

01

DECEMBER 1975

REBECCA

New Year's Eve.

The baby cries in his crib. I yawn, my body reluctant to move. I haven't had a full night's sleep since Caden's birth back in April. Add the stress of impending doom and I am down to maybe three hours of sleep a night.

Civilization is perched on the eve of Armageddon. It has to be tonight. The Watchtower Bible and Tract Society insist that they cannot see beyond 1975. With the oil embargo of 1973 and the Vietnam War, I am not surprised. Chaos rules the world.

Tossing my covers to the side, I roll out of bed. The old mattress springs creak.

Dressed in one of my husband John's t-shirts, I shiver. We keep the temperature low, relying more on the wood stove in the living room to heat our house. Money has been tight since John quit his job at his uncle's quarry back in June in order to spread Jehovah's truth full time.

I tiptoe to the crib at the foot of the bed in the dark. Caden reaches for me as I approach. Can he sense that the end is near? Kids are

so perceptive.

His diaper is wet. I kneel down at his changing station on the floor and roll out a plastic mat over the carpet. Laying him down, I unsnap his blue pajamas. He kicks his legs as I rush to undress him. I do not want to be in the middle of such a trite chore when Jehovah finally unleashes his wrath upon the earth.

Understanding Armageddon is a privilege; not knowing if I will survive is pure torture. I came to the religion late, only three years ago, when I was sixteen. Have I since repented enough, prayed enough, and pioneered enough to be saved?

Our solid brick house in the obscure northern mining community of Bancroft, Ontario, Canada, protects us from icy rain and heavy winter snow, but it is no fortress. It cannot protect my family from the end of the world. If Jehovah deems us undeserving of a life in Paradise under his divine rule, he will find us and strike us down along with the entire population of unworthy worldly fools.

Caden continues to fuss after being changed, so I sit with him in our rocking chair and offer him my breast. The chair squeaks like a loose wooden floor plank.

Unfortunately, my breast refuses Caden any milk. Frustrated, he sucks harder, sinking his small teeth into my flesh. I bite my lip to keep from yelping.

Growing impatient, he cries at his failure.

"Shhhh, baby, shhhh." I don't want him to wake his father.

Caden pumps his tiny fists and feet in protest. Breastfeeding has never come easy to me. Such a tiny baby, I fear he is not getting enough nourishment from my body. Suddenly he wails at the top of his lungs.

"Rebecca?" John groans from his side of the bed. "Is everything alright? It's only..." he eyes the bedside clock, "five in the morning."

"I'm sorry, honey. The baby's hungry, but I'm not producing any milk again," I choke, embarrassed.

"Sweetheart, I can hear the stress in your voice. You need to relax." John's voice is calm and steady.

I stand up and pace the room with Caden cradled against my shoulder.

"What if my struggle to feed my son is Jehovah's way of

condemning our less than diligent behavior?" I ask.

John flips on the light on his nightstand and sits up. The covers fall to his waist exposing his lanky torso.

"Rebecca," he sighs, "you know as well as I do that we didn't get pregnant on purpose."

"That doesn't make it right," I insist, walking over to the bed and sitting next to him, still cradling Caden whose crying has softened to a whimper.

"We were so careful," John reminds me. "Nobody is more meticulous than you when it comes to plotting your cycle, counting out every day."

"I know, I know," I snivel.

Technically, children are a blessing, but with the approach of Armageddon, it had been strongly suggested that childbearing be put off until after Judgment Day.

John reaches out and caresses my arm. "Rebecca, it was an accident. You know what the doctor said. How were we to know that a bout of the flu could so drastically alter your cycle?"

"Since Caden's birth, I've worried about the possibility of every day being the last. But now here we are, on the last day of 1975. This is it. This may be my last day with my son. It's so unfair. It's not his fault that he was conceived. Would Jehovah really punish him for something over which he had no control?"

"Maybe God meant for us to have this child," John suggests. "Perhaps Caden is a gift. Maybe our child is destined to become someone great, a born leader."

John's strength comes not from his physical stature, but from his faith. When he talks about religion his brow furrows, and his hazel eyes darken with intensity. Passion resounds from his every word, giving him the power to mesmerize a potential convert, an entire congregation, or me.

John captivated me on the first day we met.

Sixteen years old, sitting on the curb, I watched as my mother, dressed in short shorts and heels, helped her new husband, husband number four to be exact, some retired, washed up, pro-baseball player twenty years her senior, move our scant belongings into his palatial four

storey home on the outskirts of Bancroft.

They didn't need my help. There wasn't much to bring from our dumpy two-bedroom basement apartment where we had lived in between husbands. No furniture, just Mother's hippie clothing, her gaudy cosmetics, and her hair curlers. Oh, and one box of toys.

A car pulled into the driveway and my last dad, husband number three, got out and let his daughter Carla, my six-year old half-sister, out of the passenger seat. Dressed in a lavender dress with white patent shoes, she looked like some high society kid. I watched as her dad picked her up in his arms and spun her around. She giggled. He smiled his perfect smile. I kept my mouth of crooked teeth shut. Their matching thin noses made me self-conscious. I found myself trying to hide my tulip bulb snout.

Husband number three gave Mother a curt nod and drove off without even acknowledging me.

I never met my biological father, husband number one. Mom left him before I was even born and she refused to tell me where I could find him. I didn't have anybody to call me Pumpkin or Sweet Pea.

"Hey, wanna jump rope? I can jump Double Dutch," Carla chirped, skipping up to me, her blonde pigtails bouncing in line with her step, her natural hair the same color as Mother's dyed coif.

"You need three people for that," I muttered, dismissing her.

"Maybe Mom will play too."

"Are you blind? Can't you see she's busy?"

Carla shrugged and ran off to play elsewhere.

Mother once told me that I inherited my father's nose, his mousy black hair, and his boring brown eyes. I watched the cars pass by, like I always did, studying every male passenger, evaluating each one's appearance. Did he look like me? Would he recognize me as his daughter and whisk me away from this tragic life? The first man was too young. The second had red hair. What about the man with grey hair? What color was his hair in his youth?

"Excuse me, Miss, why the frown on this beautiful day?"

I looked away from the road to find a handsome young man with cropped chestnut hair, dressed in slacks, a white collared dress shirt with short shirt sleeves, and a blue tie standing in front of me on the sidewalk

holding a stack of pamphlets. His smoky eyes and deep voice portrayed a genuine concern for my wellbeing.

I nodded in the direction of the house. "Mother's moving us into her new husband's house."

"And you're unhappy about that?"

"I don't see the point in this whole production. She's just going to end up divorcing him."

The stranger chuckled.

"It's not funny," I protested. "Marriage is supposed to be something you take seriously. My mom treats it like she's playing a game of musical chairs."

"I'm sorry." He turned on his heel and sat down beside me on the grass. His bare arm grazed mine causing something inside me to tingle. "I didn't mean to hurt your feelings. I totally agree with you. About marriage that is. I believe that it is for forever and I believe it has a better chance at success when it is grounded in faith and religion."

"Mother calls us atheists."

"You know, just because she's Godless doesn't mean you have to be." He held out his hand. "My name's John Ryan."

"I'm Rebecca. So John, what do you believe in?" I asked.

"As far as I am concerned," John continues, bringing my focus back to the present, "we've been blessed. A child of our own will make up for the fact that neither of us will have any biological family in Paradise."

My heart sinks with his reminder; only Witnesses will survive Armageddon.

"I'm going to make one last effort to convince my mother to convert."

John frowns. "Why do you do this to yourself?"

I play dumb. "Do what?"

"Torture yourself with unrealistic expectations about your mother."

"You yourself have said it's never too late for someone to convert. Are you going pioneering today?"

"Of course."

A MATTER OF CONSCIENCE

“Well, so am I. I am going to go to my mother’s and introduce her to her grandson. It might be the push she needs. If she changes her mind, I’ll bring her here and we can get one of the elders to come baptize her.”

John manages to curl his lips into a half smile. “You do what you feel you must, honey.”

“Well, first things first, I need to make Caden a bottle.”

After breakfast, I kiss John goodbye, buckle Caden into his car seat in our pickup truck, and set out for my mother’s place. Our old rusted Chevy needs a grocery list of repairs, but John refuses to do anything with it until after Armageddon. It makes sense to wait. Who knows what will happen to transportation in the new system?

Before starting the truck I search for any warning signs that the blood bath has already begun. The sky is not red or fiery, but a depressing grey. The snowflakes that fall are light and fluffy, not the least bit stormy or menacing.

I look in the review mirror at my son. “I’ll make this trip as quick as possible,” I promise him. Taking a deep breath, I turn the key in the ignition and back out of the driveway.

In the ten minutes it takes to drive to my mother’s place, my nerves unravel. I have not seen her in two years. We have spoken on the phone, sharing stilted conversations at best, each ending in a fight. We take turns hanging up on one another. We have not gotten along since I announced my engagement to John.

“Mother, John asked me to marry him,” I gushed one evening over dinner.

She looked up from her plate. “Not that Witness boy?”

“Yes, that Witness boy.”

Husband number four coughed, but kept his head down, his eyes on his potatoes.

“And what did you say?” Mother asked, raising her wine glass to her lips.

“I said yes,” I replied, thrusting my left hand out to showcase my engagement ring, two modest cubic zirconium stones riding a thin gold wave.

Choking on a swig of her merlot, Mother's eyes bulged. She covered her mouth with her left hand as she coughed, displaying her own bejeweled bauble on her ring finger, a diamond the size of a small boulder.

