



*just an
old
country
boy*

A REFLECTIVE HISTORY
OF LEON SUTTERFIELD

written by his granddaughter



Table of Contents

dedication

introduction

I

funeral

apprehension

II

cold creek

navy days

III

changes

game day

IV

raspberries

outro

refrain

dedication

Grandpa,

You are often in my thoughts. You are a marvel and somewhat of a mystery to me. Your dedication, sacrifice, and commitment to all that is good and true, pure and holy, marks you as the best person, the most exemplary and virtuous man, that I have known. I must express my gratitude for your pursuit of godliness because it has saved my life.

Your granddaughter

introduction

In the first quarter of my life, I became fascinated by the feeling of control I could access when I processed my feelings and dreams and turned them into language. This is a trait I believe must have come from my grandparents in part. My grandmother gave the rules of language the respect they deserve and instilled in me a love for those rules (the only rules I love), and my grandfather used language as his tool to bring messages down from heaven and interpret meaning out of life. For that alone, they have my living devotion.

When I was 25, a virus entered the global stage, an unknown thing on an unknown mission. The power that this virus possessed and the control we humans thought we had could not exist in the same place. As a result, the world shifted, the world I had only just begun to understand. This world shift affected everyone I know in impossibly dissimilar ways, so complex, unrelated and dependent upon circumstance that if I were to try to untangle the web of this one event's meaning, I'd have an infinity to decipher. Whatever it was, whatever it means, it has become a catalyst for the existence of this book.

In this book, I am not going to decipher infinity. I am going to tell you about my grandpa. I am going to tell the story of my grandpa's life, his faith, and its impact on my life. If in the telling of my grandpa, I happen to arrive at a linguistic equation for deciphering infinity, that would make this book something worth reading, wouldn't it?

I

“Prayers for your family during this time of loss. I pray that God gives you all peace and comfort. Mrs. Sutterfield was such a sweet lady. I have lots of memories from Shields Church of the Nazarene that include both her and Brother Sutterfield from my childhood and teenage years.”

“Russell and Esther Zinn and Carolyn Hixson are watching the live stream. Our love and sympathy to your family.”

“Wanda and I watched online. We love your family so much. Our love and prayers are with you all. God bless!”

“So many memories from our growing up years! Looking like twins and doing things together! Glad I was able to be with you by way of the livestream. Would have loved to be there in person! God bless you all! I love you and will be praying for you all!”

“Great memories! First meeting Janis when Richard brought her to hear me sing in the Messiah at SNU. I thought she was so pretty - seeing Janis & Leon at Capitol Hill Church meet and marry quite quickly - Homemade ice cream - Ballgames with Leon & Richard playing for the church - Staying with her in the daytime after a surgery - Visiting at their various pastorates, family reunions, OKC trips. I will always cherish her calls & prayers for me. She was caring, compassionate, competitive, friendly, and outgoing. So sorry for the turn of events with the virus to keep us away. Thanks for the live internet feed. You all had a wonderful service for her. We mourn but rejoice with you that she is rejoicing now in Heaven. Love & Prayers to each of her family.”

“Janis Elaine Sutterfield, of Moore, Oklahoma, passed away March 15, 2020 at the age of 81. She was born June 3, 1938 in Urbana, Ohio, to Lewis & Opal (Harshbarger) Zinn. Janis enjoyed playing the piano and taught piano lessons for over 30 years. She was a proud pastor’s wife and devoted her life to church and taught Sunday School. Janis was a prayer warrior and was very sensitive to people’s needs. She enjoyed entertaining and was a great hostess. Janis was very friendly and loved to make people happy. She could spell any word and enjoyed working crossword puzzles. Janis deeply loved and enjoyed her family, grandchildren and great-grandchildren. She is survived by her husband, Melvin Leon Sutterfield; 2 daughters, Cheryl Seymour & husband, Culley, and Carol Fowlkes & husband, Eddie; 5 grandchildren, Shawn Seymour & wife, Rachael, Scott Seymour & wife, Bristol, Jay Seymour & wife, Madi, Maddi Kade & husband, Chris, and Jana Kelsay & husband, Austin; 4 great-grandchildren, McCartney Seymour, Scottie Seymour, Bobby Grace Seymour, and Luke Seymour; 6 siblings, Alice Kaup, Edith Williams, Russell Zinn, Roy Zinn, Joyce Forrider, and Richard Zinn; and a host of other loving family members and friends. Janis is preceded in death by her parents, Lewis & Opal Zinn; sister, Marjory Brown; and brother, Raymond Zinn. Funeral Services will be held at 10:00 AM, Wednesday, March 18, 2020 at Shartel Church of God, located at 11600 S. Western Ave., in Oklahoma City. Interment will be held at 3:00 PM, at Pryor Cemetery, in Stuart, Oklahoma. There will be a livestream option available through the church so people can feel free to watch at home if they are unable to attend in person.”



