

**Oh, Trinities : A Short Story Collection**

English Department Honors Thesis: ENGL 4390

*By: Griffin Cobb*

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## Intro

A few months ago, I came across the poem *Invictus* by William Ernest Henley and grew enamored. I like poetry as much as an average person, which is to say I read it when it's in front of me but never seek it out. It's a perfectly fine poem, a short, four-stanza piece of perseverance and pride, something any overly aspirational man in his twenties would cling to. But something made this piece latch to the inside of my skull. I had to memorize it, recite it alone in my car, and watch Morgan Freeman read it on repeat. I briefly mentioned it to my father over the phone while we talked about graduation and bills and how I was doing in school, and he told me it was his favorite piece of poetry.

There are some things in this world that we are destined to love. My mother craved chips and salsa when pregnant with me, so when I go to a Mexican restaurant, I have to get my own basket of chips. My grandfather learned magic tricks to impress my grandmother, so I can shuffle a deck of cards and make a specific card stay on top. Civilization came together because we could tell and believe stories that inspired us beyond bleaker realities, and I cling to words of pride and perseverance when they seem so outside my grasp.

Stories are how I have learned, loved, and lived past moments of darkness. They are what I love most dearly, and the day I became conscious of that was the day I felt determined to write.

I often consider myself one of four things: a brother, a son, a friend, and a writer. In seventh grade, I thought, "If a good story can inspire such euphoria, it would be a sin not to recreate that for others." It wasn't that wordy, of course, but the message hasn't changed despite writing's difficulty only becoming more apparent every year.

This collection is my best attempt at fulfilling that goal of trying to appease my seventh-grade ambition. It is the culmination of the talent and teaching that's been available to

me thus far. There will be much more successful attempts in the future, I hope, but every story must have a beginning.

## **The Twins of Orsted Church**

They were twins of prophecy. Brothers Kyle and Blain were born prematurely in Sheridan, Montana in November of 1976 in the basement of Orsted Catholic Church. Their mother survived but left as soon as she could stand, so the twins were given the last name Orsted. On the night of their birth, the skies were ash gray, and the wind smelled of sulfur. They were sickly infants, but Father Thomas bathed them and proclaimed triumph.

Kyle Orsted had grown in full from his early birth, strong and tall for his age with a bright smile. The clergy cherished him, following him in prayer and letting him wander the wheat fields outside for an hour longer than Father Thomas allowed.

Blain Orsted never quite grew out of being premature. He was slight, short, with skin sickly gray and rash-red at the joints. The clergy tolerated him, letting him join in prayer but always keeping a close eye and a tight leash. He was, however, a bright child with a mind for invention and innovation. He and Father Thomas often shared nights working on radios and heaters when they would break.

Kyle and Blain were good to each other, but only while Kyle felt favored. The time Father Thomas and Blain spent together would throw Kyle into a screeching fit.

On their ninth birthday, Blain blew out candles first because he was technically two minutes older, and Kyle cried. Afterward, the pride that often gleaned in Father Thomas's eyes faded as he explained to the twins how Blain would die. The two were born in fulfillment of a prophecy, passed down over decades to Father Thomas.

“A faithless mother would bear twins,” he said, avoiding the gaze of his children. “And they would be the salvation of this church. As the two turned fifteen, one would be slain at the hands of the other, and their blood would cleanse the clergy, and save them from Rapture. The

slain brothers would be sickly in body but mighty in soul, and as they fell, the lord would welcome them into the coveted arms of heaven.”

He referred to Kyle as the forgiven and Blain as the emancipator. The clergy celebrated the boys more equally than normal. Kyle basked in having a purpose and gorged himself on cake while Blain learned what it meant to fear death. He stomached the festivities so as not to interrupt his brother’s joy and placate Father Thomas. That night he tried to pray but couldn’t think of what to pray for. The Father’s words were law, and his death would salve the church; to fight that would mean damnation, for both them and this family they’d been given. So he prayed for a kind brother, one that may grant him a swift death and a kind life.

That same night, a soft glow awoke Blain. While his brother slept, comatose on sugar, Father Thomas came in with a lantern and led Blain downstairs.

“What do you think of the prophecy, Blain?” Father Thomas asked. The man looked tired. Blain tried to muster reverence but quickly broke down into tears.

Father Thomas continued. “Not many are gifted with such importance. Still, it is an unsavory fate.” He promised Blain not to leave his side as he marched towards his destiny, so long as Blain continued marching.

Over the next year, Blain was constantly shadowed by his looming fate. Since the prophecy had been revealed, they’d grown more devout to Kyle, the forgiven, and all together loosened the leash on the emancipator. Father Thomas spent his mornings teaching Kyle to lead service and sharing his sweets, but at night fixed radios and read verses with Blain.

“The others forget thee who will free them,” Father Thomas said. “They worship the one who must commit the sin. Does that not set fire to your stomach?” Though he was the one who

delivered the prophecy, Father Thomas would often speak of it as unfair, asking things Blain hoped to ignore. He sometimes wished for everything to be quiet.

“You are of strong mind, child, and young though you are, you can be strong of body and soul. To free those that ignore you, you must be strong.” His words sank into Blain’s mind. He could not earn the admiration nor worship of the church, but he could earn their freedom.

“I need to be strong to save them?” he asked. Father Thomas nodded.

The next year, Blain did not touch a radio and forgot about heaters. Every morning, he ran through the wheat fields, a special permission given to him by Father Thomas. During summer, the rays warmed Blain's gray skin into a healthy tan. Though they rarely stood next to one another, he and Kyle were now the same height.

Kyle found himself busy giving sermons and blessing the sick that would visit, noses bloody and hearts broken for their inevitable end. While Blain roamed free, Kyle rarely left the church. Despite his young age, the church placed expectations beyond the just prophecy on him, but he seemed to shoulder them nonetheless. His title, the Forgiven, had morphed among the clergy into the Forgiver.

Another year passed, and Blain grew taller, shoulders slightly broad and near no sign of the sickly child he’d once been. From what he could tell, Kyle had grown fatter and less jovial but carried with him a sincerity when looking at the church's patrons. Blain’s blood boiled. He worked to strengthen himself while his brother showered them with kindness he had never been afforded.

Blain listened to one of Kyle’s sermons through the attic’s floorboards one day. Alone, he spoke out loud the thoughts that he felt ashamed of. Only God could hear him. “My brother

showers them with kindness, yet he is meant to kill me. He forgives, yet he is meant only to be forgiven. He grows fat from their worship while I grow strong in the face of death.”

“It isn’t fair, is it?” Father Thomas stood at the attic stairway. Blain went pale.

He continued. “This prophecy, so unfortunate. The sickly twin sacrificed after fifteen years so that the other may be forgiven.” Sweat ran down his forehead, veins rippling across his forehead. Blain had never seen the father look so strained.