"Oh, for pity's sake Rebecca, we're not living in medieval times. What's the rush? You're still a child," she scolded.

"You married young," I reminded her.

"And look where it got me."

"So marrying my father was a mistake?"

"I'd still be married to him if it wasn't."

"So does that mean that I was a mistake?"

"Rebecca, you know I didn't mean it like that. Look, you're only sixteen. You're not even old enough to get married without my written consent. You've barely started high school."

"Secondary education is of little importance to Witnesses. John dropped out of school three years ago, when he turned eighteen."

"Great. So you want to throw your life away on an uneducated, older man? What can he possibly offer you?"

"Religion. Faith. A chance to survive Armageddon."

"Armageddon?" she scoffed. "You're not suggesting that the world is coming to an end, are you?"

I nodded. "And soon."

"Good God, Rebecca! This cult of yours, it's just a silly phase. You'll grow out of it, I promise you."

"It's not a cult and it's not a phase! I don't want to live here anymore pretending this is a normal family. Your newest husband is old enough to be my grandpa!"

"Rebecca!" Mother hissed. "You will watch your mouth and show your stepfather a little respect."

"It's quite alright Patty," husband number four said, so matter of fact. "Rebecca, this suitor of yours, does he have a job?"

"Yes. He works down at the local quarry."

"Does he have a house?"

"He just bought a bungalow with half an acre in town."

"So he can provide for you?"

"Yes."

He looked up at my mother. "Patty, I say we let her marry him."

"You can't be serious?" Mother squawked.

"She loves him. She doesn't want to be here. At least we'll know where she is instead of her running away with him."

Mother looked at him, and then at me, then back at him, and back at me again. "You know what? Fine. Do what you want. It's your life to ruin. Now if you'll excuse me, I've lost my appetite."

She topped up her wine, pushed her chair away from the table and walked off, glass in hand. A moment later, she slammed her bedroom door, the sound vibrating throughout the house.

Mother signed the papers permitting me to wed John, but she did not attend my wedding.

But today will be different. Today my mother will lay eyes on Caden and cry tears of joy as she holds him for the first time. Their bond will be immediate and she will finally see a reason to do whatever it takes to survive Armageddon.

Pulling into Mother's driveway, I cringe at the sight of the garish six-bedroom, seven-bathroom house. Really, who needs more toilets than beds?

Carla answers the door dressed up like an antique doll in a pink ruffled dress with matching silk ribbons in her Goldie-locks hair.

"Mom's in the kitchen," she mutters before turning away from me without acknowledging the baby.

Holding Caden close to my chest to shield him from any wickedness lurking in the house, I make my way to the kitchen, walking past husband number four in the living room. He grunts hello, raising a beer can in my honor. I do not respond.

My mother, Patty, all five foot three inches of her, flits about from stove to pantry to counter to stove. She can't weigh more than 105 pounds. Tomato paste stains her cream-colored apron. The familiar smells of fried onions and garlic invade my sinuses.

Patty's frizzy hair, more yellow than blonde, her blue eye shadow, and her bright red lipstick saddens me. Her long claw-like nails belong on a streetwalker, not on a forty-something mother of two.

"Making a batch of spaghetti sauce?" I ask.

"Rebecca!" Mother jumps, "you startled me." Her eyes widen when she sees Caden.

This is it. The moment I have been waiting for. "Mother, this is Caden Jonathan Ryan, your grandson."

"He's so precious!" she squeals. "Can I hold him?"

"Sure," I smile, handing him over to her, trying to suppress my anxieties about having a worldly person touching my son. She isn't just any worldly person; Mother is a potential convert.

"I didn't even know you were pregnant," she sighs.

"Well, you know, we haven't exactly spoken much," I remind her.

Caden giggles, comfortable in her arms.

"Do I see teeth?" she asks.

"You do."

"Oh, you're such a big boy," she chirps, making funny faces at Caden. "How much does he weigh?"

"Fifteen pounds, I think."

"And when's his birthday?"

I bristle. "You know we don't celebrate birthdays."

She frowns. "Oh Rebecca, don't tell me you're raising him in that cult of yours."

"Religion," I correct her.

She rolls her eyes. "Whatever." She takes one of Caden's hands in hers, returning her attention to him.

"It's not too late to save yourself you know, Mother."

"Dear, you're not trying to discuss Armageddon with me again are you?"

"Yes."

"Must we? I haven't seen you in two and a half years, not since you... converted. Let's talk about something else. Every time we talk religion on the phone we fight."

"Because I don't see how anyone who knows about Armageddon can choose to ignore it."

"I'm not ignoring it dear. I don't believe in it. I fail to see how the end of the world can be construed as a good thing."

"How can you turn down a chance to live in Paradise?"

A MATTER OF CONSCIENCE

"What about all the non-believers? Do you really believe that God, a loving and merciful power, will indiscriminately murder five billion people?"

"I'm not making this up, Mother. It's going to happen. Tonight."

"Rebecca, can't you see that you're setting yourself up for a huge let down? What's going to happen when the world doesn't end?"

"Don't convert for me, do it for your grandchild," I plead.

"So that's why you brought him here? You're using your own son as bait?"

Upset, I steal my son from her arms. He starts to cry. "Aren't you happy for me, Mother?"

"I am dear, but the thought of watching my grandson grow up in the confusion of an extreme religion devastates me. What will you tell him at Christmas when there are no presents? And at Halloween when kids are dressed up like pirates and cowboys and witches and-"

"Mother, stop. There's no sense in worrying about it. I'm not going to have that problem. Armageddon-"

"Is never going to happen."

"After tonight, the only children on the planet will be other Jehovah's Witness children. They will all believe the same thing and they will live happily ever after."

"Sounds more like a fairytale than scripture," she mutters, turning toward a hot pot on the stove.

"So how's the world going to end?" She challenges. "A world war? No. You said tonight. There's not enough time for that. What about a comet slamming into the earth's surface? No. I think astronomers would have seen that coming at us by now. Maybe the earth is simply going to implode?"

"Mother, you're being sarcastic."

"You don't know, do you?"

I bow my head. "No."

Mother stirs her sauce. "What kind of religion makes you choose between God and your family anyway?"

"One that loves you and protects you from evil."

She drops her spoon. "I'm hardly evil!"

As much as I feel sorry for my mother, and as much as I wish I

could save her, I need admit defeat. I need to let go and move on. I can no longer afford to emotionally attach myself to her knowing that Jehovah could strike her dead at any moment.

“Good-bye Mother.”

She turns to face me again. “Do you hear yourself? When did you become so self-righteous? All I ever did was love you the best I knew how.” Her voice cracks.

“I don’t have to listen to this!” I hiss. Upset I storm out of the kitchen with Caden close to my chest.

As I rush through the living room, husband number four says something to me, but I do not hear him, nor do I say goodbye. Let them all be condemned to death. I don’t care anymore.

Driving home, my fear of Armageddon mounts. My palms sweat on the steering wheel. The morning’s dull clouds have darkened.

I speed across town. What if meteors, lightning, or balls of fire, fall from the sky? What if I become an unintentional casualty? How accurate is Jehovah’s aim? What if my death isn’t accidental?

Caden cries in his car seat. Can he sense my malaise? Does he deserve to be banned from Paradise because of his unfortunate time of birth? It isn’t like he had a say in the matter of his conception.

Pulling into my driveway, I breathe a sigh of relief and park. I waste no time hopping out of the truck and turning my focus onto unfastening Caden from his car seat and hustling into the house.

Inside, I lock the front door, kick off my shoes, and place Caden in his playpen. I race through every room, closing the curtains and blinds, shutting us off from the world outside. John is still out pioneering though. Oh, why did he have to go out today? I mean, I understand why he did, but I just wish he didn’t have to. I need him here with me to keep me calm.

Too anxious to eat, I skip lunch. To kill time I decide to bake an apple pie. This confines me to my avocado green kitchen, my favorite room in the house. I can keep an eye on Caden, who is settling down for an afternoon nap in his playpen, from here.

My hands tremble as I peel half a dozen Granny Smith apples. I slice my ring finger with a knife. Blood drips to the countertop.

Wrapping my hand in a dishtowel, I run to the bathroom to clean and bandage the small but deep wound.

Oh, when will this wretched day end? I am exhausted and it isn't even half over.

Returning to the kitchen, I finish the pie and shift my focus to preparing dinner. I bought the groceries yesterday sparing no expense despite our meager bank account. Tonight's meal is an important one. It needs to be special, incase it is our last supper. I want it to be memorable, in case we survive.

I make John's favorite, filet mignon with mashed garlic potatoes and steamed broccoli topped with melted cheddar cheese.

At six o'clock, John bursts through the front door.

"Honey, I have some amazing news!" he exclaims, wrapping his arms around me and whisking me up off the ground.

"What is it?" I ask, expecting him to announce that he converted someone.

"I sold the house!"

The dramatic confession catches me off guard. I pull myself out of his embrace and nearly lose my footing.

"You what?" I wheeze.

"I was pioneering and this man called me a quack. He said I wouldn't need my house after Armageddon because I could live anywhere I wanted. He made me an offer."

"You're joking, right? John, tell me you're joking."

He hands me a check. "Take a look."

I unfold the scrap of paper and gasp. "But this is less than what we paid for it; it doesn't even come close to covering the balance of the mortgage owing."