Jana

funeral

A sanctuary with high, vaulted ceilings constructed in warm wood makes an octagonal shape. Rows of pews in straight lines face a stage set with greenery, instruments, cords and cables. A darkened baptistry rests at the back, awaiting use. A pulpit marks the center of the room. It is brightly lit. People fill the pews, wearing dark colors. Beautiful flower arrangements cheer up the purposeful solemnity of the occasion; they are gathered

around a blush colored casket. Near it, a few men in muted suits stand at respectful attention and direct the proceedings of the funeral.

I am seated near the stage. My family fills in the space around me. I hold onto my husband's hand beside me for the length of the service, until it is my turn to go up and speak the words I have prepared to say about my grandmother.

Remembering Grandma

For the past several years, we've been slowly losing my grandma. We know what it's like to have grandma around but not really have grandma around. Good health hasn't come easy to her. Worry, fear, discouragement were feelings she knew well. There were times that those feelings were closer to her than any person could have been.

It's uncomfortable for me to confront the fact that she endured a lot of pain. Especially in her final days, pain was written all over her. There isn't any comfort in that. It's hard to deal with it. My family, we've done a hard thing. My mom and my aunt, you have done an extremely difficult thing. My grandpa, I can't imagine what it has been for you to see Grandma through this. But I realize that even though it is one of the most difficult things to do, even though there is little comfort to draw from the experience, seeing Grandma through this last struggle is how we honor her the most. Gathering around her just to witness her last breath is an act of the deepest love. It's a kind of love that people don't talk about often. It's not very pretty.

I'm really proud of my family. We have a new appreciation for our time together. We realize how precious our presence in each other's lives really is. I'm thankful my grandma and my grandpa centered their family on the gospel of Jesus Christ. Because of that, we have a source of comfort and of hope.

When my brothers and my cousin and I were little kids, we would often stay at the grandparents' house for a night. It was a big deal; I even had a tiny branded suitcase for the event that read, "Going to Grandma's." And every night before we would go to bed, they would gather us into the living room, we would kneel at the couch, and grandpa would pray for us. Those prayers are more than memories that we bring into adulthood. They really mean something. They mean that I have grandparents who have deeply cared for me for all of my life.

I will miss my grandma's face and how she lit up with joy every time one of us grandkids or great grandkids entered her home. I don't believe we'll ever be used to not having her join us in a game of Catchphrase. I'm so thankful today that her pain is finally relieved and I know she's rejoicing. I rejoice with her.

The paper I'm reading from makes a distracting dance by my shaking fingers. My voice trembles. I try to speak the words with the full force of the meaning behind them, but I fear some is lost. I worry that these words reveal too much, that perhaps they reveal things which are better left unsaid. They come out like heavy rocks moved for the first time in years, revealing careful forms made of careless time. I am aware that as I speak, I am making a history. I worry I'm not the right one to make it.

After myself and a number of my family members have spoken, revealed our hearts, and returned to our seats, it is grandpa's turn. He takes the stage. He is acclimated to the place behind the pulpit, much of his life has been lived teaching from it. He looks natural there. He places his hand on the papers set in front of him. The right side of his body leans into the left in a comfortable position. He removes his opposite hand from his trouser's pocket, swings it forward to meet its partner, clears his throat, sets his shoulders, and begins to speak. Of this speech, I remember only two words, repeated throughout as if in place of all the words which could fill the space of 60 years of dedicated marriage: "*precious woman.*" I tighten the hold my fingers have of my husband's hand.

Grandpa finishes and removes himself from the stage. He sits in the inside aisle of the nearest pew. He sits alone, surrounded by us, and an empty space beside him. I try not to notice the empty space. I imagine his life continuing on from this funeral service, at home, alone. It is a blurry image. I am uncertain of what his loss will mean to him. What will his grief be like? How will he need me now? I hear sniffing from family gathered around me in the pews. I know their thoughts are clouded with worries like mine. We all must have felt a little more alone when we lost Grandma. Something constant in our world ceased to be.

I keep my focus at the front of the room. The quiet becomes a refuge. The solitude this silence offers brings me back to memories of my grandparent's house. I rely on them now as if they are a soundtrack to my grieving. I can see the green carpet in the living room where I would sit with my knees bent, legs tucked underneath me, running my hands over like it was the surface of water, imagining fish beneath it. And next to it, the cabinet where the cassette tapes of our Christmases wait for us to play them back again. The setting at grandpa and grandpa's house never changed, and neither did they, not by much. Grandma's hair held the same

tight white curls. Grandpa always gave the same big hug. They attended every school play, every ball game. At their house, it was always Cheerio's for breakfast, bologna sandwich for lunch, goulash for dinner, and an ice cream dessert.

