

IMAGO DEI: STORIES

by

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ABSTRACT

Translated from Latin, *Imago Dei* means the image of God. In the very beginning of the Torah, the writer says that God created humanity in Their own image. According to the text, woven in the fabric of who we are is God. In a post-secular society, the concept of God brings a lot of weight and baggage. Which God are we talking about? Can God be talked about it? Is God or thinking about God even relevant anymore? Hasn't science taken care of it? What good can discussions on faith bring us?

These are the questions explored in *Imago Dei: Stories*. Within the collection is a story about a group of college students in the Bible belt struggling with sorting through emotions in the aftermath of their pastor's suicide. There's a husband search for grace and acceptance in the midst of a looming divorce and a dying father. Finally, there's a letter from a youth pastor who is publically accused of abusing a transgendered student.

The collection was written under the guidance of Dr. David James Poissant with the help of Professors Laurie Uttich and Nathan Holic. In the directed readings portion of the program, I read Marilynne Robinson, Bret Lott, and Flannery O'Connor to get a better picture of faith and moral fiction. For craft guidance, I read works by Bret Anthony Johnston, Junot Diaz, David Foster Wallace, Vanessa Blakeslee, and John Henry Fleming.

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NINETY-SECONDS

I left for Orlando to be with my cancer-infected father the day after Rachel's inaction to our son Raymond's bloodied face. Ray told me that she didn't even look up from cutting carrots for some vegetarian stew she found on Pinterest. He swears by turning the other cheek and Rachel constantly ignores him.

Ray went to bed that night and I started packing. The nice part about Jefferson were the evenings. We had maybe five neighbors in the mile radius around our home, so there was this beautiful silence around 6pm. No hum of cars. No police sirens. I never thought I'd live in a town where the biggest noise complaints would be because of a cicada's chirp. Even before Rachel and I's marriage went to all hell, I would spend the evenings reading on a hammock in our back yard. The place was never an escape, only a safe spot where being alone was guaranteed. Escaping brings this negative connotation to it, like I was some shitty, deadbeat dad leaving behind my family for some Pynchon novel. It wasn't like that. I called it R-time. Rest. Richard. Rejuvenation. It was necessary in order to be even a decent father or husband.

The doors could and would be open and right near November, our chimes danced in a sweet cool breeze. You couldn't get this in Jacksonville or in the House of Mouse for that matter.

She had been slurping Pinot Noir from glasses my family friends got us for a wedding gift all afternoon. She waltzed in the room like the preceding events were just like a boys high school volleyball score, not our son being bullied.

She closed the door and removed her blouse revealing her pale, untended torso. The only moment her eyes weren't glued on me was when the blue of her top covered her lamenting green eyes.

"If you have something to say, just say it," I said.

"Sometimes they need to get bullied, you know?" she asked.

Some comments don't deserve a response. I'd learn now that she needed to rant a while to get at what she really wanted to rant about. The first sentence rarely was her thesis.

"If you really want him to be himself, he needs to learn that there are consequences to that," she said. "You can't just expect everyone to accept you. You're still coddling him. He's seventeen for Christ's sake."

"Are you seriously saying I'm a bad parent for trying to protect our son?" I said.

"Everything you say now is about not judging him. Some judgment, I mean, can be helpful. My Father judged me, and it's what propelled me to do something with my life."

"And what would the life of Rachel include?" I asked.

Her hands lifted in repulsion to idea that I looked down on her.

"Being a mother."

Sometimes she just pitches a slow ball right down the middle.

"You're the furthest thing from a mother," I said and I went back to the book I was reading. The only applause from that homerun were those damn cicadas outside.

"Don't do that. Don't blame me for him. You were never there to show him a role model." She wasn't waltzing anymore. She put her head down and made a B-line for the

bathroom across the room. I checked the door to make sure he's not there. We've learned that hard way.

#

After the nine-hour drive, I pulled into my parent's driveway. I had been imagining how I would handle the situation if Ray came home after troubles with his husband. Would I be loving or graceful? I'd sure like to think so. I mean, he's my son. Right? He's Ray. He'll always be Ray. My *Ray-ban*. My out-front-the-house-playing-catch-*Ray-ban*.

I remembered immediately after stepping out of my car, why we didn't move down after I found out about the cancer. The moisture pounces and attacks any opening it can find. The part of me that believes weather is a shitty excuse to not move in with your sick father is certainly not the part of me that sweats oceans.

During the ride, I tried to put myself in Rachel's shoes. I tried to extend some form of compassion for her. I remembered her father and his comments about Ray and how she at one point thought Ray was worthy of sticking up for. I can only do that for so long before I just get too angry. My therapist says I need to slow down when it comes to getting through it all. You get ninety-seconds he says. Ninety-seconds to let it consume you or to let the synapses open and close and let the energy convert to something more productive.

And besides that, I was here to forget. I was here to forget Jefferson and all its bullshit as much as possible. Even if I couldn't forget it long term, I needed a reprieve. R-time. I needed to tell my parents what was going on. Hell. I'll say it. I wanted them to know.

You feel a scary warmth in your chest, the first time you begin the D word with your parents. In a split second, you go from fearing what will they say to believing this is the heart

attack that the doctors have been warning you about. I bailed as my mouth started to greet them. My father was smiled and began to speak happily about his doctors and football and I didn't want to break him of that this early in the trip.

“Dr. Patel likes UCF too, and a happy doctor is a good doctor,” my father said. He went to Georgia Tech, where I teach Engineering, but he started rooting for the Knights when he moved to Florida to retire.

“Dr. Patel is a good man, Dad. He'll do what he can.”

I tried to keep him out as much superstition as possible. Growing up I trusted my father. We didn't have Santa, Jesus or any of it and we attended Mass only on Christmas Eve and Easter because the opportunity cost of hell was too high. He claimed it was something about Pascal's Wager. Not that we believe in Hell, but on the off chance hundreds of years of rational thought were wrong, we wanted to be on the safe side. I wasn't going to have my father get Joel Osteen on me. He was stronger than that.

“Have you heard from Melissa lately?” During football, he at least tried to engage. Even before cancer, he still wasn't the best at father, and the medicine didn't help that at all.

Brandon, my brother, and Melissa, after a ten-year dating relationship, eloped in Vegas and then divorced within seventy-two hours on their honeymoon. She was much prettier than Rachel and a hell of a lot smarter. My father loved Melissa as a daughter. This stuck in Rachel's craw worse than anything I could outright vocalize.

My mom was the one to force Brandon to propose. She threatened to take back their invitation to Thanksgiving and Christmas if they didn't stop living without the benefits of marriage. Melissa couldn't or at least didn't want to deal with the label. She left a note saying

that she regretted getting married on the pillow of the Jamaican beach house they were staying in for the honeymoon.

Melissa and I got along really well. During Thanksgivings and Christmas', Rachel accused me of loving Melissa more than her, and, on some days, on most days, she was right. I certainly at least loved the idea of a Melissa. It seemed she always wanted me to publicly confess my love for Melissa and let her out of the marriage, like I was this jail guard keeping in her in a cell. Rachel held on to the idea that divorce is only allowed in cases of infidelity. She held on to the little stuff. She could forget the parts about submitting to your husband, but not the stuff that dealt with sex.

"I haven't, have you?" I said.

"Actually yes, she and Brandon are coming over for Thanksgiving this year," he said.

"They got back together?" I said.

I looked around the living room, searching for some family pictures. Most of the pictures were of the other grandkids and Brandon. Partially that had to do with us never taking family pictures together, but I can't help but think if that was a message from my mom.

"Well, really good for him. She take him back or what?" I said.

"She actually called him. She was tired of being lonely, I guess," he said.

"Hows- um- shit- Miranda?" he tried to ask. This was regular between Brandon and I. He remembered more about Brandon. After the divorce, Brandon moved back home for a bit to heal and recover. Around that same time, we learned how far the cancer had progressed and he was put on some new medication that fuzzied his memory. Brandon was the closest, so he started to attach to him more.

“Rachel?” I said.

“Yeah. She still teaching kiddos Jesus fairytales?”

“Yeah,” I nodded along. I revealed a smile letting him know I got the joke. The things he remembers.