John only smiles, but for the first time since I met him his confidence does nothing to ease my anxiety.

"But this is our home," I argue. "It's our stability, our future. This is where we dreamed of raising our kids. We planned to grow old here together. You have to back out of this deal."

"I can't. I signed a contract." He sounds proud.

"A contract?"

"The buyer happens to be a real estate lawyer. He drafted

something up.”

“How convenient. Honey, have you lost your mind?”

“I’ve never been saner,” he insists. “I figured it out; the man who bought the house, he was a test.”

“What kind of test?”

“Jehovah sent him to test my faith. If I was certain of my truth, then I would be okay with discarding all of my material possessions. I proved to Jehovah that my faith is unwavering.” John chuckles to himself. “Now let’s eat. I’m starving. Dinner smells delicious.”

Sitting across the table from my husband, I try to think of anything other than the fact that he sold our house. He merrily shovels food into his mouth while I pick at my potatoes. I know he is right. We can move in the new system; it will be a fresh start on more than one level. Heck, the old man won’t even survive Armageddon. It’s not like there will be anyone to make a claim on the contract. I need to relax and be more supportive.

“What do you think the new system is going to be like?” I ask, as I cut the pie for dessert.

John’s eyes beam with optimism. “Honey, it’s going to be unbelievable. We will live without judgment. Caden will grow up without prejudice. Every man, woman, and child will be loved and accepted. There will be no more disease, greed, pornography, or drugs. Superficial materialism will be eradicated. We won’t be ridiculed anymore.”

I recall what my mother said about five billion people being murdered. “What about the others - my mom, your mom, family.”

“We’ll start new families. Do not weep for the worldly. There is no Hell, remember. They will die, but they will not suffer.”

This thought comforts me as I clear the table and wash the dishes. Marriage after marriage, my mother’s self-centered life has been nothing but turmoil. She will finally rest in peace.

After I put the dishes away, I bathe Caden. He splashes about in his basin of warm water. In Paradise, he will grow up without ever knowing the wicked of the world we now live in. Life will be easy for him instead of a struggle, the way it has been for me and John and the rest of the world’s Witnesses.

"Sleep tight, sweetheart," I coo as I put him to bed at eight o'clock.

There are only four hours left until the day ends. What is taking Jehovah so long?

I retire to the living room to find John with his eyes glued to the television. I flinch, expecting to see news broadcasts announcing that the world is under attack or that the world is being ripped apart by a natural disaster, but all I see are thousands of inebriated worldly people, gathered on some city street, preparing to party.

"Look at those poor souls," John remarks. "They don't realize that they should be praying for their salvation. Fools, the whole lot of them. They deserve the fate that befalls them."

I turn away from the screen. "Can you turn that off? I... I can't watch."

"Why not?"

"I don't want to see it, the destruction. When it arrives it will rain down unannounced. I know I should be excited, but I don't have the stomach for mass destruction."

John gets up off the couch and turns off the television.

"I'm sorry," I say.

He comes to my side and wraps his arms around me. "Not to worry. We shouldn't be watching TV anyway. Let's get ready for bed. Just think when we wake up tomorrow--"

"You mean if."

"No. I mean when. There'll be no more evil, no more government, no more war, and no more religious prejudice. Satan and his evil temptations will be abolished from the planet. Paradise awaits us my love. Our time has finally come. Our patience and devotion have paid off."

I smile at my husband. "And I have you to thank for my salvation. Who knows where I would be today if you hadn't found me."

"But I did find you. We were meant to be together."

"I love you."

"I love you too," he croons. "Let's make love."

"John," I giggle. "Don't you think we should wait and see what happens to our world?"

"Why?" He kisses me before I can protest.

Bang!

Startled, I jump, breaking loose from John's embrace. Caden screams. Chills race down my spine. Sex is forgotten. I bury my head in John's chest.

Bang!

02

APRIL 1994

CADEN

Breaking news! Kurt Cobain... Dead... Heroin...

Holed up in my bedroom, my door closed, I only hear the words. No sentences. Just words. Refusing to believe my ears, I flip through radio station after radio station on my stereo, only to hear the same report over and over again.

I must be dreaming. Still somehow hopeful of a different outcome, I switch on my television, but every channel broadcasts the devastating news. Dead. Dead. An icon is dead.

...Shotgun wound to the head... appears to be self-inflicted...

Shaken up, I sit down on my bed and slouch forward, head in my hands. My fingers shake against my face. I think I am going to be sick.

I catch my reflection in my bedroom mirror. My shoulder-length, bottle-blond hair, a-la-Cobain, is such a fucking stupid tribute.

Behind my reflection, hangs a black and white poster of Kurt strumming an acoustic guitar. He looks thoughtful. What song was he thinking about when that photograph was taken? What message did he want to share with his fans?

Kurt is too important to be dead. He represents Generation X. Hell, Kurt is Generation X. Angry and frustrated, unloved and unheard; he reassures me that I am not alone, that I am not, contrary to my family's belief, some kind of circus freak fuck-up. How will I go on without the voice that gives me a sense of hope through lyrics of despair?

Suicide? Why? How could he do this to me, to us, to his devoted fans? We need him. I need him. How could he just abandon me? If he couldn't make it in this life, a man who had everything, how am I, a kid with fuck all, supposed to?

A scream builds in my throat, creeping into my chest. My lungs and stomach expand. I hold it in, fearful that the sound of my anguish could shatter windows, or at least catch my mom's attention downstairs.

Unable to listen to any more news about Cobain, I turn off the television and switch on my stereo again. The edgy industrial rock of Nine Inch Nails pumps through my floor to ceiling speakers.

... God is dead, and no one cares...

I imagine my step dad, Ray Mason, his body filling out his plush leather recliner downstairs, reeling at the blunt lyrics. Ha! Fuck him.

My mom met Ray on the exact same day that she left my biological father, John Ryan. She certainly wasted no time moving on.

Four years old, I woke up in the backseat of a strange car, wedged between my mom and my snoring little brother Eric, his head resting against my shoulder, mouth agape, drooling.

The car door on Mom's side opened and a man's hand swooped in taking hers and helping her and her swollen belly out of the car. Mom's friends in the front seats also got out. I nudged Eric until he woke up.

"Where are we?" he yawned.

"I don't know," I admitted.

"Are you scared?" His voice wavered.

"No," I lied.

"Oh. Okay."

The sky was middle-of-the-night dark. Stars twinkled. A porch light from a big brick house illuminated Mom, her friends, and the stranger who had helped her out of the car.

I watched the stranger, a short, pudgy man with a meaty face. What did he want with my mother?

The man who drove the car walked around to the back of the vehicle, popped open the trunk, and unloaded three green bags. Before we left Bancroft, Mom had told us that we were going on an adventure.

Mom came to my door and opened it for me in the same manner that the stranger had opened hers. She held out her hand, but I refused it.

“Come on, Caden. We’re here.”

“Where’s here?” I folded my arms across my chest.

“Come with me and I’ll show you.”

I remained steadfast in my seat.

“Caden, it’s very late and Lindsay and Barry need to go home.”

“I want to go home too.”

Mom crouched down on the pavement, meeting me at eye level. “Honey, this is home now, at least until I get set up and find a job.”

“But what about Dad?”

“Honey, the congregation and I tried to help him, we really did. I promise you’ll better understand when you’re older.”

I pointed to the short fat man. “Who’s he?”

“He’s a kind gentleman who is letting us stay with him until I find us an apartment.”

Where we were that night, and still are today, fifteen long years later, is a snob-nosed suburb on the south end of Guelph, Ontario, a middle-class, blue-collar city just west of Toronto, stuck between the business core of Mississauga and the farming community of London. Mom never looked for an apartment.

I hate it here.

Anxious, I roll a joint, climb out my bedroom window onto the garage roof, spark the pinner, and inhale. I hold the smoke in my lungs, holding it hostage; the one thing I have control over. I exhale slowly, but not until my lungs beg for air.

From my perch I look out over our ordered street with its cookie cutter houses standing in perfect rows that stretch into the distance. How did I end up in a family that holds such fanatical religious views? Why does my mom insist on belonging to the laughing stock of all religions?

All my life I have heard the whispers, suffered the ridicule, and endured the humiliation of doors slamming in my face. How does she remain so loyal when society doesn't even try to take the Witnesses seriously?

A chilly spring breeze forces me to reach back into my room for my leather jacket. From my coat pocket I retrieve my latest high school term paper, an essay written for my English class. It announces my latest grade in red permanent marker, a giant F bleeding into the paper.

I can't say I deserve any better. I didn't even read the book the paper was about. I wonder if I can go to the teacher and explain that my religion teaches me to refrain from reading the book. Heck, my religion doesn't even rate higher education as a priority. So what is the point of trying? Why bother?

Folding the essay into a paper airplane, I decide to drop out of high school. I am too old to still be in school (I turn nineteen today; legal drinking age. Look out liquor store, here I come) and I am failing all of my classes this semester anyway. I throw the makeshift airplane into the wind. It glides for a few feet before making a nosedive to the ground.

Inhaling the last remnants of my joint, I lean against the house and relax. Closing my eyes, I listen to the birds chirping in a nearby tree, and drift off into my memory, forgetting about my idol's sudden death and my decision to drop out of school, focusing instead on more important things in life, like girls.

I lost my virginity last winter.

Melissa danced in front of me in her Catholic schoolgirl skirt. Posters of pretty-boy boy bands were taped up on the bubblegum pink walls of her bedroom. Melissa's amber hair brushed my cheek as she bobbed her head.

