

ABSTRACT

Better is One Day

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Every court case is a story, a drama played out before peer and judge. Characters move around stage amid recitations of scripted lines. Too often, the casual observer ignores the real people with unique stories and motivations who comprise these cases, and instead focuses just on the decision. Based on the Supreme Court case *Masterpiece Cakeshop v Colorado Civil Rights Commission*, “Better is One Day” follows the story of Patrice Monohan, a disgraced trial lawyer trying to find work in the legal field. Dogged by memories of her abusive religious father, Patrice struggles to find meaning in her professional, personal, and spiritual life. A chance at a redemption lands in her lap in the form of a Supreme Court bound religious liberty case but it might just be at the cost of her conscience. Faced with impossible decisions and gut-wrenching doubts, Patrice is tried in the jurisdiction of every court.

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BETTER IS ONE DAY

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of
Baylor University
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Honors Program

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Waco, Texas

May 2020

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For my Lord God

For a day in your courts is better

Than a thousand elsewhere.

I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God

Than dwell in the tents of wickedness.

For the Lord God is a sun and shield;

The Lord bestows favor and honor.

No good thing does he withhold

From those who walk uprightly.

O Lord of hosts,

Blessed is the one who trusts in you.

Psalm 84:10-12 (ESV)

CHAPTER ONE

Doors

There comes a time when one questions the most fundamental principles of one's existence, when the threads of one's story either knot so densely or unravel so completely that the tapestry turns illegible and all sense of substance and meaning falls by the wayside. It just so happened that Patrice Monohan reached that point in her life at the exact moment when she attempted to pull open the push door of Beeman & Fatellia, LLC.

Pale sunlight filtered through the yellowing leaves of the dual beeches on either side of the modern-in-the-seventies business park. Though the sun sat at its peak, it failed to protect Patrice from the chilled winds that cut through her light jacket, the only one she owned. One usually only donned a jacket in San Francisco to put on airs, as an accessory. Patrice had done so on occasion, that fundraiser at the Ritz-Carlton for Dr. Glen Meitzer's reelection campaign (a who's who of northern California, of course), and perhaps once or twice when she and James first kindled their spasmodic relationship. A jacket in central Oklahoman autumn conveyed nothing of the sort, and yet, when Patrice had pulled it across her shoulders that morning, it had the feel of a mask, meant to protect her true face from onlookers. Or precisely the opposite.

She stood with her hand rested on the brass handle as the small failure echoed in her hollow chest. It spread like liquid nitrogen through her veins and numbed her fingers. Surely not, after all this. To be bested by a plain door - a bridge too damn far. Only two

options. Either to return to her car and call off the entire affair, or to admit defeat, in the form of an easy push, to the most inconsequential obstacle one could face.

A minute of motionlessness offered her a third option: die here on this threshold, bony hand ever clutching the brass handle, a pile of dust in a light suede jacket. An option not without its positives. To live for infinity at the stoop, to prevent all manner of defeat by refusing to participate in the contest... no, just another defeat. Patrice, Patrice, what a shame. Surrounded by crucial losses on three fronts and all for a bit of brass.

A middle-aged man exited the building using the other of the glass double doors and shot Patrice a strange look. She slipped inside before the door swung closed. Victory.

The interior of the office refrained from the trappings so often accustomed with the illustrious practice of law. Gone were the floor to ceiling glass windows, the immaculate greenery (satin, of course, but only seasoned horticulturalists could tell), and the oil paintings of the founding partners, begrudgingly done at their wives' request. Religious imagery stood out on every side, more akin to the administrative wing of a church than a place of work. I can do all things, blah blah blah. A crucifix on the wall, a star of David in a display case, a star and crescent in a frame. Out of the corner of her eye, she even noticed a small statue of the Buddha with lit incense. Her son Peter's face swam in her mind, the day of his dedication, so long ago. Sixteen years in November.

Seated behind an overcrowded cherry oak desk, the receptionist waved Patrice over. Perhaps mid-twenties, flaxen hair, and a bright smile - the kind of man that knew he wanted more from life than the role of a receptionist, but had no rush to move on quite yet. Give it a few years, kid. Hit the eject button soon or you'll die chained to that ugly piece of hewn wood. A tacky brass nameplate introduced him as one Isaiah Foster. He

spoke with a quiet voice, as if he meant to share a secret but had not yet decided how much to tell.

“Hello ma’am. How can I help you?”

“Here to see a Mr. Beeman, I have an appointment with him at 2 o’clock,” she replied. He clacked away at his keyboard in a blur.

“Mrs. Gotzek?” he asked. “Patrice Gotzek? Of Lemecki, Bratt, and Koulsakis?”

She started at the name. The past never quite stayed past. How rude of it. “No, Patrice Monohan. Not Gotzek. Not any- it’s - it’s not important. Just Monohan.” Her dark complexion hid the blush from her cheeks, but the mislabel had caught her off guard, to say the least. An image of James, unbidden, swept across her mind. The tough, hot summer. The scent of sweat and vellum, heady, rich. Deep red days and endless blue skies. She forced the image away.

Isaiah Foster did not hesitate. “Indeed. Please have a seat and Mr. Beeman will be right out.” Before he had finished the sentence, a set of double doors swung open and a large-gutted man in a charcoal suit a size too small strode through. He wore horn-rimmed spectacles on a thin silver chain around his neck, far too small for his wideset, ruddy face.

“No need for that, here I am, here I am, and how many times have I told you, Isaiah? Mr. Beeman is my brother. You, and our guest, ought call me Phil, or Philip if the mood strikes you.” he chided. Foster nodded, unfazed, as though this battle had been fought many times before this, neither side gaining ground in the No Man’s Land of inter-office formalities.

The man, presumably Beeman, locked eyes on Patrice and smiled wide, white teeth assembled in neat rows. He extended a thick bear paw of a hand, which Patrice grasped with the proper amount of firmness to display strength without being aggressive and lifted it up and down the customary three iterations. His hand swallowed hers whole and had rough calluses on the palm - this man knew work, knew toil. "Pleasure to meet you, Patrice. How was the drive in? Weather suit your taste?"

"Likewise, Mr. B- I mean, Philip," she said in return. "It was fine, no problems." He didn't need to know that she had sat in her car outside for about an hour waiting for their appointment. People showed their nerves in unique ways, but some ways could go without sharing.

"Why don't you follow me back to where the magic happens, and you can meet the rest of the crew, eh? Although, truth be told, it isn't much of a tour because this isn't much of an operation. All the same, follow me." He rumbled back through the paneled doors, Patrice caught in his wake.

Beeman hadn't just feigned humility in his description of the firm - from where Patrice stood at the front of the open space, she could see every nook and cranny in the office. A large central area housed two desks, equipped with the requisite computer and office-related paraphernalia, pictures of children, pennants from universities attended. Between them, a large photocopier, a decade old at least. Two very pale middle-aged women sat behind these desks, carbon copies of one another all the way down to their gaudy, clunky glass jewelry and layered brown hair streaked with gray. Their nameplates claimed them as Sandy Bates and Kathleen Williams. Beeman made the necessary introductions.

“Ladies, meet Patrice Monohan, our newest team member.” They smiled the smile that all white folks smile, lips strained together, as if a single gleaming tooth stretched the social fabric so thin it could snap. Patrice waved a greeting but had to clarify.

“Newest prospective member, that is.”

Beeman remembered himself and cleared his throat. “Of course, of course, much to discuss. As you were.” Before Patrice and Beeman had even shifted to leave, the two had already returned to their keyboards and *clack-clack-clacked* away.

Beeman spoke over his shoulder as they moved to the two offices that opened off the main area. “Sorry to speak out of turn, there. I’m just so thrilled to have you, I got a bit ahead of myself. Let’s see what George is up to and we can get moving. George!” he called out. A balding man of average height and slim in build leaned out from the break room to the right.

“Ah, Georgie, there you are. Come on into the conference room and let’s chat it out.”

Five minutes later, the three of them sat in cushy leather chairs around an oblong glass-top table. George Fatellia belonged to the word lawyer more than the other way around - the receding hairline, hawkish nose, pin-stripe suit, and sharp, intelligent eyes. Simple arithmetic. He had graduated top of his class at Notre Dame, spent twenty years in corporate litigation, and then fell in with Beeman after a brief stint doing pro bono work in Oklahoma City. He spoke with a delicate eloquence reserved for doctors with grim diagnoses.

“Now, let’s begin the discussion on a common standing.” He sucked his teeth and waited a beat. “Patrice, your arrival here is by no means organic, and I think you know this to be the case. Circumstances dictated that a union of sorts between this firm and your talents might be a possible benefit to all parties involved. In no small part due to a longstanding relationship with your father, Phil and I are happy to invite you into the fold, on a provisional basis.” On the table in front of him, a stack of legal documents in neat columns. He fingered these as he spoke but did not break eye contact. His gaze cut through her like a scalpel and her arms tingled with gooseflesh.

“That’s not to say,” Philip broke in, “that you won’t end up here for the long haul. We just need to test the waters first. Certain elements of your track record, combined with the kind of work we do here, may not be conducive to an effective or healthy work environment.”

So, they had heard. Made sense, all the local news affiliates had run the story and it even got some national coverage. Largest breach of attorney-client privilege in twenty years had to catch some eyes. And with their established friendship with her father, it all added up.

On the days where she stayed in bed, the days where rain fell with no clouds to block the sun, on those days she thought about what happened. In all the musing and recollection, no single moment stood out among the rest as the back-breaker straw, the bridge too far, the last bit that tipped the scales. Instead, a cavalcade of moments bunched and bundled together in the form of power suits, luxury cars, and the crackle of a gin fizz. And yet. What happened, happened.

She swallowed the firm lump in her throat, and it travelled to the seat of her stomach where it stuck fast, a lit coal. Lucky they even let her in the door, if they really knew.

“I understand.”

“Good,” George said. “Good. Now do you have any questions for us before we begin the interview process?” Phil reached over and put a hand on his partner’s arm.

“Georgie, let’s not use the I-word here. It’s a conversation, a colloquium if you will.”

Fatellia sighed. “Fine. Any questions?”

“Well, what kind of law do you practice here, exactly? I tried to find some documentation online, but you don’t have a website.”

“Damn,” Phil grunted “That developer said he’d have that site up and running two weeks ago!”

“What he means to say is that we accept cases involving particular First Amendment infringements, among other constitutional infractions to other extents. But the former is our manna and butter, so to speak,” Fatellia offered.

“Oh, so free speech cases?” Not her specialty but she aced Con Law at Stanford.

The two shared a meaningful look. Phil gestured that George ought to explain.

“By now you know that we are good friends with your father, I’m sure. It’s why you’re here at all, and not, to be perfectly frank, holding a can on Lombard Street and asking for change.” She tried not to show how close that remark landed to the truth. He continued. “Well, we met him through our pro bono work here in OKC.”

Connection made. Her father, the evangelical pastor. Two lawyers taking First Amendment cases. The iconography in the lobby. Her first guess had been off by about one or two clauses.

“Religion,” she remarked, the word heavy off her tongue.

“Every creed, every doctrine,” Philip affirmed. “That’s the tagline on our defunct website. Should look great when *someone* gets it up and running.” He shouted the last part out into the common area and both women barked a laugh.

A silence fell in the room like a light blanket of powdered snow. Could that door be reopened? Years’ worth of accumulated barricades, boarded up and derelict. And yet this job, a possible knock on the other side? No. Just a job, the first in two years. A gift horse, not to be looked at in the mouth for any period of time.

Her mind drifted. Cedar pews in neat rows, hymnals and Bibles tucked into their pockets and prepared for the forgetful Sunday pilgrim. Light filtered through the face of Christ and refracted in different hues across the sanctuary. Dust motes collected in the rays of sun, drawn to the warmth and life. Choral voices reverberated off high walls, *how great thou art, how great thou art*.

Outside the church, the soft sun warmed a patch of dirt in which a sapling boxelder strained upwards. Two pairs of hands, one small and one thick, patted around its base. Remembrance, love, new life caked into topsoil. Her father’s proud smile. A prayer for good weather.

“He also told us what happened with you two,” George said. “And we need to know right now, before our... conversation, whether or not you can do this work.”

She paused, took a breath. Necessity forced her hand. “Yes, I can do it.”

“Just the answer we wanted to hear!” Philip grinned.

Fatellia pinned her down behind the weight of his stare. “Indeed, it is. And I’m sure we’ll find out if that’s true much sooner than later.”

For the next hour, they discussed her qualifications, her aspirations, her relevant experience and her philosophies. Philip seemed more than happy to end the conversation at several points, but George kept on, grilling her on what happened, how it all transpired, what blame she held and how she had learned from it. They wanted particular answers, the same answers she gave to Lemecki, Bratt, and Koulsakis those years ago. And though she offered them the desired responses, it marked only the opening salvos of a what amounted to a chess game between her and Fatellia. Every admission of guilt, a sacrificed pawn. Every refuted accusation, a claimed rook or knight.