“Well, if it makes her happy.”

“I don’t know if it really does.”

“If the cult isn’t making her happy, well then, she should leave it. They don’t have any real power anyway.” He looked over to the kitchen and motioned for me to lean in closer. “Patel said a beer every once in a while isn’t going to kill me any faster. Would you mind-?”

“Would Mom say that’s okay?” I said

“Mom doesn’t have to know,” he said hitting my arm with his elbow and smirking a bit.

“I know your bullshitting me, but sure.”

“Watch the foul language,” my mother piped in from the kitchen where she was preparing my father’s sandwich for lunch.

After Patel’s diagnosis, my father begged her not to tell me about the lymphoma. He already thought having her take care of him was bad enough. He didn’t want his 35-year-old son caring for him like a “fucking toddler” he said. If he was going to die from this, he wanted to die with at least a shred of dignity. I walked in the kitchen to grab him a Miller.

“You know,” my mother said washing her hands, “I wish you wouldn’t curse so much here. I know Rachel puts up with it, but you’re at home now.”

“I’ll work on it.” I said.

“Did you talk with Rachel today?” she asked.

“She’s doing well. Ray’s got a big scouting game today. I’m Skyping him later.” It would break her heart if she found out that me coming here was the first step towards custody battles and lawyers.

“I know your father talks a lot about Ray’s,” she paused, “you know, behavior, but I’m proud of you for sticking with him and not putting him out on the streets. You know Terry? Her husband threw Blake out of their house after he came out as a homosexual. Thanks for treating my grandson better than-”

“Don’t tell me about assholes like him. They don’t get to be called Dad. That’s a sacred title.”

“He’s a good man. He’s trying to show some tough love. You don’t know what he’s been through.”

I wondered what her definition of *good* was and if I fit the bill and how she somehow thought that I didn’t know what he was going through. I always thought Ray and Blake would get along. Not just because they’re gay. I just know that Ray has to be lonely in his situation. Rachel doesn’t want him hanging out with other gay kids or girls, or anyone, really, lest he fall into his sin or tempt others. She grew up in the South, but she can only blame so much on where she’s from.

Since he came out about five months ago, she practically lives in the church after she gets out of teaching. On Thursdays, she meets with Ray’s married douche of a youth pastor, Jacob, for counseling on how to convert him.

#

While I get there's no rule book to life, there are internal guideposts that tell us how to and how not to react to certain events. There was no guide to that pit in your stomach when you hold your baby for the first time. That overwhelming warmth that arises from the feeling that the baby's soft, cotton hair gives us when you run your fingers through it. There's no right feeling, but there sure as hell is a wrong one.

"I think I'm gay," Ray said. We were eating dinner like any other one. My therapist says this is something that happens. Kids pick ordinary times for huge news thinking that it will lessen the blow.

"We love you, Ray," I said. When I talk about responses, I don't think I'm perfect, but that was another damn near home run.

Rachel just stared at him. Silence.

"No matter what," I said.

She shifted her glare to me, like I wished a holocaust upon his loved ones.

"How long have you felt this way? Is this like a phase?" she said.

"No," he said. I was proud of my boy for standing his ground.

"Is there anything else you need to tell us?" she asked.

"Rachel," I said.

"What? Don't stop me," she said.

"Rachel," I said.

"Shut up," she said. "Ray, you can't say something like that."

"He can," I said.

"Mom, there's nothing you can do about it," he said. "This is my life."

I imagine that he was running on some intense levels of adrenaline. I couldn't have been prouder. He was standing up to Rachel, like I wish I could.

"Well if you're both just going to team up against me, then screw it," she said.

"Have you dated anyone?" I asked.

"Not yet."

"So, you don't really know then?" she said.

"Mom," he said.

"You don't know. You can't know until you actually do it. But you won't do it in this house. That's for sure."

Did I want my son to be gay? That's not a fair question. Did I want the bullying? Did I want the terrible conversations with my family? Did I want Rachel to turn her back on him? No.. But did I want him to always be himself, no matter the cost? Beyond the shadow of a doubt.

My therapist says that I've let Rachel take too much of me. Not that I've lost the good man inside of me, but that I've let this anti-Rachel take over. He says that I've lost what makes me, me and that's one of the biggest reasons I resent her. He says the key to regaining happiness is regaining Richard. This is why I fought so for Ray. I never want him to look back on his life and say, "Well I did what *they* expected of me." Things with Rachel wouldn't have gotten this bad if I would've just let me be me. If I teach Ray anything, I want to teach him to *fuck* them, regardless of who they are.

#

Recently, Rachel started going to the gym after counseling because physical activity would be good for her spiritual health, which required her taking a shower right when she came home.

She has to know on some level, that I'm not the one with cancer meds and I know what's happening. Maybe I'm paranoid, but maybe she's the one creating the reason for divorce. If I won't cheat, she'll force her hand. Like some necessary evil. I'm planning on letting them ride it out until someone catches them. I kept Ray in the dark about it all. If it comes to custody battles, then it'll be my WMD. I hate myself for thinking this way.

But all that was back in Jefferson. My dad yelled from the TV room, "Get in here. They're on the 20 and Johnson's on fire. How's the Miller coming?"

Football was the only time he was ever lucid when he was one meds. Dr. Patel says a lot of his patients have some kind of a clarifier, he calls them; something that brings them that back into reality. Clarifiers are Dr. Patel's main focus of research.

I slid him the glass across our vintage table that separated the two chairs.

"When's Rachel coming? Am I going to get to see my gay Ray before-?"

"That's not as cute a nickname as you think," my mother said.

"You both should be proud of me," my father said. "At least I can still remember details about my grandkid's choices."

"It's not a choice-" she tried to say as I cut her off to avoid the well-worn subject.

"Ray's doing well. I'm Skyping him tonight. He had a big game today. Lots of scouts."

"Good for him."

"He takes after you."

“At least he won’t be getting any girls pregnant, right?” he smiled.

UCF ran the ball in totaling 60 points against PSU’s meager 14 as the clock expired.

“I gave Coach Shafer a tape of Ray. He said he’s interested in meeting with him,” I said.

“He’s going to play college football? A kid like Ray wouldn’t fair well with men like that.”

“Ray can carry his own.”

“A homosexual like Ray,” he paused, “I don’t see alumni be excited about a fag on the-” he stopped to cough up some terrible concoction of a yellow green liquid. I know he’s of a different age. I know he’s sick and he’s mind is fuzzy, but guys like him and fathers like him are why Ray comes home beaten. But he’s my Father and gets more grace than those guys.

Dr. Patel said be careful for days like today and not judge the progress by the moment and to just trust the process. It’s pretty hard to trust some system from a doctor whose father just finished in the tenth percentile at the Boston Marathon this year. I doubt he’ll just trust the system when his time comes.

He never finished the sentence. The game finished and he said he wanted to take a nap.

I grabbed my laptop from upstairs and headed out seeing my mother helping his tear stained face and shirt, shift back in his seat. It was around 6pm so I escaped to the Starbucks three lights down and logged in to Skype and texted Ray. This wasn’t the best hammock, but it was exactly what I needed.

Hey, I’m ready when you are. I want to hear about the game.

Read 6:01.

Ray was always on his phone. Rachel promised him a iPhone 5s if he went to Exodus; the recovery group that met at St. Stephens UMC on Tuesdays to encourage one another to let off their chains of homosexuality.

Ray doesn't need a recovery group and he certainly doesn't need a new phone. He still had a 3Gs. We hooked it up with Skype so I could use the minutes from our cell plan with my dad and just use Skype with him on my trips. I liked actually seeing my boy's face for a bit. Out of everyone, I can read him the best. It's a good feeling knowing that you have access to another human like that.

Rachel and I were told in pre-marital classes that we'd build that kind of access to one another. We went over Gottman's house of trust. We read through Keller's *Meaning of Marriage*, and we filled out a bunch of Prepare/Enrich worksheets. We did everything we were told to do by pastors with seemingly great marriages.

I ordered a skinny, no-whip caramel macchiato. Rachel wanted me to lose some weight. She said getting skinny stuff at Starbucks was just like the real stuff just without the sugar. I'd be on and off with P90x for two months. I'd lost about ten, but she said she didn't say anything. Regardless of everything going on, you want your wife to notice things like that.