She tugged at my t-shirt and pulled it over my head. Her fruity perfume invaded my nostrils and I forgot to protest her advances. Looking down at my bare chest, I expected to see my heart slamming up against my ribcage.

Then Melissa unbuttoned her white blouse. My body temperature rose with my erection at the first glimpse of her white cotton bra, which followed her shirt to the floor. I forgot to breathe.

Still wearing her skirt, she straddled me and pressed something into my right hand, a condom. I knew it was a test. I should have said no; ended it right there. It was my chance to bow out and not give in to sin. But her nipples, a pretty rose petal pink and hard, were more persuasive than my righteous thoughts.

Her fingers fumbled with my belt buckle; I fumbled with unwrapping the condom. Melissa wanted me. For once in my life I was good enough for somebody. She liked me for me. And I loved her for it.

A rapid knock on my bedroom door startles me and I struggle to maintain my balance on the roof. The door to my room flies open before I can get my bearings. The smell of marijuana lingers, wafting into the room through the open window, advertising my latest sin.

My stepfather stands in my doorway dressed in his everyday navy blue wrinkle-free, stain-resistant slacks and his royal blue button up work shirt. For a moment I consider jumping from the rooftop before he can get sanctimonious on my ass for deviating (one of his favorite words) from Jehovah's path. The man loves big words. He thinks they make him sound intelligent when really he just sounds like a condescending prick.

"Son, could you join your mother and I downstairs in the living room? We have some concerns we wish to discuss with you." His voice booms with authority, a command disguised as a question.

"Sure," I mutter, straddling the windowsill back into my room.

Walking down the hallway, I am a good six inches taller than Ray. He stalks behind. I can feel him trying to stretch himself taller. Descending the stairs, the finest hairs on the back of my neck stand on end. Ray smells like sweat, or as he likes to put it, he smells like an honest man after doing an honest day's work. I guess that is better than smelling like pot.

I hear several voices talking in a hushed panic, including those of my brother Eric, my little sister Amanda, and George Graham, a close family friend, coming from the living room.

Mom sits in the corner on her chair, her hands folded in her lap, her lips pursed together. Eric and Amanda share the sofa with George. Three other men, all dressed in cheap suits, stand side by side, sporting identical bowl haircuts, each with a bible and a copy of the Watchtower

Magazine in their hands. I haven't been to a meeting in over a year, but I still recognize the men as elders from the local congregation.

Shit! It's a fucking ambush!

"Good day, Caden," Brother Joseph Best says, tipping his stupid thick mop of grey hair in my direction in a phony attempt to be civil. His tone is curt.

Joseph is our local congregation's head honcho.

"What the fuck is this?" I growl.

"Caden, watch your language!" Mom scolds.

"We are a judicial committee sent here on behalf of the congregation," Brother Edward Marchment explains.

Edward wants to be Joseph. He tries to imitate his fearless leader by combing his red hair in the same fashion and by buying all his suits to match Joseph's attire.

"We haven't seen you at the Hall in quite some time," Brother Ted Pitch says.

Ted, who happens to be Ray's best friend, is the most genuine of the bunch. He doesn't carry himself with the know-it-all arrogance of the other two. His crisp charcoal suit almost looks professional. Joseph and Edward's light grey outfits look more like ill-fitted school uniforms.

Judicial committees are never a good thing. They never praise, only reprimand.

Brother Joseph makes a big production of sniffing the air. "Do I smell marijuana?"

"Unfortunately, you do," Ray responds. "I am sorry to report that I just found Caden smoking the narcotic in his room."

"Hey! Technically I was outside. And how do any of you guys even know what pot smells like anyway?" I retort.

"Why on earth would you do such a wicked thing, Caden, and purposely contaminate your body in such a manner?" Brother Ted asks.

"I was upset. My favorite musician just died."

The three elders exchange glances and frown. Brother Ted studies my hair, but says nothing. He doesn't have to. I know what he is thinking. Witness men are not supposed to dye their hair or grow it long. Once, Ray chased me around the house with scissors in a failed effort to cut it off.

"Idolatry you do realize is the devil's work, don't you?" Brother Edward asks me. He immediately looks over to Brother Joseph for approval, like a lap dog begging its master for a treat.

"What can I do for you fine gentlemen this evening?" I ask, intent to get this meeting over with.

"Caden, why don't you take a seat," Ted suggests.

"I'll stand thank you," I reply, folding my arms over my chest.

"Do you care to explain your recent string of absences from the hall?" Ted continues.

I shrug. "It's more of a sabbatical. I've been busy."

"With what?" Edward challenges. "Certainly not with pioneering. You haven't logged a single hour in almost two years."

"Or with your education," Ray chimes in. "I saw your last report card."

"I thought education wasn't important to Jehovah," I snap.

"Poor grades won't get you excommunicated, but I'm afraid that some of your disagreeable behaviors that have been brought to our attention will," Brother Joseph declares.

"And just what exactly do you know?" I ask.

George coughs and shifts in his seat. *Crap!* Now I know why he is here.

One day last month, I left school on my skateboard and headed to the local coffee shop. There, I ran into George, dressed in his green stock boy uniform for the grocery warehouse where he worked.

Even though I had drifted from the religion, I still considered George to be a good friend, someone I could confide in. His simplicity and inexperience with the real world due to his sheltered life within the organization entertained me. With modern haircuts and reasonable fashion sense, he seemed to want to be cool, but his dedication to the religion held him back.

"Skateboarding?" George said. "Are you forgetting that sporting activities are not permitted within the Organization?"

"It is not a sport, it is a mode of transportation," I shot back.

"Ha! Clever. So how've you been? I haven't seen you at the hall in like months. You and your brother are the only other guys I have to

talk to. All the old suits are so dull and stuffy.”

“You’ve still got my brother.”

“I’ve started pioneering with him since you’ve been missing in action.”

I nodded at his uniform trying to change the subject. “You on your way to work?”

“Actually, I just finished my shift. I’m on my way home to change and then go pioneering after dinner.”

“Do you ever not pioneer?”

“It’s a duty we as Witnesses have been called upon to do. And I am privileged to have the honor to serve Him.”

“Ugh,” I groaned, “could you possibly be any more enthusiastic?”

“Really? Do you think I need to try harder?”

“Are you kidding me? It was a joke. Geez, George. You need to get out more.”

“You should come pioneering with me and Eric tonight,” he suggested.

“Oh no.” I shook my head. “I refuse to have another door slammed in my face. My ego can’t handle it.”

George frowned. “You’re not supposed to have an ego.”

“Yeah, well, I do.” I pulled out a pack of cigarettes from my jacket pocket.

George gasped. “Since when do you smoke?”

“It relaxes me.” I held the pack out in his direction. “Want one?”

“Heck no! Aren’t you worried about tempting Satan?”

“Nah,” I replied, blowing smoke rings. “I’ve done worse.”

George’s eyes lit up. “Like that Melissa Hartlet girl? I’ve seen you around with her a lot.”

His excitement amused me, so I told him.

“We broke up last month, but I was sleeping with her.”

“Sleeping?” George blushed. “As in fornication? As in multiple times?”

I nodded, barely containing my laughter at his choice of terminology. “We were together for almost a year. Of course we did.”

“Is... is it worth the... deviation?” He was practically salivating.

"You should see the look on your face," I laughed. "Yeah, it's worth it."

George shifts in his seat again and I lose it.

"Unreal! How could you? I don't fucking believe this!" I yell. "I thought you were my friend!"

"Caden, I'm sorry," he whispers. "I didn't mean—"

"Didn't mean to what?" I challenge.

But Ray interrupts our dialogue.

"I'm sorry, Son, but I've been concerned about your smoking and your substance abuse for a while now. When I talked to George and he notified me about your sexual relations with this Melissa girl, well, I felt it was the final straw. I had no choice but to turn you in."

"Ray, you did the right thing." Brother Joseph assures him with a firm hand on his shoulder.

Ray nods, basking in the compliment. "You need a wake up call, Son. You have deviated too far from the truth as of late."

"Caden, I'm sure that you can understand why we are questioning your dedication to your salvation," Ted says.

"We fear that the devil has drawn you over to his dark side," Edward adds.

"I'm sorry that you all feel that way," I reply, turning away from the crowd and walking into the hallway. I shove my feet into my eight-hole Doc Martins.

"You have not been excused," Ray reminds me. "Where do you think you're going?"

"Nowhere," I mutter.

"Then why put on your boots?" Ray overemphasizes the word boots, like boots is a dirty word. Ray hates my Docs. He calls them war clothing.

"I'm going outside for a smoke," I say.

"That's just as well," Brother Joseph states. "The committee needs to take a few minutes to discuss the situation and your discipline amongst ourselves."

"Very well," I grunt before slamming the front door on my way out.

Standing on the sidewalk in front of the house I light a Players Light King-sized cigarette. Smoking is not permitted on my stepfather's premises, but the sidewalk, as I am well aware, is public property.

They are going to kick me out of the religion. That is what these stupid judicial committees are best known for. It is the ultimate sign of failure to them.

I always knew this day would come. I did try to be good and I did try to follow all the rules. As a child I did everything Jehovah wanted of me regardless of public mockery and taunts from my classmates. Baptized at nine, I started pioneering, often at my classmates' houses. I did it all to please my mom. I loved to see her smile.

