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The Ticket

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The Ticket

Blair Bundy Jr

Adam was understood to be a pious and obedient boy. One who kept a foot fixed firmly on his breath and a book held steady in his hands. “Amendable qualities”

“A swell son.”

“Little pleaser.”

“Child of God.”

“The nigh-perfect boy.”

He’d heard it all his life. Eighteen years old and considered a well-grown man. He and his younger sister worked with their mama: cooking and selling plates, as well as cleaning the homes of the rich. They split their proceeds sixty/twenty/twenty. Adam and his sister were fine with her taking more. Although their work was equal, she’d taught them everything they knew. Given them life and a home and love in every way she knew how. She was all a mother should be.

In his tiny, close-knit, Southern Baptist town Adam was more beautiful than all the men and even some women. He hadn’t shown interest in any girls and was admittedly not as . . . boyish as the other guys. His voice was softer. His demeanor was at once gauche and graceful. Although well-liked, his name was joined with whispers of a certain deviance. And, as one sister of the congregation reminded his mother under the guise of sanctity, “wounds left to fester often grow into something untreatable.”

Soon enough, decided by his mother, his church, and his self-righteous town at large, it was time Adam began his journey to marriage. And they had settled on the perfect woman for him. Cynthia, the pastor’s dignified daughter. She loved reading, possibly even more than Adam did. By age nine, she’d spent her Saturdays reading to the old, illiterate folks who’d never gotten a chance to finish or even attend school. By ten, she’d led the other kids in Sunday school services. By twelve, she’d led the entire congregation in prayer. All with her father’s subtle push. Ask anyone in town, she was

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what every girl should be: a diligent servant to God, a selfless servant to her fellow man, a gleeful servant to the rules of this world as designed. If she so desired respect, that is. And, so, that's what Cynthia was. A symbolic servant as her father, her town, and her faith had called her to be.

Adam knew her his entire life. Like him, she was quiet and kind. While friendly, they were not friends. After all, in the 50s it wasn't the way for boys and girls to leisure together. They did as their sex did. If not, it was a sign of a deep-rooted, dark-sided issue.

The Pastor was Adam's idol. An upstanding pillar of the community. The mouthpiece of God who lived his life according to the commandments as inscribed on Moses' stone tablets. When he spoke, people listened. When he asked, he received. The people were his guide. Their respect and admiration was his to feast on, and Adam gladly gave it all. Outside of his mother, this was the only semblance of a father he'd truly known. His own had died in the second Great War shortly after the conception of his sister.

* * *

The night before his arranged proposal, Adam was, in a sense, summoned by the pastor. His sister teased and congratulated him in a single breath, "My brother, the class climber. The worthy."

"Will you take your little library when you leave us," she teased more, with a whisper of sorrow.

His mother, ever the coach, said, "You may already have it, but it's respectable to ask for his daughter's hand."

"Stand tall."

"Show him you're a worthy and holy man."

"Be the son I raised you up to be. . . . Make mama proud."

Sure, she'd said and he'd heard it all before, but now he had something to earn and something to lose. His mother was a devout and dutiful woman who, like most here, did as she was raised to. She had little clue of the jaws she was sending her only boy into. . . .

The pastor's wife and daughter were away on a missionary trip, "greeting God to those in need [of Him.]" That night, in the pastor's very own southern-gothic abode, Adam sat with him in a candle-lit room without windows. Adam thought it was chillingly charming. The pastor gave him his first-ever taste of wine. It was red and bitter, resembling yet quite unlike

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the sweet communion he'd tasted many times before. It brought with it a feeling unlike any he'd ever known.

Ease.

The conversation was not at all Cynthia-centric. But rather the pastor spoke in a way Adam had never known him to. This wasn't the man who had personally bestowed upon him holy advice, baptism, and guidance. This wasn't the man he watched from a distance framed by a podium. In this moment he was a man, not God's mouthpiece. And Adam was the perfectly quiet foil to his pastor's endlessly aromatic voice. It had power in it. A word Adam didn't know but could feel . . . *seduction*. There was something more profound in the way he held onto Adam's sparsely spoken words. He treated them like mined jewels. Adam had never truly been listened to, which was largely fine with him. He didn't have much to say, honestly. He mostly felt. Though, his feelings tended to be fairly quiet as well.

Switching back on the conviction the podium had gifted him, the Pastor told Adam, "There is a reason God's children are known as born again. We are born into sin again and again and again many times in this life. It surrounds us," he said as he refilled both their glasses. "I shall tell you a secret not many of us are ready to accept. We must indulge our birthright. Though, only in small doses. Following the indulgence, we make a plea for penance and we cleanse. That is the true, unadorned way of God."

Adam was confused by this "secret." It was no message God or pastor had preached before. So, he asked, "I thought we were to turn our backs on sin? Completely?"