Make that a Caramel Frap. Extra whip with that Caramel Drizzle.

I texted: *Hey, I saw you read the other message. Ignoring your old man?* But I deleted it; too harsh. I needed to walk on eggshells with Ray, especially with Rachel circling him at all times. I'm sure this was tough on him. God knows I didn't want to be here in Orlando, FL especially getting pissed at my dying father over something I know he doesn't mean. Rachel didn't put up with this kind of thinking. She told me to just turn it off and deal with it like a man.

A Carmel Frap, Extra Whip with drizzle for Richard.

Rachel and I slept together for the first time on Valentine's Day of our junior year of college, four years after our first kiss. Rachel had a soft face. She had this beautiful sense of humor that seasoned any conversation to perfection. She believed people should wait until marriage, but she said she certain about us, like certainty was the loophole God never thought of.

After a few glasses of cheap wine; I would become her exception. It was both our first times, and I slipped out a bunch. We tried to copy what we saw on TV and realized instantly how fake that was. My foot cramped up and she knocked over a candle with her foot at one point. I didn't carry around a condom, so she told me to pull out before I finished.

She spent the night at my place for the first time and three weeks later was forced to sort through the wreckage of the hurricane of the blue shade on a pregnancy test she bought on her parent's credit card from 7-11.

"I need to get married, like now, like this minute," she said sitting angelically on the marble bathroom counter still holding the wreckage. She still had the capacity to sit angelically at least in my eyes then.

"How'd we support ourselves, much less-?"

"Your Dad could get us set up somewhere, right?"

"Do you really want to live in Atlanta?"

"Don't you want to get married?"

I sighed and looked past her.

"Of course."

I called my Dad and he said that he was less than enthused about the whole deal, but that he understood. He would set us up in a house near Atlanta until I could get an engineering job. Rachel wanted a bigger house and a dog, so I took an overnight job unloading trucks at Walmart. She complained that I didn't spend enough time with her. She said that I was always too busy and that it wasn't fair to her. Luckily, the teaching opportunity opened up in Atlanta, where we've lived ever since.

Hey Dad, Jacob's over. He's making Chicken Devan for Mom and me. He brought a movie. Think we can move our catchup till tomorrow?

Your homophobic mother's a cheating whore, Ray.

Too harsh. I deleted it, with slight reluctance.

He liked Jacob. Jacob never forced Ray to talk about being gay. At his core, Jacob believed that Ray's behavior is causing him to head towards eternal fires and flames and he just sits silently, fucking my wife and serving my kid Chicken Devan trying win him over to some god.

Ray, I haven't told you this, but your mother has been sleeping with Ray after work for close to three months. We're separating. She's test-driving him as a father for you. What a bitch, right? Well, call them on it. Tell them I told you. I'll buy you a plane ticket to Orlando, and you can stay with me.

My finger hovered over send. I knew I had the power to get him on that plane and leave Rachel. It'd kill her.

Delete, delete, delete.

He deserved much better than that.

Okay. Can't wait to hear from you.

Send.

Read: 6:20.

You're the best, Dad. Thank you.

#

I walked home and went into the kitchen. My Mom was finishing up dinner.

“Oh, honey,” she looked at me. Mothers have a way of knowing.

“Can we talk?”

I hated doing that as a kid. It always meant I was minutes away from grounding.

“Sure, Rich.”

I remember watching *How To Build A Zoo* or something like that and the main character saying it only takes six seconds of intense courage. I wanted to get it tattooed on my arms.

Deep inhale. *Shit. Shit. Shit.*

“I want to get a divorce.”

Exhale.

I think she expected this day would come. She didn't want Rachel and I married. She was fine when we were dating, but she believed in the permanence of marriage. They loved her how you are supposed to love your daughter or son-in-law. More out of duty than anything. It was part of the job details to her.

“Why, boo?”

“I can't do this anymore.”

“Is that you two are fighting is there someone-?”

“You could say that. She’s sought counseling at church with some guy she’s been sleeping with.”

“How do you know she’s been-” she looked around the room to see if my father was there, “sleeping with him? Have you seen them together? Terry down the street-“

“No, Mom. She’s been at the church all the time with this Jacob guy. There were rumors earlier last year about him and some other lady, but that other person never came forward.”

“The pastor?” she tried to relate to me in this. She wanted to help, but she hated the idea of a divorce and she hated the idea of me being married.

“He’s over right now cooking with Rachel and Ray. Ray, for whatever reason, likes him.”

“You don’t control that.”

“Seriously? Sure I do. He’s in my home, sleeping with my wife. And making DeVan on my fucking china.”

“You can’t control what Rachel feels. Or Ray, for that matter.”

“Ray is my boy.”

“Ray is y’all’s boy.”

“How can he listen to a jackass like Jacob?” I asked.

“I don’t know. And neither do you.”

She stirred in some meat to the skillet already sizzling.

“She’s offering him a phone if he goes to a gay recovery group.”

“Maybe a phone’s more important to him right now.”

Taco night has the way of announcing itself. This was always my favorite meal growing up. I thought back to the comic books and tv shows that mattered to me during taco night. I thought about all that I would give up for a Batman graphic novel.

“More important to him than his identity?” I asked.

“You accused Terry’s husband of making his kid’s sexuality his identity. Aren’t you doing the same?”

“I’m not. It’s different.” I said.

I knew it really wasn’t different. I knew that it was simply the reverse side of the same coin, but I wanted to see if I could defend myself.

“How?”

I’m silent. Just like Rachel was.

“Look at what Rachel’s doing, doesn’t that allow us to get divorced.”

“Sure. We’d been happy for you Richard if you wanted to leave Rachel. You know we love who you love, but-“ she paused and look at me. “Do you still love her?”

“I don’t know.” I shift my eyes to the ground. She reaches for my chin and makes it level with hers.

“That’s okay too,” she said. She pulled my forehead towards her lips.

It can’t be okay. The warmth in my gut rises. Ninety seconds I remind myself.

It can’t be okay that I don’t love her anymore. We made a promise. I made a promise. If I can’t be a man of my word, than fuck this whole thing. I wanted to live and die by word. My word meant a damn. I told her loved her. She told me she loved me. Coming to Florida was a valiant excuse to leave everything I couldn’t handle.

A thumping reverberates from upstairs.

The steps announced my father's presence.

"You're a good man Rich," Mom said kissing my forehead again.

"I don't feel like one anymore."

"None of us feel good. It's a part of growing up. You learn to deal with regret."

She names the warmth in my gut regret.

"It's not the Knights, per se, but the Buckeyes are playing Michigan and we should watch it."

My mom went back to being my mother and finished browning the meat. I grabbed a beer and sat down to watch two teams I didn't care about and embraced the finite qualities of this regret.

I pictured myself in front of the lawyers signing documents sealing it all. I pictured me at my father's funeral in the black suit Rachel bought me, alone. I pictured myself seeing Rachel and Jacob's Christmas photos with Ray. I pictured him smiling.

Would that be good enough for me?

Did I really want him to be himself, or did I want him to be some version of himself that I created?

My dad looked over at me. His eyes rounded by a translucent tender greying flesh. I notice new wrinkles below the yellowing bulbs and I think about the millions of images imprinted on his cornea. His friend being shot between teeth in the war. *Click*. The heather grey sky on the afternoon of his wedding. *Click*. The summer vacations to Key West, when Brandon slipped and fell in the pool and he jumped in to hold him above water. *Click*. The phone call

telling him that his grandkid had a beautiful head of hair. *Click*. And I thought about how he replays them. Life has a way fading the edges of the memories, shaping and shifting them into something meaningful.

“Are you going to finish that?” he asked referring to my beer.

“Yes, Dad.”

“You know Dr. Patel says-“

“Let me grab you one Dad.”

“You’re a good son, Rich. I’m glad you’re here.”

“For beer?”

“If Ray turns out to be anything like you, he’ll be alright.”

Click.

#

I decided to leave right after my Dad fell asleep. I left a note on the table saying I’d be back. I wanted desperately to catch Rachel. Catching her meant that this all would end. Catching her meant legal battles and costs, but it would end the uncertainty of it all.

