

Death at Hell House

Throughout the 90s, hell houses gained in popularity as haunted attractions run by local churches to illustrate the consequences of sin. Depicting scenes of moral failure, they normally ended with a chance for repentance and salvation.

Gabriel West stood alone and looked at his creation. It wasn't much: a few temporary buildings or trailers, linked by tunnels made of black plastic draped over wooden frames. Tomorrow night, it would be filled with volunteers from the local youth groups and hordes of local teenagers ready to walk through a haunted house turned morality play.

Gabriel West looked the part of the itinerant preacher. The grey flecks at his temples added maturity to his youthful face, and his piercing blue eyes could still captivate a whole congregation or make a solitary parishioner feel fully understood for the first time. He could effortlessly shift his tone from quiet joking and

friendliness to fire and brimstone gravitas as the situation demanded. He made it seem so natural that nobody who talked to him could ever guess how much calculated effort he put into every interaction.

Still, the days of the big tent revivals and traveling minister were coming to a close. The big cities had mega-churches with big name preachers teaching feel-good sermons, and his mainstays, the small towns, were either going broke or becoming suburbs with their own mega-churches. It seemed the world was moving on and didn't have a place for his kind anymore, and Gabriel had thought he was at the edge of ruin when he had the idea that could give him a new path.

He saw the ad on TV eleven months ago. Laying on a stiff mattress in a cheap motel in a miserable Texas town, the ad for a local hell house came on in the middle of the afternoon. It was being hosted by a church in the same town where he had just collected a "love offering" of ninety-three dollars! How could anybody afford to run TV ads in this dust bowl town? And they were charging fifteen dollars a pop to go to a church event? Gabriel remembered grabbing his few bags, packing up his car, and making the decision to check out this new attraction on the way out of town.

Gabriel saw the future that night. He had looked at the cheap setup, volunteer actors, and financial return, and he knew what he needed to do. That same night, he had ingratiated himself with the pastor and volunteered to stay on for a few more nights, seeing how things were run all the way from the control room to the orga-

nized prayer rooms. Everybody loved Gabriel, and they were happy to keep him around. He had to sleep in his car those nights, but it was worth it to learn everything he could in those days.

Since that night, it had been a busy year of planning his own hell house. As he traveled around to different churches, he looked at the demographics of towns and outlined his script. He sketched out sets on diner napkins and talked to pastors about the need for a "Halloween ministry." That had finally landed him in Tom's Fork, TX, population 2,436, where he had spent the last few weeks recruiting local teens, building the sets, and spreading the word to churches and schools in the surrounding area. Everybody loved Gabriel.

BLAM!

Gabriel heard the door fly open and slam against the thin walls of a portable somewhere near the entrance. The last volunteer had left when it was still light, and Gabriel couldn't imagine a vandal or small-time thief making it out to the middle of the barren field unseen. Still, it had to be investigated. There were thousands of dollars of borrowed audio-visual equipment scattered throughout this ramshackle setup, and Gabriel would be on the hook for anything that happened.

Gabriel made his way up to the entrance and saw the door to the first room wide open. Dim light spilled out and danced around inside the empty portable. The perpetrator must have turned on one of the television screens. This was obviously not a master thief, Gabriel thought as he snuck up to the door. He couldn't see any

movement inside, beside some color bars flashing on the screen deep inside the room. Gabriel slipped in to look around.

BLAM!

The door slammed closed behind the pastor. He reached instinctively for the door, but the handle was stuck. Gabriel tried to let his eyes adjust, but the colors from the screen made it impossible. The corners of the room looked blacker than ever, and he remembered setting it up just this way, so it would be impossible to see the volunteer tour guides hiding in the darkness. It was a small trick that worked well, even when he knew about it. He had to turn off the screen to see anything.

Gabriel stepped toward the glowing screen to find the power button just as it changed. Stock footage started rolling: cattle being led into a slaughterhouse, Hitler at Munich, the LA riots. The scenes got more graphic with images of actual dead bodies cut into the footage, and Gabriel couldn't remember making the introduction this unsettling.

"Welcome to your personal hell house. If you make it out alive, you will be reborn."

This was not Gabriel West's voice. He had recorded all the voice-overs, but this was definitely not his voice.

