

Counting the Cost

Staring intently, Harry saw a bulbous bead of blood form at the tip of his finger. Turning pages too fast again. Even before he had anything to write. The address was right, how could it not be. A burned church was hard to miss.

Stuffing his notepad back in his left pocket, pressing his cut finger against his thumb, Harry hobbled towards the charred ruins. The roof might be gone but the curved boundary walls couldn't hide that this church was no more than 2500 square feet in area. Classic rectangle shaped. Steeple in the front, above the door. Turning back to the dalmatian SUV he clicked the trunk open with his right hand firmly in his pocket. As Harry shuffled to grab the table in the back, he went over the address in his mind. This was supposed to be his city, but a specialist like him didn't have a beat. To the untrained eye an apartment building, an office complex, a warehouse, parking structure, even a church, they all burned the same. But Harry didn't have an untrained eye, and that's why he was sent to just another burned building, another accident, another thing that couldn't just be made again.

A few years ago, there would have been someone here to carry the table for him, but these days Harry had to do it himself. A few years ago, Harry was one of the older detectives at the station, but these days Harry was one of the youngest. A few years ago, Harry wanted to retire, but these days, Harry had a job to do. He technically had a partner, Calvin, a greying beat cop with kids he had to pick up this afternoon. He was the only reason Harry wasn't technically the youngest left, but he was on patrol at this hour on double shift. Harry hoped he would finish up here by lunch to meet up with him. After struggling to drag the table to the middle of the blackened ruin, and then setting it up, Harry limped back to his municipal chariot to get the real key to this desolation. A fat green folder. Green was his favorite color, and being the only Arson expert in these parts had its benefits, these few.

Setting the folder out on the table set up in the middle of the ruin Harry asked himself the same question he was asked this morning. Asked by his Chief that retired around the time Harry joined the force but was recalled last year. "Why did First Reformed burn?"

Along with the file, Harry brought his cane to lean on as he opened the green folder on the table and spread out the subjects. The cover page of the report gave a summary of the location.

FIRST REFORMED: EST 1776~

Dutch Calvinist Reformed Church, split from the Reformed Church in America (RCA) in 2014, Split from the Alliance of Reformed Churches (ACA) in 2029. Independent since. Polling station for state and federal elections from 1900 till 2036. Current Pastor, Rudolph Hickory since 2030. Umbrella insurance policy, including Arson obtained by the church March 2036

Harry looked around, old lumber, dry lumber. No wonder there was nothing of the roof or steeple left. The only interior wall left was towards the rear of the former church, clearly the load bearing wall that once held the pulpit. At least according to the schematics on the next page of

the report. Harry turned and moved the summary to the top right corner of the table, under it was an incident report from 2 weeks previous.

INCIDENT REPORT: 10/26/36

OFFICER CALVIN BAAS REPORTING.

While on standard solo patrol received a call from dispatch at 7:26 PM regarding a disturbance at Sunday night service at First Reformed church. Was informed that disturbance involved a large group. I immediately diverted to First Reformed which was less than 5 minutes' drive away and called for any backup available to assist in resolving a group disturbance. At this time, I also submitted with dispatch a request for electronic access to my non-lethal arsenal secured within my patrol vehicle.

Minutes later I arrived at First Reformed. I had not yet received electronic access to my non-lethal tools from dispatch authority but entered the church nonetheless as I heard arguing from outside. Upon entering the church, I witnessed two large groups confronting each other. The first group just near the door as I entered was led in front by a CONSTANCE SMITH who was engaged in argumentation with another group, made up of most, but not all the congregation led by pastor RUDOLPH HICKORY. I moved between the two men and the two groups and informed them that this disturbance would soon be resolved. I raised both my arms, each in front of each man to indicate de-escalation as is department policy. I was not able to ascertain exactly what the dispute involved. Despite my attempts to de-escalate, the argument continued, until a bottle hit a member of the congregation. As the two groups engaged physically, my officer physical alarm system was set off. I managed to disengage to the rear of the church until Fast Response De-escalation Team arrived. Upon arrival we managed to take both RUDOLPH HICKORY and CONSTANCE SMITH into custody using non-lethal means and both the congregation and SMITH's group dispersed. Both were taken to the station with the aid of the FRDT and questioning began while their Counsel Request Affidavit was being processed by the NSA.

