continued to be careful even after Zeke grew tired of holding the shotgun and hung it by its sling over his shoulder. Zeke was powerfully built and looked like he could do all the killing he wanted with just his big, callused hands.

And then, out of the blue, Zeke found the

shears and said he wouldn't kill him.

"That's...that's good news, Zeke. You've made a wise decision." Finley looked at the door. The room was in the center of the clinic, with no windows, and only one door leading in and out. At the moment all the furniture but his chair was piled against the door. The examination table was upended with its stirrups in the air. "There's probably a SWAT team in the hall by now, Zeke, so if you'll clear the doorway, I'll go out and tell them you've changed your mind. They won't shoot me, and since you haven't hurt anyone yet, I'm sure they'll just..."

Finley started to rise from his chair but Zeke motioned him to stay seated.

"No, doctor, you don't understand. I just had an epiphany. A kind of vision. The Lord really *does* work in mysterious ways, like the song says."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, I've had a change of heart, thanks to Jesus. He reminded me of some Scripture. It'll save your life, but there's still a price to be paid. Can you guess which Scripture I'm talking about?"

"Uh...no. I can't."

"Matthew 5:30?"

Finley couldn't recall going over that one in the seminar. He shook his head.

"'If thy right hand offend thee...' Aren't you right-handed, doctor?"

"Yes, I am, but what does that have to do with anything?"

"Well, Jesus said, 'And if thy right hand offend thee, cut it off, and cast it from thee: for it is profitable for thee that one of thy members should perish, and not that thy whole body should be cast into hell.'"

When Zeke finished speaking he snipped the shears, and Finley suddenly understood what he planned to do.

"You... Are you going to cut off my..." He stopped himself. No need to plant the idea if he

was mistaken.

“Yes,” Zeke nodded, “I’m going to cut off your hand.”

Finley felt a cold shiver pass over him. It raised goosebumps on the backs of his arms.

“But that’s . . . That doesn’t make sense.”

“I know it might not right now, doctor, but maybe someday it will. And maybe you’ll live to thank me. I came in here thinking I’d have to kill you, but now I know I don’t need to. You’ll be able to go on living, and in time you might even redeem your soul.”

Finley rubbed his arms.

“But . . . you can’t. I mean, *why* would you want to cut off my hand?”

“So you can’t perform any more abortions. You need your hands to do that, and if you’re missing one, well, you can’t do the work.”

“But they’d put you in jail for that. Prison.”

“So be it. After all, I came in here expecting to get the death penalty. I know I’ll go to prison, but I’m still young. When I get out I’ll be able to remove another doctor’s hand, and then maybe another before they lock me away for good.”

He snipped the shears, and Finley thought of his surgical training. If he lost his hand it would mean he could never operate again. There *had* to be a way to avoid that.

“Just think of the news coverage this will get,” Zeke went on. “Murders have become so commonplace, but this . . . *This* will get people’s attention and . . .”

While Zeke talked Finley looked at the door again. Too bad it was blocked, because he knew the police would be in position by now. If he could just get to the hallway they would protect him. But he’d never make it if he bolted. He forced himself to stop thinking about escape and focus on what Zeke was saying. Careful listening and calm discussion were the only things that would open

the door.

“This could save *so* many lives,” Zeke said. “Believers all over the country would suddenly realize they don’t have to kill abortion doctors to make them stop their abominations. Yes, word would go out, and ‘He that hath ears to hear, let him hear.’”

Ears to hear. Finley wondered if the police were listening to them with surveillance devices. Probably. He chided himself for not thinking of that sooner. He should have been pumping Zeke for practical information, to help the authorities get a better idea of what was going on.

Finley cleared his throat and spoke as clearly as he could. He wanted his words to be understandable to the people outside the room.

“Is that shotgun the only weapon you have on you?”

“What does that matter? One gun or a dozen, you’ll be dead if anyone tries to break in here.”

“But . . . I thought you said you’re not going to kill me.”