“Father, are you well?” he asked. Was hearing Blain’s heresy this painful?

Father Thomas stood upright and wiped the sweat from his brow, but his gaze remained intense, and he spoke through clenched teeth. “They love your brother. More than I thought they would.” He bent to one knee, and mumbled, “Have I chosen wrong, Lord?”

Blain ran to help him, but Father Thomas waved him off and descended the steps, muttering under his breath. Thoughts muddled in Blain’s mind, all tangled and pulling at one another. He’d never seen the Father so weak. What did that mean for the church, for him? And what had Father chosen wrong?

His thoughts came to a halt as a sudden silence took over the church. Beneath the attic, Blain heard the sermons stop, the air dead before murmurs of worry took over. He rushed down, and through the stairs, he saw his brother on the floor, sweating and bleeding from the nose. He was sick.

Blain could feel a new fire light in his chest. Perhaps Father had chosen them wrong.

In the two years after Kyle’s fainting, the coddling by the church only grew. Kyle would weakly sing hymns while clergy washed his feet during the day. During the night Blain would level the fields of grass with one swing of his scythe, summer air clinging to his cold body.

Father Thomas no longer spent time with either of the twins. Blain would only catch sight of him

briefly, prostrate before the altar just before sunrise, weeping in prayer. He then locked himself in the back office, until the next morning.

Kyle remained bedridden during the falls and winters, but the warm weather let him return to his duties. Blain now rarely saw his brother; he himself spent more time outside the church than in.

The first time the two talked since the initial prophecy was on their fourteenth birthday. “One more year until we must fulfill our purpose, brother,” Kyle said. Once so excited and boisterous, Kyle Orsted spoke with the solemn gravity appropriate for one fated to kill his twin brother.

“One more year,” Blain echoed. Father Thomas had whispered of strength and sickness every day since the prophecy. He had chosen wrong. The church had been blinded, their leaders weak, but Blain would save them. He would bite his tongue another year and live up to his title as emancipator.

And that year quickly passed. In the days leading up, anticipation and solemnity enwrapped the church. The day of, Blain spent the morning standing amidst the wheat fields. The sky was dark gray, and the wind carried something pungent through the air.

Inside, the entire congregation sat in their pews, facing the altar. On the dias, Kyle stood, now leaning on a cane, a ceremonial dagger in the other hand. When Blain took stage, he towered over his brother, who would not meet his twin’s gaze.

As the minute of their birth approached, the church stood silent except for the tick of a clock. Father Thomas watched from his podium, expectant. He looked from brother to brother, then smiled at Blain, yellow teeth clenched tight.



The hour was about to strike. Before the clock chimed, Blain bent down to his brother and whispered, "Forgive me." In a swift moment, he grabbed the dagger from his brother's frail hand and sank it into his chest. Kyle's body hit the ground. Blood pooled around Blain's feet.

The church went silent. Blain looked around, expecting shouts or curses, but all he saw were gaunt faces.

"We have been wrong!" Blain shouted. "He was the weakness that needed to be culled. I have saved us. I am the Emancipator!"

The clergy didn't respond, their horrific expressions frozen. Everything was still.

The church doors slammed open, a thick wind forcing itself in. The smell of sulfur wafted through. Confused, Blain looked for Father Thomas, who now stood over Kyle's crumpled form.

"Father, what is this? I freed them, saved them, right?" Blain asked. At his feet, blood continued to pool from Kyle.

Father Thomas' yellow teeth gleamed. His smile curled higher and wider than natural. "Great emancipator," he said. "You have murdered your brother for not but prophecy."

"You told me to!" Blain shouted. Kyle's blood now spilled down to the pews. The clergy still did not move.

"I told you to be stronger, that your death was unfair."

Father Thomas' face flickered orange, and Blain's back grew warm. He turned to see fire creeping from the door, setting the crimson floor ablaze.

"I told you I was here to comfort you," Father Thomas said, "while your brother dallied and forgot his purpose. But you have forgotten yours, child." After he spoke, a second chime rang through the burning church, and Blain's heart sank. The sickly twin was to die at fifteen, the

prophecy had said. Blain struck Kyle as the clock proclaimed their birthday, but Kyle was two minutes younger than he.

“He wasn’t old enough,” Blain whispered. The church had turned to an inferno. Each member of the church writhed, melting into Kyle’s blood. Some of their limbs twisted at odd angles, eyes boiling out of their sockets, lazily staring back at Blain.

“Neither of you ever were,” Father Thomas said. The words rang through Blain’s mind as fire consumed all around him, leaving him alone. He sank into the blood, letting hours pass before all he was left with was ash.

## Seeing Your Own Breath

St. Matheson's basement was cold, dry, and dark. Ben Hudson sat against the wall, plucking at his small kalimba. Each small plink helped steady his breathing, slowly falling in sync.

He'd been locked down here for about a day, hired by the church to exorcize a demon. Exorcisms never took him longer than a few hours, but when he discovered the ghost of Tyson Faulkner rather than a demon, he paused long enough for Tyson to lock the only exit.

Outside the door, Stuart the groundskeeper fumbled with his lockpicks.

"Why don't you have a key?" Ben asked. His voice was hoarse from calling for help through the night. Only Stuart had heard, and Ben now wondered if that was a rather bad stroke of luck.

"Lost them all back in seventy-six," Stuart said. His voice managed to be squeaky and gravelly at the same time, and Ben was thankful to have it dampened by the thick metal doors. Across the room, Tyson twirled a rusty set of keys around his spectral finger. Ben got to his feet, but Tyson floated up and placed the keys above a loose ceiling tile.

"You're not making this easy," Ben said.

Tyson twirled in the air. "I told you, old man. You're dying here with me." Ben took more offense to being called old than the death threat. He was only thirty and still wildly uncertain about most of life. Tyson was a teenager, or was one when he died.

"Why is that, again?" Since he'd been down here, the two had some back and forth but Tyson only gave cryptic, derogatory responses. All he'd gleaned from the ghost was his name, that he'd killed himself in the basement years ago, he hated St. Mathesons, and was perfectly content staying a ghost.

“It’s lonely here, and I’ve gotten a bit of a reputation so no one comes down any more.” Tyson smiled wider than flesh would’ve allowed. “You’re my last shot at a friend.” The supernatural didn’t frighten Ben anymore. Teenagers, however, were exhausting. Coupled with the lack of food, water, and sleep—Tyson would beat on the rusty cabinets any time Ben dozed off—he found the whole endeavor more tiring than a regular demon. The small tines of the kalimba were keeping him sane, a sharp distraction he could pace his breaths to.

Stuart hadn’t made progress in the last two hours. If he was going to get out of here, Ben thought, he needed those keys. There was no beating a ghost in a game of chase, and trying to exorcize Tyson was both morally and logistically difficult for Ben. He needed to help the kid move on.