"Each room you enter will reveal something about yourself. Do not try to deny or avoid the lessons. You must accept all of them if you wish to be reborn, and you will not escape without being reborn."

These were definitely not his words. Gabriel felt goosebumps involuntarily on the back of his neck, and ice ran down his spine as he tried to recognize the voice.

As soon as the video cut to black, lights on the other side of an open door next to the screen turned on. The light was coming from the other side of the opening, which meant the string lights in the makeshift passageway to the next room must have turned on.

Of course. Gabriel had scripted this, too. It was the cue for guides to take the tour to the first scene. He tried the door he had come through one more time to satisfy himself that it was locked or jammed. After a final attempt to work the handle in the dim light, Gabriel walked into the passageway toward the next room.

The hallway was short; just a few steps down and back up between trailers. The string lights reflected off the black plastic that enclosed the space. Gabriel thought about running straight through the plastic, but he remembered it was almost as thick as a tarp. He had left his knife in the truck. Still, it might be possible to find a seam.

As Gabriel reached out to the false walls, he heard a slapping sound. He stared in disbelief. Something had hit the other side of the plastic. He paused for a moment, then he heard another slap from the other side. A second later, he heard slapping and hitting all around him. He thought he could see the plastic bulging in at different places with the hits. Another second later, and it sounded like thousands of hits all around him. It

sounded like a rainstorm hitting a tent out in the open. It grew louder, and Gabriel could now swear that he saw hands pushing in from all sides.

Gabriel noticed the open door at the end. It was just a simple door to the next trailer, but it was always closed until the scene was ready. It was a simple trick Gabriel had seen at the other hell house to allow the teenage actors to get back into place. He knew it had been closed when he first stepped into the passage, but it was open now.

Gabriel saw a light inside the next room. He couldn't tell what awaited him inside, but he knew that the noise in the hallway was becoming deafening. The slapping had turned into pounding, and it seemed like the plastic was bulging in more and more. Any moment, those hands might be touching him through the walls, and that gave Gabriel an instinctual fear he couldn't understand. He ran forward, tripping up the steps and falling into the trailer. The door slammed shut behind him, and he didn't try the handle but breathed relief as the roar from the hallway became muted.

"Jimmy!"

Gabriel heard the voice yell out. It sounded far off, but somehow confined within the room. It felt like the dimensions of the tiny trailer had changed after he entered, and he could no longer see the far wall. A sliver of light from under the door behind him was the only light.

"Jimmy! You get over here, boy!"

The pastor recognized the voice, and the dimensions of the room were no longer important. He didn't want to find the voice. Nobody had called him Jimmy since he was a kid. More importantly, he recognized this voice immediately, and he prayed it was his imagination. His father had been dead for over thirty years, and he couldn't be hearing his voice right now.

"Jimmy Waylon, Junior!"

The "junior" always made him wince. It only reminded him and the whole town whose son he was; it was a mark from birth that it would take thousands of miles and a new name to escape.

"I heard you been stealin', boy."

The last words were quieter, and eerily calm. Gabriel, or Jimmy, remembered a scene so clearly now. He had been caught shoplifting from Mr. Conner's feed shop. His dad, the elder Jimmy, had beat him that night. Jimmy, Sr. was a drunk and a thief, but he took every opportunity to mete out justice in his house. All it took was a stolen candy bar to push him over the edge.

Gabriel felt his legs go weak. He tried to steady himself against the door he had just come through, but his hand found nothing but air, and he slipped to his knees. So, what if he had stolen a candy bar? His father never worked an honest day in his life, and he had raised his son to be a grifter like him. This couldn't all be happening because he stole a candy bar.

No.

There was an explanation. Somebody knew his real name, and they guessed their way to a phrase that

sounded like his father. It had been thirty years. His father's voice would be easy to fake. Take an East Texas drawl and add some Jack Daniel's and the rasp of a couple of thousand Marlboros. This was some elaborate prank with some lighting effects to make the room seem larger.

Gabriel couldn't figure out that last part, but he had calmed himself down when he saw the door at the other end of the trailer open. The dimensions seemed correct again, and the opening was only about twenty feet away. He got up to his feet and hurried into the passageway before he could think about it anymore.