“I’m not, unless they rush us. Then we’ll both be dead.”

“So you’d kill us both? You sound like you have a . . . Do you have a *bomb* under that wind-breaker?”

Zeke made a disapproving face. “I know what you’re doing, doctor.” He gestured to the door. “Sure they’re listening, but it doesn’t matter. Like I said, we’ll both be dead if they break in. I’ll shoot you, then they’ll shoot me. But I don’t have any choice in the matter. Everything’s in God’s hands.”

Finley tried to go on but words failed him. His seminar failed him. You couldn’t reason with a fanatic.

“You should be on your knees,” Zeke said. “You should be thanking the Lord I had my epiphany when I did.” He snipped the shears. “Murder is bad, and even though I could save thousands of innocent

babies by killing you, the taking of a human life is something I don't want to have on my soul. But let me pray on the new plan, because I want to be sure I'm following the Lord's will."

Zeke bowed his head and locked his fingers over the shears. The suddenness of the action surprised Finley, but he had enough presence of mind to know that Zeke was as vulnerable just then as he was likely to get. He looked around for a weapon. Any sharp surgical instrument would do, but the only things on the countertops just then were tongue depressors and a rubber-headed reflex hammer. And then he thought he might not need a weapon at all. If Zeke were deep enough into his praying he could surprise him and . . .

He looked back to Zeke and saw that he was watching him.

"Don't be thinking that way, doctor. Shears beat tongue depressors. And if you escalate to that rubber hammer, I have this." He reached back and patted the stock of his shotgun.

Finley took a deep breath and told himself he should be more careful. He was giving away his thoughts.

"Okay," Zeke said, snipping the shears. "I've prayed on the matter the best I can under the circumstances, and I'm pretty sure I'm doing the right thing. So I guess we should get on with it." He opened the jaws of the shears, placed them over his opposite wrist and gave them a little squeeze. "Hmm. Not very sharp. You know, this isn't the best tool for the job. Do you have anything else in here?" He closed the drawer the shears had come from and opened another. "A cleaver would be good."

"A . . . a *cleaver*?" Finley went a little light-headed.

"Ah," Zeke said, looking up from the drawer. "I just thought of another Bible passage. From Luke. 'When Elizabeth heard the salutation of

Mary, the baby leaped in her womb; and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Ghost.' *That* passage is proof that fetuses are alive. The baby responded to a voice, so that shows thinking. Living intelligence."

Finley was still picturing cleavers and said something about the gestating fetus in Elizabeth simply twitching as its muscles developed.

The shears clattered on the countertop. Zeke spun and reached around to pull the shotgun off his shoulder. When he stopped spinning he was facing Finley and the gun was trained on his head.

"They're *not* fetuses, they're *children*! And Elizabeth's child was John the Baptist!"

The abruptness of Zeke's change from conversational to savage stunned Finley. He sat staring down the barrel of the gun. The black hole of the bore made him think of an astronomical black hole, but one that sucked in thought rather than light. Thoughts seemed to streak past the edges of his consciousness, funneling into the barrel, and luckily he recognized a seminar memory of the Luke passage on its way by.

"Oh, uh... you're right, Zeke. That passage *does* describe John the Baptist reacting to the voice of Jesus's mother. So that's an event involving *miraculous* circumstances, and you can't really apply what happened there to an everyday pregnancy."

Zeke considered, then he took a deep breath and returned the shotgun to his shoulder. He picked up the shears and went back to digging in the drawer he'd been looking through before the outburst. He held up something shiny.

"What's this? A uterine dilator?"

Finley felt sluggish, probably because of the stress hormones being pumped into his blood. He managed a nod in response to Zeke's question, and Zeke placed the dilator back in the drawer.

"Ah, good," he said, after digging around

some more. "Here's something we can use." He held up a coil of plastic hose, the kind used by the suction machine. "I can make a tourniquet with this, to tie off your arm above the cut. And let's see, what else will we need?" He shut the drawer and thought. "I guess we should prepare for you going into shock. I took a first aid course once and they said that when someone's in shock you should elevate their feet and cover them, to keep them warm. Do you have any blankets in here?"