“Heaven is a place bountiful in love, Tyson,” Ben said. “Are you afraid of death?”

“Clearly not,” Tyson said. From the ceiling he pulled out a rope tied into a noose, waved it, and put it back. Ben cringed. He’d set himself up for that.

Tyson continued. “Not much to be afraid of anymore, is there?”

“I can assure you, there’s plenty,” Ben said.

“Oh? And what do you know of beyond death?” Every time Tyson spoke, the room got colder.

“Beyond the scriptures and what I believe in, not much.” Ben was never a fan of talking about himself. “But I have seen what happens when people try to refuse it.”

He thought of a job from months ago. “I saw a father try to bring his daughter back. Stole her corpse from the morgue, and prayed. I was called in to exorcize whatever took her over. By the time I got there, he was dead.”

Tyson’s expression soured. “Family will do that to you.”

There's history there, Ben thought. But he didn't want to be too direct.

"It's true that blood can cloud the will of the faithful," he said. "But it is also faith that can clarify."

"Do all priests talk so odd?" Tyson said.

"I've been told it's just me," Ben said. "What I mean to say is that faith can help us let go of what burdens us."

Tyson floated up and ran his hands through the ceiling. "I don't think we have the same burdens, preacher, if faith is all you need to toss them out."

It went against his instincts, but if Ben knew one thing about being young, it was that you were desperate to be correct.

"I can't imagine you dealt with much sorrow at such a young age," Ben said. Tyson looked down at him, a hollow and hurt expression visible even in his ethereal state that made Ben immediately regret saying anything.

"What do you know about me?" In a flash, Tyson flew up inches away from Ben, who stumbled back. He spoke, quiet and mournful. "All I ever had was sorrow. That's all I ever got."

Ben clearly touched a nerve, to which he felt guilty.

"We all experience sadness, Tyson." Perhaps it was the exhaustion, or knowing that it was making no difference to Tyson, but the manicured front Ben reserved for various church-related activities waned. "Trust me, we do."

The sounds of knocking interrupted them. Ben warily made his way to the door.

"Mr. Hudson," Stuart called out. "I broke the lockpicks."

Ben knocked his head against the wall. "Well, what now?"

"I've got a crowbar back at my house, I could go get that."

Ben pushed against the metal doors, affirming how stupid he found the idea. “Sure, Stuart, go get the crowbar.” It wouldn’t be any more efficient with him staying around, Ben thought. “How far away is your house?”

“‘Bout two hours,” Stuart said. By the time Ben could think of protesting, the other side of the door was silent, the groundskeeper already gone. The glow of sunlight that broke through beneath the door was fading, telling Ben his second night here was approaching.

He turned back to see Tyson afloat, his interest in the conversation broken. Against the darkness of the basement his wispy form produced a pale blue light that just barely outlined the rusted and rotted storage. As far as hauntings went, it was one of the more pleasant looking ones.

Talk of death was getting him nowhere, and Ben still didn’t fully know how to feel about Tyson committing suicide. It was too desperate, too rash and violent an act for him. He’d known someone who killed themselves a few years ago, a friend of a friend’s sister. Everyone seemed more shocked than mournful, unable to understand how someone could be so reckless in one moment that the rest of life fades away.

But part of Ben understood the desire, at least. He’d seen horrors of both man and devil, and he knew that they would never fully cease, and he thought about the endless numbers of days he would have to keep going and going and going.

In the basement, it was now cold enough Ben could see his breath. Rapid, small puffs escaped before him. He hurried over and played his kalimba again, soft, steady plucks of a repeating melody. He timed his breath to it, and felt stillness returning, though his chest still ached.

“What a neat trick,” Tyson said. He twirled around Ben, sending chills across his skin.

“It helps,” Ben said, still short on breath. “Can’t always breathe super well when I get stressed.”

“Why would you be stressed?” Tyson said, face twisted into a mocking grin. It irritated Ben, but then Tyson continued, more subdued. “I understand, though. Anxiety is a dark shadow. Good things morph into bad and the worst things become worse.”

“I don’t have anxiety,” Ben said. He didn’t feel amazing about getting sympathy from a teenage ghost. He thought it patronizing, sure, but it was increasingly uncomfortable to think he could relate to someone who had killed themselves.

Tyson laughed. “And I’m not dead.”

Ben didn’t often find himself frustrated, but a ghost slinging diagnoses at him was apparently a tipping point. He wanted to defend himself, not entirely sure against what.

“Don’t try and taunt me,” Ben said. “You know nothing.”

“I know a great deal, preacher,” Tyson said. “I know how your chest must clench, how every future looms just beyond your reach, how little you actually control despite so desperately trying to.”

Ben wondered if this is how it felt to be haunted. He’d dealt with devils and spirits, but they were always in another’s residence, another’s life. This was different. This was like facing his own demon.

“Silence,” Ben said.

“Touched a nerve, have I?” Tyson slowly floated towards Ben, arms outstretched. “I can offer you freedom.”

Ben pulled a cross out, instinctively holding it before him. Tyson stopped, unphased but confused, before his laugh filled the room. He was no demon, no matter how much Ben wanted him to be.

He put the cross back. Exhaustion and irritation suffused him—made his body feel too heavy. “What do you know about me?” he said. Who was this child to tell him how he felt?

And with sudden clarity, he understood the frustration of being told what life is like, and of solutions offered without being wanted. Away from him, Tyson played with his kalimba, slowly and softly repeating Ben’s melody. It was an eerie reflection, one that Ben didn’t want to fully stomach, but understood enough to sober him up.

Ben walked to Tyson and sat across from him. “I was terrified of the dark, once,” he said. Tyson’s stare was hollow, but he stayed silent, his attention lent.

“It’s why I became an exorcist,” he continued. “If I could bring enough light to this world, then there would be no shadow to fear.”

“Sounds foolish,” Tyson said. The tines of the kalimba reflected his ethereal form, the spaces between like bars holding him in. “There’s not one without the other.”

“I learned pretty quickly. But, it hasn’t been until recently I started really appreciating that duality.” Ben grabbed the kalimba. “This belonged to that girl I told you about. Her father used it in his ritual. I told you he didn’t make it, but I almost died too. The only reason I survived was this.”

He played the melody again. “Whatever possessed that girl couldn’t take away what this meant to her. The sound stopped her dead in her tracks, and gave me enough time to free her.”

For a moment, neither spoke, just listened to the metallic notes echo across the dark space.



“What was life like?” Ben asked, softly and honestly. Tyson floated up and around, apparently unable to stay still while he talked.

But they did talk, for a while, as Tyson recounted what he remembered.