The anxiety built at every mile marker and I race. I raced hard lost in the questions.

What do you say at a moment like that?

Do I go for the home run like I normally do?

Would silence suffice?

Do I use the word whore?

Do I say anything to Jeremy?

He doesn’t matter in this. He will be dealt with later.

I pull onto the block. Buttoning the top button on my shirt. This is official business here.
This is where men are made.

I pass our neighbors. I wonder which ones of them knew about Jeremy and refused to tell me. I see my house in the distance on Sugarcrush Ave. I see an extra gray car along the green strip of grass.

Do I tell Ray?

I looked down at the clock. 1:45am.

I wondered what Jeremy told his wife to quench her doubts. I wondered if she has any idea or if she wants any revenge on him. I wondered how she can love such a two faced pig like him.

I pulled in to the drive way and walk over to Jeremy's window and look inside. I saw a pocket sized NLT bible resting on his passenger seat with his nametag clips to the outside.

What gall? What balls? Coming straight from church to fuck my wife.

I felt the warmth rise up. Ninety seconds. Think rationally, I reminded myself.

Why am I so angry?

Because this asshole is sleeping with your wife and trying take your place.

What does my anger say?

I stopped walking towards the door and looked at the garden littered with weeds.

I asked myself again: What does my anger say?

I'm hurt. That's all. It's natural.

What does my anger say?

Nothing. I'm hurt. Move out of my way.

What

Does

My

Anger

Say?

I still love her. I still love her. I still love her.

I still want her to be Rachel.

I looked at the weeds in the garden and remember building it with Rachel when we first moved in. I remember her making a joke about lilies. We laughed at the way daffodil sounded. Cheesy shit.

I thought wanted proof, but I still want her to mine. Seeing the two of them, having certainty, that she moved on, wasn't what I needed. I needed Rachel. I needed Ray. I needed my parents well.

I needed Jefferson to turn back. Just a year. Just a fucking year. I wanted to go back to cheesy and cliché.

Is this what dealing with regret feels like? A crushing desire to feel normal again.

I got on my knees and pull a weed out.

And another and another hoping that that there would be something at the bottom of this forsaken garden.

AND BY OPPOSING, END THEM

Three days after my pastor Terry Forsthat shot himself, I found Lauren in my kitchen making my favorite dessert. His death was a forest we all needed to grieve our way through. Lauren had made that recipe a thousand times in her own kitchen. The bars were a church group favorite. That's how we had met each other, six months earlier. She knew where things were in her apartment and everything resided in its labeled home, but in mine, a homeless sugar container set up shop wherever it may have pleased. She kept sighing every time something wasn't where she wanted it to be. I was a junior at Texas A&M. She expected too much of my kitchen. Her boyfriend's wasn't clean either, but she expected that of him. He's still got some rough edges, she excused. *Double fucking standard.* I had a mom who taught me to clean up after myself. Jeremy grew up in foster care with a dad who left sinks full of filth that sat for months after Jeremy's mom, or, in his mind, their resident maid, died. Jeremy was an atheist, which mattered to her, but he'd seemed to have a good heart. Lauren understood the messiness as a part of his developing redeemable character.

"Ryan, you can't just talk about not showing up," she said after I asked if we really had stayed here for the group tonight. After this past week, the last thing I wanted was to talk and listen to how they were handling the death of our pastor. Matt would say something goodheartedly sexist about Lauren's relationship with Jeremy. The married couple would talk about how great their sex life is and how Lauren should just wait with Jeremy because it's better in marriage because they knew friends who'd lost their virginity before marriage and they think they have a better sex life than them. And I would hold my tongue because it just generally upsets everyone to hear a cynic. The intention of these groups is to bring people to community,

but I think it's a breeding ground of gossip cloaked by confession and what we call accountability.

“But I'm just saying, hypothetically, if I wasn't home-“

“Hypothetically, you can melt me a stick of butter.”

I obliged. I never thought I'd ever be indebted to Lauren for something like this.

We left my room about 30 minutes ago and we don't have enough time as is. She left her bra in my room. She threw on her pink cami and asked me if I could see anything on her way out, which was dumb question because she knows they're the only thing I can see. I imagined she would wear pink panties, like the ones from the models at Victoria Secret. She didn't. She wore light blue ones. I liked that about her, she wasn't who I fantasized her to be.

In the kitchen, I kissed her on the left of her neck right on what was looking like to be forming to be a hickey.

“You can't do that.”

“Even now?” I said.

She reminded me of what we did and that we needed to do it just once, but that we couldn't bring it up again. That if Jeremy found out, he'd kill me and make her watch it. That we were grieving and what happened, happened. We can't go back. I reminded her that I still wanted her and nothing she could do could change that. She reminded me that I wanted to go seminary in Dallas and that this would come in the way of that. That she knew she didn't want to be a pastor's wife. I reminded her that I'd give it all up for her. She reminded me that she was not worth the process. I knew that was bullshit that Jeremy had taught her. She turned toward the oven.

My roommate Matt emerged from his room. Matt was the running back for the Aggie's. Matt was referred to as the "black Tebow" in a pretty racist *Sports Illustrated* cover story. It's amazing the shit that gets by the editor's desk these days. The writer of the article got fired from the magazine, but he got hired by FOX News to do a talk show about conservatism in sports. Matt liked the guy enough to be his first guest.

After our Pastor shot himself, it was released via Twitter that before he went home and loaded the gun, he had confessed to the elders of Imago Dei Church to getting his mistress of five years pregnant. He had preached on adultery a total of fifty times since he'd started sleeping with her. But you don't just randomly start sleeping with your secretary. It takes a process. He'd have to have been working on her for years before that.

Matt assumed the unofficial interim pastoral role for at least our group. Matt thought the pressure got to him and that we need to release what we are feeling or we'll blow up too. Matt had a history of blowing up randomly and punching a walls or doors. One time, he threw a blender through our window.

Terry pastored Imago Dei with thick-rimmed black glasses and a large heart. He was known to drink copious amounts of whiskey and was a regular on the Real Time with Bill Maher. He campaigned for the Kenyan's reelection, and even testified before congress for legalizing gay marriage. Once he got Matt to start attending Imago, the rest of us flocked to his services. They were an unstoppable team. All in all, Imago drew almost 7,500 every Sunday.

In the kitchen, Lauren fumbled to crack open another package of crescent rolls.

I was wearing an old Imago t-shirt when we went to buy the crescent rolls earlier in the afternoon. The cashier wanted us to know how sorry she was for our loss. I immediately

regretted wearing the shirt. I didn't want to a charity case. I wanted to fight back. Lauren said thanks and grabbed my hand to pull me out of the store before I said something she'd regret.

“Are you making those Cheesecake bars?” Matt asked walking in to the kitchen. “If this is your way of coping, use the kitchen all you want.”

Matt was in the middle of a short term sabbatical from his training diet. He planned to make the most of his food therapy.

“Remember last time you made them?” he asked.

“Like three months ago, when Jeremy cheated on me and I wanted to eat myself out of it and you ate half the pan,” she said putting the last line of rolls on top of the mixture.

I remember the night well. I had already fallen hard for Lauren when Jeremy started sleeping around with other girls. I'm not a proponent of slutting around as Matt sexistly calls it, but I wanted her to know that I was available if she wanted to get revenge on Jeremy. Like a back up plan.

“How's he doing, anyway? Still coming tonight?” he asked. Matt viewed Lauren like a little naïve sister, much to Lauren and Jeremy's disdain. She originally thought Matt was interested in her and she liked the idea of dating a division one running back, but after he never made an official move, she resided to the idea that was another Christian boy stricken by fear of falling prey to the siren song of dating and that she should just give up trying.

Matt would more or less confess Lauren's sins for her in the group. She would text him whenever she messed up. She trusted him, even after being screwed time and time again. Everyone knew that she wouldn't keep herself accountable if it wasn't for Matt, so we dealt with the awkwardness. He said he was doing it for her good, hoping that she'd learn from it.

“He’s running late. He wanted to see if he could pick up anything?”

“I think we’re good. Mike and Shannon cancelled, so it looks it’s just us four,” Matt said.