She walked them through the catastrophic meltdown of her career and personal life in slow, methodical steps, with care to avoid the unnecessary or the gratuitous elements – still wanted to get hired, after all. The brief period of rising stardom, the huge victories, coupled with the onset of the drinking and lavish lifestyles. All culminating in the biggest breach of attorney-client privilege in LBK’s history, or in the entire state of California for that matter. Half a dozen lawsuits, countless depositions and disappointed looks, a blacklist across the seaboard, and the initiations of divorce proceedings. James. Even when her stomach stitched from hunger or her ulcer acted up, nothing stung quite like that manila folder stuffed with the end of all good things.

This conversation would conclude long before the chess match. He played with patience, intelligence. Political and direct, but with a sidelong glance across the board. At

the end of the allotted time, the three shook hands, and left the pieces where they lay in the conference room. The game would resume at 8:30 a.m. the following day.

For a seasoned attorney, at practice for more than a decade, the thought of a fresh start at this firm filled Patrice with a nervous tension that buzzed in her fingers and put her stomach in a spin cycle. All the possibility, the redemption. Her pride, wounded and caged for so long, began to at last stretch its webbed wings. But it all rested on such an anemic foundation – one wrong move, one misplaced piece on the board, and the weight of the future would crumble with her underneath, a regular Samson. More useful in death than in life.

Before she returned home for the evening, she combed through her purse for the crumpled ten-spot she knew lay hidden in the secret lining. It hadn't seen the light of day since the bankruptcy court ruling came down, but now emerged in the harsh light of the nearest 24-hour diner. A kind old waiter took her simple order of a black coffee and a slice of pie, which she savored in tiny bites. When time came to pay, Patrice hesitated, her fingers clutched tight to Hamilton's wrinkled face. Five years ago, she had spent north of four-thousand dollars in a single purchase without a batted eye. Now the thought of parting with this ten-dollar bill put the food in her stomach into a boil. She worked up the nerve and smoothed it out on the table.

Once at her home – a sorry motel off the highway nestled between a carpet store and a spate of greasy fast food joints – she called James. Maybe if he could see her working again, if she could prove that what happened could be undone or at least be healed. Maybe then she could hear her son's voice once more. Instead, she received

seven rings and a polite invitation by an automated voice to leave a message. Maybe another time.

Her regular routine consisted of a book in bed, followed by restless attempts at sleep spent in thought about past and future failures. But tonight, she left the book uncracked, the thoughts ignored and earned the sleep of those with grand intentions.

CHAPTER TWO

Brass Tacks

Oftentimes, people remark about how their first apartment resembled a closet on account of its size. For Patrice, her new workspace at Beeman & Fatellia, LLC redefined the expression; she had personally emptied the supply closet and Isaiah helped her slide a desk into the tight space. No floor-to ceiling windows to view the skyscape of San Francisco, not even a measly peephole to glimpse the outside world. The respective members of the firm put in effort to spruce up the place and give her a nice welcome. Isaiah put up a poster with his favorite band of which Patrice had never heard. Sandy and Kathleen had bought her identical desk plants, tiny succulents with cuboid leaves, apparently unplanned. Beeman had gifted her a tacky nameplate of her very own. Fatellia gave her copies of every single open case under the firm's purview – five boxes' worth – and a command to familiarize herself with the basics of each file. On top of the boxes, a copy of the Bible, the Book of Mormon, the Qur'an, the Torah and Talmud, a collection of the Vedas, the Dhammapada and Vinaya, and even the writings of Confucius.

“Some light reading for when you get a break,” he had commented.

It took every ounce of her strength to swallow the fire of pride in her throat. Orders given tasted better than orders received. After a few breaths, she consoled herself. Start from the ground up and assume there is nothing beneath you. She set to work.

Mounds of paper formed on her desk, thousands of briefs, motions, petitions, interrogatories, depositions, tax forms. Waves of names and arguments and responses washed over her as she plunged headfirst into the fray. Come lunch time, she'd mustered

her way through half a box. Her five co-workers, at Phil's behest, took lunch together in the conference room, as a get-to-know-you type thing.

From this, she gleaned that Isaiah had graduated last year from a small Nazarene college in Bethany, and had moved to Oklahoma City to increase his career prospects. His new life in the big city had created a gap between him and his parents who wanted him to return to their hometown in rural north Texas, near Pampa.

Sandy and Kathleen, resident paralegals for the firm, joked that each had been assigned to work with one of the partners but no one noticed if they swapped for a day, least of all Phil. He laughed louder than the rest at this, and even Fatellia managed a thin smile. One, maybe Kathleen, grew up in Missouri while the other hailed from South Dakota. Or was it the other way around? Patrice struggled to find anything to distinguish the two women in her mind and settled on the fact that Sandy had a beauty mark just above her lip.

Phil spent his whole life just outside the city and loved it beyond reason. He contained within his barrel-chest a heart that burned for Oklahomans and a thousand stories about the history of the city's founding. A conversation with Phil always included a reminder to everyone in the room that he had been just down the street when the bombing occurred; in his mind, it lent him a particular gravitas. Kathleen and Isaiah might get caught mid-discussion about the relative woes of regional sports teams and in comes Phil: "I had tickets to the minor-league game the day before the attack. Real sad business, that." He would sigh and stare away in deep repose while the others waited a respectful amount of time before reengaging the conversation.

George Fatellia remained an enigma. At times jovial, at times contained, always observant, he both participated and monitored. He held himself at arm's length from the group, for reasons unknown.

After lunch, George and Phil met in the latter's office for what George termed a 'debrief'. Every square inch of the walls housed memorabilia, sports or otherwise, all centered around Oklahoma. Odd. Place had never meant much to Patrice – a modern individual had transferability built into their DNA. As soon as she left her parent's home in Nebraska, she booked it for the coast. Four years at USC, three at Stanford, and nary a look back to the desolate countryside until she met James on a trip back to Lincoln to see her mother. To encounter a person like Phil... confused her. A relic of a bygone time when a place's worth lay in its definition, its connectedness, when deracination constituted the exception, not the rule. She rubbed her temple. Two lives stretched out in her mind, and in the version where she stayed in Nebraska, what happened, in fact, didn't.

In this altered life, she had faith enough to believe what her father preached. Questions didn't haunt her before communion and doubts didn't linger after God's people said amen. This faithful Patrice went to Nebraska University, fell in love with her first boyfriend there while she majored in elementary education and married him at the church her father pastored. So clear, so full of light, this life. Picket fence simplicity. Moreover, she never touched a drop of alcohol in her life, nor got a taste of how far a six-figure salary could stretch.

Nothing but a mirage. She had had the doubts, the questions. She had lost her virginity in the summer before her senior year of high school to a football player named

Michael who spread the rumor that the pastor's daughter liked it fast and loose. That Halloween, she spent a night in the drunk tank of the local police department sobering up. Her relationship with her parents worsened day to day. Mom didn't know how to talk to her anymore so instead she just shook her head, disappointed that her parenting methods had produced such a maladjusted specimen. Dad preached louder and louder, to drown out the demons in their ears. Beeman coughed and brought her back to the present.

“Now, Patrice, I know your specialty area was in intellectual property. There'll be an adjustment to constitutional jurisprudence but we've seen you at trial and those skills are going to come in handy pretty soon. We have a case of particular import for this office, with national implications.”

She raised a threaded brow. “SCOTUS potential?” Philip nodded.

“It's a case that has been circulating the lower courts for a while and only recently got bumped to the court of civil appeals after our initial favorable ruling was appealed by the activist group that filed the suit in the first place,” George explained. “Fact is, we need an ace in the hole for when this goes to trial, someone with experience in jury deconstruction and high stakes.”

“A ringer,” Patrice said.

“Indeed,” George said. “It's a big ask, but we both feel confident in bringing you on to the case. Trial date is set for two months from yesterday. We'll spend that time getting your feet wet in this type of work, smaller cases, smaller stakes. Work our way up to the big leagues. Anyway, here's your copy of that file.” He produced an extremely thick bundle from a side table and handed it over. *Society for an Inclusive America v. Roth*. Never heard of such a society, but it sounded like the right idea.

“When you’re finished, come talk with me,” George said. “Phil is headed up north to Kansas City for a conference and won’t be back a while. If you have any questions, door’s always open.” Was that genuine? Or another chess move? Would asking a question display weakness or humility? Ignorance or curiosity?

She spent the rest of the day in her shabby ‘office’ and read until the letters swam before her eyes in a haze of black ink and inscrutability. Of course, start with the big case, the career-maker. Any hope of overcoming what happened lay here, this file. A new possible life joined the other two in her head, one in which absolution took the form of a Supreme Court triumph. This could stomp out what happened, a new garment to wear besides sackcloth and ashes.

Altogether, Patrice understood the facts of the case well enough. A Jewish classical violinist quartet had been approached by two men about performing at their same-sex wedding reception. Cue a denial of services on religious grounds and the suit practically wrote itself – violation of human rights codes, emotional damages and restitution for suffering endured on behalf of the couple. Adam Roth, the leader of the quartet and the one whose name would suffer public scrutiny as a result, contended that the couple could just as easily purchase one of their albums and play it in their stead, but that the group would refrain from a live performance.

Similar cases had cropped up throughout the states in recent years following the movement to accept non-traditional forms of marriage. People today often forget that progressive leaders like Obama, as recently as 2009 still supported marriage as between a man and a woman. As states started to piecemeal recognize gay marriage, the floodgates

opened and suits poured in claiming discrimination at the hands of, most often, Christians.

But years in San Francisco left her in doubt of Beeman & Fatellia's mission. So quick to affirm her ability to do this work, but those doubts had already crept back into the margins of her mind. Why shouldn't these people marry one another and be able to hire wedding performers like anyone else? No answer presented itself, at least not one wrapped in two thousand years of dogma.

Redemption glistened before her, but it required an understanding she did not have, an argument whose premises she rejected and had rejected for years. Ever since she sat in that cedar pew at twelve years old and stained her Sunday dress the color of Jesus' sacrifice because her father had forbidden her mother from teaching her about menstruation. Too unclean to speak into existence.

George materialized at the door to her closet. He knew. He could see it all over her face.

"Mind if I sit for a while?" he asked, and when she nodded, he pulled over a stool from the adjoined kitchenette just outside. "Your father told me what happened between you two. At least, what decency would allow him to share. No one here understands more than myself, I think. Phil, he was raised in the church and never had any trouble accepting it rote. He's a Lutheran, though he can't stand to read Luther. Make what you will of that.

"Isaiah is Ashkenazi Jewish. Been to temple every week of his life. Sandy, she's a Buddhist believe it or not, converted in the summer of '87. And old Kathleen is as devout a Catholic as they come. She always invites the rest of us to vespers, bless her. I think

Isaiah humored her once and went to a potluck put on by the church, but he admitted to me in private that it was only because he heard the words free and food in direct succession.”

“What am I supposed to do with all this information?” she asked, exasperated.

“Understand. We all walk trails on earth that cross the spiritual paths. Threads of the mundane are crossed over with the fabric of the divine in a myriad of ways. Take some time. Think about it before you up and quit.” How had he known she was already considering a quick escape?

As he turned to leave, she placed a piece in a vulnerable position, in an attempt to lure out his queen for a decisive blow in the game. “And what about you, George?”

He turned and smiled, genuine. “Haven’t you guessed yet? I’m an atheist.”

Huh. Hadn’t expected that. He paused, as though prepared for some remark about why an atheist would work at a firm dedicated to the protection of the opposing side, but she offered none. With a pat on the doorframe, he returned to his office and left her to think.

She sighed and resumed her copious reading, with one arm propping up her head and the other fidgeting with a pen, thankful that he had not asked her the same question.

Her mind wandered as her eyes scanned the pages, from Fatellia to her other boss. Beeman belonged to Oklahoma City just as he belonged to it. He had roots, deep ones, and when storms came with their elemental intensity, no doubt Philip Beeman wouldn’t move a single inch of red dirt.

Dad had planted the tree outside the chapel entrance to commemorate her birth. Every year they would visit it on her birthday and cut a small notch into the bark.

Seventeen years, and that tree grew mighty and broad, the notches further and further beyond her reach. On long Sunday afternoons, when her father would stay long after service let out to pray with his flock, Patrice would scale the boxelder as high as she could. Higher, higher. Sap all over, sticky and rich. Rough bark left scrapes on her palms. Higher, but not too high. If Dad saw her tangled in the branches, punishment would come.

As she flipped the next page, she could have sworn it stuck to her hand.

CHAPTER THREE

Familiar

James called back. Of course, Patrice didn't know about this until well after the fact, having put her phone on silent for the day as she and her newfound legal team attended several client meetings back to back. The sight of his name on the screen screwed up her stomach into a tangled skein of yarn not even the most diligent crocheter could unravel. What could he want now, after two years of radio silence?

She must not have contained her reaction well, because Fatellia raised an eyebrow at her after she set the device facedown onto the table. She declined to share. Not his business, no business even to tell.

Their last meeting had run an hour and a half longer than expected, as the lawyers on both sides quibbled on settlement amounts with the defendant's lead counsel, a nice-enough man in a tweed coat a size too small that caused the flesh around his neck to bulge and quiver with every spoken word. Around halfway through the colloquium, Patrice had grown so bored of the proceedings that all of her attention landed square on that epidermal overflow. Hypnotic. How did he button that shirt his morning without a hydraulic press? A feat of modern textile engineering.