The completeness of my memory is what I treasure, it is a solid object. It doesn't slip away, like other memories more fleeting and confused with emotion. The constancy of grandparents develops solid memories. These live with me, available for me to return to for comfort, the solid pieces forming into a completed image. It tells me I know where I come from. This is how home is created. A deep connection with the past allows for a foundation from which to build the future. Grandparents make this possible. Our lives intertwine in a precious tapestry, using the past, blending the present, imagining the future.

It is the moment in the funeral when the casket is prepared for viewing. It is the moment we find out if she's really in there, if she looks like herself. We will see how changed she must be by death or by funeral home hands. Silence accompanies the preparation, a fitting arrangement. In this silence, I have a mind of worries, yet a stillness resides in me, unmoved. I prepare to meet my grandmother's face, washed in rest.

The procession begins. Those who occupy the back row make their way forward. A man approaches on his own. He wears a suit and tie. I recognize his face; I knew him as a child. He was a member of my Grandpa's church. Here in the aisle, he meets grandpa's gaze as he approaches the front row. He stops, turns to him, and bows his head. Grandpa acknowledges with a solemn nod. The man moves on.

I witness this from my seat, and I become overwhelmed with emotion. All of this service I have seen through dry eyes, only now do I hang my head and let emotion shake out of my shoulders and fall onto my face as tears. It's something strange. In this moment, I see my grandfather's entire life. I see the man that he is. I see a journey reaching its end. The fullness of this life is shown to me, and I see him as if for the first time.



apprehension

Am I allowed to talk about apprehension when I talk about my grandfather?

I am outside his home, looking to the closed door, feeling apprehensive.

This is not something I am used to. I have visited the place many times and know it well. I have been cared for so well by my grandfather all of my life, never having a reason to doubt his intentions. What I feel now is, I suppose, something that happens when you have to meet your grandpa all over again, when you have to go to 'grandpa's house' and not 'the grandparent's house.'

My grandpa is a good man. He is real and true and pure. He is honest and hard working. He likes to show me the plants in his garden and describe how the weather may be affecting the growth of each one. He wears a baseball cap and a buttoned up dress shirt tucked into khaki pants with tennis shoes. His hair has been gray as long as I've known him. His big ears hold up his thick glasses. One of his eyes is totally blind. It is milky white and pale blue. He tells jokes. He always has one. He enjoys himself so much when he tells a joke. His eyes gleam, even the pale one. His shoulders shake. He smiles a satisfied smile, and the joke, usually, falls flat.

My grandpa is a good man, so why do I feel apprehension about our meeting? Perhaps it appeared the moment my grandmother's casket was laid in the ground, something born from the uncertainty of loss. We traveled to Stuart to have her joined with grandpa's resting family there immediately after her funeral service. It was a drive long enough to recover a cheerful spirit among us. We gathered in a small chapel at the burial grounds. Outside the sun was glowing over a pond at the foot of a grassy hill. I was surprised by the serenity of Stuart. My brother said a prayer, we passed tissues around, and then we found her plot. Someone recited a verse, and it happened, we laid her to rest in a beautiful place far away from us.

I thought that was the end. The day had been long, filled with sorrow, longing, peace and hope. All the necessary ceremonies were complete. But in the cemetery, each of us starting to tear away and return to our vehicles, grandpa began a resolute march in the opposite direction, his back to us, and getting smaller as he walked faster. He was heading for a grove of trees. I thought and puzzled over it, where could he be going in such a hurry, in such a place, at such a time? Perhaps he needed the cover of shadow for a moment as a new wave of

emotion came over him. Perhaps this is his grief mobilized, away from us, the way I feared it. I met questioning eyes with other family members, and my mother said, "He must be going to look for the others." She meant the others who are buried.

I know my grandpa is a good man, but I don't really know him. I don't know what it means to watch him walk away. It feels like a planet is between us, as if we have carried out our days on different hemispheres, and our language is incomprehensible to each other. His life has been one of service and sacrifice. He has lived his life as an offering to God. I don't know how to begin to compare our lives, somewhat out of fear and uncertainty from my life's incompleteness, somewhat out of an expectation that I will reveal myself to be an unfavorable granddaughter to such a wonderful man. The world I inhabit is so different from the world that shaped him.

After staring for a few long, apprehensive moments at the front door of grandpa's house, I make my way inside. I have arrived to help him, something I have wanted to do for some time. I am filling in a cleaning duty that he finds himself unable to complete, it hurts his back too much to twist and shove a mop around the floors. He is seated in his comfy chair ready to greet me as I step through the door. He says, "How's Jana?" with a knowing grin. I say, "I'm pretty good, grandpa, how are you?" He shows me the cleaning supplies.