He was technically older than Ben, they found out. Born five years earlier. He was never a fan of school, though he challenged that school just wasn't a fan of him. The only things he had a passion for was tennis and art, both of which he got called gay for, more so by his father than classmates. He dropped out of highschool at fifteen after he told a boy he liked him, who then told the school, who then told his dad.

“I got back to the house and he'd already changed the locks,” Tyson said.

Ben rubbed his eyes. “Jesus.”

“So I was lost and didn't know what to do so I came here, and I wasn't expecting it but they took me in.” Tyson looked around the room wistfully. “It was nice. I helped clean, ate meals with the priests.”

“What happened, then?”

“My dad came back.” Once again the room's temperature dropped, and Tyson's light dimmed. “I don't know how he'd found out, but he started coming to Sunday mass. I tried to tell the Father, but he thought it was a chance for me to forgive him.”

“And?”

“And I believed him. Or I trusted him enough to try and believe him. After a few weeks, my Dad invited me back home.” Tyson paused, and for a moment it felt like the air had been sucked out of the room.

“But the yelling, the berating, it all came back the moment I walked in the door. Nothing had changed. Nothing could change. I couldn’t, he couldn’t.” Tyson floated below the hole in the ceiling and reenacted his hanging. “And I just didn’t want to deal with that any more.”

Ben didn’t realize he’d been holding his breath, and let out a sigh, accompanied by the only thing he could think to say. “I’m sorry.”

Tyson shrugged, and wore that same eerie smile, though it had become slightly endearing. “It’s ancient history.”

There was plenty racing through Ben’s mind, all slowed to a crawl thanks to the lack of sleep. He was plenty familiar with tragedy, to which he’d pity those involved and occasionally himself. Pity felt too patronizing towards Tyson. Ben just carried a sadness that sat in his stomach. It ached, but it was comforting in its weight and solidity.

“You would’ve made a great exorcist,” Ben said.

Tyson laughed, his ghostly cackle still sharp, but now melodic. “Thank God I’m dead then.” And Ben found himself smiling too. Then he closed his eyes and found them extremely hard to open, and was reminded that he was locked in a basement and would die if he didn’t get out relatively soon. How long had it been since Stuart left?

“I can’t say I agree with your decision,” Ben said. “But you seem content, so why are you still here Tyson?” His mouth was dry and chapped. He slouched against the wall.

“I’m not entirely sure. I can’t leave this basement, but I heard through the floor that St. Mathson’s hired my dad after I died to keep up the cleaning. Maybe I was supposed to haunt him, and he just never made it down here.”

Atop the sadness in his stomach now sat an anger he was too tired to voice. He would handle Stuart. He just needed to rest for a moment, and he’d make a plan.

For a moment he debated on saying something to Tyson, but the ghost continued rambling. “I think it’s just another curse, destined to sit around, alone.”

Ben didn’t respond, dozing off for a moment before snapping back awake.

“I forget people need sleep,” Tyson said.

“So do I every now and then,” he said. Ben shook his head and got to his feet, trying to regain focus. Tyson flew to the ceiling and tossed the set of keys at his feet. Ben felt a moment of relief, then looked back at Tyson and remembered why he’d come here in the first place. Tyson needed to be free. It was a sobering thought, and a bittersweet one. He looked at his new friend, resolute as he could.

“Don’t look at me,” Tyson said. “Keys are yours, you can be on your merry way.”

“I’ll leave after you,” Ben said.

Tyson laughed, and stopped when Ben didn’t move. “You’re still dedicated to this? There’s nothing to save, Preacher. Leave.”

“I’m not going to let you keep dwelling down here,” Ben said. “I promise you there are better things to be found beyond.”

“I’ve had plenty of promises broken before, I don’t need more.” Tyson’s voice once again rang with defeat. “This is my curse.”

“For the moment, it’s our curse.” Ben kicked the keys to the side. “We’ll do this together.”

The room then grew bright. Tyson’s blue glow turned yellow and warm. Ben was startled, but his body welcomed the small amount of heat.

Tyson gasped, then laughed. “So all I ever needed was some pep talk from a preacher?” he said. He kept laughing, roaring and infectious. Ben couldn’t help but join in.

“This is pitiful,” Tyson said. He floated down, his glow now waning.

“Any more pitiful than an exorcist afraid of the dark?” Ben said. He needed to be strong and content in these final moments, but it pained him more than he thought. He would miss Tyson.

They stood in silence while the light continued to dim. Before he was gone, Tyson asked, “Will I be okay?”

Ben took his kalimba and placed it into his friend's faint hands. “You will, I promise.”

And then Tyson was gone.

The basement was completely dark once more, void of warmth. Ben wiped away tears, a mix of emotions now exaggerating his exhaustion. But the dark was heavy, threatening, and he needed to get out. He felt around for the keys and ran to the door, the slightest sliver of light outlining it. The dark to his back made him feel vulnerable, like it would claw into him any moment. His breath grew rapid. It took what felt like ages for the right key to find its hole, but the satisfying noise of pins clicking into place rang like sweet music.

The door opened and summer air rushed in, condensation immediately clinging to Ben's cold body. He stumbled up the stairs, reached the top and sat back down. The scents of dewed grass and oak trees warmed his lungs and calmed his spirit.

“Mr. Hudson?” Walking up was Stuart, his truck parked haphazardly against the side of the church. He carried with him a small crowbar and a couple hand towels. It was hard to tell, but Ben could faintly make out a resemblance to the wispy features of Tyson.

“You're out!” Stuart said. He dropped his crowbar and looked sheepish. “Terribly sorry for the delay. You see I got back home and saw I'd left the tap running so...”

Ben took a deep breath, and got back to his feet. Stuart rambled out his excuses, avoiding eye contact until Ben was right in front of him. Barely breaking his stride, Ben threw his body weight behind a punch, connecting with Stuart's chin and knocking him unconscious. His jaw broke which Ben considered a fair trade off for his two broken knuckles. He would call St. Mathson's later about his termination.

Ben walked to the front of the church and saw the sun rise. The dark navy sky before him was fading to bright purples and yellows, casting back the cold shadows. He closed his eyes once more to soak in the blossoming rays, and took a deep breath. In the distance, he heard faint chimes.

## **Non-Prophet**

**November 3, 2009**

When the news broke that Pastor Albert Winshaw had been arrested for embezzlement, the Tennessean Times assigned Lainey Williams to the beat. She'd immediately driven towards the county jail, and about halfway there, a beer bottle on a back road gave her a flat.

Her son, Devon, along with her granddaughter, Grace, drove to meet her, spare tire in tow. It was Saturday, so neither had church, and Grace didn't have school. Lainey leaned against her son's car, November winds cutting through her two jackets. Wheat fields bordered either side of the road, their pale yellow dim against the overcast sky. Grace sat in the driver's seat, windows rolled down while Devon unbolted the popped tire.