"No, my boy. We condemn living completely in it." The Pastor's tone was serious and final. So, Adam made it make sense. After all, at times the world existed in a gray place; although merely fantasy, books had taught him that.

Before he could ponder the thought for long, something touched his lips. Something that fit there. It was bitter but warm. Something that felt all at once frightening and primally familiar.

It was the pastor's lips. And it was over just as quickly as it had arrived. "Pastor, I—" Adam began, but never finished, as the pastor rushed in with "This cycle of sin and self-repentance is our ticket to Heaven, Adam." Maybe, it was his own name falling off such respectable lips. Maybe, it was the ease provided by Jesus's special drink. Maybe, it was the way his pastor looked at and listened to him. Maybe, he was beginning to understand why the room was windowless and why the wine was heavy and either way he'd leave this

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room with a new secret. He didn't know what exactly it was, but he made a choice to give what was requested. Adam pressed that foot more firmly on his breath and kissed his pastor. Knowing full well it was what the man wanted. *This is my choice.*

They went on to do a number of things that night. Things their townsfolk would label abominable. Things many outsiders would do as well. Although, what Adam felt wasn't so settled. It was soiled. Exhilarating. *Possibly even holy.* Only wrong because of their statuses in relation to one another. *Or, maybe, our similar sex? Not age.* No, for the idea of a 'teenager' had only been invented the decade prior. So, Adam set aside his internal, eternal questioning and rested his eyes solely on the statue that centered this windowless room. A stone Jesus in his most famed position—suffering on the cross. Adam had achieved the destiny of what he was made to be—eager to please. And the pastor? He was God's chosen; and who better to please than God? So the deed was done.

* * *

Later in the night, in the bathroom of this godly, gothic abode Adam stood naked with God's mouthpiece. A numb stillness to him. The pastor said "We have chosen sin together. Now we must take penance together." The pastor held a tiny, adorned dagger; and following his plea, reopened a sealed wound on his forearm. He then handed the stained silver to Adam. He wasn't fond of the idea of splitting his skin, but still, Adam had an ingrained respect for his pastor and his God. If blood was what got him into Heaven then so be it, he had already begun this journey.

As he let his sins bleed out, he hoped it was worth it.

The pastor then led him to the clawfoot tub in the corner of the bathroom. "With baptism, we're made clean again." Together they sat naked in the water, as it was slowly stained wine red and Adam fought off one recurring thought.

Run.

No. He'd follow his pastor and the voice of God anywhere. It was his duty as a man. But still, the thought fought back and with greater force than he had.

Run.

No. The pastor took Adam's hands into his own. "Cleanse yourself with me?" he asked. "Anything for you." Adam responded. "No. For God." To-

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gether they submerged. The pale green walls of the bathroom would hold these memories as long as he would.

Run.

No. Beneath the water, he envisioned the rest of his life. He'd never speak of, let alone think of, this night again. He'd marry Cynthia and they'd have a few kids, as is their earthly duty. They'd be happy enough. He'd work himself to the bone to feed the mouth he'd married and the ones he'd make. Or he'd be shipped off to war and die like his papa if the third great one were to come. Or he'd rise to be a pillar of the community like his pastor. Taking secrets to a windowless room like his pastor. Groomed to take his pastor's place as if some chosen heir to God's flock.

Either way, he'd live as all before him and all around him did—in this town forever. With these people forever. Miserable forever. Ashamed forever. He'd love this life. He'd choose this life. As is his earthly duty.

Run.

Together, they surfaced dripping wet. They stepped out of the tub and Adam felt no different, but the pastor seemed renewed. Whether by this ritual or by God was not Adam's to know. So he played the game he'd only just realized life to be. "Are you cleansed, my boy?"

"... I am."

A mirrored, yet one-sided smile. The pastor kissed Adam's forehead. "Now, await my daughter's return 'marrow morning and claim your wife. Be made one with my blood, my child. Your God, your mother, and your pastor have ordained it."

On his way out, Adam had no thoughts, only his feet knew where they'd go. They led him home to where his mama and sister slept. To the underbelly of his mama's bed where an eternally empty suitcase lay. To his room where all his earthly possessions lived. To the shelf where his books rested. To the loose floorboard in his closet where all his savings and secrets hid. And to a halt at the exciting threshold of the only home he'd ever known. It was here that a reckless mix of thoughts, beliefs, and feelings dripped like a faucet. It was here that the two people he knew best slept. The two he'd spent his whole life with. The two people his heart beat for . . .

Choose them.

That was but a moment and a whisper to his feet. And so they walked out and walked onto a bus that led to the train where, hopefully, a true cleansing awaited him.

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Maybe it wasn't a path paved to Heaven. Maybe it led to Hell's fire, but it was his. Something he'd chosen. So, as he held that tangible ticket, Adam ever so slightly raised that foot and took his first ever breath.