I finish the job in a little over 20 minutes. The wooden floors now have a shining gleam and a fresh scent. I join him in the living room and take a seat across from him on the couch, perched on the edge, for I am not sure how long I should stay. Leaving my grandparent's house within an hour of arriving does not feel right. I have never done that before. I wait for him to speak. When he does, he asks about my job. I tell him it's going well. An exchange of insignificant information begins between us. There are stops and starts to it, the information passing as if through traffic. A bit nervously, I land each phrase with something sarcastic and a soft chuckle. Grandpa does the same. I wonder if this is a family trait. We move onto the subject of where I live. He asks me to remind him of the location. I give him the street names: May and 63rd. Suddenly, I realize I've found it: a link. Grandpa knows May and 63rd. He brightens up, looks deeply into the far corner of the room, and describes the May and 63rd of his life. "Well, Donny and I worked over there at the electric company. And him and his wife lived down the street, not too far away, in a beautiful house. I stayed with them for a while when I returned from the Navy." He offers details, I interject questions, and our conversation moves along steadily. I

gather new pieces of his life that I hadn't known before, and old pieces of the place I live which time has buried.
When I leave, I feel lighter.

II

Leon

cold creek

It's only natural for a good old country boy to get up to some antics once in a while. I'm no different than anyone else. I get the work done, and then I have some fun. I go looking for it, or it finds its way to me. Most of the time it's my brother's idea.

Our family works hard, long days on the farm. Our father works harder than anyone. At home, it's mind your work. At school, it's mind your lessons. On Sunday, Mom has us get up and dressed to hear the sermon at church, where it's mind your manners. Life is quiet as long as the rules are minded. But like I said, I struggle with that, only as much as any boy would.

Today at school it's near impossible to hear what's going on in the classroom over all the buzzing activity of springtime just outside the window. I watch a breeze move through a row of trees, bobbing the branches. Birds flutter around and reposition themselves among the green leaves. The tall grass of the fields is alive in a new way. It's waving to me, just to me. And a ladybug crawling along the windowsill, even this ladybug is letting me know it's better to be outside today than inside where the lesson drags on.

I turn my head to the front of the room. When I let out a sigh, Donny, my brother, meets my eyes from his seat just ahead of me. He shows me a piece of paper in his hand, folded up four times into a square. The teacher knocks her knuckles against the blackboard, and he turns back quickly. I keep my eyes forward while my mind continues to drift. I wonder what he wanted me to see on the square of paper.

Next thing I know, the folded paper is dropped onto my desk with a smirk from the girl seated to my right. Donny scribbled "top secret" over the front. I carefully pull it open to keep the noise down and avoid the teacher's notice. I read the message he left and look up to see him grinning back at me. I can't keep myself from grinning, too. He's got another scheme, and in silence, we agree.

He and I work quickly. Within a few moments, we've both been excused to use the washroom. We meet outside where two other boys from the class are waiting around.

"Fellas, who'd like to go for a swim?" Donny asks us. He puts the question like a challenge, and what he really wants to know is, are we brave enough to accept?

We look around at each other until we're all sharing the same mischievous smile.

"I think that'd be mighty fine," I say. Donny whacks me on the back and the other boys giggle.

He says, "I was hoping you'd say so."

Donny leads the way and we take off from the schoolyard, not looking back. Just like that, we fall into this plan together. A nervous sweat is starting down my neck. As long as we make it out of the opening and into the rows of trees that line the perimeter, we'll get away clean. It's possible we've already been found out, but I don't want to know if we have. I want to swim. I want to feel the sunshine on my face. I want to sink my feet into the mud. It's glorious to be on my way.

We keep up a brisk pace around the trees and then it's a few more yards down the hill where the creek bed gurgles. At this spot, the creek's been dammed up to make a swimming hole. Dozens of songbirds screech noisily around us since we're disturbing their afternoon wash. The boy who reaches the bottom first sheds his clothes and splashes in. I am hollering and huffing after him while the others do the same. In the blink of an eye, four boys who are supposed to be in school are dunking each other in the creek.

I take my turn at the rope swing. Its gnarled knots are rough in my hands. When the last boy to go has cleared the way, I wind up with a few steps backward and leap from the ground. My hands lose touch with the rope. For a moment I am in the air. I am flying over the other boys and the water beneath me. I plunge into the

sparkling creek. It's fantastic. My head pops up out of the water almost immediately, my arms make circles at my sides.

The four of us laugh and carry on for a while. Donny decides for us that we should go back to school just for the end of it. He's sure we can get by with an excuse for the time we've been gone. We make our way back, dripping creek water from our clothes. I stay back at the tree line waiting while they go inside one at a time. When it's clear, I break away from my hiding place and hope that the other boys made it inside without being caught. I hope with all hope, I'm happy from my afternoon adventure, and I'm finally dry. It is smooth sailing from here, just another hour or so in the classroom just like any other day, as long as the other boys don't blow it all. Gee, I hope they made it.