After our afternoon, I kind of wish they would come over. I would at least be able to know what they were talking about. The guilt hadn’t really set in yet. I guess my face had contorted a bit, and Matt detected it quicker than I did.

“What? Is that problem?” he asked.

“I mean, won’t it get awkward?” I replied, forgetting that he didn’t know.

“I’m telling Jeremy to bring some Jameson and ginger ale,” Lauren said.

“You know how I feel about that in my apartment,” Matt said.

“It’s just once, Matt, lighten up, for Jeremy’s sake. It’s my apartment too,” Lauren said as she retreated to my bedroom to grab her bra. I prayed Matt didn’t recognize anything. I figured if he saw something, he would’ve already made a comment about it. Things had been tense between us since the news about Terry. He said midterms were kicking his butt, and that coach was pushing practices to beat LSU this week.

“*Sports Illustrated* won’t find out,” I teased.

“You know my Dad’s history with it. I just hate it,” Matt said.

“Dude, you drank your way through freshmen year. Our pastor killed himself. We can have a drink. Lighten up.”

“Whatever, man,” he sighed.

“Just let me know if a reporter comes by. We’ll hide it.”

I joked with him, but most of the time I caught myself getting a little too bitter with him. Him and I played NCAA football on the PS3 every Friday morning and I let him play as A&M. I

learned it was easier to give in rather than fight with him. Besides, it must be weird playing yourself in a game like that. It had to draw you out of the gameplay. He never got a dime off the games either. He was too pumped to even care about the supposed legality of it all.

“Honestly, man, I’d like something to take the edge off,” I said.

“You know he drank a lot, Ryan.”

“But with Terry it’s different. I’m sure he drank numbing the affair.”

“Maybe. But still. You shouldn’t drink. It clouds your judgment.”

I paused and looked at Lauren. “I guess I’m just thinking about why it even matters to us. He wasn’t my dad. Shouldn’t we feel more sorry for his wife?”

People cared about Matt and the way he lived. Well-meaning grandparents bought their grandsons Matt’s jersey for Christmas. He mattered to people. Be like him, they said, meaning really; he’s the best we got because most of *them* are pretty messed up. Most of college football seems to be one rape charge away from Gomorra. Matt represented the next wave for Saturdays. He carried Tebow’s torch as far its light would shine. I never saw the need for a Tebow. We were always told Jesus should be enough for us. It’s this celebrity evangelical game that throws guys like Terry under the bus.

“Because we’re sinful, man,” he said. “But, I know you feel something for her, man, because you actually have some empathy, Ryan. Don’t lose that, man. That’s what it boils down to.”

Shouldn’t I be feeling guilt by now, then? This was the scariest thing about this whole thing. Facing Jeremy could be avoided, but I had to live with myself. I knew the guilt was supposed to come, but I was waiting. I kind of wanted guilt because then I could work past it, but

there was really nothing. I pictured sleeping with Lauren all the time. Terry called it lust. But that didn't really matter, especially now. I called it coping with singleness. The girl I loved was getting screwed by a cheating atheist, and the best thing I had was a romantic imagination of waking up early after making love and frying her some of her favorite vegan scramble.

"I don't know," I said.

"Stop being humble, man," he said. "You know you have the biggest heart out of all of us."

"But is a big heart enough? Like really? Terry seemed to have a pretty goddamn big heart."

"Well listen. I can have all the articles I want, but you didn't have my freshman year. You're not fighting back numbness all the time. You had 20 years of church and love and grace."

"In theory. I mean no one really does that anymore do they?"

"You know that's not all true."

I grew up in a Baptist church that didn't have a whole lot to say about grace, but really neither did Matt. It was what Terry tried to teach him the most. I came home after a party my sophomore year, I had had a few drinks, and it showed. He looked at me, shook his head, and took the Tylenol to his room and duct taped the light switches on so that I'd have to deal with it when I woke up. He wanted to teach me a lesson about drinking. When I bought some condoms later that year for a frat party that some guys in my college algebra class invited me to, thinking that I may have had the chance to finally use one, he tore up the box and gave me a lecture about how if some reporter came by the apartment and found a box of condoms, that would be the end of him. He lived in this continual fear that someone would find out he wasn't perfect. He

projected that on to every one he was close to. I don't know if it was out of a selfish fear of being found out that he hangs out with sinners or if it was simply that he held himself to such an unreasonably high standard that he didn't know how to let things go.

Jeremy finally rang the doorbell. Matt answered.

“Yo, Tebow! How's it goin'?” Jeremy spent more time trying to look like Chris Hemsworth than finding a job, and he talked a lot about his stand-up comedy career. He said it's like being a pastor except actually making a difference, he said with his tongue firmly pressed in his cheek knowing that it would piss off Matt.. He opened up for some big time comic that came through the school one time. He thought himself to be a big deal; Lauren found it attractive. Humor and abs were her thing.

“You know man, straight up,” he looked at me. “I'm sorry bro. I know this whole things been super shitty for y'all. Please know I'm sorry.”

I didn't want him to be sorry. I didn't want his sympathy, especially as he walked through the door. What was I supposed to do? Look at him and say I hooked up with your girlfriend because she finally let me. If he was an asshole to me at least I could at least feel like I was getting even.

Earlier, she laid on my bed looking through some old pictures of Terry and I and we talked about one sermon he gave on sex. I was on the computer clicking refresh on our local news website, seeing if they had updated their article on his suicide. This had become a habit for me. I would type his name on Twitter and click the see all button. There were a lot of big time pastors sending there love out to Imago Dei. Every new tweet, article, or blog post confirmed my sadness. I wasn't alone in this. Other people felt this lost, this angry, this sad.

She was over to bake for the group, but she wanted to see my room which, I figured meant she wanted something else. You look into that sort of thing when all you can think about is being with someone. You make every little signal something point towards the bedroom. We both agreed that premarital sex wasn't always wrong, but she was the only one with experience to back it up. I only had some assumptions about the matter.

“Do you ever think we could be together?” I asked her.

She said that she could see it happening. She talked about how when people grieve they do things differently than they normally do. It provides for them a cover. She complained about Jeremy's lack of faith for a bit and I listened. It's what you do my father always told me; if you want to get with a girl, you listen. They love that he said.

She paused and turned her head away from a moment after mentioning how much it hurt that Jeremy continually didn't care about her. I went in for a kiss. She pulled away for a moment, but I went further into her lips, she grasped the back of neck with her palms and forced me towards her. She tasted like cinnamon. I had kissed other girls, but none of them kissed me back like that. She started unbuttoning my shirt and with each button my reality came more and more in focus. I lifted my arms up, like in the movies. This was it. This was the moment that would change everything according to every youth pastor everywhere. This was the point of no return.

She took off her shirt and moved my hands to the clasps on her bra. I thought of Jeremy experiencing this same thing with her earlier in the week and a part of me felt he was in the room with us. I needed to prove I could do this. She handed me a condom from her purse.

I expected to feel terrible. This was my youth pastor's worst nightmare and some how, over years of purity retreats and *Every Young Man's Battle* book clubs it became mine.

She knew the raw part inside of her that she had to tend to after she was done with this sort of a thing. That part of me was untapped. She told me to try to get to that place and quickly. It would be the only way to get up in the morning. I tried to find it for a moment, but I couldn't.

Maybe this was a good thing. Maybe I couldn't separate this from everything else. Maybe that's actually the scariest thing you can do in these situations. I had to remind myself to feel remorse for taking what wasn't mine, but I couldn't feign it. I couldn't force myself to feel sorry. I had to reconcile the fact that I simply enjoyed it.

"Do you feel guilty?" I asked still sweating. I knew in some recess of my mind that I couldn't keep harping on this. This wasn't normal. Most guys didn't have this happen to them and I would be putting her in a bad spot by forcing this.

"I didn't until you asked," she laughed it off. So I did too. "Just pretend it never happened. You'll feel better."

"I don't want to." Was I that bad that she wanted us to forget this?

"Trust me. This is how you navigate this whole thing," she said.

And here I was standing in front of Jeremy still internally searching for some place for my guilt to rest for a goddamn second.

"Hey man, I brought some drinks, hope that's okay," Jeremy said.