At last, the two sides came to an amicable agreement and the agreement put into writing for the judge to see the next morning. By all accounts a win for Beeman & Fatellia – their client would go home with a cute chunk of change. Pitiful by Patrice's standards, though. Back in San Francisco, she didn't put on her eyeliner for anything not

seven digits long. But to these Native American workers, it might get their kids off the reservation and over to Stillwater or Norman someday.

Even she could use that money now. Last time she checked her bank account, the clerk at the local credit union all but laughed her out of the building. The first paycheck from Beeman & Fatellia had covered next to none of her expenses, especially since a considerable portion of her future income still belonged to Lemecki, Bratt, & Koulsakis. Her stomach rumbled, upset that she had skipped breakfast in order to scrimp.

As they filtered out of the conference room of the corporate headquarters of the company against which they had brought suit, Patrice gave a wistful glance at the chic office space. Perfectly fake ficuses, glass frosted to perfection, the newest computer models, beautiful yet presumably uncomfortable furniture. The quintessential modern office. Fatellia turned back to her.

“Seem familiar?”

“Oh, you know. Just reminds me of home.”

“Lincoln?” he said, half a smirk on his lips.

“Yeah, right.” She paused and caressed a wax frond of the nearest plant. “It’s nice. Real nice.”

Fatellia joined her by the fern and examined it.

“Might be nice, sure. But it isn’t real.”

“Obviously. It’s a fake plant.”

“Right, right. The plant. Well, it doesn’t need anything to keep it going, that’s for sure.”

She sighed. “That’s not such a bad thing. Independence, autonomy – it’s immortal.”

“Yes,” he replied, “but it never grows. And that, to me, is sad.”

“Sadder than death?” she asked.

“Quite a bit, actually. Reality is messy and despite our prevarications to the contrary, that is why we quite like it.” He brushed a stray frond with a delicate motion. “The oldest trees on earth tell beautiful stories when they finally fall. You can read it in their rings. There a drought, here a terrible fire. And despite these, they grew on. What story does this eternal plant tell?”

“Maybe it doesn’t want to tell a story at all, ever think of that?” she replied.

A curious look back at her. “Everything tells a story, Patrice.” He departed with quiet steps.

Something kept Patrice rooted in place. She scanned the room again and her imagination kicked into gear. She could see herself, the San Francisco version. Her facsimile strode through the cubicles, trailed by a flock of nervous assistants whose names she never bothered to learn. Always in a hurry, always counting hours in fifteen-minute increments. Not billable, not her problem. Part of her cringed now at the memory, but another part yearned for those long days, for the never-ending work. She rubbed her forehead to relieve the onset of a headache. James’ missed call.

Before she left the suite, she peeled a fake leaf off the plant and stuffed it into her pocket for safekeeping. No one would ever notice. Didn’t need to water it after all.

Once she slid into her car, she pulled out her phone and stared at the notification. Maybe it had been an accident, a butt dial. Maybe he didn’t want to hear her voice ever

again. Call, don't call. Her finger hovered over the button. He hadn't left a message. James always left a message if he had something important to say.

Call, don't call.

Her nervous finger answered the question for her as it twitched and pressed the green icon. Damn it all. Too late to back out now.

One ring. Two. Three. Someone on the other end picked up.

"Mom?" Not James. Peter. Sweet, smart Peter. The color of browned corn stalks in September, voice like autumn's vivid windfalls. Her mind, a spinning top at a hundred miles an hour, now tumbled and rattled on its side in violent jerks. Three years of emotion screwed up behind her eyes and in her throat. Oh, God. Say something before he hangs up!

"Hey- Hey there, Petey."

"Oh, hi. Didn't think you'd call back." His voice had deepened, closer to the register of his father but unmistakably his own. A pang shot from her stomach to the base of her spine as she realized just how much of his life she had missed in the last three years. Birthdays, games, contests, projects, maybe even girls now?

"Well, I thought it was your father."

"Oh." His tone dropped.

"Not that I wouldn't want to talk with you—" she started.

"No it's okay—" he began at the same time.

"—I didn't know if your dad ever got you a phone—"

"—I don't really know why I'm even calling, but—"

“—and the courts really don’t want us in contact, and all. I’m sorry, what did you say?”

“—now that I have you, I guess I have a question,” he said.

Patrice steadied herself. Did he want to live with her, finally? Did James fail worse than she had? The possibilities tumbled over each other. Every breath split her ribs apart.

“What is it, Petey?”

Silence on the other end of the line.

“I’m getting baptized. In a couple months. You could be there, I guess. I don’t think Dad would mind.”

Her breath caught in her throat. Of all the dirty things James would do to get back at her. He knew her history with the church, with her father. They had always agreed to raise their kids without that in their lives. And now, after only two years, James had brainwashed her son into some Bible-thumping nut. A perfect revenge for the years of marital hell they had given each other.

“Oh, and Mom?”

“Yeah?”

“People don’t really call me Petey anymore. Just Peter.”

“Okay, sorry,” she replied, but he had already hung up.

She shuddered. Baptismal fonts under stained glass. Frigid water, a rush of adrenaline like the Holy Spirit. She never arose from that blessed submergence; thirty years spent staring up at the glassy surface so close but always out of reach. Thirty years

of held breath, gone stale in strained lungs that burst at their seams for new life but find only the muddy waters of the Jordan.

She put her phone on 'Do Not Disturb' and drove home, the wax leaf embedded in her palm. Rain streaked down her windshield, and the sky turned taupe, as though unsure of itself. Lights blurred in the rearview, a refracted mess of red and white spirits, half fleeing and half giving chase. Petey – no, Peter. Unbidden memories washed down her – the craftsman house on the cul-de-sac in Lincoln, with green wood paneling and a delightful porch. Hamburger scent wafts from the backyard, entices passing kids with the promise of summer bliss. A shouting match, police cruisers. The look on Peter's face when she told him that she'd be splitting time in San Francisco and Lincoln, and the look on his face when she told him that San Francisco would blow Lincoln away.

A familiar burn tinged her eyes. A tree cut down by her own father's axe on the day she left home. A wax leaf pressed into her hand.

#

Beeman took her on a field trip at the end of their first month working together. He loaded up his Ford pickup with a few boxes and they set off down the interstate on a crisp, clear morning. Despite her questions, he declined to inform her as to their destination. Instead, he bellowed to a Styx song that played on the car radio, every so often pointing out notable Oklahoma City landmarks ("Over there is the oldest continuously operating glass-blowing company west of the Missouri and north of the Red!").

They never spent too much time together alone, Patrice and Beeman. The latter had cultivated his man-about-town image with care and took every chance he could to get

out of the office and move and operate in the world, among the people. Of course, this left Fatellia and the para's with most of the heavy paper lifting, but they didn't seem to mind – Beeman atoned by overseeing the firm's financials and ensuring each employee had fair compensation relative to the workload. Homeostasis at its finest.

They drove for about a half an hour and traffic thinned out in lockstep with the highway itself, until they at last pulled into the parking lot of a large building complex. Built in the 1960's brutalist style, it had rows of narrow windows set deep into a solid gray concrete façade. Blocky letters, underneath which the concrete had discolored in odd splotches, read ST. YVES MEDICAL CENTER. Out in front of the main entrance, a small group of people congregated with posters and lawn chairs. Fundraiser, perhaps? Been a while since she had a Thin Mint.

A Catholic hospital. Just how Patrice wanted to spend her day, when she could instead brush up on precedents for the Roth case. Fatellia would quiz her near the end of each day on relevant case law so that she could draw upon it at any given moment in the heat of trial. Instead of preparing for the case that might save her career, Beeman had towed her to the brink of town for unknown reasons. She voiced her concerns.

“Sir, are you sure my skills wouldn't be more useful... elsewhere?” she asked.

He popped the bed of the truck as they got out, then climbed into the bed. “Do you know what it is we're here to do?”

She shook her head.

“Then how do you know your skills won't be useful to us here? Here, grab a box.” She shouldered one and went to move away before he placed another one on top of it. Her muscles strained at the offense – what could be inside?

As they approached the entrance, she peeked around her armload at the congregation of people. Their signs gained definition – definitely not Girl Scouts. Many bore the slogan “St. Yves Kills LGBT” among more colorful turns of phrase and even a few unsavory drawings. Chants arose as they drew near, along with heckles and shouts. Hurtful stuff. But Patrice got the distinct notion that this trip had significant work relevance.

A kind, portly nurse in pink scrubs directed them to a bay of green-painted elevators that took them to the fourth floor – pediatrics. Another nurse, taller and with wire-rim glasses guided them into a spacious children’s playroom. Patrice set the boxes down and opened the top one to confirm her theory. Toys of all sorts crowded the container: G.I. Joes with brawny arms, Hot Wheels in every color and design, a couple Nerf guns, a yo-yo, Polly Pockets, even an old Lite-Brite. She turned to her employer.

“You could have told me this was a delivery, I would have more adamantly refused your offer to tag along.” They stepped out of the room and sat on a bench outside the playroom, situated just in front of several windows to view inside. “Seems a bit below your paygrade anyways. Couldn’t they send someone? And what’s with the protest outside?”

Beeman shushed her and pointed to his watch – 10:00 on the dot. From further down the corridor toward the nurse’s station, a jumble of shouts and cries. She peered around Beeman and couldn’t quite process the sight.

Advancing in a phalanx toward them, a crowd of young kids, each attached by a series of tubes and wires to their own IV stand that held a clear bag of liquid. Their white patterned gowns swished and swayed in a hypnotic array. The oldest appeared to be

around thirteen, with the youngest tottering along behind the group who could not be older than three or four. Most shocking of all, each child lacked a single hair on their head. Light glinted off over a dozen bald heads, almost brighter than the normal fluorescent. Flanked on every side by watchful nurses, the children moseyed into the playroom. An ebullient roar followed – they had found the new toys.

She watched through the window as the children plundered and distributed their new bounty based on pre-established guidelines. A cold shock ran the length of her spine. One of the boys bore an incredible resemblance to Peter, when Peter had only been five or six. The same bright eyes, mulatto skin, and indefatigable energy. She tried to stave off the memories and the sealed cache of pain that corresponded, but to no avail. Down, into the sweet melancholy.

Christmas day, 2005. The year before she slammed the San Francisco shaped wedge into the center of her family. Peter wore red flannel pajamas, a perfect match with his daddy. He had risen before the dawn to jump up and down on their bed, even though they had only finished wrapping his presents not four hours prior. White lights twinkled in the boughs of their tree, adorned with all manner of ornaments with no organization or theme. Boxes of myriad dimensions littered the ground around the tree. For the rest of the morning, she held James' hand tight in her own and sipped coffee from the mug Peter had painted in art class at school.

She had missed the next Christmas. And the one after that.

Beeman broke her from the reverie. “You can see why I didn't have someone from the hospital stop by for the toys.” She hastily wiped a stray tear from her cheek and nodded.

“That doesn’t explain the folks outside, though. Sounds like something up our alley?”

“Well,” he said, “you’re not wrong. Basically, it goes like this. This here is a Catholic hospital, yeah? Well, it is technically a private venture but does accept certain government subsidies on account of its advanced program in pediatric oncology.” He gestured toward the playroom, now a constant blur of white cotton and thin metal rods. “A few months ago, a certain individual local to the hospital came seeking a hysterectomy. Pretty standard procedure for the most part, but the doctor in charge of the case started to question the whole thing after a slew of the usual tests for uterine issues came up negative. No PCOS, no endometriosis, no cancer or uterine prolapse. After a long conversation, it came out that the patient chose to have the surgery for elective reasons – she wanted to become physically the man she believed she was mentally. Don’t know how much you know about Catholics, but that amounted to a firm accusation of God’s incompetence and the doctor refused to do the surgery, and, as head of surgery, commanded that no one in this hospital would perform such a procedure. Now, the patient is suing the hospital for discrimination on the basis of gender identity under the new SOGI legislation the Oklahoma legislature passed last year.”

“Sorry,” Patrice interjected, “but what is SOGI?” She’d never heard Beeman speak like this. His transition from gregarious co-worker to accomplished lawyer took a matter of seconds. Despite his pretensions otherwise, Beeman figured a damn good lawyer when he put in the effort.

“Sexual orientation and gender identity. Several states have included SOGI under the banner of protected classes in terms of employment and public accommodations, including healthcare.”

Patrice nodded. She’d seen the laws, never heard it phrased that way.

“So, are they a client?”

“No, not just yet. But they are being sued. For a hell of a lot of money. And for an end to the subsidies.” Beeman scratched at his neck with a large hand. Every so often, excited cries came from the room before them. “What do you think about it?” She considered it for a beat.

“Well, he should have either done the surgery or been prepared for possible consequences. It’s a changing world. Folks should be able to get whatever parts of their body hacked off or put on if they want – it’s a slippery slope, otherwise. What’s to stop some wacko from refusing someone’s treatment because they’re left-handed? Church used to think lefties were an affront to God, too.”

“Why do you think the doctor refused in the first place?”

“Because he’s been brainwashed into believing outdated ideas,” she scoffed.

“Because he’s blindly following a dogma used to control the poor and illiterate for two thousand years.” It sounded weaker than she meant, as if the many years had dulled the sharp edges of her animosity.