"And then Dylan passed out," Grace said. "And Michael thought he'd killed him and started crying, but then Dylan woke back up and it turned out he just passed out from the shock." She would be sixteen in a month, which stressed Lainey to think about.

"Is Dylan or Michael the cute one?" Lainey said.

"Grams."

"I'm your grandma, I've gotta ask."

"You really don't."

Grace went on her new smartphone, something new and shiny Lainey knew Devon couldn't afford, not on a preacher's salary at least. His wife had passed not long after Grace was born, maybe it was leftover life insurance payout. Either way, Lainey had half a mind to chastise them both for wasting money, but the kid never asked for much, so she bit her tongue.

Devon finally pulled the popped tire free. He grabbed the spare while Lainey took out a dwindling pack of cigarettes and lit one.

“For heaven’s sake Mom, I thought you quit,” Devon said. He hated her smoking, and she hated him reminding her.

“I write, kid, and so I smoke,” she said.

“Mom, stop making up your own rules.”

“Not making anything up. Just how it is.”

“Could you at least not do it in front of Grace?”

Grace was slowly rolling the window up. “You’re putting yourself in an early grave, Grams,” she said before the window closed.

“Grace!” Devon snapped.

Lainey took a deep breath. “Nothing early about it, no idea how I’m still standing. And when I do die, you’re both cremating me.”

Devon pinched his temples. The only thing Devon hated more than Grace’s manners and his mom’s smoking was Lainey’s lack of faith.

Lainey wanted to keep arguing because that’s the only way she was able to talk to her son any more, but she needed to press him about the church.

“So, think your almighty Winshaw’s innocent?” she said.

“Pastor Winshaw’s always been an exemplary man,” Devon said. “Fervent in his faith as one could be. Whatever investigation or trial they put him through, I’m sure they’ll find him as innocent as he is devout.”

“And if he’s not?”

“He is.”

“You’re really that sure? Devon, this is why I worry about you. Have whatever faith in God you want, but don’t blindly lump in people with that just cause—”

“Mom, please, just drop this.”

“I can’t ‘just drop this’. You’re my son. Plus, I’m covering this story. I’ll be nose deep in Winshaw’s shit til he’s got a verdict.” Nearly every resident of Tennille, Georgia— and, by extension, most reporters of the Tennille Times— were Baptist. Lainey wasn’t a believer and thus had no conflict of interest, until of course her son became one of the priests. But Tennille would rather keep the status quo than adhere to strict standards. It was another facet of ideology Lainey didn’t understand, but one she wasn’t going to lose her job to challenge.

“Well until then, leave me out of it,” Devon said. “When he’s found innocent, then you can apologize.”

Grace had left the window open just a crack to keep listening. The girl sank into her chair, trying not to look as sad as she did. Despite what her behavior might imply, Grace was still Christian, and at church as much as any other kid in Tennille. Winshaw was a pillar of respect and community, especially for the youths.

While she felt bad for the two, and a bit vindictive, Lainey saw an opportunity in this shit show. If Devon was this defensive, then he must be more rattled than she’d thought. If Winshaw really was guilty, it might shake Devon just enough. And she was not above pushing her son.

“Fine, if he’s innocent, I’ll apologize. Hell, I’ll even clear out my Sundays, start attending sermons,” she said. “But, if he’s found guilty, you’re gonna have to apologize to me, and,” her wrinkles deepened as she smiled. “The paper’s got need of a copy chief, and it pays just as good as a preacher.”

“Deal,” he said, not even looking at her.



“You sure about that, kid? You got that much faith in Winshaw?”

“I’ve got faith in the lord and in my community. And I’ve got faith you’ll see the truth.”

“Feel like I need this in writing. But, since it’s relevant, I’ll just put my faith in your word.” There was a look in Devon’s eye she couldn’t place, but he seemed serious. Lainey nodded, knocked on the window to say bye to Grace, and then got in her car. She drove off towards the precinct, determined to get her son back.

### **December 22, 2009**

Lainey stood in the corner of the Tennille Baptist Church’s nave, shifting her weight every few minutes and trying not to show how uncomfortable she was. Wreaths wrapped around the halls, tiny motes of fluorescent light peeking through the faux pine. Service ended, and the congregation flooded out and around the large Christmas tree that stood in front of the main entrance. Tennille was not an ostentatious town nor a rich one, but when Christmas came, every purse and pocketbook flew open.

This made Pastor Winshaw’s crimes that much more vile in Lainey’s mind. Tennille had been hostile to her throughout the years, but it was also home. These people were robbed blind by the one they trusted the most, but Lainey heard people mumble prayers and wishes for Winshaw’s good health as they walked out.

Since his arrest, Winshaw had been officially charged with three counts of larceny, a total of a hundred thousand dollars over the course of three years taken from the church and placed into his pockets. Apparently, the only reason he’d been arrested was thanks to an anonymous tip — an email full of public tax forms, never scrutinized, as well as some more conspicuously acquired personal finances of Winshaws. Whoever sent it knew anyone in the town would’ve

ignored it the moment they saw who was being accused, Both the Tennille police force and two county sheriff departments received the message. The church had funded his bail, and so Winshaw now sat at home on house arrest, awaiting trial in April.

As the crowd flooded out, uncomfortable glances shot Lainey's way. She was a reminder of what they all wished to ignore. Lainey couldn't fathom how they all convinced themselves of Winshaw's innocence. If a hundred grand vanishing without a trace could be chalked up to the wind, she considered quitting the paper and just robbing the bank.

Left sitting in the pews were a few old women gossiping in the back, a youth group leader cleaning up, and Devon and Grace up front, talking to another kid Lainey assumed was a school friend of Grace's.

Before Lainey could join, Grace and her friend got up to leave, meeting her mid-way down the aisle. Grace smiled. She'd gotten her license earlier this month, and now new car keys dangled from her hip.

Lainey's stomach churned. Just where had Devon gotten the money for that?

She took a deep breath, trying to be a journalist rather than a mother at the moment. Both had burning questions, the former needed answers.

"What are you doing here?" Grace asked.

"Just need to talk to your dad. You headed out already, kid?" Lainey said. She eyed the boy next to her. She didn't recognize him, but from the nervous look and awkward stance, she figured this was Michael from computer science.

"Yeah, gotta get ready to meet some friends for a lil Christmas party," she said. "Oh, and this is Michael."

The kid reached out a nervous hand, struggling to keep eye contact. “Nice, uh, nice to meet you, Ms. Williams.”

“Williams was my husband's name,” Lainey said, deadpan.

Michael just kind of stuttered awkwardly while Grace glared at her.

“I’m just kidding,” Lainey said. “No need to freak, I’m just an old lady.” Michael chuckled half-heartedly and Grace shot her another look.

“Alright, alright, I won’t keep y’all. Just don’t do drugs or stupid,” she stopped herself from cursing. “Stuff.”