I stroll up to the school building. It seems like it's a world away from the creek. Every kid inside must be jealous up to their necks of us. They'll ask me how I did it. They'll probably want me to take them to the creek next week. And then I'll have to keep up this secret operation, maybe I'll charge a quarter for my troubles.

I open the door and rush inside. It is quiet. I try to stop my heavy breathing. I make the softest steps across the creaky wooden floor. One step, two steps, creeping closer to the classroom door. My heart is going faster than it has all day. Then I see them, circling around the principal right there in the hall, and my heart stops still.

My pals look up, dread and disappointment is masked over the rambunctious glow of afternoon sun on their faces. They hang their heads low, and I know that the fun is over.

"Leon," the principal calls, "I need to speak with you."

It's a long walk to the office. I want to stop and ask each of them what happened. I am dying to know how we got here, but there's no use. I wonder if the other boys will try to give excuses or not. I try to think of one, was I called home for a moment for something really important? But what? Maybe I'll say I got sick all of a sudden, but what if another boy says that? A lump is growing in my throat and my fingers stick together with nervous sweat.

There's no time to give an excuse, we shamefully enter the office and just as soon, we're out again. The principal says he trusts we had a good time swimming, but we must go to class to finish the day at school. He

says he will speak to our parents, and that's the worst news of all. It puts a churning in my stomach that doesn't quit for the rest of the day. My eyes swing over to Donny, his face is pale and he's just as worried as I am. We were discovered for our absence, but I can't figure out who could have known we were at the creek.

I get back to my seat in the same old classroom. It's just as horrible as it was this morning. The teacher acknowledges us with a nod and continues the lesson. She looks extra stern. I dare not say a word to anyone. I cannot think of what my father will say, I cannot bear the agony of that confrontation when we get home. Dad will get the truth out of us, he always does. And when that happens, he'll make sure we get a good spanking that will keep any idea of skipping school out of our heads for a lifetime. Now the teacher is my one hope. I concentrate hard on her mouth moving to try to will her to keep teaching forever. If she would just go on and on like she does, I won't go home. But time won't stop for no one. I feel every second before it slips away and brings me closer to the final hour, the final minute, the final second. And then, it's another long walk home.

"You are dismissed," the teacher says.

I catch up to Donny at the door, and we march ourselves down the hall, not saying anything. Outside in the schoolyard, we see a group of girls gathered around, giggling behind their hands with their eyes on us. It is the very last thing I would like to see right now, I know immediately it's the bad kind of attention from the girls. Donny knows it, too. He starts walking faster to get around them. Then we hear, clear as day, from somewhere within the group, "and they didn't have any clothes on!"

Donny stops dead, his face flushes red. "What are you going on about?" He demands.

"We saw you at the creek!" The girls shriek with laughter at this announcement.

I look at Donny, he looks at me. I can't stand it any longer, I break off at a run. They must have followed, they must have known! They knew all along, they were there?! They saw us! They told on us! Anger, confusion and embarrassment like I haven't felt before fuels my escape from the schoolyard. My bare feet pound into the dirt. I don't stop running until I see our house.

Bent over with my hands on my knees, I gulp the air back into my lungs. I look at the dirt on the ground where a few ants crawl. I think how these ants don't have a father. They don't have a school. Heck, they don't

even need clothes. They must be doing much better than me. I wish I could be an ant in the dirt, I feel just as low. I look back to see the others coming home from school. Donny is with them. He sees me and runs up.

"Donny, let's just have the truth out and get it over with," I call to him. I'm still panting a bit, but my mind is made up.

He says, "Everybody knows it. I bet dad knows it by now, too." He sighs. "I'm sorry, I didn't know the girls would follow like that. I just can't imagine it. They told everybody about it. And you know what? They were hiding in the bushes. I mean, can you just imagine?" He shakes his head.

"I don't care. Now let's just get inside and get it over with, okay?"

"Are you angry? Now don't be hard on me. I couldn't have known nothing that you didn't know!"

My ears are blazing. Arguing is the very last thing I'd like to do. I don't want the details either. I know it's Donny's fault for passing a note around the classroom, but it's not something I want to talk about. We're both in it just the same. And I can't wait another moment. I just want to have it out. Over and done.

I breathe out long and hard. I say, "I'm not angry with you." I turn and head up to the house. Mom is on the porch waiting up for us, she always is. When I reach her, she says, "Go see your father in the yard." My belly is churning worse than ever. I don't waste any time, and Donny is following close by. Behind the house, dad is waiting.

He has his arms crossed over his chest. His nose tips down at us. I'd learned that, with dad, you keep your words brief and you hurry them along.