Obviously no ordinary accidental church burning. But Harry wondered why him? Was this burned church really such a mystery? Looking around it was obviously a complete job, but he pondered the suspects. Rudolph wouldn't burn a church he called his own fief for 6 years. Unless he wanted a new one.... An expensive one... And Smith? Was his dispute really worth burning a church over? Constance Smith...

The worst time of year was election season. Ever since the ballot riots, they would get these big catered meals the whole week of any elections, local, state, federal, whatever. Harry was never around to eat them these days, only to hear about them, he preferred his own cooking. Even if it was just for lunch. There was always some pithy card that came along for the ride from the benefactor. When Harry was a rookie, back when he was on permanent desk duty since he always needed the cane while he waited for his prosthesis, it was his job to throw them away. Around the same time the DA started stacking those cards on his desk instead of tossing them, Harry started to make his own lunch. Surely it wasn't that Smith?

Harry moved the incident report to the right, just under the summary. Under it was the transcript of the interrogation for Constance Smith.

SUSPECT INTERACTION REPORT: 10/26/36 11:25 PM

SUSPECT: CONSTANCE SMITH

OFFICER CALVIN BAAS REPORTING

*Description of suspect: *REDACTED* Please submit a request to the state database for descriptions on sitting legislators during wartime per the RESOLUTION FOR THE PROTECTION AGAINST PERSONAL HARASSMENT (DOX BILL) 2028*

OCB: Please state your name and occupation for the record.

CS: Of course. My name is Constance Smith, elected representative for REDACTED county.

OCB: Mr. Smith, what was your business at First Reformed this evening?

CS: I wished to engage a respected constituent on his duty to the democratic process.

OCB: What duty did you feel he needed to be engaged on.

CS: His duty to provide a venue for our ballot as his church has for over 100 years. His church was the last ballot location in town other than the library, and since that fight last midterms my voters aren't going to go there anymore where their ballot can just get lost.

OCB: Did Father Hickory tell you why he no longer submitted his church to be a ballot location for this election?

CS: He said it wasn't the job of the church to sort out our voting issues, and that he had a duty to protect his congregation from violence. I told him that's exactly why we needed his church to be the ballot location, to give those of us left who understand duty a place to vote, a place real Americans wouldn't fight. You know, before I was an assemblyman I did my duty in Ukraine. I didn't fight for our democracy just to have nowhere to vote now, neither did the rest of my constituents.

OCB: Thank you for your service. What was your MOS?

CS: There's no need for thanks, really. Logistics, near Lviv. Not the most glorious post but key to our victory.

Ah. Harry furrowed his brow, that's why the name sounded familiar. Not exactly the way Harry remembered Ukraine ending, but then again Smith left that former country to become a politician, and Harry only left it without a foot.

OCB: Our victory.... Of course... So, were those fellow veterans that came with you to First Reformed to confront Father Hickory?

CS: A few yes, but most of them were just parents of kids over there in Taiwan right now. We tried to explain to Hickory how wrong it was that while their kids are fighting for our democracy, they don't even have a safe, reliable place to vote.

OCB: I see. After I arrived and stepped between you and Pastor Hickory, it looked like a bottle hit one of his congregation in the face which set off the brawl. Do you know anything about that, or who might have thrown that bottle?

CS: Bottle? What are you talking about? The fight started because my son, Kyler, standing right next to me got hit right in the face with a Bible!

OCB: Ah your son, how old is he?

CS: 17.

OCB: Oh, so did you want him to have a chance to vote before he turned 18? I assume he is planning to join up.

CS: Well, no, Kyler managed to get a college exemption because of his grades and recommendations. But maybe he can go to OCS after college if this is all still going on. Is this really relevant?

OCB: No, I suppose not. Can you give me the names of the rest of your group that went to First Reformed that evening?

Before answering the last question, Constance Smith's lawyer arrived with his approved Counsel Request Affidavit. Smith was released shortly after with no charges.