"It's alright, man," Matt said. "I'm glad you're here."

We all sat down at the dinner table and Lauren, him and I popped open a Shock Top. When Jeremy's father passed away, he left him some of the money he stole from his last church. It didn't take long for him to open up about the whole thing. He wore his heart on his sleeve in

one of the most un-clichéd ways I've ever seen, but then again, I grew up Southern Baptist. Vulnerability wasn't really a thing we did. Ever.

“So, how are you processing everything,” Jeremy asked to start us off.

Matt spoke up first, “I think I'm struggling most with the why. You know? Like why he'd have go and do that. Why he needed the affair. Wasn't God enough for him?”

There's an obligatory nod everyone must do before you move forward from that kind of question.

“He didn't need the affair,” Lauren said, “He didn't need it. He wanted it. We gotta refocus that”

“He was one of the most honest guys I met. He didn't want it. He obviously felt sorry about it. He wanted to get rid of it.” Matt said sipping his Gatorade. He always drank the stuff from the bottle. Everything he drank had to be from a labeled cup, just in case some photographer was out. He couldn't be caught with a solo cup, even if it was clean.

“Well he continued with her didn't he?” I asked him.

“Yeah. But I'm saying, why'd he want it then? I looked at the photos from the paper. She wasn't all that hot.” He paused and looked to see if there was a response, specifically from Lauren. “I mean, it probably had something to do with his wife. He probably wanted more.”

“Well that's just flat out- sexism,” I said.

“It's in the Bible, man, the women tempt the men since Eve and Adam,” Matt said.

“So is taking responsibility for your own shit. Yeah, Terry shat in public and probably would've caused a massive media outcry if he didn't kill himself, but he would've at least owned up to it. You're blaming the affair on the woman.”

Matt just kind of looked around the room slyly. He wanted out of the confrontation. I knew I was too strong on him, but it's important. Not just for my friend Matt, but for the Matt that's jersey is sold. There's too much sexism in the church. If I have the ear of one of the leaders, we need to clear this up.

Jeremy piped in, "I think he just means that society would've had a huge problem with it."

"Why do we even care? We have to take at least some of the responsibility." I said.

"No we don't," Matt said. "He should've been held under the microscope. He put himself there. I'm not taking responsibility for it."

"Not everyone holds themselves to your stupid standard."

"It's not stupid, it biblic--"

"Shut up about this. I get it. You're pissed at the woman. But it doesn't give you a right to be stomp over everyone else, you fucking prick."

I had never snapped at Matt before. I had never been that direct with him. It always bothered me, but you're supposed to bottle that sort of thing up.

He whispered, "You have no idea." The certainty in his voice hinted that at any moment the on the field, Matt, the one that every pro team in the country coveted, could come out and end me.

"I do," I said. "I won the Preacher Award my senior year of high school. I started a Bible study. I get the 'your life's in a fishbowl' thing." More than anyone, I feel that I can relate to Matt.

That award sat uselessly in my parent's attic. I hated it at the time. I didn't want to be known as the Christian kid. I didn't want to be the guy everyone turned to make Catholic jokes. I didn't want to be the guy who had to wear shirts with dumb bible verses on them. I was that guy for far too long. Living with Matt only exacerbated the issue.

"It's not the same."

Lauren and Jeremy awkwardly shifted in their seats. She tried to break the tension, "I think the bars are done," Lauren said as she rose to retrieve them.

"Fuck the bars, Lauren," Matt said. He never cursed unless he fucking meant it.

"Matt," she tried to calm him.

"Stop it. Look at me." He didn't. "Look at me!"

I looked up to see Matt's eyes light up. I knew where he was going. Jeremy tried to get up to help Lauren. Everyone kept trying. We all tried. There was a sense we all knew where this was heading. We all were coping. It was just coping. This is how Matt coped.

"Jeremy, sit down. You'll want to hear this too."

I tried to find that place Lauren lived in. The part where my moral life and beliefs were separate from what I did. That place that I wasn't my worst mistake. That place where I didn't believe what we did was a mistake, but simply something that we did. That place where even if Matt blew us out of our murky water, at least I could handle myself. I needed this place now more than ever.

"Lauren, how'd you get that hickey on your neck?"

There was a way out of this without it blowing up. I thought she'd lie. She had to. It wasn't a hickey she'd say. She was baking and bruised it or something. She turned to Jeremy and her tears started.

"I want to break up," she said.

Matt shot me a glance, and I had to just take it. I knew Matt wanted to be in charge here. He wanted to show the moral high ground.

Lauren asked Jeremy to go outside so they could talk. He followed her out. I don't think he ever saw it coming. How can you prepare for that type of thing?

"You two hooked up, right?" Matt asked after they had left.

"What does it fucking matter?" I'm not letting him off the hook this time.

"You know what Lauren's going through, and you took advantage of her."

At that moment, Jeremy started yelling outside the door.

"Like it matters to you. Why would you pull something like that?"

"Lauren's like a sister to me."

"You're taking advantage of her, just with religion."

He just shifted his eyes towards the door and then back at me.

"You know it, you want to rescue her don't you?" I said.

"That's called responsibility."

"That's called bullshit."

Matt put his head in his palms and seemed to be praying.

"Like praying is going to help this?" I asked. As the words came out I knew I was just as bad as him that I was lashing out, but I wanted him to see how he fucked up here.

“What are you doing to help?”

“Trying to find happiness, I guess.”

“And that’s helpful?”

“If I’m happy, I can help others find it too.”

“I’m pretty happy, Ryan.”

“No, you aren’t, and you know it. You wish you could party again. You know you wish you could screw around again. You don’t genuinely want to give it up.”

“You’re damn right I don’t. But you can’t do everything you want.”

“Why?”

He sat there for a second searching through his museum of verses.

“I don’t want to talk about this.”

I feared that I was next in Jeremy’s wrath. I needed to win this one.

“Because I’m right?” I said triumphantly.

“Maybe, Ryan.”

“Then say it.”

“Say what?”

“Say I was right.”

“Will it make you happy?”

“Yes.”

Jeremy yelled *I love you* at the top of lungs, like Stanley in *Streetcar*, only it was in my apartment complex and to my Stella. It was the only part of the fight I could actually make out the words to.

Matt waited to see my reaction, but I wasn't going to give him any.

"Well, what are you right about?"

"That you don't need God to be happy. You don't need this, you don't need Terry's, you don't need small groups and bashing on atheists. There has to be happiness out there."

I had been pursuing ministry for years because I felt it was my calling. People thought I'd be great at it. My parents thought I'd help so many people come closer to Christ, but look what it did to Terry. Look what it did to Jeremy's Dad. Look what it did to Matt. Hell. Look what it did to me.

"Do you believe that, Ryan?"

"Sure," I said.

"I'm scared for you."

"Thanks."

"Genuinely, man. You don't just give up on something like faith that quickly."

"Maybe I wasn't predestined like you."

The shouting outside calmed down to silence, and I stood up to check the door to see if they were both alive. Matt followed. I hoped Lauren was there, crying and needing an arm or a shoulder or something. Not that I wanted her to be hurt, but I wanted to be there for her. I wanted to know that she saw something in me, than she didn't see in Jeremy.

"So, that's what this is really about? You don't believe anymore?" he asked like he knew the answer.

"I don't know."

"You act like you do."

“You act like *you* do,” I replied.

I opened the door to check and no one was around. I heard the sound of Lauren breathing heavily muffled through the door. I sat on the bench next to our door and Matt leaned up against the wall.

“Because I have to. Because you have to act a little bit,” he said.

“I don’t want to act anymore.” I said.

“Then don’t. Look what acting did to Terry.”

Lauren’s moaning got heavier and heavier. I imagined her up against the door right next to us. It was too easy to think back.

“Aren’t you scared that’s going to happen to you?” I asked

“That I’ll kill myself after an affair with some woman?” He kept looking toward to the staircase.

“That you’ll feel the need to.”

“Terry didn’t have football. He was paid to be religious. It was all he had.”

“But isn’t this your thing?”

“Another guy will come up soon. I just need to tend to what’s in front me, and, right now, that’s being a bit over the top.”

“I don’t want this anymore,” I said.