"Dad, we got into some mess today at school," I say. He grunts. He turns his eyes on my brother. Donny's got his head hung low, he won't look up. I stick my elbow in his ribs. That gets his head up.

"Dad, I'm sorry. I took us away from school today. We missed an hour of our lesson. But I promise, we got all the good hours," Donny pleads.

"I wish you wouldn't have done that," Dad growls. "What was it you got up to?"

"Swimming at the creek," Donny answers.

Here it comes, the worst part of all. Dad does not speak or move or gesture or communicate one single thing more for a while. At his full height above us, with a stern look masking all his features, he thinks about what should be done. A silent giant determines our fate. I wiggle and Donny squirms as we wait.

After several long moments, his speech begins, the words come out like soldiers falling in line. "You boys have disappointed us at school. You know we send you there on purpose, so that you can learn something, so that you can keep some knowledge in your heads and do something with it. You'll learn nothing if you play at these schemes and tricks, going off to have your fun on school time. And it may have been fun for a time out there in the creek this afternoon, but here we are discussing and it's not so much fun now." He pauses. He resets his shoulders. His eyes stay on us. "Since this happened at school, it seems to me like this a problem for your principal to handle. While you're there taking his lessons, you're under his authority, is that right?"

We say, "Yes sir."

"So we'll have you tell us who you think should take care of this situation. Should I send you back to your principal in the morning, or should we have it settled here at home?"

My eyes went wide. I tried to think fast. Surely we'd like the principal's punishment better than we'd like our dad's belt to come down on us. I tried to figure out if Donny thought the same way. His expression hadn't changed, he was pale as ever. He might not be thinking at all. It was too much. We were on top of the world when we were boys skipping school, splashing around in the creek with the sun shining down and the rope swing making us fly. In a day, we'd been heroes turned to rascals. It seemed to happen so quickly. And now we'd been given a choice. Could it be true? Can he really mean he won't punish us tonight? I have to think.

"Well, Leon? Do you have your mind made up?" Dad asks.

"I think we should go back to the principal and apologize. After that, it's up to him," I reply. I give him no reason to doubt my confidence in my choice.

"So it's back to the principal. First thing you do when you get to the school, you go to the office. Donny, what do you say?"

Donny's shoulders are perking up. He looks dad in the eyes for the first time. He says, "I think he's right. I think I should apologize at school."

"Be sure that you do," Dad's strong voice completes the agreement. "Get inside now. Wash yourselves, you smell like the creek."

We're already running. We run into the house chasing after each other. We feel like we've got new lives. We wear big grins on our faces. It's incredible to be out from underneath the threat of a sore behind. I follow Donny through the house and we finally stop to catch our breath outside.

"What do you say? Huh? What do you say, Donny!" I scream at him.

"I say, that's the best whooping we never got!" We squeal and laugh. We leap with our legs and swing our arms up over our heads.



Navy days

I know it this morning better than I have known it since the beginning of all this: a sailor's life is not the life for me. This stretch of countless days on the endless ocean stopped and started by unknown missions in godless places, it's no good for a country boy. Problem is my home is so far away I hardly remember the kind of life that is for me. Still, even if I were to remember it crystal clear, it's not there anymore at all. I was the last of us to leave it behind to go to war.

I let out a quiet sigh. I tie up my boots.

Looking around me at the other men, I see that I'm not the only one counting my regrets and sorrows this morning. There's a melancholy thick as fog in the air. It happens like this anytime we spend an evening on the island. We go out and we just get carried away, it's like something else takes us over. I'll never speak a word of

it, I swear. I know it's just like a sailor to think and dream of home only when he's done all he could to shame it. Well, we leave it behind us anyway. We're off again this morning, back on the ancient, distant sea.

Navy isn't so bad, I should say. I have a bed every night. I'm fed and clothed. My job is meticulous but it's not dangerous. I have an assignment as electrician's mate, so I maintain the function and repair of the ship's electrical equipment, the batteries and generators below deck. I am rarely called to action, except to keep up with daily operations, and this next stretch of time on the water should be routine. Although last night on the island, among the waves of our merriment, word got around about mixed signals, misguided leaders, and foreshadowed storms. I didn't waste my time thinking much of that. It's just like a sailor to pass the night with legend and lore.

A fella smelling of smoke bumps into my shoulder as we stumble up the ramp onto the ship. He looks up at me since I'm rather taller than him and there's a glaze over his eyes, and he's mumbling something low and slow as if there were rocks tumbling around in his mouth. I recognize that he was one of those men giving warnings last night through a cloud of smoke. His pupils are small specks between the thin slits of his eyelids. We both take in a breath, sharing a cold stare. Just off instinct, I know I should not raise the matter of being bumped into with him, even though there's an instant quickening of my blood when a man disrespects me. I've learned by my busted knuckles how to tamp it down. I stand still; he moves on.