At the mention of blankets Finley went cold again, but this time it wasn't just a shivery sensation that raised goosebumps; the chill reached to his core and he knew it was because his body was pulling in blood from his extremities, preparing for the loss of the hand.

"Any blankets, doctor?"

"N-No. No blankets."

"What about hospital gowns? Do you have any of those in here?"

"No, I . . . This room's low on supplies, I think. I heard the nurses talking about it earlier."

"Okay. Then I guess we can . . . Here. We'll use my windbreaker." Zeke slipped the gun off his shoulder, removed his jacket and put the gun back in place. He tossed the jacket to Finley. "Put that on." Finley pulled it on over his smock. Zeke looked around. "What else? You'll need your feet elevated. I guess we'll lay you out on the floor face up after I do the chopping, and I'll put something under your heels. But that'll make the blood rush to your hand, won't it, lying down like that?" He looked at the floor. "This is going to be messy, even with a tourniquet. I don't guess you have any towels either, huh?"

"Just . . . Just paper towels, I think."

Finley gestured to a wall-mounted towel dispenser that was next to a sink set into one of the counters. Zeke popped the dispenser open. "Hmpf. Not enough." He looked in the cabinet above the

sink, then the one below.

Finley cringed at the sight of the cardboard box Zeke pulled from beneath the plumbing. He dragged it out onto the linoleum, rooted through it and straightened up holding a cranial perforator. It was rusty.

Dr. Mossa showed Finley the box of antique instruments the day he came to work at the clinic. He said Finley would be using them, since he was the new kid on the block, then after a long moment he laughed. The old fart's idea of a professional joke. Why couldn't *Mossa* have been on duty when Zeke went psychotic?

Zeke put the perforator back in the box and held up an old decapitator — a forceps device with a wire chainsaw blade running from the tip of one pincer to the other.

“What's this?”

“It's . . . It belongs to Dr. Mossa. I'm not sure what it is.”

“It's a decapitator,” Zeke said, giving Finley a censoring look. “We both know that.” He started to drop the instrument back into the box, but he paused. “You know, we might be able to use this.” He turned the decapitator this way and that, examining it. “To remove your hand, I mean.”

Zeke experimented with the decapitator. Finley watched as he drew the saw wire back and forth, back and forth. “Yeah,” Zeke nodded. “This could work. It would take awhile, but, hmmm . . . It would do the trick.”

Finley didn't know which would come first, the scream or the loss of bladder control, but before either happened Zeke said, “Nah, it would take too long. Be really messy, too. I guess the shears will work better.” He put the decapitator back in the box, shoved the box back under the plumbing and opened another cabinet. “Hey! We got paper towels here. Mop up shouldn't be a problem now.”

Zeke placed a bundle of towels on the sink

counter, and then he went to work making a tourniquet. Finley watched him wrap the hose around his forearm, estimate the length needed, and cut it with the shears. When he finished he set the leftover tubing aside and shoved the tourniquet into a pocket. Then he pointed to the countertop to the right of the sink. "I think that would be the best place for the surgery. If you put your arm on the counter and aim your stump at the basin, that should catch most of the blood." He looked at Finley. "You couldn't bleed to *death* could you, with your arm tied off?"

Finley didn't seem to have enough breath in his lungs to answer. It had been squeezed out by events pressing him against a wall of inevitability.

Zeke shrugged and explained how he planned to remove Finley's hand. He acted out both his part and Finley's at the counter while he talked. "See, you'll rest your arm here, near the edge of the sink, and I'll tie it off just above the wrist. And then . . ." He repositioned himself and placed the hand holding the shears so it was knuckles down on the countertop. "And then I'll lean into the cut like this." He raised himself up on the balls of his feet and rocked forward. "I'll put as much of my body weight as I can into it, see?"