But even with the best intentions, my behavior is often unacceptable. I give into worldly temptations. Foul words slip out of my mouth. Girls look at me and I look back.

The front door opens and shuts. Mom looks a decade older than her thirty-eight years. Her face is weathered, her skin sandpaper rough. Grey hairs mingle amongst her thinning black locks.

"They're inside deciding your fate and you're out here polluting your body?" she hisses.

"Why not? They're going to disfellowship me anyway, Mom. We both know it. I may as well disassociate myself before they can kick me out. Call it a pre-emptive strike."

Mom walks straight up to me and slaps me across the face, hard.

"How can you in good conscience continue to disgrace your family like this? The committee will show you no mercy now. And what's worse, you show no remorse."

"There's nothing I can do!" I protest. "The elders have thought I was evil since I was a kid, all because in picture books I liked the black and red horses when I should've liked the white one. I was a kid, Mom. I didn't know any better."

She looks unconvinced.

"Why must you take his side?" I ask.

"Your father is a good man, Caden."

"He's not my father."

"Oh, why can't you call him Dad?" she wails. "Why are the two of you so stubborn that you can't get along? Amanda and Eric are so

good with him.”

“He hates me.”

“Ray doesn’t hate you.”

“He hates me because I don’t bend to his views.”

“He’s just concerned about your well being and your future.”

“Bullshit! He’s concerned about his image. That’s what this whole production is about.”

“Why must you be so difficult?”

I’m the difficult one? I’m her son. She should love me more than her second husband and more than her religion, but she is trying to talk herself into distancing herself from me.

“Why must you continue to dye your hair?” she asks.

I roll my eyes. “You’re bringing that up now? Again? Really?”

“But your natural chestnut hair is so beautiful, especially when it’s cut short.”

I raise my voice to her. I can’t help it. “Why can’t you all just accept me for me, huh?”

“We accept the real you, the natural you; not this fake person with colored hair and earrings.”

“Don’t forget about the tattoo,” I goad her. “Geez, I can’t believe Ray turned me in.”

“Your father is passionate about his religion.”

“He’s not my father.”

“He’ll go to whatever lengths necessary to follow the rules.”

“Whatever lengths necessary,” I mimic. “Is that what happened with his own daughter, Madison? Did he go to whatever lengths necessary to remove her from his home?”

Mom’s eyes look panicked. I appear to have hit a nerve.

“Caden, must you bring that up?” she sputters.

“Do you know, Mom? Do you know where she is?”

This is not Ray’s first time forsaking family in the name of Jehovah. His marriage to my mother is his second marriage too. His first wife defected from the religion and Ray left her, refusing to stay married to an apostate, a traitor. I know Madison exists, but there are no photos of her. There is also an unspoken understanding that we do not talk about her. There is no communication between father and daughter.

I have no contact with my biological father and there are definite reasons for that.

Ted pops his head out the front door. "Caden, could you rejoin us, please?"

"Sure thing," I reply. I take one last drag off my cigarette and toss the butt in the front lawn. Mom scurries to pick it up as I walk into the house and kick off my boots.

In the living room, Brother Joseph clears his throat.

"Caden, as you are well aware, we as the governing body of the organization, have an obligation to safeguard the unity of our congregation. A non-believer loses the thinking that makes such unity possible. For this reason, it has been decided by the elders that you be disfellowshipped from the Jehovah's Witnesses."

Mom gasps like she was just told that someone had died. Eric smirks.

"The elders feel it really is in the best interests of your family and the congregation," Ted explains.

"Mommy, what's happening?" Amanda asks.

"Great. Now if you will excuse me," I ask, "I'll be in my room if you need anything."

"Not so fast," Ray responds.

"Yes?" I turn to face him.

"Caden, I think we need to take this one step further. I think that as part of your excommunication you need to move out of this house."

"What?" I choke.

"Ray!" Mom shouts in disbelief.

He makes eye contact with his wife. "You know the rules, Rebecca. Witnesses are not to associate with non-witnesses, especially excommunicated ones. You know the sayings with regards to apostates, 'don't invite him in your homes', 'not even eating with such a man' and 'never greeting him'."

"But Ray, he's our son," she pleads.

"Jehovah's Witnesses do not give preferential treatment to family members," Ray says.

"But where will he go?" Mom asks.

"Yeah, where will I go?"

"You're nineteen now, an adult. You'll figure it out."

"You're making the right decision Brother Ray," Brother Joseph says, patting my stepfather on the back.

"A wise call indeed," Brother Edward agrees, nodding.

"With that, Brother Edward, Brother Ted, and I must be off," Brother Joseph says.

"Thank you for coming gentlemen," Ray replies, sounding like he just received some prestigious award from the parting trio.

"We'll let ourselves out. Ray, spend some time with your family," Joseph instructs.

I catch George sneaking out behind the three men.

"Good riddance you fucking rat!" I yell out after him.

"Caden," Ray scolds. "Do not lay the blame on George. It rests solely on your shoulders."

"Well isn't this your lucky day. Now you'll be rid of me like you are rid of Madison. I guess that's what, two children down," I look to Eric and Amanda, "and two to go."

"What did you just say to me?" Ray roars.

Amanda recoils, cupping her hands over her ears.

"You heard me. What happened to Madison? Did you kick her out of your house too? Did you disown her because she chose her Mom's religion over yours?"

"Caden!" Mom panics. "Stop!"

"Why? They're valid questions. Is this what's going to happen to me once I'm gone? Are you going pretend like I never existed? Shit, it's not like he killed her."

Ray grunts and storms off into the kitchen.

"You know what? Forget it. You don't want me here? Fine. I'll go pack," I say in my toughest voice.

"Mommy? What's going on?" Amanda asks again as I run up the stairs to my bedroom.

Angry, I throw my clothes and my few belongings into two duffel bags. From under my bed I retrieve a small lockbox. Inside are my valuables, my money, a Ziploc bag of marijuana and rolling papers, and a separate bag of magic mushrooms.

Packed, I telephone for a taxicab to come pick me up. Then I wait

for my ride outside on the sidewalk, smoking another cigarette.

Mom approaches me one last time as my cab, a black and red chariot, pulls up to the curb.

I look into her worried eyes. "Hey, did you realize that it's my birthday today?"

"We don't celebrate birthdays. You know that."

"Wrong. You don't celebrate birthdays. As of today, I do. I am nineteen and I am going drinking. Tell Amanda that she can have my stereo equipment and my TV. Heck, tell her she can have my room and everything in it. She'll like that."

"Caden--"

"But there are a few playboy magazines hidden under my mattress that you should really get rid of before she stumbles upon those one day while making the bed. I imagine that could be awkward."

"Caden," Mom chokes, "I'm sorry."

"I'm not. I don't want to be where I am not accepted or wanted."

03

SEPTEMBER 1977

RAY

The coffin at the front of the church is smaller than I imagined it would be. My brother Mark is... was twenty-two, three years older than me. Sure, he was small and sickly, his legs bent, practically useless, and yes, his back was crooked, reducing his height, but his coffin should still be somehow... bigger.

Mark's picture, blown up into the size of a large painting, is displayed on an easel beside the coffin. His mangled smile, lopsided head, and telling eyes over-advertise his cerebral palsy - the adult face with the comprehension of a small child.

"Frankly, I'm relieved by his death," I whisper to my mother who is standing beside me in the front pew.

"Raymond James!" she hisses, blotting her eyes with an already soggy-to-the-point-of-useless tissue. "How can you say such a blasphemous thing?"

"Mom, you were still changing his diapers and spoon feeding him. He had the mental capacity of a four year old. He was wearing you out. Why did God shaft us, a pastor's family, with a retard anyway?"

Mom glares at me. She hates it when I use the 'R' word. "The Lord sent us Mark to humble us, and to teach us love and compassion. He sent Mark to a

religious family because He had faith that we could handle the situation and we would let it make us stronger instead of tearing us apart."

My father stands at the pulpit, skyscraper tall. His voice booms through the crowd.

"The good Lord saw fit to take my family's beloved Mark unto His embrace. I have no doubt that he is smiling down upon us from Heaven at this very moment, happy to see such a turn out of friends, family, and loved ones, all who cared so very deeply for our special boy."

*

My eyes fly open and I am relieved to find myself safe in my warm bed instead of confined to a cold, hard church pew. Mark died in 1966, eleven years ago, but the nightmare makes it feel like yesterday.

It takes me a moment to realize that Madison is screaming in her bedroom. My wife, Laura jumps out of bed without acknowledging me, and bolts from our room, down the hall to comfort our young daughter. Did she have a bad dream too? Madison started kindergarten three days ago and I know she is having a difficult time adjusting to the new routine.

The glowing numbers on my alarm clock tell me it is four o'clock in the morning.

Madison's screams are soon reduced to a faint whimper and I smile. Laura is a wonderful mother. I could not ask for a more attentive, dutiful wife and homemaker. I can envision her in my mind, cradling our little angel in her arms and humming a lullaby to calm her down.

I cannot help but feel sentimental about Madison starting school. Already five years old, our daughter is growing up so fast. It seems like just yesterday we were changing her diapers.

Two minutes later Laura returns to the marital bed.

"Is everything alright?" I ask, rolling over to talk to her.

"Oh, Madison had a nightmare."

"I thought as much."

"But she's also quite feverish." A hint of concern colors Laura's voice.

"Didn't she just get over an ear ache two weeks ago?"