I find that the more I get to know the men in my ranks, the more unpredictable they become. Fights among us aren't uncommon, and the officers seem to encourage it. I heard one say it was good that we sort out our differences before we're in real danger. That must be why some of these guys will throw me into a rage on purpose. Honest, I can't understand why I get it so often. Like this man bumping my shoulder, I don't know if I'll truly let go of that. It'll hang onto me for a while; anger is my silent traveler. But there's good men, too. If there weren't any men better than me, we would never get this ship anywhere, we would just be throwing ourselves around having fits of all kinds. This one man in particular, I can't understand him at all. We will settle down to eat our meals, and there he is turning thanks, praying over his food. Every time. I see him at his bunk and he's got a Bible open on his lap, not giving his attention to anything but this book in front of him. My mother would admire that, she wanted me to be that way. I guess he must be a true Christian man.

Back in the engine control room again. There are meters and lights to read and interpret. There are large batteries to move in and out. Myself and the other men carry out the maintenance required. All the small

intricacies of electrical work command the attention of my fingertips, but my mind drifts like the ship from the shore.

After long hours at work, night closes in around us. The waves rise and fall without rhythm, without input from celestial light to make sense of them. The sailors collect in the mess hall after finishing our duties, sensing in the wind that there's a storm upon us. Suddenly there's a big drop. I stick my arms out to stabilize myself, my stomach flips. A few who are tasked with securing the deck are talking hurriedly and their eyebrows lace together and droop over their noses. We are onboard the destroyer equipped with missiles on the deck. If the ship were to take a roll from the tossing waves that would equal up to 50 degrees in slope, those guns are meant to detach from the deck and disappear into the sea, giving the ship the advantage of correcting itself upright without the extra weight. I get the sense from the tension in the room that these sailors aren't discussing mathematical probabilities, but rather horrific imaginations. It's now I realize this storm is the worst we've been up against.

In the faces of the men who pass me in the halls, I see something I haven't seen before. There's something new, something solemn. The ship rocks. I snap into action. I rush with a few others to the engine room. Everyone is rushing. Water is rushing over us. In the engine room, water is rushing. I see lights blinking. I see sparks flying. And then, I see nothing. Light vanishes, the rocking continues. My chest is all of a sudden flooded with a sobering coolness.

"Where is the generator?" A commander snaps. "Where is the backup power?"

Everyday I've wasted on this ship has been devoted to preparing the backup power for the eventual and unpredictable moment that the electrical power ceases. That moment arrives, the power fails, and we're sinking. This reality hits each of us, I mean, we know we're sinking. We know it's over. The water keeps rising. The waves throw us around. It's a dark, dangerous moment. Desperation speaks the same language as the Christian man every night in his bunk; each of us begins to pray. It's a strange sound, it's something that will stick with me forever if I make it out, the sound of these sailors praying. The darkness of the night stretches on.

Relief comes with the morning light, now the winds have backed off. The storm has passed us and we're still here. I go up to the deck with a few men to see what the damage has been, to let the light of a day make us new. We took a shock with this storm. Each of us went through our worst fears and thought about them all

night, but when we saw the deck this morning, completely cleared of all equipment, we were shocked all over again. The ship took a beating from the sea, and nothing was left to show for it, except the unreasonable fact that we're still on it above the waves. Silently, we look around at each other and take in the emptiness.

I've talked it over with plenty of the guys. We can't help but talk about the storm day and night. We ask ourselves what would have happened, what could have happened if we sunk. If we sunk to the bottom of the ocean like we should have done, what would become of us, where would we end up? We all prayed together in our hour of need, why only then? How could we have any hope that God would hear us? We got the power back on for the ship. We continue our journey as if it never happened. We'll be in Hong Kong soon. But I just can't forget it. I know the answer to the question. I know God wouldn't hear my prayer, I'm afraid. And yet, I'm alive. It seems as though He did.

III

Leon

changes

A new office building going up on 63rd street contracted us to do the electrical work. Donny and I agree, it is the biggest project we've taken on yet. A nice thing about the job is when it comes time to wire a new site, all the other construction has to stop. It makes for a quiet work space, and I'm thankful for peace today. Even Donny is out for the day, so here I am working alone in this dark, empty space.

I don't get this way too often, but I'm a little worried for myself. Since I've come back home, everything has changed so rapidly. I live in Oklahoma City. I attend church with Donny. A family that I knew from Stuart is kind enough to house me. So I don't worry for my basic needs, I can provide for myself, which is more than can be said for many of the guys I knew on the ship. I worry about the future, mostly. I don't know what I'm gonna make of my life, and I'm not convinced that I'm doing the right thing. I'm lost trying to figure out what the right thing would be. I hope it jumps out at me soon, kinda like the other things in my life have done.