Grace sighed. “We’re just going to Denny’s.”

“If I’m being honest, that might just be worse than doing drugs.”

The two laughed while Michael darted his eyes back and forth. Grace elbowed him, and he gave a soft, fake laugh.

They were absolutely going to do drugs, Lainey thought. Part of her wanted to act like a proper guardian and discourage her granddaughter. The other part of her remembered the few grams of weed she kept in the medicine cabinet for particularly stressful days. Lainey was many things, but a hypocrite only rarely.

“Well just be safe,” Lainey continued. “Don’t run anyone over.”

“Not unless they deserved it,” Grace said. Michael looked panicked again.

“Alright, get goin before you give your Dad an aneurysm.” With that, Grace jogged out, Michael quickly trailing behind. She could overhear the boy asking Grace if she’d forgotten her car keys immediately after. That slight bit of concern made Lainey like him just a bit more.

The old ladies, whom Lainey could have just called ladies, followed along with the youth group leader. Up front, Devon stood alone, shuffling back to the podium, gathering his papers.

“Kid’s getting too old, y’know,” Lainey said. Devon and Lainey never really talked about parenting. Lainey blamed him for being so closed off to her parenting approach, but that didn’t stop her from pushing for those talks every now and then.

“Mom, when you keep calling everyone ‘kid’ we can’t tell who you’re talking about.” Devon paused like he was choosing whether or not to keep up the conversation. Lainey thought he never talked to her more than he needed, but either exhaustion or the holiday spirit pushed him to keep speaking.

“But yes, she is. She’s always been years ahead of her own age, so it feels like catching up more than anything,” he said. He did seem tired, Lainey thought.

“Sounds about right. Wouldn’t know what that’s like, you were always lagging behind as a kid. Shocked me every time you avoided repeating a grade.” Lainey chuckled but cut herself off as Devon remained silent. “How’s, uh, how’s that boy she was with? We like him?”

“His name’s Michael, and yes, I like him. He’s sweet, his family moved here a couple years ago. They’re good folk, and help out during the food drives.”

“As long as he ain’t a dipshit or druggie.”

Devon sighed. “Mother, please not in church.” As he spoke, the oddity of her attendance finally struck him. “Wait, what are you doing here?”

“What, a mom can’t come see her son and granddaughter for Christmas?”

“A mom, maybe. You, specifically, no. And it’s not Christmas.”

Lainey did her best not to react to the jab. She thought it best to ignore it for the moment. She had work to do.

“Winshaw’s trial is set,” Lainey said. “County news is starting to take notice, even heard the Atlanta Journal is sniffing around.”

“Lovely, what does that have to do with you being here?” Devon asked.

“I’m here to win our deal.”

“What?”

“Winshaw is guilty and I’m proving it. I need you to get the church’s books for me. Expenditure, timelines, whatever payroll y’all believe in—anything that could show all the lil holes Winshaw poked in the system over the years.”

Devon fell silent. He stood there, before just shaking his head and walking away.

“What, afraid you’ll lose now and have to commit the sin of copy editing?” she said, but he kept walking. Ever since he was a child, Devon ran away when he was about to get into trouble.

“Hey, listen when your mom’s speakin’ to you!” Lainey called after.

“Why in God’s name would I do that?”

“What, listen to me or help me?”

“Honestly, both at this point.” Devon swung open the office door, Lainey rushing up behind.

“Alright Devon,” Lainey said. “I put up with plenty of your attitude, and never say a word, but this is disrespectful as-”

Devon turned on a heel, making eye contact with her for the first time tonight. “My attitude? Me, disrespectful? You come into my place of worship, hide in the corner, swearing to

high heaven, and ask me to start handing over documents just so you can get that sweet sweet praise from your news friends. Please, Mom, tell me what part of this conversation has been me disrespecting anything.”

“Oh please, Mr. high and mighty, ever since you’ve joined this fucking hivemind, all you do is look down on me. This whole town’s been on my ass since we moved just cause I’ve read more than one book.”

“Will you get off that ‘whole town’ bit? Do you even know your neighbor’s name?”

Lainey didn’t.

Devon continued. “You don’t know anything about us. You just make things up in your mind and never stop to see what’s real or fake.”

“I can’t tell what’s real? Real rich coming from someone defending a con artist! When the head of your whole troupe turns out to be an actual criminal, I’m somehow more of the villain! If this town isn’t against me they sure as hell aren’t for me.”

They’d had this fight over and over for the past decade, but it had been a couple of years since it got this intense. Both needed to be right. For Lainey, at one point, because she wanted her son’s respect, but that seemed to be a lost cause. Now it was more for simple pride. For Devon, she figured it was just her genetics shining through. Hell, the desire to always be right probably led him to being a preacher, in part. The irony would hit her during some of those high, lonely nights.

Instead of retorting, as Lainey expected, Devon sat at his desk. “Just leave, Mom. I don’t wanna do this right now.”

“Leave? Devon, you started this whole thing. I’m not just gonna—”

“Mom, please.” They locked eyes again. “Just stop.” His voice was soft and exasperated. Lainey hadn’t ever seen her boy so tired.

“Alright,” she said. It was hard, but Lainey dropped her pride for a second to act like a mom again. “Devon, what’s wrong?”

“I’m fine, holidays are just busy.” Silence stretched between the two for a minute before Devon spoke again. “So, what, you want more dirt on Winshaw?”

“I don’t expect you to have the past three years of payroll all neatly stapled or anything, just wanted to ask if you could get together what records you could. I need to make a timeline.”

“What’s that gonna do, Mom? Whatever email the district attorney got was enough to charge him. The man’s good as convicted, and no news story is gonna be better just because you’ve got the exact pennies.”

Here was her opening to push. “Oh, you think he’s gonna be convicted now?”

Devon winced, like Lainey’s words physically hurt him. “Yes. As much as you like to think, I’m not an idiot.”

“What happened to your blazen faith in his innocence? We’re knowingly giving gift baskets to criminals now?”

“Mom, everyone knows. Everyone knows Winshaw’s guilty.”

After all these years, she still couldn’t wrap her head around this fucking town. But the pit in her stomach grew as her suspicions turned more solid. Devon was hiding something..

He sat up at his desk and rubbed his eyes. “Everyone’s always known, subconsciously at least. Winshaw wasn’t the most upfront guy to begin with. But if we acknowledge, we acknowledge that you can believe in God and go to church and preach love and still be a bad

person. Tennille can't handle that. Money's rough, money's always rough, but faith is gonna get us through rough times more than a hundred thousand dollars would."

Lainey could grasp faith, in any measure. She always navigated life by what was in front of her. "Christ, this fucking town."

Devon continued. "Again, I'm not saying everyone is convinced he's guilty, just that no one cares either way."

"And you? You don't care?" Lainey asked.