"You . . . You . . . No. You can't really be serious about this."

"Of course I am. And I think it'll work. These shears are heavy-duty and I'm a carpenter, just like you know who was, so I'm strong enough to do it."

Zeke tore open the fresh bundle of towels. He began humming too, and after working for a while at the counter he said, "That's the song I mentioned earlier. *God Moves in Mysterious Ways*. An old hymn we sing in church." He stood back to look at the bed of towels laid out where he'd said Finley's arm would rest. "It's not an operating table, but it'll do, don't you think?"

Finley still couldn't speak. The press of events that had squeezed his breath out of him was now squeezing his gorge up. He thought he might vomit. He must have looked pretty bad because Zeke asked if he was steady enough to stand. "I mean, can you stand at the counter here while I operate?"

Finley tried to answer but felt even sicker. He made a retching sound in the back of his throat.

"No, I guess you can't," Zeke said. "So we'll, uh . . ." He looked around. "I'll fix it so you can sit while I'm working."

He went to the door and grabbed a stool from the pile of stuff stacked against it. He set the stool near the sink, patted the seat and said, "Here you go, doctor. Come on over."

Finley couldn't make himself get up from his chair.

"Come on."

With a great deal of effort Finley forced himself to stand. His legs were shaky. Zeke slid the chair over to the door and jammed it where the stool had been, then he returned to the stool and gave the seat another pat.

"Come on, doctor."

"Wait. I have . . . I have something I want to . . . The way I understand this, you want to amputate my right hand so I can't perform abortions, right?"

"Well, I don't *want* to, I *have* to."

"Good. You don't want to. That's good. So . . . what if I promise I won't do any more? Abortions, I mean. I could do that. I could promise."

"Yeah, well maybe you'd keep that promise and maybe you wouldn't. This is the only way to make sure. Come on. Have a seat."

"No, wait. I mean, that's so drastic, to cut off my hand. There *must* be another way to work this out. I mean . . . there *must* be."

Zeke started to reply, but then he seemed to think of something. He told Finley to pick up a

tongue depressor.

“What?”

“Pick up a tongue depressor. With your right hand.”

Finley did as instructed.

“Now hold it the way you would a scalpel.”

Again Finley did as he was told.

Zeke looked at the hand holding the depressor and rubbed his chin.

“What are you thinking?” Finley asked.

“Just that I might not need to cut off your hand. Maybe I can just disable you somehow, so you can’t operate. Let me think.”

He bobbed and craned, studying Finley’s hand from different angles.

Finley wondered how Zeke would disable him. Probably by removing a finger, or no, his thumb. He wouldn’t be able to hold a surgical instrument without an opposable thumb. Losing the thumb would be awful, but just seconds ago Zeke had been talking about cutting off his hand. And before that he wanted to kill him. So things were looking up. Finley told himself that with a little more time he might be able to get away with his life, his hand, and all the hand’s parts.

“Darn,” Zeke said. He pointed to the suction machine against the door. “I forgot about that thing. You use it to suck babies out of the womb in the first trimester.” He looked around. “You call this an examination room but really it’s a death chamber. You do suction abortions here, and you could still use that machine if I just maimed you, so it looks like the whole hand will need to come off.” He stepped to the counter where he would be working. “Come on,” he said grimly, gesturing to the stool. “Let’s get this done.”

Finley felt his gorge rise again.

“No, I . . . I can’t go through with it.”

Zeke laid the shears on the counter and pulled his shotgun around. He aimed it at Finley and said,

“You’ve murdered babies and you’ll murder more if I don’t stop you. I’ve offered you a way to save your life, but whether you take it or not is up to you.”

Finley tried to think of a response but nothing came to him. He took a stiff-legged step toward the stool, then another, and when he reached it he sat down heavily.

“Good,” Zeke said. He returned the shotgun to its place over his shoulder and picked up the shears. “Now lay your arm here on the counter.”

Finley did.

“Closer to the sink.”