Beeman chuckled slightly. “You might be in the wrong field of law, Patrice.”

Like she had a choice in the matter. “I know what happened to you. Your dad told me and George before we brought you in for the interview.” Patrice raised a hand.

“Let me stop you right there, Phil. You don’t know a goddamn *thing* about what I went through. You don’t. You just don’t. And you shouldn’t trust whatever my father says about the past. He’s a great preacher, which entails that he’s a great swindler.” She stood to leave but realized that they had driven there together, so a dramatic exit did not amount to much. Beeman nodded and coughed to clear his throat.

“You’re not wrong there. But I do know that your father isn’t the same as how he used to be. You’d be surprised. Ironic for a preacher to have a come-to-Jesus moment, all their moments should be come-to-Jesus moments, but he really did change. Happened about the same time as your stuff out on the coast. Two might be related, couldn’t say.” She rolled her eyes, and he noticed. “But back to the suit, how do you think the judge should rule? Hypothetically, of course.”

She didn’t even need to ponder. “For the potential patient, obviously.”

“Oh?” he raised an eyebrow. “Obviously?”

“I mean, yeah. They discriminated based on nothing but bullshit two-millennia old scruples. In violation of the law, I might add.”

“And all this?” he gestured at the smiles pasted across a dozen faces. “All this could be lost if the court sided with that patient, who, in all likelihood, could get the same procedure done at a secular hospital. They lose the state subsidy, the pediatric unit gets less money, the kids get less treatment.”

Patrice’s blood heated up in her veins. “Seems kind of scummy, holding kids’ lives in the balance to justify being shitty to someone for something they can’t control.”

“I think you’re missing the point, Patrice. You see one person being harmed in this situation. Two outcomes of the case are possible, if they decide for the patient: the

doctor is enjoined to perform the surgery, or the pediatric funding is gone. It's easy to see how the kiddos get the shaft, but what about the doctor who has to choose between his conscience or the lives of those whom he is sworn to save? You might not see how that's much of a choice, just save the kids. Conscience be damned. But it's not that simple. People who say that have usually never been forced to breach the principles they hold with the utmost seriousness and fidelity. And is that damage, to the conscience of the doctor or the chemotherapy sessions for his young patients, less or more than the harm done to an individual who could easily find another location to receive the operation where no damage is done?"

Patrice chewed on this for a while. Her eyes landed on the same young boy who looked so much like her Peter. He had found a jigsaw puzzle in one of the boxes, a picture of a beautiful Alpine panorama, and now shifted pieces around with a grimace of concentration on his pale face. She found her voice at last.

"You sound like my dad."

"Thanks."

"Wasn't a compliment." She turned on her heel and took the painted green elevator to the lobby. The protestors jabbered at her as she walked back to Beeman's pickup. She wanted to stop and tell them that she agreed, that if she represented St. Yves in court it would only be for a paycheck, not because she believed they had justice on their side. But as she considered the dilemma, that boy's determined corkscrew of a face rose to the fore.

As she waited for Beeman to join her, she thought about what he had said. Violations of conscience. Working for Beeman & Fatellia came the closest that she could remember.

Her boss clambered into the truck with a knowing smile, like a child holding some icky thing behind his back.

On their drive back to work, Beeman missed the exit. She pointed it out and he scoffed. Buildings and signs zipped by as they flew along the I-40 closer and closer to the city center. To their left, the red clay-infused Oklahoma River stretched wider, small eddies and whitecaps, dozens of tiny people in javelin boats that cut through the water. Midday sun gleamed off the Devon Boathouse's smooth sloping roof.

Before she knew it, they had pulled into the sparsely populated parking lot of the Oklahoma City National Memorial. Here and there a few minivans littered the asphalt, and one school bus painted, for whatever reason, green and white. Private school probably. She got out of the car without asking Beeman why they had stopped. If today had taught her anything, Beeman had his reasons.

They walked through the memorial park in reserved silence. Exuberance belonged to certain milieus. Dozens of metal shapes floated above the grassy surface of the park, a neat illusion made possible by clear plastic bases. A family of green and iridescent patterned wood ducks glided across the surface of the hundred-yard reflecting pool that reached right to the foot of two large stone rectangles with a space between them. Gates of Time, the plaque read. She peered through them to the other side. Looked like normal old 2015. She looked to Beeman for answers but saw only his back as he pushed onward.

The last stop on the tour loomed above their head in the form of a shifting leafy cloud: the Survivor Tree. From a distance, it appeared as any other American elm. A thick trunk that split into several girthy branches, fresh new coat of serrated, tapered leaves. But as she drew closer, the tree gained in character. A narrow walkway of dark bricks, guarded on each side by a column of chained stanchions, led to the base of the tree. Since spring had only just arrived, the branches stood out in all their thin, bony glory with only a scarce level of leaf cover relative to how it would look in the summer. The main trunk of the tree, from which the majority of the larger branches extended, veered sharply to the right and gave the impression that the tree had lost its balance, teetering but never falling.

Beeman launched into a casually fastidious explanation of the tree's history and symbolism, but Patrice ignored him and instead read the story from the pages of the tree itself, as Fatellia had taught her. It had grown since the bombing, but not enough to hide the scars. Blackened in some places, deep gouges and notches elsewhere. She placed a hand on its weathered trunk, moved it up and down as the craggy bark tickled her fingertips. Horror had touched this tree, brought it to its knees, left it for dead. And yet, new leaves sprouted. What courage, what perseverance! Shame singed her cheeks and the tops of her ears. Overshadowed literally and figuratively by a damn tree.

Behind the tree, a hip-high lip of stone formed a wide arc, with text engraved onto it. *The spirit of this city and this nation will not be defeated; our deeply rooted faith sustains us.* A weight dropped from her throat to her stomach and blood rushed to her head in pounding waves.

Faith sustains us. Her father's voice on a Wednesday evening deep in the Nebraskan Outback. Sixty people, huddled around a greedy bonfire, prayers on their lips. She stared into the heart of the vagarious blaze and prayed that God would deliver her from his servants. No matter how hard she looked, she could never find the center. The blaze expanded forever inward. As the sun set on the collected worshipers, the spray of stars that dotted the vaulted night winked at her in cruel mockery, so high and infinitely removed from her concerns. Her father continued his sermon from atop the hewn stump of a wide sycamore. Cast your burden onto the Lord and he will sustain you.

Beeman broke into her reverie with a gentle hand on her shoulder. "Do you know why I brought you here, Patrice?" She just managed to shake her head no. "I wanted you to see what I see, not just in Oklahoma City but everywhere. No matter what happens to us, no matter how many branches we lose, there's something in us all that keeps us going." He paused to rub his forehead. "I'm not the most qualified guy to say all this, but Georgie isn't really the type either so I guess it's up to me. And I know I'm not saying it quite right. But here's the gist – if you want to find a reason to keep coming back into the office and doing the work we do, sit here for a while. Sit here and do nothing, bring a book. On days you want to and especially days you don't. All I ask is that you give me an update after a while."

Come back here? To read those words every day and think back to those infinite fires each time... she shivered but agreed. Bringing fire to the foot of this tree courted real danger.

The ride back lasted longer than possible. Patrice hunched over in the passenger seat. In her hand, she clutched a thin bright green leaf with serrated edges.

CHAPTER FOUR

Dignitas

On instinct, Patrice checked her phone first thing on getting up. Ten or so emails from the office about various issues that demanded her immediate attention. Various app notifications. A new podcast episode. Nothing from James. Or Peter. The boxy clock on the cheap balsa wood nightstand glared at her in the dim light. 6:43.

She lifted her body up from the uncomfortable bed and shucked the paper-thin sheets. Two months at the same ratty motel off I-35, and it never got better. Her skin still itched every morning from the mites, and the shampoo in the stained stainless-steel pumps bolted to the shower wall burned her scalp. Her neighbors usually stuck around for either a half hour or all night; same activities, regardless of time spent.

Last week, she and Sandy had gone out for a bite to eat after work ended. Patrice had hesitated at first; who knows what motivation Sandy could have? A spy, sent by Fatellia, meant to root out her deepest secrets and flaws as reasons for a future termination?

After a moderately priced dinner, Patrice's fears dissipated. Turns out, she had never met someone quite as simple as sweet, sweet Sandy. And not simple in a derogatory way. Sandy had earned *magna cum laude* at Notre Dame undergrad and breezed through her CP and CLA certifications. Even Patrice had relied on her skills for the cases they'd worked on in the two months since her arrival. A deep river, Sandy, just not particularly wide. What she cared about, she knew about, and she cared about a dozen things. Including meditation. Hence the early wake-up call.

When Patrice arrived, Sandy had already converted the breakroom to a full-service meditation station. Incense burned in a small bowl, two mats lay parallel to one another, and light, tinkly music played through a tiny speaker the size of a soda can. The weak sun filtered its rays through the closed blinds. Sandy beamed at her from her crisscross seated position on the floor. Patrice forced a smile in response.

“Let me go put up my things, and I’ll be right back, okay?” Patrice said, then hastened to her closet. Her breathing quickened as she stood in the confined space. Not a good idea, not good at all. What would Sandy put her through? Some kind of weird initiation? How long would it last? She pulled her hair back and took a steady breath. One more. Then she turned on her heel and rejoined Sandy, who patted the open mat next to her. Patrice sat down with a thud.

“So, uh,” Patrice quavered, “what’s the plan here?”

Sandy put her finger to her lips and shushed. Ah. No talking. Just meditation. Then she closed her eyes and fell so still that Patrice would have thought her a statue if not for the near imperceptible swell and decline of her chest with each breath.

Patrice tried her best to imitate her friend (could she call her that now?), placed her arms the same way and tried stay motionless. A few minutes passed. The music tinkled on. What instrument? A xylophone? No, windchimes! Windchimes for sure. Her neck itched, but she didn’t address it. There, a hum. The air conditioning, no doubt. Cool air poured into the room and gooseflesh ran along her arms. Surely, ten minutes must have passed. Maybe fifteen. The atmosphere stretched thin in the room. Sandy spoke at last, eyes still closed.

“Meditation isn’t easy. A lot of people think all that it means is sitting quietly, not moving or thinking, that it’s easy.” Patrice blushed; she belonged to that group of people. “In reality, meditation is incredibly hard, especially today. We all have a million things going on in our minds at once. Responsibilities, wishes, emotions. Too many thoughts for our heads, so we meditate.”

“Hard not to think.”

“It’s not about *not* thinking, it’s about thinking about the right things.”

“And how do you figure out which things are the right things?”

Sandy smiled. “Meditation.”

Damn hippie.

Patrice twiddled her thumbs for the rest of the half hour that they had set aside. At the end, nothing had changed. She couldn’t concentrate on anything for more than a few minutes without distractions, observational or work-related. An image of Peter, replaced just as fast by briefs and upcoming depo preparation. A bitterness spread in the back of her throat at the thought of that one night spent in jail for driving under the influence, the onset of her ruination, the first domino, the— how much did she have in her bank account? Gas prices had gone up, have to factor that into the budget. Wait, why did that matter? What about the DUI? DUI, DWI, whatever. There’s the connection, gas, driving, driving, gas. She stopped in her mental tracks as a sudden clarity came over her.

Her brain had concocted its own defense mechanism, to protect her from herself. As if spending more than fractions of a moment with her own company would spiral her down a black hole. How pathetic.

She avoided Sandy the rest of the day, only used the restroom when Sandy had just left, had her lunch in her small office instead of the break room. Not Sandy's fault. Patrice just feared that if they crossed paths, an invitation for a repeat of that morning might come. For the most part, they kept to themselves throughout the day, until the clock struck six and Patrice meant to head for home. A quick check – no one left in the office. Patrice sighed, and gathered her things – coffee mug, battered attaché, purse, keys. She had just pushed the double doors open into the lobby when Sandy spoke from one of the chairs, nearly causing Patrice to jump out of her skin.

“Patrice. I know you're avoiding me.” That obvious, huh?

“Well, no, you see,” Patrice started, “I just had a busy day and all. First court appearance for the Roth case soon, so we're all hunkering down to prepare and get our ducks in a row. That's all!” she exhaled in a rush.

Sandy shook her head and smirked. “That's not it. You got weirded out by this morning.” Patrice gave up the ghost and nodded. Her coworker placed a gentle hand on her arm, a bridge between them. “That's completely okay. It's not for everyone and that's the point. Come back if you want, but no pressure. Try it on your own once or twice, in a place that works for you. See you tomorrow!” she said and departed the building, while Patrice stood silent in the lobby, the phantom weight of Sandy's hand still on her arm.

Later that night, Patrice attempted to meditate. Situated on top of the horribly thin mattress in her motel room, she inhaled and exhaled in controlled sequence, and tried to expunge thoughts of 'business' in any form. It took a long while, but eventually she noticed that she hadn't thought about work in several minutes. Of course, upon this thought, the streak broke and her constructed mental space imploded.

Through the wafer walls, she heard the newest set of neighbors set to the usual business. They kept at it for a while as Patrice covered her ears and tried in vain to find the release of sleep. Before too long, the woman started to shout, and Patrice could just decipher that her partner had proven too distracted to complete the transaction.