“Then, honestly, give it up. I don’t think you really want to or you would have by now, but if you’re feeling like that is the best thing. Do it. But you need to decide,” he said.

I waited to hear her moan again, but she didn’t. She never told me how to get to the place where I would forget. She obviously resided there.

“Listen, I’m sorry I pulled that in there. You have every right to be pissed at me. But don’t make this out to be a faith crisis. If you’re upset about Terry, let’s talk. If you’re feeling guilt about sleeping with Lauren, let’s talk. But me lashing out at you can’t be a good enough reason for you give it up. Be pissed, man, but don’t give this up.”

I sat up from the bench and went inside. Matt followed me again, but he turned at the kitchen to grab some of the cheesecake bars. I went over to a window facing the parking lot to see Lauren’s bra hit Jeremy’s front window. How could she be so openly careless? How could she be so reckless? In my goddamned parking lot. I ran into my room rummaged around for a few minutes and found an old baseball bat from intramurals. Matt was bending over to find a knife to eat some more, and I slipped through the door without alerting him. I was ready to finally make him pay. I pictured me smashing Jeremy’s headlights in. I pictured pulling him out of the car and battering him, like in a Tarantino film. Straddling Jeremy. Right fist in the mouth. Left fist in the temple. I wanted to smash his skull in. I wanted him to feel something besides his godless apathy. I wanted Lauren to come down from wherever place she found to cope and live in reality with me. I pictured taking over for Jeremy in the car. I pictured her saying that that’s what she wanted all along me to be a real man. I thought of all the sermons Terry gave about masculinity and how a Biblical man fights for a woman. I wanted to live the type of the life I could be proud of.

I ran down the stairs ready to make them pay when on the last step, I heard an engine begin to rumble. I slammed open the door and saw Jeremy’s red Camaro shoot out of the spot. Lauren was sitting next to him, with my hope of revenge in the backseat. I tried to force my bat so deep into the concrete, like Arthur’s sword. I popped my shoulder out of place. Before the

pain set in, I left the bat and tried to run after the car, sprinting in the middle of the road. I tried to push past the shock, but it wore off. My knees hit the concrete in surrender. I laid my head back and spread out in the middle of the pavement and stared at the sun, the clouds, the birds jostling for position.

EXODUS

Dear Pastor Austin Smith,

I'm writing to you this morning because I'm sure you've seen the news, and I want to set the record straight. This letter will be released online later this evening. I wanted you to see this earlier to compose your thoughts. I'm bearing this cross by myself, in so much that I can and hopefully this lets you know what I feel in a way that honors God, my family, Owen, you and the congregants of Brooksville Bible Church.

It started the night Owen showed up at our door after their mastectomy.

I know you don't accept they or their as a pronoun for Owen. Truth be told, it took me several times of calling them her before they drilled it in my mind. You always said that the most important of youth ministry is connecting with them on their level. I know you probably thought it was childish every time I brought up gender-neutral pronouns in staff meetings. I'd like to think that I fought you on it for Owen's sake, but I can't ignore this sick part of me that just wanted to be against something for the sake of antagonizing someone like I've been antagonized.

You referred to the pronouns as "a cry for attention" and that "she should deal with the confusion like a woman of God." You told me it was my responsibility to fix Owen. I never asked what that would've looked like, what fixing Owen would've been?

Would they have no longer gone by *they*? Would they have identified as a girl? Would they have found a boy to date? Would they have had a prom? Would they have gotten married? Had kids? Would they have gone to sleep knowing something wasn't right?

I don't believe that you hated Owen. I think you only saw your side of the coin.

If only you could've seen it, standing back in my doorway, I'd never seen a smile quite a large.

"I finally did it," they said. "My dad kicked me out, but I fucking did it, Tim. I fucking did it."

They reached out and pulled me in with a close-ness unlike any moment we had shared before. I could feel the surgical wrapping right below my chest, where their breasts typically rubbed against my abs. While she was tall for her age, she only reached my shoulders.

My first sermon for your youth was on the Beatitudes. It was a revised talk of what I did my thesis on at Emory.

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

If people persecute you on account of me, then rejoice. You are in great company.

When you hired me, I was soaked in inductive bible study. In that first talk, I told them that, as Christians, we need to be brothers and sisters united in the holy cause in bringing Heaven to Earth. It's our holy mission to make down here look more like up there. After the talk, you came up to me and asked why there wasn't more bible in it? You had some other critiques about homiletics and such; that I moved too much and was jittery. I always hated your critiques on

many different levels, but namely I think I knew you were right. I don't think I ever thanked you for showing up.

After you left, a short brown-haired acne-bombed faced girl donning a two size too big UnderOath t-shirt, skinny jeans, and black Chucks approached me. She didn't look like any of the boys or girls from the student interviews. The deacons' kids and Tyler dressed in Ralph Lauren and seemed to take pride in ironing pleated club shorts.

"Why did you say "sons and daughters" and not "children"?" she asked out of breath. I was more confused than anything.

"Well... let's start with this, What's your name?" I asked.

"Owen. Why did you say "sons and daughters"?" she repeated.

"Well Owen," I said, "why do you ask-?"

"Because it alienates people. It leaves no room for the gender neutral," she said.

"You mean transgendered?" I asked. I was so far out of my league. I consider myself fairly liberal, but I still went to college in Georgia. You can only be so liberal in the south.

"I mean gender neutral, like God. Male *and* female," she said.

"I truly appreciate you saying that. You certainly gave me something to think about."

I invited her to come up throughout the week to the offices and we would talk about the gender-inclusive stuff. She hadn't told me that they'd identified as such. I figured I would listen to her and I get to the root of her problem. There would probably be some divorce or her dad was probably an asshole and I figured we'd meet a few times and she'd be done.

My pastor did the same with me when I told him I wanted to go Emory.

“Guys who go there end up embracing all sorts of perversion,” he said. Perversion again being a euphemism for the LGBT community. Since CS Lewis said it, it apparently seems okay for every one to say that now a days.

“You’re going to turn into one of those progressive, universalist types,” he said.

“There are worse things,” I said. The corner of my smile inched a bit higher. Tyler has a smile like this. It was the first thing I noticed about your son. It wasn’t his fault.

“God Damn Emory and that load of heresy. I’m worried for you, son.”

He used “goddamn” often, like he was somehow privy to ask God to damn things. I became a pastor to try to push ~~asshole~~ guys like him out of the pulpit. I wanted to be in the profession of showing the world a deep love from our Lord. I wanted to embrace those whom Jesus embraced. And if I’m brutally honest with myself, I like having hundreds of eyes plastered on me for my sermons. I like it, but it’s not my motivation. You don’t do it for the eyes, but it’s impossible to ignore.

In Owen and mine fifth meeting they mentioned something about a surgery.

“My Dad thinks it’s a bad idea, too permanent,” they said.

“He does have a point on the permanence thing,” I said.

They looked down in their seat.

“I’m not agreeing with him, but I am saying it is permanent. You need to consider that” I said.

“I wouldn’t want them back,” they said.

“How do you think your Dad would react?”

“He’d fucking hate it. Absolutely fucking hate it.”

They'd curse in our sessions. I tried asking them to limit it, but I thought about what it meant to allow them to say what they needed. The way God listens. That's the kind of listening I want to pursue.

"How about your Mom?"

"She'd probably be supportive. Since the pills, she's been pretty okay with almost everything."

Owen was caught at school with a baggie of Atavan and Adderall that they had purchased off some dealer at lunch. In their backpack was two bloodied razor blades and a suicide note dated and timed for later that day. It got picked up in the local news and parents were interviewed, principals were blamed. She had been to Verge for about three months at that point. It was easy to call her a visitor, or *seeker*, as you call them, and separate her from us. ~~You do that all the time.~~ We do that all the time. I do that all the time. We create categories for people. We box them in and make them jump through a bunch of hoops just for them to change to a more holy box.

Turns out, I was right about the Dad. We talked about forgiveness in the meeting right before their surgery.

"You can't expect me to forgive everyone. I'm not ready for that yet. I'm not saying I'm not open to it later on. But right now. I want to fucking kill him or me or something because that guy made me feel like shit. Worthless shit."