"It's, I don't know. I do, I do care, but I've just got too much on my plate. Since he was arrested, I've been filling in, on top of preaching, on top of Grace's school. I can't care about it and still hold everything together."

Lainey couldn't wait anymore. She needed him to be honest.

"You knew he was guilty," she said. It was supposed to be a question, but deep down she'd known it was true. And it infuriated her.

"Christ, is there any integrity in this place? You preach day in and day out about morals but can't bother to hold your own accountable?"

Devon wouldn't make eye contact. The two were once again a mother chastising her son. Journalist Lainey Williams might stay calm, but Lainey Williams, the mother, knew how to push her son over the edge.

"Why make our bet in the first place if you knew?" She wanted to hear him say it.

"Why do you care? You wanted me out of here anyways."

"I wanted you to see reason, to not blindly follow a crook stealing money from a bunch of fanatics. How long have you known?"

"He wasn't subtle. When eight grand disappears from the mission fund, you notice."



The most frustrating part of all of this to Lainey was that she understood. Pride had pushed her into journalism, and money was what pushed her to this story. Her and Devon were horribly similar. She'd held out some hope that he might be a better version of her. But that was apparently too wistful thinking.

"You were in on it, weren't you Devon?" she said.

Devon looked down like a child caught shoplifting. If his silence wasn't enough, he gave a small, pitiful nod of admission.

More and more little inconsistencies started to clear up as Lainey's mind raced. "The car, Grace's phone, that's where you got the money."

"I'd known for a bit, a couple of us had. But every time he fudged the numbers, we'd get a bonus. If we said something, either the church would go into chaos, or we would be fired and shunned."

"Yeah, being shunned by this fucking town really would be a Hell." Lainey didn't know how to feel, so she fell back on being angry.

"Hey, it's not like you've made much of an effort to better your image."

"Oh, I'm sorry, Devon, let me just fake my fucking beliefs so I could get a tiny bit of the kindness y'all love to preach."

"That's not what I meant."

"It's exactly what you meant Devon! I'm your own god damn mother and all you've ever wanted was for me to be different."

"Stop acting like you know everything!"

If there was anyone still in the church they likely heard Devon. He spoke softer, more defeated. "Why the hell do you think I started coming to church? You were always convinced

this entire town was against you, so you lashed out at enough people to make it true. And have you ever taken one goddamn moment to think of what that meant for me? The looks from parents, the remarks in class, my own teachers treating me like an idiot; I was twelve in a town that hated my mom who hated them back so much she ignored her own son.”

Each sentence was like a dagger into Lainey. Her anger kept her from fully processing anything, but her body felt weak and wounded.

Devon was crying. “So I started going, and everyone started being nice, and I found people who paid attention to me. I found a God who thought I was important.”

Lainey felt like she’d just run a marathon. The torrent of emotions swirling around gave her more chills than normal. It was too much at once. Unexpectedly, though she couldn’t quite think straight, on the cusp of her subconscious, she fumbled with the question — had her son abandoned her, or had she abandoned him? Whatever the answer, she wouldn’t admit to anything right now. Not to a thief, a liar.

“Happy to see uprooting my life and slaving away at a shitty newspaper was worth it,” Lainey said. “Thank God you found the church to get away from your terrible mother so you could grow up to be a righteous thief.”

Devon didn’t respond.

“How much’d you take?” Lainey asked.

Devon stayed silent.

“Devon, how much?” If her son wanted an attentive mother, he would get one. She stared him down until he spoke.

“Ignoring all those little bonuses from Winshaw, about eight thousand.”

“All that for a car and phone?”

“I’m taking her and Michael to the Gulf on spring break, too.”

“That’s it?”

“Yep.” Devon stared at the ceiling. “A little here and there for groceries.”

Despite her convictions, Lainey couldn’t keep the same level of anger knowing it was all for Grace. With a bit of respite, and not wanting to tire herself anymore, Lainey subdued herself back to being just a journalist.

“Why start stealing now, what happened with all those ‘bonuses’?”

Devon seemed too tired to argue. “Just wasn’t enough. Mortgage went up, Grace’s birthday was soon. If Winshaw wasn’t gonna get reported, neither was I.”

“But he was. Who sent the DA that email?”

“No idea. At first, I was terrified, but it was kind of perfect. Tennille could write it off like just another empty threat, Winshaw probably wouldn’t be convicted, but also wouldn’t want to come back and deal with any suspicion. I’d step up as Pastor, enjoy the raise, and then stop the scheme altogether, no one the wiser.” It frightened and impressed Lainey how thoroughly he’d thought through this. She didn’t give him enough credit. She never did, really.

“Still not sure who sent the email,” he continued. “But whoever did, whatever their intentions, they gave me a hell of a blessing.” That kind of dumb luck infuriated Lainey. Not a damn thing is learned when disaster is saved by some whistle-blowing miracle.

“So why make that bet in the first place?” Lainey asked. She still couldn’t place the logic behind that.

“Honestly, I just lied. Part of me was sick of talking about it and wanted to go home. The other part, since I’d just found out, expected to be arrested by then. Didn’t really matter either way.” Lainey, reporter and herald of the truth, raised a liar.

What would she do with him? “Whatever your plan is, Devon, I’ve still got my story. Any big ideas for keeping your name out of it?”

Devon took a deep breath. “I don’t know. I guess part of me had some hope my mom would, for once, choose her son over her pride.”

Lainey couldn’t find a response, so she said nothing more, and neither did Devon. A moment passed, and Lainey walked out, still cold. She barely caught sight of Grace, running out of the church. She could hear very faint sobs.

Lainey stood for a moment. Grace had heard, which added a new weight to this hell. It was too much to think about at once, so she made her way out of the church.

### **December 25, 2009**

Lainey sat in her home, alone, blankets draped over her feet and a legal pad on her lap. It was nearly sundown. She was supposed to be at Devon’s for brunch but decided against it. Neither he nor Grace had come to check on her after the fight. It gave her time to make a decision and finish her final draft of the story.

### **March 31, 2010**

It was Sunday afternoon. Lainey stirred a pot of soup while Grace lay on the couch, looking through a magazine. She’d been staying at Lainey’s since the year started. After her feature ran, Devon was questioned and arrested, and like Winshaw, eventually was bailed out and put under house arrest while he awaited trial in May.

In the meantime, Grace’s phone and car had been repossessed, and Lainey now took her to school.

“Is Michael coming over today?” Lainey asked.

“He’s got computer science homework,” Grace replied.

“Doesn’t that mean you have computer science homework?”

“Probably.”

“I thought you liked that computer stuff?” Lainey said.

“I like doing computer stuff, the class sucks ass.”

“Who’s teaching it again?”

“Mr. Crosby.”

“Ah. Yeah he’s a dick. Divorced his wife back in the day for a former student, who left him high and dry. Been angry about it ever since.”