Maybe he should have meditated beforehand.

#

Fatellia groaned in frustration and adjusted the wired frames that perched on his nose. “Patrice, you missed the part we just discussed. It’s ‘since *West Virginia v Barnett*’, then you go into the next part. You had it a minute ago. Where’s your head at?”

This again. A single mistake, a simple one at that. “You know they’re going to interrupt me before that point anyways. What’s the point in memorizing the script when their entire purpose is to get me off of it? I bet you my next paycheck that I don’t even get four sentences in a row.” She picked at her fingernails and avoided his gaze from across the table.

“Not enough money to get me interested.”

“And whose fault is that, now?”

“You’re evading. Do it again,” he commanded.

“We’ve been at this for hours,” she said, exasperated.

“And you’re still making errors.”

She stood from her seat and stretched her back out, hands on hips. Outside, people went about their daily business with no idea that within this unassuming office, a case developed that could change the face of United States jurisprudence. No surprise there –

people didn't seem to care much about court cases until a ruling came down. Then the outrage would start.

"Fine. I'll do it again." And she did. And again. And once more. Fatellia pinched his nose and sighed.

"What is it this time? I remembered everything!" she cried. "Nothing's good enough for you!" He stared at her and waited to see if she would add anything more, then responded in a measured tone.

"It's not about being good enough for me. It's about being good enough for three judges on a panel. And if *I* can tell that you don't believe in your own product, then *they* will spot it as soon as you walk into that courtroom. You doubt yourself and your case, you doubt for even a second that justice is not one hundred and ten percent on your side and they will grab hold and never let go." He broke off to readjust himself in his seat, and a curious expression crossed his face. "I never asked you if you're on our side."

"I am," she replied, too fast.

He waved a hand. "Yes, you are a member of this legal team. But we both know that you made that choice and accepted this offer because it was the first in three years. That no one else would take you. We are sitting together in this room not because of an accord of conviction, but because of your desperation. Now, you might be able to convince the average layman that you really, truly, think that Roth should be able to refuse service. Hell, you could convince a lot of lawyers too. But you have to tell me right now if you are one hundred percent behind our client. Otherwise, I'm pulling the plug on this whole thing. You go back to being unemployed and I tell your father that it just didn't work out. It would break his heart, no doubt, but I run a business and I'm not

betting the future hopes of this firm on an emotionally compromised horse. I brought you in because of your skills in high profile cases. But in each of those cases, the stakes involved, at most, one person's right to their intellectual property and possibly millions of dollars. We have in our hands the future of religious practice in this country. The consciences of millions of religious observers. Their freedom to move about and operate in the world in a way that corresponds to their deepest held beliefs about the nature of the universe and their place in it. Not to mention the future of this firm. So, you have to tell me right now." He paused and pierced her with an arctic stare. "Do you think we're *right*?"

Patrice's cheeks flushed and her fingers clenched tight on the table's edge until they just about snapped it in two. What an impossible load of nonsense! Either agree with me or it's out on the streets for you! No ideological opposition allowed! No, no. Can't think that way – this had to be a strategy, a vulnerable chess piece that, when claimed, would place her in mortal peril. Deep breaths. In, out. The inferno in her breast cooled as she responded. If he wanted the truth, he could have it, for whatever it's worth.

"I don't know, quite honestly. If Beeman heard, I assume you did, too. About my history with the church. My father." He nodded, so she continued. "That kind of shit, it doesn't just go away. You may be gung-ho about the First Amendment, but I've seen the other side, the fine print of the Constitution you hold so dear. My great granddad was a sharecropper in Louisiana. My grandmama couldn't vote, much less divorce her abusive husband. And my father, trying to find any kind of power in a country that hated him for the color of his skin, found the power of the pulpit. He took that raggedy piece of parchment and whipped my ass with it, beat me raw with 'We the People'.

“You don’t get to judge me on this. You don’t get to stand on a stage like my father and lecture me about right or wrong. Doesn’t matter if it’s right or wrong, just whether the justices *think* the way we want. And I can make them do that. Hell, I’ve been doing that for ten years.”

Silence for a beat, two. “I wish it were that easy,” he murmured.

His words floated in front of her in a spray, only half-intelligible, and her stomach flip-flopped. With a soft grunt, he rose and exited the room. Alone, Patrice stared out the window. Well, not truly alone. Just her and her damned conscience.

#

On the Friday before the trial, Patrice’s phone rang on her drive in to work, a number she didn’t recognize. She had hooked up the Bluetooth to listen to a podcast about the history of the Franco-Prussian War, more as mindless distraction than anything else. The soft voice of the narrator, the obscure factoids about a century-and-a-half-old war, it all served to pick her up out of her worry and place her in a more manageable headspace. But that came to an end as her tinkling ringtone blared through the car speakers. As quick as she could, she declined the call. They can leave a message.

Sure enough, a notification for a new voicemail appeared. She pressed the icon and dial tone filled her car, followed by the customary automated voice. *You have – ONE – unheard message. FIRST – unheard message.* And then her father spoke.

For the first time in over ten years, Patrice heard the voice of her father. Unmistakably him, he spoke in the same deep baritone that drew so many through the chapel doors. Not a long message, maybe a minute and a half, but she did not pick up a single word. The world dimmed around her. Bright morning sun turned pale and fragile,

so thin it could shatter at a breath. Peripherals tinged in wispy black. Not her hands on the wheel, someone else's, a child's. Sounds passed over and around her but not through her, too wide, too round to force their way in.

How many times had she had nightmares about that voice? Heard it tell her that she belonged to Hell, that she would inherit not the kingdom of God but brimstone and pained eternity? From worn-down pews to the wide backyard of their country home, that voice echoed through the halls of her memory, as if every place she had ever known amplified it until she could never escape. The hills beyond town rolled in time with his crescendos, the high school they both attended broadcast him over the PA. No part of the vinyl record of her existence had avoided the deep grooves of his influence.

Even here, in the sanctity of her beat-up car, he intruded. In her amalgam of fury and surprise, she didn't understand a word he said, but before she pressed the button to replay the message, she stopped to consider whether she even wanted to hear what he had to say. He didn't give a damn for what she had to say those years ago. But curiosity bested her, and she hit replay.

-BEEP-Hey, uh, hi there, Patty. Patrice. Sorry. I know you don't like that name anymore. Anywho, I got your number from Peter. Says he called and told you about his baptism. It's coming up soon. Couple weeks, now. It'll be here in Lincoln, on the 25th of February. I hope you can take the day off to come support him. It would mean a lot, I'm sure, and not just to him. To- to both of us, I think. And James, too. Alright then. Call me back at this number if you feel like it. G'bye. -BEEP-

Damn. Peter's baptism! With the trial ramping up so soon and her struggles with Fatellia, it had slipped her mind entirely! But more so than ever, she remained convinced

that this entire charade had stemmed from James' mind – especially now that her father entered the equation. Whenever she and James argued, fought, run against each other's grain, he knew the only thing he could not weaponize – her dad. And he never did, in all their tumultuous years together. This betrayal stung the worse as a result. All the men in her life appeared bedfellows in a scheme to shred whatever tender and unsullied parts of her remained. Except Fatellia. At least with him, it truly was just business.

When she walked into the office, Isaiah gave her a once-over and immediately directed her to the break room, where he put the tea on. They sipped in silence; Isaiah did not often need words to comfort. His intuitive empathy had a mystical way of relation without explanation. As she sipped chamomile from a mug decorated with cartoon characters, she wondered if the whole thing – her father, Peter, the baptism – could be real. She shivered at the thought, despite the hot liquid that glided down her tight throat. Of the two options, real or fake, she couldn't decide which scared her the most.

On her desk, she found a bonsai tree in a neat Zen garden. A present from Sandy.

CHAPTER FIVE

Advocates

A chill, cloudy day, where the wind kicked high and whistled low at irregular intervals. Tuesday. The kind of day you spend in the glow of a hearth or in the arms of a lover. A day for postponement, for the I'll-do-it-tomorrows. Instead, today marked two and a half months since Patrice had pushed the pull door at Beeman & Fatellia, and only the first day when she attended court for their big fish case.

Patrice sat in a low-backed padded chair situated behind the prosecutor's table in the small courtroom – much smaller than any in San Francisco, not even half the size of those hallowed halls. She twitched her nose and snuck breaths through her mouth to avoid the pungent offense of the septuagenarian court reporter's cloying perfume. Ugh, a cross between roadkill and cleaning supplies.

Initial appearances in court of civil appeals for the big fish, the Roth case. SCOTUS potential. Fatellia would take the lead for now, just so Patrice could get her feet under her in this new area of legal performance. And that's all it really constituted. All trials amounted to shadow plays, as lawyers parroted just enough evidence in the right shape to convince the dimwitted jury that their shadow had more substance and definition than their opponent's. She had mastered the lines for intellectual property, constitutional law's script might differ, but the fundamental process remained the same.

Patrice had yet to meet their client before that day in court. For whatever reason, Fatellia had held their meetings at a private location away from the office unbeknownst

even to Beeman. When Patrice inquired, the answer had less than satisfied. Safety, most likely, on account of the political nature of this case.

So, she had not quite known what to expect. Who could this person be, this musician ready to stare down the weight of social outrage and possible legal consequences just because of who some potential client liked in their bed? Over the days that led up to this first appearance, she had steadily built up an image of Adam Roth as some kind of backwoods red-neck, complete with tobacco-stained teeth and overalls, or perhaps as the most milquetoast cookie-cutter middle-class white person she could imagine, the kind of white person that would live in a suburb outside of a major midwestern city (for the schools), but never take a trip inside the beltway.

Suffice to say, Adam Roth surprised her. Not only in his outward appearance, not even close to her predictions, but in his mannerisms and general mien.

He approached them from far down the hallway, eyes hard as granite and a thin mouth pursed tight within a neat beard. Not very tall, but stocky, he reminded Patrice of a bull set to charge. But when he saw Fatellia, the harsh exterior melted to genuine warmth and the two shook hands good-naturedly, as they had no doubt done many times before this. Patrice shook his hand next, as she eyed him head to toe. He wore a plain gray suit with a white shirt and tapered black tie. A navy yarmulke sat on top of neat, close-cropped hair. While he chatted with the group, he smiled, but Patrice didn't quite believe it. The way his mouth only held the smile for a fraction of a second, the way his eyebrows sagged under their own weight. She recognized it because she could see it in a mirror. Roth had put on a performance of his own for their sake.

His voice did not belong to his body, as though a much larger man's larynx had been donated to lend Roth a gravitas his posture could not impart. A certain richness, a rhythm, that calmed Patrice's nerves by its very nearness to her. He spoke in quick sentences that knew exactly where to begin and where to end, with nary a syllable wasted in between. Not to call him curt, per se, but rather... intentional. Every movement and word, purposeful.

Conversation turned to the judges. Although all ran as Independents for re-election purposes, their original appointments resulted from party-aligned Oklahoma governors. One to two, conservative governor appointees to liberal on this panel. A quick look at the previous dockets and you'd see quite a few 2-1 votes on exactly those lines. Roth gestured at the long table on the opposite side of the room where the judges sat.

"Who are we most concerned about?"

Beeman, gregarious as ever, responded, "Well, we aren't concerned, really. Way I see it, we have the power of truth and justice on our side, and if these hoity-toities have their heads screwed aright, we should get a three-oh for the good guys."

"That's hardly realistic, Philip," Roth said, his face a blank mask. Beeman suddenly became very interested in the positioning of his cufflinks relative to his coat.

"What he meant to say," Fatellia interpreted, "is that we strongly foresee 2-1 in our favor as long as we can appeal to one of the particular judges' textualist sensibilities. That would be Kuegler," he pointed to an empty seat second from the left. "Of the two liberal judges, she has a track record of deferring to extralegal history and we can spin that in our favor. But that'll be up to this one here," he said, cueing Patrice. She swallowed a lump in her throat.

“Don’t worry, Mr. Roth. We’ve got a solid case and we’ve run through it hundreds of times. And I wish I was exaggerating.” She shot a look at Fatellia, who rolled his eyes. Roth’s expression softened a fraction, which had the same effect as a piece of frozen meat heating one degree.

He started to respond, but the courtroom deputy pushed open a door on the far side of the room and commanded those assembled to rise.

Three older individuals, two men and one woman, in robes black as charred ash, filed into the room, followed by an entourage of much younger clerks and judicial assistants. Sweat broke out on Patrice’s brow under the harsh lights. Ugh, cut it out. Half the game, presentation.

Everyone took their seats. The trial had arrived.

CHAPTER SIX

Society for An Inclusive America v. Roth

Proceedings

JUDGE MCCANDLESS: Today we will be hearing oral argument in the matter of Case 15-3018, Society for an Inclusive America versus Adam Roth, doing business as Joyful Noise Chamber Trio or Joyful Noise.

Mr. Dennet, whenever you're ready. - -

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MR. DENNET: - - For the above reasons and more, we seek compensatory action against the respondent in the form of monetary relief for emotional distress. With that I yield my time.

JUDGE MCCANDLESS: Very well, counselor. Now we'll hear from the respondents. Ms. Monohan, I see here an amended response dated the fifteenth of January - - has this been made available to opposing counsel, and if not, does opposing counsel wish to exercise their right to a copy provided by the court at this time?