"She did. Perhaps the infection has moved to another part of her body. She never seemed to fully recover."

"Or she contracted another virus from a classmate. Kids are like

Petri dishes," I yawn.

"Well, she seems alright for now. We'll check on her in the morning."

"Yes. Good night, Love."

I wake the next morning groggy. I stretch in the shower, my mind still stuck on Mark. I dream about my brother often. I do miss him, but we never bonded.

Growing up, there was nobody in the house for me to play with. Mark wasn't healthy enough, physically or mentally, to engage in normal childhood activities like tag or bicycling.

My parents were always so busy with his care. They neglected me and they neglected themselves. They both died young, Mom eight years ago at the age of forty-two from a combination of grief and a poor diet. My dad followed her a year later at forty-six from a heart attack.

Scalding hot, the water turns my skin tomato red.

I never bought my mom's reasoning about God sending the family a disabled child to teach us about love and humility. I always felt that God had a twisted sense of humor and was reprimanding my parents for their sins. And they must have been whoppers; Mark was a life sentence.

Stepping out of the shower, I towel dry and dress in my work uniform - dark blue slacks and light blue short-sleeved button up. The smell of coffee and bacon wafts its way up the stairs.

"Breakfast is ready," Laura calls out to me.

"Coming." I rush downstairs and into the kitchen. "Smells delicious."

I kiss the freckles on her nose and accept a cup of coffee from her soft hands.

"You look like a lobster," she giggles, her fingertips caressing my left arm.

"Ha! Ha! Funny."

"Are you trying to burn yourself in the shower?"

With no make up and no hair products, Laura is a simple beauty. People always ask her if her cinnamon ringlets are a perm; they are flabbergasted when she tells them that they are natural.

As I sit down at the kitchen dinette, Laura places a plate in front of me. My eggs are runny and my bacon is extra crispy, just the way I like it.

She smiles. "Enjoy. I'm going to go wake our Sleeping Beauty and get her ready for school."

I watch my wife's backside as she walks away from me. She is stunning in her champagne-colored silk bathrobe, her childbearing hips creating the perfect hourglass figure on her petite frame.

When she is out of view I return my focus to my breakfast, devouring the filling meal that my wife so lovingly prepared.

I could not be happier about any aspect of my life. At thirty-one years old, I am a success as a man, as a husband, and as a father, and I have the Jehovah's Witnesses to thank for everything.

In my teens, I was rebellious, self-indulgent, and self-destructive, immersed in the drug culture, sex, and rock and roll. I lied. I cheated on exams and on girlfriends. I stole from family and friends. My father constantly assured me of my reservation in Hell.

Then I met Brother Ted Pitch.

It was the same day as my brother's funeral. That night, after drowning my sorrows with a couple friends, I was drunk behind the wheel of my father's brand new sixty-nine cherry red Chevy. Wet snow made for slushy back roads in the middle-of-nowhere country community of Puslinch where we lived.

I sped down side road thirty-five. I knew the road well. I knew that the set of curves up ahead, when taken at high speeds, made me feel like a racecar driver. My heart thumped in anticipation as my foot pushed the gas pedal to the floor. But into the first corner the car swerved violently to the left against my wishes.

Desperate to keep the vehicle out of the ditch, I turned the steering wheel to the right hoping to coax the tires back into the appropriate lane. But the car's nose continued to pursue the ditch to my left.

Frantic, I slammed on the brakes. That only increased the car's determination to detour off road. The slope wasn't so much a ditch as it was a small hill. The car, now an out-of-control projectile, missed a large

boulder by inches and crashed through a chain link fence like it was ripping through a piece of paper. The red bullet then hit a tall but juvenile narrow-trunked tree, snapping it like a twig.

But the hill was the least of my concerns. The chain link fence? Child's play. The rock was nothing. The sapling? Big deal. The car was heading straight toward a pond. Even though I had doubts about religion and God, I prayed.

'Oh dear Lord, please be frozen! Please be frozen!'

The trip from road to pond, a meager fifteen meters took seconds, but it felt like an eternity before the Chevy skidded to a stop on the ice.

Scrambling out of the car, the taste of whiskey clung to my mouth as I fell to the snow covered ground and vomited.

A single porch light in the distance caught my eye, alerting me to the house on the premises. I needed a phone. And fast. I needed to get the car off the ice before it gave way and the pond swallowed my dad's pride and joy.

Clamoring through knee-deep snow, I made a clumsy beeline for the light. It was past midnight, but I had no choice but to intrude upon the sleeping family inside the house.

I rang the doorbell three times before a man wearing a green velour bathrobe and brown leather slippers appeared. His heavy eyelids and messy hair confirmed that I had indeed just woken him up.

"Can I help you?" he asked, yawning.

"I'm so sorry to bother you sir, however, you um, see that car on your pond over there," I pointed. The headlights were still on and the car still hummed. I must have left the engine on. I reeked of whiskey. "That's my father's car."

"Dear me," he gasped. "Are you alright my son?"

"I'm not hurt," I hiccupped, "but could I use your phone?"

"Yes, by all means, come in, come in."

Inside, I dared to call my parents and crossed my fingers that my mom, and not my father, would pick up.

After four rings I started to worry that nobody would answer. My parents were sound sleepers. But on the fifth ring I heard the click of the receiver on the other end.

"Hello?" The quiet, dazed voice was that of my mother.

"Hi Mom, I've um... gotten myself into a bit of trouble."

She sighed her telltale sigh of disappointment, the one that always sank my heart like a lead weight.

"What did you do this time, Raymond?" she asked, expecting another story of a broken window, a fight with a girlfriend, or another bar brawl.

"I um... took Dad's new car and um... took it for a joy-ride." I could sense her shaking her head at me and digging her toe into the carpet from over the phone line. "Anyway, I um... lost control of the vehicle. And took out a fence. And a tree. And I landed it on a frozen pond."

"You've been drinking."

"What? No!"

"You're slurring."

"Oh."

A long silence ensued before she spoke again.

"Your father is not going to be pleased."

I really didn't need to be reminded of his impending wrath. "I know. But I need him to come pick me up. I'm at a house on side road thirty-five, the one with the pond out front. He can't miss it."

Another lengthy silence.

"I will relay the message." And the phone line went dead.

"Is he going to come get you?" the homeowner asked.

"Eventually, I suppose. He'll come, not for me, but for his car. I just have to hope I can get it on solid land before the ice cracks."

"I have a friend I can call about a tow truck."

"You do? Really?"

"Yeah. A fellow in my congregation runs a trucking company. He has two tow trucks in his fleet. He lives not five minutes from here."

"Um... are you going to call the cops on me?"

"That depends. Can I trust you to pay me back for my fence and the damage to my lawn?"

"Oh, yes sir. Without a doubt. Every penny."

"Why don't you have a seat on the sofa in the front room? I'll join you in a minute. First I want to call Edward about that tow truck."

Sitting on the couch I listened to my savior's conversation with

his friend. The homeowner's voice was soft and concerned, not for his property, but for my safety. He didn't need to be so kind. I imagined I would not take so kindly to being awoken in the middle of the night to find my front yard torn up by some drunk, punk-ass kid.

"My name is Ted Pitch by the way," he said, handing me a glass of water as he rejoined me in the living room.

"Ray Mason," I replied, accepting the drink.

"We need to be quiet. My wife is asleep upstairs. I don't want to alarm her with this situation."

Ted sat down on a mustard-colored, paisley-patterned wing chair across the room from me. His posture and poise was so straight. The house was neat and void of knickknacks.

"Bad day?" he asked.

"You have no idea," I muttered. "I attended my brother's funeral this morning."

"I'm sorry to hear that my friend."

My friend? My son? Such strange things to say, but I found them oddly comforting. His sympathetic smile tugged at my guilt in a way my father's anger never could.

"Oh, I am so dead," I groaned at the thought of my father. "I'm going straight to Hell."

Ted tilted his head in what I perceived to be a thoughtful manner. "Why do you say that?"

"Because religious men, proper men, don't steal their father's car. Car thieves are condemned to an eternity in Hell."

"Have you lost your way, son?"

"Oh no, not you too." I muttered. "Please spare me the religious rigmarole. I'll suffer that from my father when he gets here."

"Is he a Christian?"

"Worse. He's a Christian pastor."

"I'll let you in on a little secret. I'm not a fan of Christians or their pastors."

"Really? Why not?"

"Well, I believe that all churches are inspired by Satan."

"You're an Atheist?"

Ted shook his head. "Not at all. Faith is quite important as the

end of days nears.”

“End of days?”

“Armageddon.”

I laughed. I couldn’t help it. “I’m sorry, what kind of freak story are you selling?”

“Mock me if you want, but you will be kicking yourself when you see the world coming to an end knowing that you had turned down a chance at salvation.”

“Well, now you’ve got my attention.”

“What if I told you that Jehovah’s Witnesses are the true Christians?”

“Hmmm, I’ve been taught otherwise.”

“By Satan’s pastors. What if I told you that you couldn’t go to Hell because there is no such place?”

“Really? I like the sound of that.”

“And what if I told you that all pastors are the anti-Christ?”

“I’d say no wonder my father and I don’t see eye to eye.”

Ted chuckled. “Funny. Imagine a life without war, poverty, disease, racism, or religious conflicts.”

“I’d say it sounds too good to be true.”

“That’s where Armageddon comes in.”