“Well his problems shouldn’t fuck up my test scores,” Grace said. “Shit is impossible. Why do I need to know what the fuck a transponder is? I can make a website, I can scrub through files. If the class were actually about computer science, I’d have an A.”

“And what do you have?”

“C plus.”

Grace left it at that, and Lainey was tempted to do the same, but someone needed to be a hardass without Devon. She walked over and grabbed the magazine from her.

“C’mon, C’s get degrees but A’s and B’s let you use Gram’s gas.” Grace rolled her eyes but got up. She pulled sheets of paper from her backpack, and Lainey wondered what kind of computer science homework could be printed, but computers in general confused her.

The landline then rang. Grace took the opportunity to continue avoiding homework, and picked up. Lainey went back to finish dinner, but Grace ran into the kitchen, panicked.

“Winshaw shot dad,” she said. “He’s in the hospital.”

†

When they got to the county prison's medical wing Devon had already been stabilized and bandaged. Winshaw had broken house arrest and made use of a 9mm the officers had neglected to collect. Thankfully he was as bad a shot as he was a preacher, and missed any vitals. Police followed shortly after and hauled him off to state prison, no option for bail.

The wound wasn't fatal, but Devon lost enough blood to keep him unconscious for a few days. He woke up on Thursday, and that Friday Lainey drove her and Grace up to see him again.

Devon lay in a hospital bed, gauze and wound dressing around his torso. Lainey stood opposite him, while Grace sat in the corner, continuing her homework. Devon was still technically under arrest, but the officer at his door said they could enter for just an hour. Lainey recognized him from the congregation before Christmans. She figured if the powers that be were gonna be biased, she might as well enjoy it when it was in her family's favor.

"Either of you know when IBM was founded?" Grace asked. Lainey and Devon looked at each other, then back at her, and shrugged. "Awesome, thanks guys," she said.

They sat in silence for a little longer.

Devon broke it first. "Y'know, I did read the article you wrote. Besides outing me to the public, not bad," he said.

Lainey expected an argument or insult, but nothing followed. Whether it was the morphine or regret keeping him placid, she couldn't be sure. Either way he sounded defeated.

"Got me on Fox 5. I'm famous now," Lainey said. When she didn't know what to talk about, she talked about her stories. "I went and pulled all those pay stubs and tax forms from the library computers after I found out how they work the damned things."

"Really sleuthed everything out huh?"

“At least got a timeline together. You pretty much told me the rest. Only thing I couldn’t figure out was-”

Grace blurted out, “Me, it was me, I sent the email.” Lainey and Devon looked at her, dumbfounded. “I, fuck, sorry, shit, sorry Dad, didn’t mean to cuss.”

The two adults sat, stunned. Then Devon laughed, and Lainey couldn’t remember the last time she’d heard him laugh. With every attempt to catch his breath, her obsession with her reporting felt more and more foolish.

Devon finally asked, “What do you mean, exactly, Grace?”

“Well, y’know, like when school started, I overheard you talking to Winshaw on the phone about all the money stuff, and I wasn’t really surprised, but we learned about archiving in class like the day before, and my teacher said a lot of businesses keep their records online now, and me and Dylan and Michael started poking around...” She trailed on for another minute or so, Lainey not understanding a word and Devon seemingly in the same boat. Eventually, she finished her story with sending the email. “I just thought, if Winshaw got arrested, Dad would get promoted, and everything would be great,” she explained. “Sorry Dad, I didn’t know you stole too.”

“You are just like your grandmother,” Devon said, and Lainey tried to hide her eyes getting teary. A compliment from her son on top of her granddaughter being a genius, it was almost too much for one moment.

“So, what’s the future looking like?” she asked.

“Our lawyer thinks I can get off with just a fine and parole, but we’ll have to see if Winshaw helps or hurts my case.”

“If you could make it through being a preacher, prison’ll be nothing,” Lainey said, trying to assure both of them. But the thought still terrified her. Devon had a lot to respect about him. Resilience was not one of them.

“We’ll see,” he said. “Once this mess is over, though, I’m gonna go back to the church.”

Lainey felt a vein in her forehead nearly pop. “Like hell you are. You lost the deal, remember? You’re not going back.”

Devon took a second to remember the deal, then shook his head. “I’m not going to the paper. This is what I want.”

“After everything? What makes you think they’d even want you back?”

Devon picked up a stack of cards and notes from his bedside table. “I don’t think they’re too beat up about it.” They were a series of get well cards, all from neighbors and various church friends alike.

Lainey scoffed. “So all you needed to do for them to forgive you is get shot? Hell, if you would’ve told me sooner I’d have saved both of us some time.”

But still it confused her, and she couldn’t not understand any more. “I don’t get it, Dev. I really don’t.”

“It’s just who they are,” he said. “Who we are. You think people ignore what happens around here, but we don’t. We see it all, the good and the bad. We just forgive it.” Devon’s eyes began to water so he wiped them. Lainey still didn’t understand. Or she did, and she just didn’t like it. But it mattered to Devon, and it maybe meant he could forgive her.

“Fine, deal’s off. Do what you want,” she said. It pained her to give up a victory, but Devon’s smile made up for some of it.



The silence returned and Lainey felt painfully awkward. Thankfully the officer let them know their hour was up.

“Is there a smoking area around here?” Lainey asked the officer.

“Seriously?” Devon said. But once again the will to argue seemed to fade. He laid back in his bed. “I’ll see you guys later.”

“Can I have one?” Grace asked. Lainey gave her a flat stare, but Devon looked pensive for a moment.

“Fuck it, why not?” he said. “Rather you try this out with family, not Daniel, or Michael, or whoever.” Grace gave a stone-faced nod. They needed to have a talk about both boys and smoking at some point, Lainey thought, but she was content for the moment handing her granddaughter a cigarette and walking out.

## Outro

In my second year of college, I heard a quote from Bessie Head talking about her experience writing. To paraphrase, she often felt her works existed beside her in her mind, and all she had to do was translate the story onto the page. That is bullshit, I thought, or at least an incredible stroke of luck.

There are things in this world that are impossible to love without work. Writing is a practice that takes its toll. It's a slow, subjective process that doesn't ever truly end. Writing has made me struggle, stress, and slip into moments of darkness. It is the path I took to tell stories, and I pay for it with every word I write.

But it's how I show my love for stories. I stress because I want my writing to be enough to fully express how enchanted I am with telling tales. Every ache in my chest or tremor in my hand is like visceral proof of my passion.

Some things we are destined to love, but the important things are the loves we earn. Writing is grueling, but it is how I work on loving. This collection is my attempt to love what I find most hard to; brothers, sons, and friends.

Whether it works or not is a question I'm not sure I can answer yet, but I take solace in knowing I can keep trying. There will always be more writing; it never really ends.