Harry digested the report. I suppose Smith had motive, winners like him hated it when they didn't get what they wanted. But guys like Smith also care about how they look more than anything. A burned church in his backyard didn't seem like his style. Harry moved the Constance Smith report to his left. Now to see what is up with this Pastor Hickory. It was rare these days to see a Pastor stand up to a connected guy like Smith. Maybe he saw his opportunity to collect on that insurance after a convenient patsy appeared. He now looked at the transcript for Hickory. Slowly flipping the pages so as not to reopen his paper cut.

SUSPECT INTERACTION REPORT: 10/27/36 12:17 AM

SUSPECT: RUDOLPH HICKORY

OFFICER CALVIN BAAS REPORTING

Description of Suspect: Caucasian, 6 foot 2 inches, Black short hair, greying, Pastor Vestments, torn. Well built, 210 pounds. 44 years old. For full marital history, education history, Military Service record, social media account posting history, postage history and voting history see attached NSA report obtained by the department under the Revised Freedom of Information Act.

OCB: Please state your name and occupation for the record.

RH: Rudolph Hickory, Pastor for First Reformed.

OCB: Hello Father Hick..

RH: "And call no man your father upon the earth: for one is your Father, which is in Heaven "Matthew 23:9. You can just call me Rudolph please.

OCB: My apologies Rudolph, I wasn't aware....

RH: Are you Catholic, Officer Calvin?

OCB: Raised yes, I haven't been able to find a congregation since I was demobed almost 8 years ago.

RH: What about the Cathedral over on Union?

OCB: Apparently while I was gone it got eminent domain'd and the feds built one of their internet servers there. I guess they weren't happy about the presidential excommunication. But let's get back t...

RH: Is that why you joined the force?

OCB: ...What?

RH: "If any man come to me, and hate not his father, and mother, and wife, and children, and brethren, and sisters, yea, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple." You were demobed 8 years ago, usually the track is federal security contractor. But you picked local police, could you not take the oath?

OCB: No, no, nothing like that, I was newly married, I needed a job to start a family an..

RH: On a defunded, vestigial departments salary? Surely the standard federal track would have paid better?

OCB: I guess so.... but I wanted to raise my kids in the same town I grew up in.

RH: "For which of you, intending to build a tower, sitteth not down first, and counteth the cost, whether he have sufficient to finish it?" ... The same town just without your church. Are you sure it's the same town your kids are growing up in?

OCB: I don't know... I.. I guess I also just wanted my kids... and myself... to know they came first. You know how it is in the service, the confusion, the unpredictability. I guess maybe it was the federal excommunication. I just wanted to be done with it, focus on what I could actually know.

RH: That, Officer Calvin, is why First Reformed is no longer a voting location. It's why Mr. Smith insists it submit to be one, and it is why I will never let First Reformed serve anything other than God and its flock ever again. Just like you Calvin, I was finally ready to count the cost.

OCB: I see... Thanks for your answers, Rudolph, your Counsel Request Affidavit hasn't come in yet so you are gonna have to stay overnight. I need to make a phone call; I'll check up with you off the record again later with some coffee.

Harry chuckled to himself finishing the report, Calvin got eaten alive in that one. No wonder they had to call Harry up to crack this one. Well, Rudolph's interview didn't shed much light on what happened that night but for his purposes, he could now rule out some kind of insurance fraud scheme. Rudolph would never burn his own church, that at least is for sure.

All that was left was Harry's favorite part, the physical investigation. First, he slowly walked the perimeter. Most people look at a burned down building and only see spoilage. Potential energy wasted. But an Arson detective is a psychic architect. He takes a unique physical creation, something that can never exactly be remade again, and restores it in his mind. It's the only real way to know how it was destroyed in the first place. Like a hunter who knows the behavior of its prey. So much of Harry's life had been spent destroying buildings in his mind, finding the perfect weak-point, the most efficient path to demolition, then executing it. With that part of his life past, now when Harry got called out to cases like these and walked the perimeter of a building, finally ones he didn't destroy, he could build in his mind instead. With the perimeter finished it was clear by the difference in burn scoring that the fire originated in the back of the church, to the immediate right of where the now fully incinerated pulpit once stood.