Where was the passageway? He was already in another room, somehow. The door slammed behind him. Again, it wouldn't open.

Gabriel was facing an array of TV sets arranged into some sort of makeshift altar. He remembered this room was supposed to be some little morality story about how we worship media. It was cheesy, but it was straight from the handbook and seemed easy enough to setup. What teenager didn't make an idol out of TV and video games, right? It was like shooting fish in a barrel.

The itinerant pastor was almost relieved with the banality of the whole scene until the TVs started turning on.

Each one showed a scene of him preaching somewhere after he had conveniently changed his name and taken on his new identity. He saw images of himself spanning the decades. From the young firebrand to the

elder prophet, he saw his shifting persona captured on different screens. Gabriel didn't even care where all the footage came from, he was reveling in seeing all the images of himself. He was only slightly disturbed to see the same people coming up and getting miraculously healed over the years.

Of course, he had used plants every so often. What people really needed was faith, and sometimes a little demonstration helped kickstart it, right? Now all the images were just showing people coming up to put their money in the buckets. Some of the plants were used, again, to get it started, but it was mostly honest. Gabriel knew that he had grifted a little like his father, but these people had been helped. Of course they had.

The images on the screened zoomed in on the poorest and the most helpless in the crowd as they brought forward their meager donations. Gabriel looked away and spat on the unfinished trailer floor, subconsciously trying to get the taste of lies out of his mouth as he remembered some of the things he had done.

A door next to the TV altar opened. It was barely visible next to the glow of all the screens. Gabriel refused to move. He knew he could figure a way out of the room, and he didn't need this guided tour anymore. He defiantly stared at the empty opening and refused to move until he heard the crying.

Gabriel ran headlong past the screens and through the door. He recognized his son's cries. How could he not? He had thought about them enough over the years.

The light was dim, but he saw a form in the corner, hunched over and wailing into itself. It had been years, but it was roughly the size and shape of a five-year-old boy crying into his knees as he curled up into a ball. Gabriel remembered the last time he had seen Timothy before he left; he ran forward to put a hand on the little boy; to try to calm him down and explain one more time.

As Gabriel's hand touched the dark form, it seemed to disappear and then reform around his arm. Gabriel felt ice crawling up his arm as the darkness enveloped his hand and started creeping up. He tried to scream, but his breath was taken away by the shock of cold. His hand felt like it had been plunged into freezing water, and it felt like pins and needles.

This could never have been Timothy. He had abandoned Timothy and his mom over a decade ago. Gabriel couldn't even remember if he had actually seen Timothy crying, or if that was just the image he replayed over and over again in his mind of how he imagined leaving his little boy.

Gabriel had been selfish, though. He didn't want to feel tied down. He said it was the right decision at the time. He said he was too broken to be a father or husband, and he had left his family. He had already proven he couldn't be faithful.

The shape disappeared, blood was rushing back into his hand in painful throbs, and he could make out the rest of the room.

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It was an empty scene. Just Gabriel, darkness, and whatever he had imagined in this corner. He could see the door along another wall, though. It was cracked enough for some light to stream in. There was clearly a shadow moving in the opening. Gabriel's torturer was watching, and there was a chance that he didn't know he had been spotted. The pastor rushed at the door, screaming in fury as he prepared to attack.

Hands grabbed at his ankles and wrists as he was thrown into the upright coffin. The lid slammed shut as soon as he was crammed inside. He could barely move. No light slipped into the small space, and he heard small hands slapping the outside and scratching at the wood.

Gabriel remembered setting up the coffins. This was the last scene before the famous judgment scene that all hell houses were known for. The other side should open any moment, and he would be near the end. Any normal night, the next room would have a volunteer in red makeup playing the part of Satan, sitting in a foam throne as he judged the characters from earlier scenes and the audience. Then, an actor dressed like a very typical angel would rescue the audience and tell them they all had one more chance to be saved. Gabriel knew it was unrealistic, but it was a formula that worked.

The pastor waited for the door to open and reveal his judge. He had seen some bad things he had done, he

felt bad, and he was ready to say as much to whoever was doing this.