So what if Armageddon failed to arrive? I think, finishing the last of my eggs and bacon. I read and reread every piece of material written with regards to 1975 and studied every word. I believe that although the evidence and writings are very persuasive, there has never been a solid guarantee on a specific date. So many people ignored literature that used the word ‘maybe’, and focused only on material that implied the inevitability of the 1975 ending. Many of these same people then fled from the religion after 1975 passed without incident, embarrassed, assuming that they had been misled. I think Jehovah used the incident to weed out the weaker believers undeserving of a life in Paradise.

“Ray,” Laura shouts from our daughter’s bedroom, bringing me out of my reverie. “Could you come up here please?”

Coming.” Coffee in hand, I make my way upstairs.

“What is it?” I ask, walking into my daughter’s bedroom.

"It's Madison," Laura mumbles, sounding helpless. "She refuses to get up and get ready for school."

My little angel sits on the edge of her bed dressed in her pink striped pajamas, her arms crossed over her chest, trying to look determined.

I pat my wife on the shoulder. "I'll handle this."

Taking a seat beside Madison on her bed, I wrap my arm around her tiny body. "What's the matter, sweetheart?"

"I'm tired," she huffs, "and sick. I didn't sleep well."

I put a hand to her forehead. She still feels warm.

"You know, you'll feel better once you get up and start moving around," I suggest.

"But I don't want to feel better."

"Oh honey, why not?"

"Because I don't want to go to school."

"But last week you were so excited about starting kindergarten."

"That was before everyone teased me about not singing the national anthem or saying the Lord's Prayer."

"Don't pay any attention to them, Madison," I instruct. "They tease you because they are ignorant."

She looks confused. "Ignorant?"

"It means they're judging you without understanding what you are doing."

"My teacher told the class that I do it for religious reasons, but the kids still laugh at me. They call me a Bible Thumper and they tell me that the devil is coming for me." Her bottom lip starts to tremble.

"Sweetheart, the devil's definitely not coming for you."

She looks up at me, her eyes full of hope. "Promise?"

"I promise. If anything the devil will come for the mean kids who tease you."

Her facial features soften as her fear subsides.

"Daddy, what's a Bible Thumper?"

The term makes me cringe. "It is an expression the children must have learned from their parents. Often adults are scared of our beliefs so they say bad things about us and call us names, trying to upset us."

"People tease you too?"

I nod. "They do."

"Doesn't it hurt your feelings?"

"It used to. Then I learned to be strong and I learned to ignore them. On Judgment Day, it will be those who stayed true to themselves and their beliefs that will be saved. Those who taunt, tease, belittle, lie, cheat, and do other bad things; they will be judged. Remember what I taught you about how you treat people?"

"Do unto others as you'd have them do unto you."

"Very good. Now let's get you ready for school."

"Okay," she says, hopping down from her bed.

"Why don't you pick out a dress to wear?" I suggest. "I need to steal your mommy for a minute."

As Madison peruses her closet for an outfit, I pull Laura out of the room and down the hall into our master suite.

"I don't know what to do," Laura sighs, falling into my arms behind the closed door. "I'm afraid the teasing is having a negative affect on her self-esteem."

"Give her time. It's only been three days. I will call the school later this afternoon. Maybe I can see about talking to the teacher, maybe even to the students, to educate them as to why we do what we do."

"You know we aren't permitted to discuss religion on school grounds. Too many parents would protest."

"Well, I should at least try."

"Maybe we should just allow Madison to participate in the morning exercises."

I gag, caught off guard by my wife's suggestion. "Are you kidding me?"

"Maybe then the kids will give her a break," she argues. "Maybe they would find it easier to accept her. I mean its just reciting a few lines."

"And what about the holidays? Laura, be reasonable. Think. Children need discipline. If we allow Madison to participate, she'll think its okay. It will only confuse her and encourage her to test her limits and push boundaries."

"Well then maybe we should allow her to stay home today. It's Friday; let the hoopla calm down over the weekend. Kids forget about things quickly. And it would give her a chance to fight off this fever too."

I shake my head. "No. We need to teach our daughter to be strong, not to hide whenever she faces an obstacle."

"You know, you and I converted to the religion in our twenties. It's one thing to be mocked as an adult for your beliefs. You grow a thick skin and you get over it. But I never imagined how tough school would be on my child, all the bullying and teasing by children who don't even understand what they are doing. Its not something I even thought about when I converted."

"Mommy!" Madison cries. "I need help."

"Be there in a minute," Laura replies.

The tone of uncertainty in my wife's voice makes me nervous. It is not like her to second-guess anything with regards to her religion.

"We'll get through this. You'll see."

"I hope you're right," she sighs, her back already to me, on her way to Madison.

Thirty minutes later, Madison peers out the back passenger side window of my work van, staring at her school. I get out, go around to her door, open it, and unbuckle her from her booster seat.

"Can I just stay out here until after the morning exercises are over?" she asks.

I shake my head. "That would be bending the rules. Honey, it's going to be okay," I assure her. "You need to be strong. You are better than those kids who tease you, remember that. It may seem hard to understand now, but you will see when you are older that you have the truth, and with the truth comes great responsibility and a better afterlife. You don't need to make friends here. You have friends at the Kingdom Hall and you'll have even more in Paradise."

"Yes Daddy," she whimpers.

Her cheeks look a bit flushed and I put my hand to her forehead one last time. It is still warm. But is it any warmer than it was earlier this morning? It is hard to tell without a thermometer.

"Mommy will be here to pick you up this afternoon. Okay? Do you want me to walk you to the front door?"

She nods. "Yes please."

I hold her clammy hand and lead her up the sidewalk. Her feet

drag as we near the building. I look to the sky.

Jehovah, I beseech you for Armageddon. Please don't make my little angel suffer the ridicule of these boorish children. They are more clueless than she about the error of their ways. It's one thing to test the strength of your adult believers, but it is another to subject children to such ill-mannered jackals. Once you reign down your supreme power the morning exercises will be abolished. Problem solved. And I won't have to watch my daughter hold back tears as she enters her school ever again.

Back in my truck, my thoughts turn to my work. Self-employed as an electrical engineer, I contract my services out to about dozen customers, mostly industrial plants in the surrounding area. I specialize in the installation, maintenance, and repair of industrial equipment used to manufacture car parts.

Today I find myself repairing a circuit breaker in a tire factory in Kitchener and the smell of chemicals gives me a headache. With the heat in the plant, I feel like I could melt right alongside the rubber.

By the time I exit the plant a few hours later, I feel like I have sweat off five pounds. Outside, I welcome the Indian summer sun against my skin.

Leaving, I head to Brother Ted's house. He still lives in the country. We meet every Friday for lunch to discuss my business. An accountant, Ted prepares my financials, forecasts, taxes, and budgets. He also prepares my client invoices, helping me with collecting the accounts receivable and issuing payments to the accounts payable.

Parking in Ted's driveway, I look over at the pond in his front yard. It looks so peaceful now, beautiful even, surrounded by mature trees with leaves starting to turn orange. Two ducks float on the surface. The sight of the pond never fails to take me back to the winter of sixty-nine.

Before Ted could say anything more about his religion, Brother Edward arrived with his tow truck. I scurried outside and watched as the kind stranger attached chains to my father's Chevy and with the power of his truck, dragged the car off the ice and up the hill to safety.

With the car in the driveway, I ran to it to inspect the damage. The right front bumper was dented. And the chain link fence I went

through scratched the hood and the roof, but the damage appeared to be mostly cosmetic.

Back inside, Ted made us hot chocolate.

"I can't thank you guys enough for your help tonight." I pulled my wallet out from my coat pocket. "I don't have a lot of money on me at the moment, only--"

Edward held up his hand. "No need for that, son."

"But for your services," I protested.

Edward smiled. "I'm just glad I could be of service."

I handed the money to Ted, but he too refused it.

"Please," I insisted. "There must be something I can do to show my appreciation for your generosity."

"Just reimburse me for the damage to my yard when I get it repaired, Raymond," Ted said.

Not wanting to be pushy, I drank my cocoa and changed the subject. "I'd like to learn more about what you were saying earlier," I told Ted, "about your religion."

Ted and Edward seemed to light up, grinning over their mugs.

"I'm glad you feel that way," Ted replied.

Then the doorbell rang, announcing my father's arrival.

He stood in the doorway with the poise of a military officer, every silver hair combed into place. For a man who didn't believe in gambling, he had a great poker face.

"Good evening, sir," my father spoke. "I'm so sorry my son has inconvenienced you so, and at such an ungodly hour."

"Accidents happen," Ted replied in a pleasant manner. "We can all be thankful that no one was hurt."

"I assure you that Raymond will pay you back for the damage he has done to your property."

"I know. He has already given me his word." Ted looked to me. "Good night, Raymond."

"Take care," Edward called out from the living room.

Outside, alone with my father, he glared at me. I in turn looked down at my feet.

"Jesus Raymond," he growled. "Why the good Lord spared your useless behind and took Mark from us I will never know."

To this day I can still hear the crunch of my father's boots on the cold gravel of Ted's driveway.

I shake my head to dislodge the memories, walk up to Ted's front entrance, and ring the doorbell. He opens the door a moment later.

"Brother Ray, nice to see you," Ted greets me.

"How are you my friend?" I ask, stepping inside.

"I believe I'm alright."

"And Louise and the children?"

"Oh they're fine. The kids are growing like weeds. And what about yourself, Ray? How is your family?"

"Doing well. You and Louise must come for dinner with the children some time. Madison could use the company. She's finding the transition to school rather difficult."