Even though I let them, you would regularly mention that I work on their language. I tried to get them to limit the f-bomb on church property, but there is a place for strong language. They still need to learn when and where, I agree, but I'd much rather a group of high schoolers to

curse, but be honest with their struggles, than a brood of vipers masquerading as emotionally healthy. ~~Also, fuck never hurt anyone.~~

I know we all have church wounds. In staff meetings, you told us about your pastor who abused you. You described it in sermons. I imagine that took a great deal of bravery. I want blame you for a lot, but you seek a consistent honesty that I lack. Despite enduring the abuse, you kept wanting to preach. I admire your determinism. I admire that you know what it's like to go into hell. You know this better than me, but Owen knew it better than both of us.

When you first hired me, I didn't see him in you. I saw a Shepard who cared about his flock. I saw a faithful husband. I was hungry for someone to pull me under their wings and you offered. I didn't know your politics or how you would handle the growth of our church like that. I didn't know that you'd handle this, with such gracelessness.

What we are dealing with here is a child of God taking their own life because they were told they were a mistake by society, but mostly by our church. And not just that they had made a mistake or sinned, but that at their core they were a mistake, an error, a mutation. They were told time and time again from people representing a perfect, omnipotent God that He had taken a break while creating them.

At Emory a few classmates of mine wanted to go to the Planned Parenthood in Downtown Atlanta and surround some of the Baptist protestors with signs that read things like "God loves you, no matter what" or "You can't out sin God's grace" or some other verse. I went along because I was interested in the girl that was organizing the event. When we got there, I sorted the through the signs and couldn't decide between one that read "God is love" and another one "God loves you." At a certain point, it all just seems so trite. It was one of the moments

where I felt completely removed. We experience these in ministry and tie up our calling with our faith. We feel removed between speaking on 1 John or Matthew or Exodus and it feels so empty or meeting which students up for coffee. We decide between “Our God” and “Cannons” and forget that it’s only other Christians who even know enough to give a damn. To students like Owen, they care about being known. They care about being loved.

I told the girl I was interested in that I wasn’t interested in holding up the signs.

“If you don’t do this with us, I’m not sure I believe that you truly love Jesus or at least take him seriously,” she said.

It’s this moral chicken ~~shit~~ game we play in the evangelical community. We are pawns in God’s political chess match, both sides believing that He’s got our backs or at least He’s got his back against our enemies.

But here’s why I’m writing this: Owen’s main enemy at Verge was Tyler. Tyler, I’m sure, shared stories with you about Owen. Since I’ve been the youth pastor here, Tyler has stolen three students’ clothes when they were showering. He has yelled out curse words to throw off the worship team. He has made out with other Verge girls and has asked for topless photos from at least two others. I tried to confront him a few times, but, to be honest, I was scared what you’d do to me. I didn’t want you to fire me. I didn’t want you lying about me to our congregation. I don’t blame you for Tyler. I was the one who lacked the courage to call your son out.

You and I both agree on why the church matters so much. You and I both know that it can be “the hope of the world” as Hybel’s calls it. The church, especially youth group can be used to teach scripture in a new and exciting way. I’m sorry I didn’t give Tyler a more exciting adventure than the one you gave him. I wish I would’ve inspired him to love others more than he

loves himself, but I realize that I didn't love you in that same way. I let theological convictions cloud my actions. I'm sorry.

Owen was sweeping the lobby floor at the end of one of our dodgeball nights two weeks after their mastectomy. Tyler was waiting for you to pick him up with a few of his buddies. I was in the auditorium cleaning up the remnants of pizza crusts, soda spills, and some vomit from some victorious middle schooler in our soda chugging competition. I could hear slight mumblings, but I wasn't sure what was happening.

Tyler and his friends were laughing about some of the girls Tyler had "been with" and Owen overheard it. Gossiping about sex was a trigger point for Owen. Considering their life, it made sense.

They grabbed the broom and swung it at them, hitting Tyler in his gut. Tyler lunged forward at them. I'm sure Tyler never expressed to you this side of things. One of his friends told me in confidence told me the following.

"Bitch. Never do that again," he said grasping their waist.

"Call me that again," Owen said.

"Bitch."

Owen wasn't overwhelmingly strong and the spot where the breasts were was still very tender, but she swung at him hard. Tyler stopped their fist and twisted their arm backwards. He shoved them against the wall.

"Hand me the broom," he said.

His group of buddies, whom your wife has served tacos every Tuesday since they were 5th graders for a pre bible study dinner, grabbed one lying against the wall.

“Grab the cunt’s arms.”

Two of them grabbed Owen’s arms and legs as Tyler fumbled with the button on Owen’s jeans.

“What the fuck are you doing?” Owen yelled. They writhed around. Tyler yanked the pants down revealing their pink thong. One his buddies covered their mouth laughing.

“Still a slut, I see. Like anyone would ever fuck you,” he said.

Tyler’s inner thighs placed the broomstick in trajectory of Pat’s ass.

I opened the door right before any contact ever occurred.

“Tyler!” I screamed. The broom slammed against the ground, as did Owen.

“Oh shit,” he said. ~~You should probably work on his language.~~

“What the hell were you doing?” I ran over to them. My shut off. There’s no class for this in seminary. There’s no seminary class on what do when you run into your boss’ son attempting to rape a girl.

“Fucking around.”

Owen grabbed their backpack and ran out the door. I should’ve run after here.

“Fucking around?”

“With you at least,” he said. His friends had all run off at this point.

“You’re going to jail.”

“Are you going to tell my dad?”

“Or the police.” I started getting my phone out of my pocket.

“Hey, up to you, man,” he said. “It’s also up to me to tell my father about your meetings with Owen.”

“About what?” I stopped pulling the phone out of my pocket.

“How you are sleeping with Owen.”

“You know I’m not. Even your father knows I’m not.”

“He hates you. He’s just looking for a reason to fire you. Even at the *suspicion* of abuse, you’re gone.”

“Try me.”

I should’ve never let it get to that point. I should’ve stopped listening to him. I should’ve called the police. I should’ve done so many things. But what I did was nothing.

You pulled into the parking lot.

“Who’s he going to believe? The youth pastor or his son, it’s up to you, Tim.”

He left the building and made a heart with his thumb and fingers. I dialed Owen.

No pick up.

I called them again.

And again. Nothing.

I knew the next call I’d have to make was to their parents.

That recording is part of the investigation now. You can find it on the Local 6 website. Their Dad had kicked them out and verbally assaulted Owen when they got home. That’s when they grabbed the pills and the gun. They texted me to pray for them signing the text “see you on the other side.”

Which other side do you think they’re talking about?

Which other side do you think Owen is on right now?

As our commandments are meant to be written on our hearts, I can't erase these doubts. Is God more like Owen's Dad? Is that the type of father we serve and are supposed to fight for? The type of father that infinitely abuses and torments over finite decisions?

Owen took their life because they thought they were a mistake. Guys like us do that for a living. We did it. We did this to Owen. They left this earth believing that God didn't mean for them to be here. Original sin, total depravity, the devil, hell. What the fuck are we doing?

I'm asking you to accept my resignation, effective immediately. I don't have another job lined up, nor will you be asked to give any recommendations for me.

"We're in the business of diagnosing and prescribing sinning slaves" you said.

I want out of the business.

Owen wasn't perfect, I'm not perfect, and you're not perfect. I'm not here to claim that I'm superior or that even writing this to you will change your beliefs on anything except the events that took place before today. I stand before God and my family and want to grieve Owen's loss honestly. We did this to Owen. I want what's best for you. I want what's best for Tyler. I can't imagine what he's going through. Mostly because I am so consumed with rage on Owen's behalf.

Who is going to speak up for them? Who stands up for the marginalized? Who stands up for those who take their lives? We have to acknowledge this. This is a reality in which we live. We're the ones who killed them and we'll get away with this. Under some guise of theological truth.

I can't keep this up. I don't want to hate myself more than I do now, to be considered theologically right. I can't bear that weight with the title of "pastor." I call on you as a man of God's word not to ignore this. I call on you to not push this aside.

In all the love I can muster,

Tim Danwell

Former Youth Pastor, Brooksville Bible Church

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