Jacob and the Preacher:
Conversations in Context, Part I

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ABSTRACT:
"You're the child care worker. Right?"
"I'm the child care worker."
"So, wadda you want? I told the old lady I'd see you because she was freaking out. I got ten minutes. Talk."
"I want to buy you a cup of coffee and tell you how to save your life."
"I don't drink coffee."
"So? What about your life?"
"What are you, a missionary from the local church? Or are you just an asshole?"
"If I gotta make a choice, I'd rather be an asshole. What about you?"
"You're fucking crazy, man. Me, I wouldn't make a choice like that."
"That's the problem. You're not making choices. That's why your life is going to hell. And that's why I'm here: to give you the choice of saving your life. Now. Do you want to do it or don't you?"
"Are you paying attention here, preacher?"
"Sorry, Jacob. I was thinking about your history."
"Who gives a shit? Pay attention. I was asking you if you wanted to go over to the park with me. I got something I gotta do."
"Is it safe for me?"
"Sure. Don't worry. I'll look after you. Nobody's gonna touch you if you're with me. The only thing is, you gotta do what I tell you."
"I'm glad you're looking after me, son. It always feels good to know somebody's taking care of you."

I'd been sitting at a corner table in the coffee shop window for over an hour watching life pass by on The Main while I waited for Jacob to appear. Hookers, dealers, and other vagrant souls looking to save the universe strolled by with only the occasional glance. As they realized that I wasn't interested in whatever they were selling they continued off in pursuit of whatever other purpose they had created for themselves. They were the same faces I'd seen numerous times over the
years, but they aged more quickly than the faces of other people I knew. Disease, drugs, and desperation have a way of carving their history on you. “The tattoos of time,” my supervisor calls them.

Jacob was sixteen years and three months old when he walked through the door, cold air swirling after him, but at a quick glance you would have given him much more. His eyes flashed anger and arrogance as he surveyed the space around me, never once letting his look rest on my face. I could see how he was sizing me up in his peripheral vision as his scan passed closer with each sweep. Finally his focus rested on my chin and he eased himself into the seat across from me. I could smell the leather of his new jacket, four hundred dollars cast casually across a solid frame. Tailored, shoulder length hair fell gracefully over his collar. Gold and diamond flashed from his left hand.

“You’re the child care worker. Right?”

There was really no question in his voice. He had surveyed the room, isolated me from the others, and identified me in the time it had taken the door to swing closed behind him. We had never met but this was a world he knew well.

“I’m the child care worker.”

I tried to float the phrase out neutrally in the air in front of his face so he could make whatever he wanted of it. I knew if I opened with a push he would disappear back on to the street, into the land of dark and despair where he would join the other nameless faces cruising quickly to nowhere. It had taken his mother two months to set up this meeting; I didn’t want to blow it before my coffee cooled. She had warned me that he would rather walk than talk. It sounded like a cliché when she said it but, from the moment he entered the room, I knew she was right.

“So, wadda you want? I told the old lady I’d see you because she was freaking out. I got ten minutes. Talk.” His voice was calm and measured. He was used to being in control, or maybe it was just how he kept the world at bay.

Ten minutes to try to get him interested; ten minutes to start a process that could last for months, if I was lucky enough to engage him; or ten minutes to drink a quick coffee and watch him drift away again. Sometimes you get only one shot, and this was looking like one of those times. I hate the pressure, but it comes with the job. When I first started working the streets, I wanted to lay back and discuss things, but nobody stayed long enough to finish the conversation. So I learned to do it differently. The first thing is to get their attention.

“I want to buy you a cup of coffee and tell you how to save your life,” I shot back.

He looked me in the eyes now. I could see the ancient hatred and it