Ted sighs. "That's too bad, Ray. I wish her the best, and yes, we'll bring the children over. My girls know what Madison's going through. It will be good for them to talk to her. I'll have Louise call Laura and set up a dinner date. This weekend even, perhaps?"

"We'll see. Madison seems to be fighting off a flu bug. She had a fever last night. It seems to have settled a little this morning; she was well enough to attend school."

"Didn't she just have an ear infection?"

I nod. "Poor kid seems to be susceptible to everything out there these days."

Ted's front room remains unchanged from the first time I set foot in it back in 1969 with the exception of a new hardwood floor.

"The new floor looks good," I say.

"Thanks. It extends all the way into the dining room, speaking of which, shall we step into my office?"

Ted's office consists of a cubbyhole of space in the corner of his dining room. The dinner table doubles as his desk during work hours. Banker's boxes filled with clients' financials climb the walls, crowding the room.

"I have a new client to add to the books," I mention as we sit down. "A foundry in Cambridge. They need someone to maintain their casting machines."

"That's great," Ted says, pulling out the books for my account.

"Going to be worth another five thousand a year."

"Do you have your journal with you?"

I keep a daily log of every job I do and Ted uses it to prepare the invoices. "I do," I reply, handing him the book. "There's an envelope inside of business-related receipts too."

The phone rings before Ted can open the log.

"Excuse me a minute, Ray. Louise is out doing groceries so I must answer that."

Ted leans from his chair into the kitchen and reaches for the receiver. At first he sounds cheerful on the phone. But something goes wrong. His cheer fades. The color drains from his face.

Then he holds the receiver in my direction. "Ray, it's for you. It's your wife. She says it's urgent."

Laura sounds frantic. "Ray, its Madison."

My heart slams into my ribcage at my daughter's name. "What happened?"

"I knew it was a mistake to send her to school today!" she sputters accusingly, like she has already laid whatever this is all on me.

"Laura, calm down. Now tell me what happened."

I hear her blow her nose and gasp for air.

"The school called me to pick up Madison. She fainted in class. Her teacher chided me for sending such an obviously sick child to school. Madison's fever returned. One hundred and two degrees. I took her to see Dr. Haskell, you know, our family doctor. Anyway, she said to keep a close eye on Madison and monitor her temperature. If it hits one hundred and four we need to rush her to the hospital. I'm freaking out. Can you come home?"

"I'm on my way. I'll be there in half an hour."

Ted already has my jacket and shoes out for me when I hang up the phone.

I make the half-hour drive in less than twenty-five minutes.

"How is she?" I huff, breathless, as I barrel through the front door.

"Not good, Ray." Laura looks unsettled, holding her right elbow in her left hand, her right hand balled into a fist at her chin.

I kick off my work boots. "Where is she?"

Laura nods upward. "In her room."

I race up the stairs three at a time with Laura struggling to keep up behind me.

My little angel tosses and turns on her bed. Her restless legs kick at her blankets, shoving them to the foot of the bed. Dressed in a nightgown, she clings to her favorite toy, a sock monkey named Sammy. Her teeth are clenched.

"She's so pale," Laura worries, joining me in the doorway.

"She's always been a fair child," I reply, trying to stay positive.

"But not chalk white."

Moving into the room, closer to her bed, I notice blue veins beneath the skin on her arms and legs.

"Oh Ray, I'm so scared." Laura cries.

Kneeling at my daughter's bedside, I put a hand on her forehead.

"She's burning up. Maybe we should fill the bathtub with cold water."

Laura shakes her head. "No. Dr. Haskell said that cold water would cause her to shiver which could actually increase her temperature."

Sweat soaks Madison's hair, nightgown, and bed sheets.

"Have you been keeping her hydrated?" I ask.

"I've been trying. She's been vomiting up any fluids I manage to get down her throat."

"Daddy," Madison whimpers. She sits up slightly, looking at me, her eyes searching for comfort.

Not knowing what to do, I close my eyes and pray.

Dear Jehovah, protect my daughter. She needs you. See her through her sickness. No child should suffer like this. I beg you, transfer her illness unto me. Let me bear this burden for her.

"Ray!" Laura screams. "Her nose!"

I open my eyes. Blood pours from her nostrils, spilling like an open tap onto her nightgown. Madison wails, near hysterical.

"Madison, tilt your head back," I instruct, grabbing wads of tissue from a box on her bedside table and holding them to her nose. The tissues wilt in my hand as they soak up the blood and turn a rusted crimson.

"Oh God, the blood won't stop!" Laura exclaims.

"That's it. We're going to the hospital," I announce. "Laura, get me a towel or something for the nose bleed."

Laura hands me an old t-shirt from a dresser drawer.

I give it to Madison. "Honey, I need you to hold this against your nose. Can you do that for me?"

My angel nods. Her thin fingers, like skeleton bones, grip the shirt and hold it in place.

"That's my girl," I say, trying to calm everybody down.

I pile Madison's tiny body into my arms. She weighs so little. Has she lost weight? Her body looks bruised and is dotted with strange red spots. Her breathing sounds dangerously shallow.

Laura sits with Madison in the backseat of the van, cradling our child's limp, feverish body in her arms as I speed away from our home. Rushing, I run a red light. Horns honk all around me.

At the hospital, I struggle to fill out the admittance paperwork. My hand trembles, reducing my handwriting to illegible chicken scratch. My brain, cluttered with panic, has trouble answering the simplest of questions. Patient's name? Date of birth? Home address? Where do we live again?

After the questionnaire, we wait. And wait. Thankfully, Madison's nose stops bleeding. An hour passes. Then someone in green hospital scrubs ushers us into an examination room. Another twenty minutes pass before a man dressed in a white lab coat walks into the room.

"I am Doctor Channing," he introduces himself.

Channing, a squat man of Asian descent, shakes my hand. Chinese? Japanese? South Korean? I can't tell.

He goes straight to work on Madison, examining her and feeling her neck for swollen glands. He asks her to cough, looks in her ears and down her throat, usual check-up stuff.

"We brought her in when her nose started bleeding," I say.

"How has her health been these last few weeks?" Channing asks.

"She had a slight fever last night," Laura responds. "Then she fainted at school today."

"I see. Has she had any other infections or colds lately?"

Channing asks while listening to Madison's heart through his stethoscope.

"She had an ear infection two weeks ago," I offer.

"Is it just me or is her skin changing color?" Laura asks.

"Her face is red from fever," I suggest.

"No. I mean her limbs," Laura says. "Kinda yellowish."

Channing steps back and looks at our daughter.

"Jaundice," he replies. "We need to test her kidneys."

Everything happens so fast. Nurses cart Madison into another room. They hover over her like vultures, picking and poking at her. Laura and I, crammed in a corner, watch in horror. It is all a blur. A mirage. I am not really here. That is not really my daughter. Could I be hallucinating? Someone squeezes my hand. Laura. And I realize Channing is standing in front of me, his lips moving.

"Her kidneys are failing. Luckily, we caught it early. We need to start her on dialysis before they get any worse or become unsalvageable. No use adding a kidney transplant to the test results."

"Dialysis, what is that exactly? I ask.

"Blood carries oxygen through the body's tissues and organs, but it also collects and carries wastes, like carbon dioxide, dying cells and potassium, to the kidneys which then remove these waste products. When the kidneys aren't functioning properly the waste product accumulates in them and does damage. A dialysis machine acts as a replacement for the kidneys."

"I don't understand. How?"

"Madison's blood will be run through the dialysis machine, which filters it, then the clean blood is returned to her system."

I do not like the sound of this. I am not a fan of messing around with blood.

"Before she is placed on dialysis," Dr. Channing continues, "I want to draw some blood samples and bone marrow samples for testing."

Laura wheezes.

"That sounds serious," I say. "Ear aches and fevers are pretty normal childhood phenomena. What makes you think--"

"Kidney failure isn't a normal everyday occurrence in children," he points out. "A nose bleed that severe could be a sign of a low blood

platelet count. And those tiny red spots that look like pin pricks concern me.”

“What are they?” I ask.

“They are called petechiae. They are caused by intradermal hemorrhaging, or in plain English, bleeding into the skin. They also signal a low platelet count.”

“She’s bleeding internally?” Laura gasps.

“Is she on any anticoagulants?” Channing asks.

“No,” I answer.

“Suffered any injury or trauma recently?”

I shake my head. “No.”

“Have any allergies?”

He is scaring me. “Not that we’re aware of.”

“And is it safe to assume that Madison hasn’t had any radiation or chemotherapy treatments before?”

“Yes. Doc, what’s going on?” I ask.

“Sir, I want to test your daughter for Leukemia.”

My stomach turns over. “But that’s cancer, isn’t it?”

Channing nods. “Blood cancer. Yes.”

How does blood get cancer? Aren’t cancers tumors?

Madison cannot have leukemia. She has a fever. She has a problem with her kidneys, but not with her blood. I have been too dedicated to Jehovah to be faced with something as serious as blood cancer. Okay, so maybe I only get in ten hours of pioneering every week, but I work a lot of overtime. God is not punishing me for my lackluster pioneering, is he?

“Do any tests you need to do,” Laura says.

I realize that I have just been standing there like an idiot with my mouth agape.

Channing hands Laura a clipboard. “I just need your signature to approve the blood and bone marrow tests.”

She signs the documents and Channing rushes off like this is some kind of emergency.