Finley scooted his arm toward the sink and pictured his severed hand falling into the bottom of it. Not only that, but he saw it jump up on its fingertips and do a little dance over the drain. His mind was slipping.

Zeke snipped the shears a couple of times.

“We won’t worry about sterilization and painkillers and all that. As soon as I’m done we’ll get you stretched out on the floor, and then I’ll talk to the folks outside. They’ve probably been listening and know what’s going on, and in five minutes you should be doped up and full of antibiotics. Okay?”

For a moment Finley thought that if they could reattach the hand quickly enough he would be able to continue doing surgery, but then he knew that would never happen. His fine motor skills would be gone. He would never operate again.

He began to sob.

Zeke patted him on the shoulder. “I understand how you feel, doctor, but try to control yourself. I might need your advice on the surgery. Like right now. I put the tourniquet here, don’t I?” He indicated a spot about two inches above Finley’s wrist. Finley nodded. Zeke pulled the length of plastic hose from his pocket, slid the sleeve of the windbreaker up to Finley’s elbow and tied the hose around his forearm.

“Okay, this is how I’m going to do it. I’ll stand here, put the shears on the counter and slide the jaws over your wrist. Then I’ll lean down as hard as I can. If I hit at the end of the arm bone I’ll just be cutting through gristle and veins and such, right?”

Finley was still sobbing and couldn’t manage an answer. He reached up with his right hand to wipe away the tears that were rolling down his cheeks, and he thought how that might be the last act he ever performed with the hand. He wiped the tears, then he dried his palm on his smock. As if it mattered whether the hand was wet or dry.

“Well anyway,” Zeke went on, “after we do it I’ll talk to the people outside. Like I said, if they’re reasonable you should be out of here in a few minutes. Do you understand?”

Finley couldn’t answer.

“Okay, put your arm down here again, and you should probably close your eyes.”

Finley placed his arm on the counter.

“Don’t move or pull away,” Zeke said. “I’ll do my best to hit the joint, but you’ll have to hold still. It’ll take two, maybe three chops, and... Here... Let me get set...”

Zeke squirmed around for a better position. Finley couldn’t force himself to close his eyes. He watched Zeke put the hand holding the shears on the countertop. Everything seemed to get so quiet. The shears made a loud scraping sound as Zeke slid them forward. He opened the jaws wide and pushed until Finley’s wrist was wedged between the blades.

“Okay. I think that’s right, isn’t it, doctor? Is that where the arm bone ends?”

Finley heard something from above. A tick. Zeke heard it too, and they looked up together as a figure dressed in black came *crashing* through the ceiling’s acoustical tiles.

Of *course*, Finley thought. It hadn’t occurred to

him that the police could come *through the ceiling*. And apparently the idea hadn't occurred to Zeke, either. He looked like he was caught completely off guard. When he saw what was happening he let go of the shears and reached back for his shotgun.

The policeman fell in a rain of tile and debris, and he seemed to have two strong springs for legs. He hit the floor flat-footed and dipped a bit, then he came up facing them with a shotgun already leveled and aiming. He fired before Zeke could swing his gun forward.

The roar of the blast deafened Finley. He didn't actually hear Zeke thud back against the wall, but later he would remember it that way. Zeke hit the wall and began a long red slide down.

Finley threw his hands up as he turned to the policeman. He thought that's what he was supposed to do, but he should have taken the effect of adrenaline into account. That and the fact that he was wearing Zeke's windbreaker. The officer aimed at him and squeezed off another shot, but fortunately he pulled the barrel up as the gun discharged.

Finley felt his right arm jerk back, and when he brought it down in front of his face he saw that the hand was gone. He looked at the bloody stump, then he looked at Zeke on the floor.

It was surprising that he was still alive. The shotgun had cut him nearly in half. He held his hands over his shredded abdomen and smiled up at Finley, and although Finley was still deaf, he would swear later that he heard Zeke hum a few notes of *God Moves in Mysterious Ways* as he released his dying breath.