While shuffling towards the back of the church, something caught the corner of Harry's eye on the still standing wall that once held the pulpit. He would check the origin of the fire second. First, he closely inspected the wall. In its top left corner, a little less than the height of a man, a nail was driven into the wall. The nail pinned down a 2-inch piece of fabric. Strange, the church summary report said this was the sort of denomination that doesn't allow symbols of any kind in the church. Not even a cross. What could be nailed to this wall? Taking his time, Harry sauntered back to his vehicle. After an embarrassing amount of time, he finally found his magnifying glass and inspected the fabric closer. A sheet? No, it was nylon Clothes? No, too thick. A flag. Had to be. The fabric seemed to have three white points... Of course! Stars! This was an American flag! Harry stumbled back to his case file, rummaging through it he pulled out photographs of the church interior.

No flag by the pulpit on the wall, no nothing. Again, not even a cross. Someone must have broken in and nailed Old Glory up here near the pulpit. Maybe even whoever was responsible for the destruction of this church. Maybe this did have to do with mega patriot Mr. Smith after all? Harry now finally reached the back corner where the fire must have originated. Cigarette filters. Classic. The filters always survived fires, that was the point of them after all. So, a smoker, who seems to think First Reformed is not patriotic enough and wanted to send a message. That didn't exactly narrow the field down, but it was a start.

Unless this guy smoked like a chimney here the number of filters seems to also indicate a group. Nearby Harry also found some burned out cans, probably beer. Accelerant for the lit cigarette. This was looking more and more like an accident. Some group of hooligans, probably drunk, who got the sort of idea that sounds heroic one minute and then idiotic the second after

you commit to it. The last time Harry fell for an idea like that he ended up in eastern Europe for 5 years.

Scanning the area further, closer to the wall than the filters, something shined. Something laminated. It was mostly under a charred beam of wood, which must have protected it from the fire. Harry squatted down to pick it up. It was mostly melted, some kind of card. No an ID. Maybe a drivers license. No, it was too thin, and this symbol in the top left corner was not the state seal. But it was familiar... so deeply familiar you needed both hands in your brain to dig it up. While squatting, Harry fidgeted uncomfortably with his left leg in his prosthesis. This was a student ID. One for the local high school. Harry turned the card over, and furiously rubbed as much soot and ash away as he could.

KYLER

This was Mr. Smith's son's ID. Standing back up straight all the pieces started to fall in place. Mr. Smith would never be stupid or reckless enough to break into a church and nail up an American flag, much less accidentally burn it down, but his 17-year-old son might. Especially one with a chip on his shoulder after a bad showing in a fight at this very church.

So that was that, bring Kyler in, sweat him to get the rest of his posse, case closed. Harry couldn't take his eyes off that ID looking down at it. It looked too familiar. It looked like his own Student ID did once upon a time. Then for the first time in years Harry felt a shooting pain in his foot, the one that wasn't there. Stumbling over he slid down the pulpit wall. Sitting upright against that wall in the ashes Harry considered something he hadn't in a long time. Mr. Smith said Kyler had a college exemption. This level of Arson, even an accident, was a felony. As a juvenile, Kyler wouldn't do time, but he would almost certainly lose that exemption.

Harry pulled his lucky lighter out of his left pocket. He hadn't used it to light any fuses in years, but the hinges still creaked open. He flicked the flint to light it and held the ID over the flame till each letter melted away. R, then E, L, Y and finally K. He melted the school crest for good measure too, then tossed the ID across the room.

After sitting for a time, playing with his lighter for the first time in years, Harry reached for his cane and shimmied himself back up the wall till he was standing upright again. A car door slammed, and his partner, Officer Calvin walked towards Harry into the ruin. It must have been lunchtime already.

"I hope you grabbed me a sandwich Calvin, I think I have this case all wrapped up."

Calvin ignored Harry's comment, spreading his arms out to hug him he said with elation,

"Harry, haven't you heard? We retook Taipei! The Chinese army is stranded! They are already starting to negotiate a ceasefire! I think this is finally it Harry!"

Harry hadn't checked his phone since he got to the scene. Calvin, hugging his partner cried,

"God Bless America!"