MR. DENNET: Your Honor, we received the amended response and have a copy here.

JUDGE MCCANDLESS: Perfect. With that, we will move on to oral argument for the respondents. Ms. Monohan, I believe this is your first time appearing in court? Very well, you may begin whenever you please.

ORAL ARGUMENT OF PATRICE H. MONOHAN ON BEHALF OF
RESPONDENTS.

MS. MONOHAN: May it please - - may it please the court. Just as the First Amendment protects the rights of individuals to freely express their religious beliefs, it likewise protects the rights of individuals to avoid compelled expression that violates those same beliefs. Since *West Virginia v Barnette*, the courts have recognized the unconstitutional nature of compelled religious expression, and conversely, the unconstitutional nature of compelled secular expression. - -

JUDGE LEVY: Ms. Monohan?

MS. MONOHAN: Excuse me. Freedom of religious exercise - -

JUDGE MCCANDLESS: Take your time, counselor.

MS. MONOHAN: Thank you. Freedom of religious exercise and freedom of expression are tightly interwoven constitutional principles, and their intersection in the matter at hand is of the utmost importance. The petitioners would ask Mr. Roth, the owner and member of the performing music group Joyful Noise, to violate his sincerely held religious beliefs and perform original compositions live at a same-sex wedding. For Mr. Roth and the other members of the group, their music and likewise their performance are extensions of their religious belief and the expression thereof.

The petitioners are seeking injunction against Mr. Roth under an anti-discrimination statute in the state of Oklahoma which prohibits public accommodations such as retailers from withholding service from individuals on the basis of protected classes. The petition, advanced by the Society for an Inclusive America on behalf of two gay individuals who had sought services from Joyful Noise, claims that the refusal of

Joyful Noise to provide said services constitutes a violation of the Oklahoma statute. We deny that any such violation occurred.

JUDGE MCCANDLESS: Not just the Oklahoma statute, I believe. The Civil Rights Act, too. Is that right? - - Yes, there in the initial complaint. Under both.

MS. MONOHAN: That is correct, your honor. As to the facts of the case, the story is quite simple. On June 14th, 2014, Helen Milano and Debra Blasingale arrived at the business office of Joyful Noise Chamber Trio, a small two room operation in Guthrie, Oklahoma. These two women chatted briefly with Mr. Roth's office manager about scheduling a live performance. Once it became clear that Milano and Blasingale meant the performance to be a same-sex wedding reception, Mr. Roth's employee explained that each member of the group was an Orthodox Ashkenazi Jew, who adhered strictly to the laws of the Jewish Torah and Talmud, specifically the restrictions on same-sex sexual relations. The office manager concluded by telling the two women that they would not be able to perform at the union, though they would be happy to provide a compact disc of their music to be played, or even a digital pass to download their music from their website. After their refusal, the two women contacted petitioners and this case entered the court system in August of the same year, alleging a violation of statute 3 of the Oklahoma Declaration of Civil Rights.

JUDGE KRUEGER: Now please explain to me how the CD or the streaming - - that's not the same thing as a live performance, no? Quite different in nature. It's not really an equivalent offering.

MS. MONOHAN: At the end of the day, if the couple simply wanted Joyful Noise's music, they could have it. What they could not have was a live performance. In reality - -

JUDGE KRUEGER: Well, if it's all the same to you, any music enthusiast would tell you that a live performance is substantially better than just the music. Why else would they spend hundreds on tickets to sold out shows? Answer this: if the couple had come to your client and asked them to perform at a wedding reception, without telling you the sexual orientation of those involved, would your client have agreed? Or would they screen for their customer's sexuality, and violate the Oklahoma statute?

MS. MONOHAN: Well, in reality, Joyful Noise refused to these two individuals a service that it simply does not offer – a live performance at a same-sex wedding. While it is true that Joyful Noise has performed live at weddings in the past, not to mention dozens of non-marital functions, Joyful Noise has never performed at a same-sex wedding, as the constituent members have collectively deemed it a violation of their shared religious beliefs about the nature of marriage. This fact, however, does not entail that Joyful Noise has acted in a discriminatory manner to homosexual individuals.

JUDGE KRUEGER: But it does, does it not? Your group offers to perform for a man marrying a woman, but refuses when a man marries another man. You applied criteria to determine at which of these events to perform. That criteria was the sexuality of the people involved.

MS. MONOHAN: If I might, your honor. If, for example, two heterosexual men had planned to marry, for any reason, Joyful Noise would have declined the request. Likewise, Joyful Noise would accept the request to perform at the wedding of a

homosexual man to a homosexual woman should they so desire the accompaniment, as this would constitute a heterosexual union. The crux of Joyful Noise's beliefs stem from the union itself, not the individuals themselves.

JUDGE LEVY: Now hold on. According to Oklahoma statute, same-sex marriages are on equal legal footing with regular marriages. Those two unions are not distinguishable by law. They are, for all intents and purposes, identical. How do you justify treating them differently in the services you provide?

MS. MONOHAN: Your honor, Joyful Noise refused to perform at the same-sex wedding of the two individuals not on the basis of their sexual orientation or gender identity but because they requested a service that the music group does not provide to anyone who contacts them – a live performance at a same-sex marriage ceremony involving individuals of any sexuality.

When Joyful Noise denied the request of the individuals in question, they offered alternative solutions in the form of a digital album at a discounted rate to be played through a speaker system, as well as references for several other accomplished live music groups of a similar nature in a reasonable geographic distance who do provide the service.

JUDGE MCCANDLESS: But they didn't want another group, they wanted this particular one.

MS. MONOHAN: That's correct, your honor. Allow me to expand. One could imagine several other instances in which Joyful Noise denied patrons access to a service it does not provide – a fundraiser for a political candidate, perhaps. It goes against the shared beliefs of Joyful Noise to be involved in any political doings, and as such they do

not provide live performances at events of a political nature. It would then seem odd for the denied patron to file a claim against Joyful Noise for political discrimination, when the decision not to perform had nothing at all to do with the respective political beliefs of the patrons themselves.

JUDGE LEVY: That's certainly a specious argument, counselor. Certainly you wouldn't equate someone's protected, unchangeable sexual orientation with someone's mutable political leanings?

MS. MONOHAN: Certainly not, your honor. Simply that Joyful Noise is at its own discretion, based on religious scruples or otherwise, to determine what services it provides. We argue on the Free Exercise Clause of the First Amendment that petitioners seek to punish Joyful Noise for the execution of their religious beliefs. *Employment Division v. Smith* has determined our free exercise jurisprudence for going on twenty years, and we firmly believe that the case at hand falls well within the majority opinion therein.

JUDGE KRUEGER: Well, I'm glad it finally came up. I was just about to ask how your reasoning squares with precedent. Would you agree that the statute in question is generally applicable and neutral?

MS. MONOHAN: Yes, your honor. A law that bars businesses from discriminating against their customers based on their intrinsic characteristics is generally applicable and neutral, and even beneficial. Business owners do not have to own a business and it is a considerable harm to reject clientele based on attributes they have no control over, regardless of what one individual's religion might say.

JUDGE MCCANDLESS: How does your client's claim fit within the *Smith* decision, counselor? Seems to me that it runs the other way.

MS. MONOHAN: While it is a generally applicable and neutral law not to discriminate against customers in providing services, that only applies to the services that the business provides in the normal course of its business dealings. Additionally there is no law that mandates that businesses of one sort must provide services for a type of event that mostly one kind of person puts on. We have no illusions that the overwhelming majority of same-sex unions are of homosexual individuals. However, if Joyful Noise refrained from performing at a certain event that mostly white individuals attended, for example, a Ku Klux Klan rally, surely the petitioners would not be claim that Joyful Noise, because of their religious beliefs, discriminated against white individuals.

JUDGE LEVY: Quite the comparison.

MS. MONOHAN: Merely an illustration, your honor. All this to say, it is well within the rights of the business owner to choose not to provide certain services, regardless of whether the majority of the individuals who would request such a service belong to a protected class. A urologist who specializes in prostate cancer is not considered sexist for not giving gynecological examinations even though the vast majority of those who would seek a gynecologist are women. This would be true even if the urologists' motivation for avoiding gynecology was based on religious belief.

Joyful Noise determined the services it provides based on religious beliefs, yes, but at no time did Joyful Noise discriminate against any particular kind of individual who may have sought to procure services they do provide. I yield and relinquish my remaining time.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Too Much, Too Little

When court broke for lunch, Patrice beelined for the nearest bathroom. Sweat pooled in the small of her back, and her cotton blouse stuck fast to her like a damp second skin. Not enough, not enough. They could see it in her eyes, the disillusion brimming under hooded lids. Every second in that room, the judges behind the bench had flayed her apart and scoured the remains for a glimpse of doubt. Of course, they found much more than a glimpse. Her doubt fell out in the middle of the courtroom, an ugly, naked thing curled into a shivering ball. No doubt the lead counsel for the petitioners could see it too – hard to miss such a horrific sight.

She peered at herself in the mirror as cool water ran across her wrist from a function-over-form stainless-steel tap. After a couple minutes, her heart slowed its cunicular pace as the cooled blood passed from her hand to the rest of her body. It couldn't have been enough. In the mirror across from her, an unfamiliar woman opened the door and entered, her tall heels *click-click-clicking* on the polished tile.

Everything about her screamed power – the hard angles of her suit, the gleam of her wristwatch, the not so subtly cradled designer handbag. Hair pulled back so tight she looked near bald from the front, nails manicured to perfection. Private practice, no doubt. No government employee, AUSA or public defender, could afford the attire she wore, much less act as though she had in fact dressed down. Her eyes met Patrice's in the

mirror, a fiery amber that matched her complexion. Patrice averted her gaze and went to dry her hands but paused when her visitor spoke.

“I don’t care what it takes, Damion. Get your ass to the courthouse. I swear to God, if you don’t show up in the next half hour, you’re off the team.” Surely, she wasn’t talking to – no, there in her quaffed hair, a small Bluetooth headset. Still drying her hands, Patrice observed the other lawyer.

Everything about her brought back painful memories. In fact, a version of Patrice from five years ago mirrored her to a T – the attire, the confidence, the relationship with her inferiors. Even her perfume smelled familiar. Gooseflesh ran down Patrice’s arms and she shivered so hard her jaw hurt. Much too familiar. Part of her yearned for that again, that top-shelf life. The other part of her, the bruised and delicate part, revolted at the thought. That top-shelf life put her in the gutter, covered in filth and bloody. How quick the flip of the coin, how swift the mask vanishes to reveal the ugliness underneath. The immaculate lawyer hissed into her earpiece and pulled Patrice from her reverie. Damion had given the wrong answer, which is to say he didn’t obey this woman’s command at once.

“You should have told me about your niece’s Bat Mitzvah before, back when we were setting dates for court. Is it *your* party?” Presumably, a mumbled ‘no’ from Damion. “Right. Because that shit is for idiots and children. Really thought you were more of a team player, Damion.” She pressed a button on the device and sighed, then hung her head in front of the mirror for a beat where she noticed Patrice’s spying. “Excuse me, can I help you?” she quipped with a snap turn.

Patrice mumbled an apology and sped out of the bathroom, not sure where to go except far away from her own phantom misplaced in time. Blood rushed in her ears and the breath in her chest thinned to a vapor. She stumbled down a long, empty hallway and found a lone metal bench at the end. Just sit down and breathe.

Only for idiots and children, isn't that what the lawyer had said? What did that make her?

An image placed far away in the cavities of her memory appeared. Ten years old, sat at the notched wooden table in that dinky ranch house outside Lincoln. Her toes curled in the shag rug underneath. From another room, her mother hummed a few notes, not enough to comprise a melody but enough to entertain. On the whorled wood before her, a thick study Bible with frayed leather binding and foxed pages. A plateful of chicken and greens cooled across the table – her reward for a dutiful study session.

She could smell it then, on the bench in Oklahoma City, just as if she had never left. That plate of food embodied her father's ideology – follow the rules, get a proper reward. And even now, she struggled under the weight of that ideology. Follow enough rules, get a cushy position at a firm. Disobey and fall into the pit again. Tears burned in the corners of her eyes. Echoes of shoes bounced her way from down the hall. They belonged to Sandy.

“Hey there, girlie. Saw you bolt out of the toilet, thought I'd check up on you.”

Patrice wiped at her eyes and sniffled a couple times. “Thanks, Sandy. I'm alright. Just some court jitters.”

Sandy sat down next to her and crossed her skirted legs. “Don’t those usually happen *before* the trial?” she joked. Despite herself, Patrice chuckled. “Seriously, though. What got your ghost?”

Patrice hesitated at first. Biology told her not to expose this weakness, this chink in her armor, but the pressure inside her had built to a critical point and needed release somewhere. Sandy would do.

“I don’t know. Saw something that reminded me of... well, it brought back some memories. That’s all.”

Sandy clicked her tongue. “Know all about that, sweetheart. This one time—”

“It’s not just that, though,” Patrice interrupted. “I gave an argument today and I don’t know how much I believed in it. It’s tearing me up.”

“Happens to lawyers all the time, especially public defense. Nothing to worry about.”