The door didn't open. Nothing happened. He was still in darkness. Gabriel tried to find the secret latch to open the door, but his hand only found smooth wood in front of him. He finally started pounding on the wall to try to break through.

Cheers went up in the hell house control room. The small group assembled had been tracking the exploits of Gabriel West since he had stolen almost fifty thousand dollars from their small church's building campaign two years ago. They had done background checks to find out his original name and gone to different towns, digging up random videos of him preaching at various places. Finally, they had tracked down some of the plants he used in the audience and threatened to turn them over to the police until they told them whatever they knew about his operation.

When they saw the announcement about his hell house, they thanked God for the opportunity to set things right. It had been simple to approach the church in Tom's Fork and show them the evidence they had collected. With the help of some volunteers, they had rigged up the whole place with some basic lighting tricks and hidden speakers that could trick a guilty man once he was lonely enough. All they needed was his confession.

"Confess," one of the men growled into the microphone and watched Gabriel in the monitors.

“Where’s my boy? I saw him!”

The men looked at each other in confusion. They didn’t know about any boy, but they expected his mind to have added its own tricks after they started. Knowing the amateurish theater tricks might not be effective, the man at the microphone had joked about slipping some LSD into his Thermos. He quickly shook his head to assure everyone he hadn’t followed through on the joke. They knew they wanted a lucid confession.

“You need to confess, Gabriel West. Confess and repent of your sins!”

The pastor started thrashing on the screen and screaming in horror.

“I feel you grabbing me! I feel all your hands!”

More confused looks passed between the men in the control room. It did kind of look like there were other forms on the screen, but it was so dark it was hard to tell what was going on as the pastor banged on the walls.

“Confess your deepest sins and be forgiven.” After a pause, they decided to go for the confession they really needed. “Confess your sins from Cedar Falls!”

The pastor moved around more frantically, and the men hoped again that they hadn’t gone too far.

“I don’t even remember her name!”

Did he think this was about a one-night stand in their small town? They needed him to focus.

“What did you do at the church, Gabriel?”

“I met her there! She was passing through, and I knew she wouldn’t be missed!”

The man at the microphone stopped and looked at the others in the room. What was he talking about?

“Confess what you did.”

“I burned the body like the others!”

“How— how many others, pastor?”

The voice going into the microphone was no longer growling or disguised as anything but human, but the pastor didn't seem to notice. Gabriel started to laugh without humor, like a hyena bragging about its latest find.

“I have no idea! I honestly couldn't tell you! I never killed anyone that people would miss, and I never really kept count. More than dozens, for sure. Maybe hundreds were thrown in cheap boxes like this and burned alive! If you want to know so bad, you should let me out before whatever's in here kills me! After that, only God can help you!”

The men in the control room stared at the monitor. Gabriel West no longer looked like the itinerant preacher he pretended to be. Whether through a trick of the night vision or just a subconscious reaction, every one in the room believed they could see the real man in the monitor for the first time. To a man, they were all horrified they hadn't recognized this monster for what he was before.

The man at the microphone quickly made sure he was muted before making sure he had everyone in the room's attention. “If one of you isn't calling 9-1-1 right now, we're all going to hell!”

"I'm dialing," one of the other men responded before his face went blank. "What's wrong with the camera?"

The pastor's voice broke through the speakers as the cameras in the coffin started cutting in and out. It sounded like he tried to form words before the speakers cut out as well. At the same time, all the men heard his screams without need of microphones or monitors.

Abandoning all procedure, the leader of the posse ran from the control room to see the coffins firsthand. He saw the flames leaping higher than the nearby temporary buildings, and he was surprised to see the fire was completely contained as he got closer. The screams filled the air at the same time, until the sirens were cutting through the silent night. They swore they heard his screaming the whole time they fought the fire, but the investigators insisted that was impossible; the body they recovered was so distorted that it had to have burned too fast and hot for him to have lived more than a few moments.

Nobody from the control room who saw the body laying in the grass that night said what they saw on the security monitors moments before they cut out. They didn't say that thing on the grass was precisely what they saw screaming and cursing before the flames broke out, and they definitely didn't say that deformed animal was simply what Jimmy Waylon, Junior, had become behind the facade of Gabriel West.