Patrice stood up from the bench. “That’s just it, Sandy. I’ve never felt this way before and I’ve given hundreds of arguments I didn’t believe in. Did it all the time for the companies I represented out west. Now my throat feels all tight and I can’t stop sweating.” She turned to her friend, pleading. “What’s wrong with me?”

Sandy stood up with her and laid a gentle hand on her shoulder. “Nothing, girlie. Matter of fact, I think you’re doing just fine.” She grinned and led Patrice back down the long hallway towards where the other members of their entourage waited.

Roth and Fatellia talked together on the bench nearest to the bank of golden elevators, Beeman nowhere in sight. The world around them bent and curved in odd ways

and they appeared as though composited on a funhouse mirror. Back to the bathroom?
Her stomach gurgled – maybe. Roth stood up to meet her.

“Ms. Monohan, well done in there. I am grateful to have you alongside. My compatriots in the trio kvetched to no end about this shift in approach. They might eat their words when the ruling comes down,” he finished, and smiled in a restrained sort of way, as though unfamiliar with the action.

Fatellia leaned back into the bench and peered up at her, inscrutable. A slight nod. Warmth spread in her stomach at this signal of approval, but it knotted and turned frigid at the thought of her experience in the bathroom. *Idiots and children*. Mr. Roth, obviously not a child, did not bear the marks of an idiot either. Well-spoken, classically trained, owner of multiple degrees. By all standards, Mr. Roth belonged to the intellectual class. But nevertheless, this irreconcilable thing, this blot on an otherwise ivory canvas.

Roth continued. “My wife has directed me to ask the three of you to dinner at my house at the conclusion of today’s events. As a way of thanks, beyond the financial compensation amassed by the synagogue.”

Patrice looked at Fatellia. Whatever he decided, she would follow suit. Could be unprofessional, to fraternize with clients in a non-case related capacity. But not an ethics violation. Her senior stood from the bench and shook Roth’s hand. Dinner, then.

#

Beeman drove. His truck fit everyone far better than Fatellia’s coupe or Patrice’s sedan. Unremarkable streets passed in a blur. Businesses turned to housing developments and eight lanes narrowed to four, then two. They pulled into a quintessential suburban

lane, lined by leafy live oaks that stood over fifty feet tall and cast deep shadows on the neat, manicured lawns.

No one who noticed the Roth household would assume it could spawn a Supreme Court case. A red brick and white paint ranch, it lay like an L, with a two-car garage as the shorter arm. In the front yard, two kids, a boy and a girl no older than ten, swung on a tire suspended from a low-hanging branch. When they saw the car approach, they shared a look and raced towards the front door – gone from sight in an instant.

Roth had the door open before they even made the front porch and invited them into the foyer. No one had mentioned how many kids the Roth's had, but Patrice knew from the moment she crossed the threshold that the quantity could not fit on one hand. Dozens of pairs of shoes on a rug next to the door, the sound of running feet and a chorus of young voices from somewhere in the house. Delicious smells wafted from somewhere, spiced and lively. Her stomach gurgled involuntarily. With all the nerves for the oral argument that morning, food fell by the wayside. Fatellia acknowledged the noise with a wry smile.

Uninspired cream walls displayed dozens of framed pictures of different combinations of children and parents, certificates of achievement, and various Hebrew scrawlings. A simple wooden star of David adorned a cherry standing piano off to one side, slightly smaller than the organ in the chapel in Nebraska. Patrice's knuckles itched – more than a few phantom raps lingered from her unauthorized experiments on the ivories.

Eight bright-eyed, dark-haired children lined up to meet the visitors, in order of ascending age. Two boys and six girls. Patrice whistled low. Eight. Geez, Roth, keep it in your pants. By the third, Patrice had lost track of their names. As each got introduced,

they would shake hands with each guest and promptly depart to continue whatever activity the three lawyers had interrupted upon their arrival. Hopefully Fatellia wouldn't quiz her later. They met Mrs. Roth, a frazzled woman in a modest skirt and blouse, wiry and thin as wicker. Despite the general rowdiness of the kids, she never shouted at them, nor displayed any visible signs of displeasure. A perfect fit for her husband. Speaking of, as soon as they had all exchanged pleasantries, Mr. Roth dove straight into the dinner preparations. The two flew around the kitchen in an intricate and well-practiced dance, handing each other dishes and utensils before the other could even request them. Conversation broke when one of the younger girls came in to ask for help on her homework. About six years old, sheets of dark locks framed her pale face and fell on her thin shoulders. Mrs. Roth gestured to Patrice.

“Maybe Ms. Monohan could help with that? Why don't you go on and ask her?” Mrs. Roth pointed. Her small daughter glanced with wide eyes in Patrice's direction and hesitated. Patrice matched the uncertainty with a helping of her own. “Go on, now.” Tiny steps brought the girl closer to the dinner table. Their eyes met and in that moment neither could tell who feared whom the most. Patrice gathered herself.

“What's your name, dear?” she asked. Meant to be inviting, it sounded more inquisitive. Don't overthink it. She's just a child, you've done this before. Doubt crept in. Yeah and look how that first try turned out. Just tell Mrs. Roth that you're uncomfortable with it. Fatellia would notice, though. Patrice sucked on her teeth and plowed on. “And what do you need help with?”

Her already wide eyes expanded. She mumbled something inaudible. Better help her feel at ease.

Patrice pretended to cup her ear and lean in. “Sorry, darling, I got bad ears you’re gonna have to yell it loud for me!” A shaky smile. Progress!

“My name’s Sarah. Can you help me with my math?” the girl said, more confident.

“Sorry, Mary is it? You need to take a bath?” Patrice faked.

“No, I’m Sarah and I need to do my math!” she squealed and giggled.

“Oh, why didn’t you say so? I’m an ace at math,” the lawyer fibbed.

Sarah looked towards her parents, now deep in conversation with the other two strangers, then back. She screwed up her face and cocked her hip out. “You’re silly, I know you can hear!”

Patrice held her hands up in surrender. “Guilty! Now show me what you’re working on, hm?” A thick booklet plopped onto the table titled *Beginning Algebra*. “Woah-ho, this is pretty advanced stuff. This is *your* homework?”

Sarah tucked one leg behind the other and jostled up and down in place, then nodded. Huh. Patrice flipped through the pages to the one marked by a sticky note. Nothing she couldn’t handle, but beyond the caliber of a six-year-old. Sarah acknowledged this. “Mommy says I’m a prodigy. I don’t really know what it means. But I take the same class as Elijah and he’s in middle school!” she crowed.

As Patrice walked Sarah through the problem, she observed the girl work. Her pencil flew across the page and would stop every so often as she chewed on the end, deep in thought. Peter used to tap his pencil when he couldn’t get the answer. But he had never really excelled at math; deep down, Peter had a literary soul. A pit formed in her stomach and a sharp pain blossomed at the base of her neck. Just get this over with.

Pain. Parentheses before exponents. Pain don't forget to multiply on both sides. Spiral galaxies of pain. It couldn't end fast enough, but at last Sarah got the hang of it and started to complete the problems without assistance.

Beeman threw her a lifeline, and Patrice clutched it with both hands. "Hey, Patrice. Nice work today. Adam was just talking about how impressed he was by you." She rose from the table and rejoined the adults in the kitchen, only to walk into a veritable wall of smells that at the same time left her nauseous and famished.

She waved a hand. "All these two, believe me."

"Not the way I heard it," said Mrs. Roth. "I heard you were a superstar, all things considered."

"I'm sorry, what do you mean by all things considered?" Patrice asked.

"Just that, what with your hist— your father and all..." she petered off. Her husband swooped in.

"I think we were all a little surprised. Maybe even yourself. But time to talk about that later. Soups on."

Thirteen people at one long table presented a logistical challenge on paper, but every child knew right where to go to maximize elbow room and at the end of it, everyone had space to reach for food without imposing on another. If five fish could feed a crowd of thousands, one table could seat thirteen individuals. Little Sarah had gone out of her way to beat out her sister for the seat on Patrice's right, and Mrs. Roth sat on her left side.

Bowls of assorted colors filled with dishes of all kinds formed a tantalizing menagerie from the head of the table to the end. Platters of breaded gefilte fish cuts, beef

brisket, crispy potato latkes, and a pot of matzo ball soup. The near quintessential Ashkenazi offering, almost too perf-

“This is the truest Jewish meal we can offer,” Mr. Roth announced from the head of the table. “Let us say a blessing over this meal and then partake.” He extended a hand, and everyone around the table linked together. Patrice hesitated at first. Could it be so simple? Sarah looked up at her expectantly, in all her brilliance and unsullied potential. Her small hand, a bridge to a past life and a possible future. Thirty years of repression dissolved in the small slip of time it takes to take a child’s hand. No. Not right, not right. This gifted child, already shackled by dogma, had to wait for her own realization, her own epiphany and crushing realizations.

As though peering through the Gates of Time, Patrice saw twenty years of Sarah’s future. The piano competition trophies, the valedictorian speech at age sixteen, top of her class at an Ivy League. Shouting matches with her father after she lost her virginity before marriage. A dark night of the soul in which her lifetime of indoctrination swirled down the drain at the bottom of her heart into the fathomless emptiness below.

But then Sarah’s tiny fingers interwove with her own, clutched tight. Her firm grip yanked Patrice backward out from the deep endless fires in the Nebraskan Outback and down from the faraway stars, falling sideways like the Survivor Tree, but toward what Patrice couldn’t say. For the first time in thirty years, a glimmer shone out on the dim, empty landscape. Idiots and children. Mr. Roth’s ‘amen’ floated around her head, and she released Sarah’s hand far too late.

Dinner passed without event, and easy conversation flowed like sweet wine. Before long, dishes piled up in the ultra-wide farmhouse sink and goodbyes crowded the

air, some more heartfelt than others. Sarah had shadowed her the rest of the evening and when it came time to depart, Patrice leaned down to look right in her eyes.

“Thank you for a lovely dinner, Sarah.”

The girl blushed and pulled her hair in front of her face. “I didn’t make it, silly!”

“No,” Patrice agreed, “but it was wonderful because of you. I hope to see you again sometime. Would that be okay?” A tiny nod. “Good. Alright. Goodbye, then.”

Fatellia and Beeman chatted back and forth on the drive back, but Patrice fell sideways from the conversation and instead watched the trail of streetlamps meld into an unbroken line. A familiar burn in the center of her chest blossomed to the corners of her eyes and into the back of her throat. The infinitely distant fires that she had prayed to had kindled in her internal spaces. God knows what would remain after they ran their course.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Roots

The park rangers knew Patrice by name after her third week at the Survivor Tree. On mornings when her nerves or her motel neighbors prevented her from sleeping in to a normal hour, she hopped in the car and in ten minutes she had planted herself on the curved stoned bench that housed those engraved words. Every so often, they would chat with her, talk about the inane things that strangers talked about when they found themselves in unexpected conversation. The traditional script of modern human encounters did not span many topics. Weather, current events, weekend plans. Ranger Smith had two sons, both of whom had just been deployed to different branches of the military. On Wednesdays, Ranger Polowski brought a travel checkers set and the two would play a quick round.

Ranger Harmon ambled around the reflection pool on the other side of the park, within sight of Patrice. He noticed her and raised a hand in greeting, which she reciprocated with a forced smile. Please don't come any closer. Harmon always had his coffee before his rounds and conversation within three feet of him revealed that fact in an unpleasant, noxious way.

A decision would come down today, one way or the other. Judge McCandless would deliver salvation or ruination. To calm her nerves about it all, she found herself once again beneath the shade of the leaning elm, stone cold on her rear and sun warm on her face. In the spray of branches, two bobwhites flitted around, one always just out of

reach of the other. Her phone buzzed in her pocket. *Dad*. In one hand, her father. In the other, two leaves, one waxy and soft, one ridged and sharp.

She picked up.

“Hello.” A slight gasp on the other end.

“I... I didn’t expect you to answer.”

“Me neither. What do you want?” she asked. Stay impersonal. He deserves it.

“It’s so good to hear your voice, Pat, I can’t... I can’t tell you how much I missed talking with you. How many years has it been?” She rubbed her forehead. Too few.

“Thirty, give or take.”

“Damn. No kidding,” he breathed. Patrice recoiled. Had her father just sworn? Her perfect, God-fearing father? He noticed her pause. “Sorry about the language, know you’re not used to it. Ever since your mom... well, I have a hard time caring as much about certain things.”

“I-it’s okay. Why are you calling?” The memory of her mother tweaked her insides into a painful knot. James had scarce believed her when she told him that an ongoing trial would prevent her from attending the funeral. A lie – she didn’t want to see him.

“Two reasons. I heard from George that you did a fine job yesterday on behalf of Mr. Roth. Wanted to congratulate you for a job well done, no matter what ruling comes down. When’s that supposed to be, now?”

“Judge McCandless scheduled it for this Friday, ten a.m.”

“Ah, damn. Sorry again. Well that works into the next reason. Peter, James and I have been talking and we were hoping you could come up to Lincoln for his baptism, but

it's scheduled for noon that day. No way you could make it in time, I don't think. I'm not asking you to miss the ruling, though."

God, the baptism. It had entirely slipped her mind after the pressure of case prep. Well, not all the way. But she couldn't deal with that on top of her workload. Madcap hours under the green glow of banker's lamps, endless quizzes on precedent, all for one moment of absolution. And her father, the right hand of God's swift injustice, now asked her to throw it down the drain. She stared at the tilted elm before her and perceived that need to grow again, to put down roots and continue on, to seek sustenance. But where?

Fatellia. Peter. Oklahoma City. Lincoln. Work. Faith. Everything tossed into her blender of a brain and set to max, swirled into an indistinguishable mass of sweet memories, bitter griefs. Tears sputtered down her cheeks in twin trails. What lay on the other side of the gates? Two futures, one brand new and untethered from precedent, one bound firm to the past but somehow less stable.

"You there, Patrice?"

"Yes," she squeaked out. "I'm here."

"Well, I'll send you the address. I have faith you'll do what you think is best. Gotta go. Bye, now." Dial tone.

Ranger Harmon found her there half an hour later with a mound of used tissues next to her. He offered to throw them away for her, but she declined. When he finished his rounds, a small wax leaf remained.

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She called Fatellia from the airport to let him know that she couldn't appear for the ruling. He took it well, better than Patrice had any right to expect given the

circumstances. Suspended her for a week upon her return, without pay of course. Actions and consequences and all that. It sounded like a joke at first, but he hadn't laughed, and neither would she after paying for the flight and losing out on a week's paycheck.

Even as the flight attendant called for her group to board through the scratchy intercom, doubt ran roughshod on her conscience. Peter and her father had invited her to the baptism, but what about James? Peter had specifically gone behind his back to reach out to her. The only indication that James wanted her there came from her father, as if that meant anything.

Damn it all. James would have to deal with it. A thought struck her. Before the divorce, she had said that about James a lot. Delayed trips home? James could manage. Issues with Peter at school? Sorry, need to prepare for trial. Within her new selflessness, that same old selfishness. God. Nothing comes simple.

She turned her phone off and boarded, doubts stowed away from sight. Mental states may shift during travel.

Two hours and one uncomfortable middle seat later, Patrice pulled into the parking lot of the church. An hour early of course. Nobody needed to know that. The first half hour of waiting slipped by in a blink, but the second half dug its heels into the dirt and the minutes came with a deep reluctance.

A few folks dressed to the Midwest nines showed up and filtered inside. Why noon on a Friday, of all days? Why not Sunday, when everyone would be off work? They must have their reasons, and good ones. Her phone buzzed in the cupholder of her rental – probably Beeman or Fatellia with the results of the case. It wouldn't hurt to check. No

harm in knowing. Before she could, a familiar sandy blond crew cut and horn-rimmed glasses approached the front door. James.

Sweat dripped down the back of her neck. Leaving was still an option, no one had seen her yet. That window closed with every second that bled by. She shoved her hands in her pockets. From their depths, she produced the spiny leaf from the Survivor Tree. Her fingers traced its edges. Much more brittle than when she had first taken it, more insubstantial. It changed with time, took on new characteristics. But even as the leaf weakened and moved beyond its old life, it matured into a new, precious thing. With the leaf in hand, she exited the car and approached the entrance to the church. She took a deep breath and pulled on the handle. It swung out on well oiled hinges, and a blast of cold air conditioning washed over her.

A good start.

The three of them stood together across the lobby. The sight of all of them was too much. She staggered a bit but caught herself. Her mind fuzzed around the edges and thoughts drained through a funnel with too small an aperture. How do you greet people you hurt and abandoned? How do you unburn bridges? The ashes of her past still rained from the sky and she now had to act as though nothing had ever caught flame in the first place. Wounds may become scars given enough time, but plunging the blade in the same exact place might undo any healing that had ever taken place.

Organ chords resounded from within the sanctuary and only just reached the foyer where they stood, still not aware of her presence. A familiar hymn, “In the Garden”. Fitting. She hummed along without a second thought, slipping into a habit broken for

three decades. Apparently, she had hummed too loud, because Peter looked past his father and grandfather to where she stood behind them.

Oh, Peter. Her son. The light of her life that she had done her damndest to put out. He stood taller than his father, lanky in his ill-fitting suit but sharp. He had a strong chin with a little bit of stubble, and a simple haircut, far different than other boys his age who peacocked around with wild cuts and colors. He smiled a bit when he saw her, and Patrice's heart crumpled like a sand castle washed by the incoming tide. She wanted to live in that moment of recognition forever – just recognition, no anger, no disappointment.

The three men walked up, slow. James, ever the academic- wore a tweed blazer and brown wool pants over a linen shirt and bowtie. He looked older, but this hadn't surprised Patrice. Facebook offered convenient ways to check in on her ex-husband without prying. Her father surprised her most, since he abstained from social media and she hadn't seen him in twice as long as James or Peter.

Old age mistreated Wesley Monohan. He would be seventy-two this year, but the deep wrinkles by his eyes and the saggy paunch on his neck argued for a decade older. Ever a large man physically with equal size beliefs, everything about him now screamed diminution. He hunched over a tennis-balled walker, and had lost a considerable amount of weight. Rode hard and put up wet, he used to say, but always about others. Now, though, the man looked more skeleton than man. It beggared belief. This couldn't – but it could, and was.

She didn't attempt to hug them, and they didn't offer. James placed a hand on her arm, and the sensation of his touch sent her heart into a tizzy. He was okay with her being

here, that's all she needed to know. No one knew what to say. Until Dad broke the silence.

"God bless you, Pat. You made it."

"Hey mom," Peter said.

"Patrice," James said.

"Hi everybody." God, what a start.

"How was the flight?" James asked.

"Not too bad, not too bad. Had an overfriendly seatmate, but that's just how it goes," she forced a laugh.

"Well, we're just glad you're here," James responded.

A loud voice on a microphone ended their reunion and directed them inside the sanctuary for the beginning of the service. Patrice breathed a sigh of relief. No doubt hard conversations would come at some point, but small steps like that conversation could were a good jumping off point.

They filtered into the large room, as red carpet and red upholstered pews put on a bloody display in the bright columns of outside light that fell from long, thin windows on either side. Peter guided them to the frontmost row and left to meet the head pastor in the back.

Everything in the sanctuary set Patrice's teeth on edge, including her father next to her. The combination of her father and the ten-foot crucifix on the wall behind the pulpit rustled painful memories out of their dark hiding places. Her knuckles turned white from the strain of her clenched fists. Her father leaned over and spoke in a velvety whisper as the associate pastor welcomed the attendees.

“We’re all glad you’re here Pat. Especially me.”

“I’m here for Peter and James, not you,” she said through gritted teeth.

He nodded. “I deserve that. And much worse, probably.” She didn’t dignify this with a response. “You’ve missed a lot, you know.”

“You think I don’t know that, Dad?” she seethed.

“Thirty years is a long time, s’all I’m saying. When your mom passed—“

“Please,” she interjected, “can we not do this right now? For once in your life can this be about someone other than either of us?”

A deep sigh and folded hands. He kept on.

“It’s about Peter as much as it is about all of us. The church body needs to be on good terms to support its newest members, no? If they can give Peter a second chance, maybe you could spare one for your poor old dad?”

“How can you even ask me that, here, of all places?”

“There’s no better place than here to ask forgiveness.”

“Well I’m not him,” she gestured toward a stained-glass mosaic of the son of God strapped to a cross.

“And I’m not him,” he said, and gestured to a twenty-foot banner with orange and yellow bolts of fire, the licking flames of Hades.

Patrice white knuckled the hem of her dress and the fabric cinched under her grip. Maybe not, but that didn’t mean he deserved a get-out-of-jail-free card. Like the edge of a well-worn blade, her anger had dulled over three decades, but if pressed, could break skin and draw enough blood to be dangerous. Her father best maintain a safe distance.

In a last-ditch effort to end this conversation, she craned her neck to watch as the rest of the parishioners filled up the sanctuary. Smiling faces, all. Too many. Too happy. Smiles didn't belong in a place like this.

A short, balding man in a floor-length robe, which is to say, an average length robe, moved to the glass podium square in the middle of the raised platform. He tapped a long gooseneck microphone a few times and produced an ear-splitting howl of feedback that belonged more to a death metal concert than a church service. After the screech faded into the burgundy carpet, he addressed the congregation.

“Friends, thank you for being here for this special occasion. Now, normally we would be doing this on a Sunday morning when the whole congregation could be here, but the church is going to be shut down for renovations soon and this was the last day we could schedule it. So we're just going to roll with the punches here, be flexible. Feed thousands with a few loaves, as it were.” A good-hearted chuckle from those assembled. “Well, praise be to God. Today we have the blessing of celebrating two souls who have decided to undergo the rite of baptism, and in so doing, make a statement before the church and before God of their rebirth in Christ. Peter and Alyssa have chosen to undertake a crucial aspect of the Christian journey, one which Christ himself had performed on him in the desert. Just like when Christ arose from the water and a dove came above his head, so too will these baptisms please our Father in heaven. If the two would join me in the font?”

He moved toward a recessed area of the perimeter wall of the sanctuary and stepped down into a pool of calm aquamarine water. The two set to be baptized stood just

outside in white linen robes. Peter's face shone and his white teeth refused to hide as he smiled wide.

The pastor's words faded into the ether, her father alongside. All that remained was Peter. The first stirrings deep inside, the silent promise and cosmic responsibility. Stomach stretched thin in anticipation. Pain, unimaginable pain and then, at the apex, a cry rings out in sterilized yearning. Strong lips on her nipple, the milk trickles at first and then flows. She and the baby in the rocking chair of the nursery, respite of respites. United at point of contact as every mother and their offspring had connected for all time.

A word cuts forth from incoherent babble – he expresses himself. Ball. Ma. No. His own name. Peter. Recognition lights up his eyes – self-awareness. *I am Peter.*

Slam dunks on a Little Tikes basketball hoop. First day at school. Tears on both sides.

Back then, in the days of novelty and small virtues, she could reach out and touch his cheek, hold his small hand whenever she liked. But a thousand compromises pulled her hands further and further away. Work late just this one night. Miss this one school play. Miss two days a week, then three and finally weeks at a time. Then ten years slipped past, the quick flit of a bird in front of the sun. Gone before you even noticed.

Some nights, when Patrice awoke to the car horns and shouts in San Francisco, she would think of Peter and believe that she had done her best. She never beat him, she fed and clothed him. Worse mothers existed, and in plentiful supply. That thought sustained her and kept the guilt at bay long enough for her to fall asleep.

But here, now those assurances withered away in the stained light. Self-deception, that's all. Her gut roiled as the guilt flowed over the levee her mind had constructed over

three decades. A failure in every way that mattered, in all the ways that counted. Mother, wife, and... daughter. No, not as daughter. What daughter would put up with all she had and still sit next to the man who raised her without beating him within an inch of his life? That impenetrable space, that airtight space – no guilt would seep through there. But still her stomach twisted and her jaw clenched. Why?

Deep in that sunken vault of beastly grief called her heart, a drop of guilt. The sharp edge of Peter's grin pierced the thick exterior and inch by inch it filled until no air remained. She stifled a gasp as the guilt dripped down her cheek in plain view of the congregation.

Peter called her. *Peter* called her. He bridged the divide, he flung the Voyager Probe into the void of their sundered relationship and invited her home on his terms. Despite what she had done and refrained to do. Despite what her father had done and refrained to do, maybe, just maybe, she could stretch her arm out. Maybe they could plant a new seed.

The pastor read from a thick, worn Bible not unlike the one her father no doubt still used. He placed a hand on Peter's chest and another on his back. They moved in conjunction and Peter plunged into the green-blue water. Patrice lived in that moment for as long as she could. Simple peace on his face under the waves. The hint of a smile.

A new Peter broke the surface, someone that Patrice would very much like to meet.

As the crowd cheered and clapped, she turned to look at her father, a new man himself. Light poured from his wrinkled face, but not the harsh light of her youth. A soft light. A humbled light.

Nothing could erase those abuses, heal those deep wounds. But for the first time, pity blossomed where anger had reigned for so long. It would take time, as all good things require. Time for life to return from the brink and for beauty to dig itself up from the ashes.

After the service concluded, the four of them assembled in the parking lot. James and Peter hugged for a long time, their strong arms gripped tight. Her father went next. Finally, Peter turned to her.

Damn it all. She rushed into his embrace and she held the eternal distant fire between her two thin arms.

“Thanks for coming, mama,” he whispered in her ear.

“Of course, baby,” she replied through choking tears. Too soon, they pulled apart.

James put a hand on her shoulder. “A long time coming, I think. You heading back to OKC today?”

She nodded and wiped a tear from her cheek. “I have some unfinished business.”

“Oh, Pat!” her father exclaimed. “What happened with the trial? Did you win?” he asked.

Patrice had forgotten to turn her phone to check. No doubt the answer lay in her inbox. She scrambled to her purse and retrieved the device. The other three looked on with baited breath, but she just stared at the black screen and her reflection within.

Two months of work. Three years of disgrace. One moment of absolution.

She put the phone back in her purse and her fingers touched the elm leaf hidden within. Sarah’s small hand clutched tight. Peter, underwater. The mess of reality.

She’d check later. First, to plant some seeds.