I could only think about baseball before. Sports consumed my life. I started to play as a kid only because there was nothing else to do. I picked up the only glove I found in the school's equipment bag because I knew mom and dad couldn't buy me one. Just like that, I'm the catcher, and then it took off. I was locked in the game. The tiniest movement on the field was in my focus, and that's how I could be so good at it, I didn't miss anything. You didn't want to lose to me, that's for sure. I could be nasty about it. When I was in school, I couldn't give my attention to the lessons at all, playing ball was too important, and it's showing up now. The

way I didn't listen to anyone, I just wanted to get in the game, and they needed me in the game. Well, not anymore.

No other sounds in this building to interrupt my thoughts. I work slowly at connecting the wires.



The ball game is over, and the team crowds around to talk before heading home. The sun is sinking in the summer sky. It's the church softball league I've been invited to play for, and we just earned our second victory since I've joined. A few guys slap their hands on my back in the huddle we've created.

"Leon, it's good to have you on the team, you'll be at service in the morning?" The elder who acts as the coach asks me.

I shrug and say, "Well, I suppose so, since we won our game."

He nods. He doesn't catch onto the joke I'm making.

The team plays Saturday nights, matched up with other churches from Bethany or northern Oklahoma City. We practice on Wednesdays. It's different being around this group of men and women. I get the feeling when they pray, they mean it. There's a genuineness about the things of God that I only remember seeing once before from one young man in the Navy. Before every game and every practice, we huddle and pray. Setting the tone like that for a softball game is also different for me. I think it might be what's keeping me from blowing my temper as often as I used to. I'm just glad I haven't been asked to lead a prayer yet.

A few yards from us, there's a group of women from the church who watched the game and now stand around discussing whatever ladies discuss. I have met only a few of them. I really honestly try not to stare in their direction.

I notice gradually the two crowds of men and women coming together around me, breaking up into small conversations between groups. Phil, who plays outfielder, asks Susan about what she'll prepare for a potluck coming up. That's something I really treasure about these church people, they eat together often, and they eat together well. Rick and Tim sing in the choir with a few of the women, they chat about their next performance. The coach calls out to the crowd, "Well, it's time for me to get my kids into bed, we'll see you all tomorrow, goodnight!" And the crowd chirps back a series of phrases that communicate the same thing: "Goodnight, Bye bye, see you tomorrow!" His departure prompts a few others to find their way home for the evening.

It's just at the moment that I've turned away to leave that I hear from behind me, "Leon!"

So just as soon, I twist back around, and there's a group of women who have turned their eyes on me. Their eyes have a mischievous sort of glimmer. I step toward them, and they step toward me, altogether as if they are one.

"Leon, we wanted to ask you a favor. See, we know that you live in Warr Acres, isn't that right?"

I reply, "Sure do." I join my hands together behind my back, and shuffle my feet a bit.

"Well, you see, Janis lives there, too. We thought you could take her home and that would save us a trip."

Another woman from the group adds, "A trip to Warr Acres, since you live there," and then ducks her head down.

I know Janis. I had the pleasure of introducing myself previously in church. She is the piano player. She has stayed quite still among the women in the group. I consider what they've asked.

I say, "Janis, would you like for me to take you home?" I look right at her, as if the others aren't there. She gives me the wonderful pleasure of returning my look, with a shy smile, and responds in her soft voice, "Yes, that's all right."



We're back to work at the site for the new office building. Donny just returned from a trip to see mom and dad in Stuart. While we work, he tells me how dad has got things running on the farm.

"It's getting out of his control. It seems like he knows it is, but of course, he's not admitting that any time soon." Donny coughs. He wipes his hands on his jeans, and looks up at me. "Did you hear about his accident?"

"What's that?" I start listening a little better, my hands operating the wire tools up in the ceiling.

"Well, so you know that old threshing machine, it always acted up. You know that, and I know that. And dad, he just keeps on using it without anyone to do the raking, you know, like we did. That's just dangerous, I might even say reckless."

"You say something happened to him?"

"Oh yes, terrible." Donny pauses. He lifts his arm and shows it to me, pointing to a spot beneath his elbow and moving his finger down to his wrist. He says, "From here to here, he'll never be the same. It got caught up in the machine."

"Ohh my."

Donny shakes his head. "It's tough to look at, I'll tell you that. Skins all twisted and misshapen, still pretty badly bruised, but he keeps it wrapped up."

"Wow, that must have hurt." I rub my hand over my wrist, where it's sensitive all of a sudden. He steps away to grab a tool from the truck.

I stand there alone and wonder if my parents are going to be all right, wonder if they need me. If my dad keeps on working like he's used to, sooner or later, he'll work himself into a grave. Then what? I'm wondering if my dad needs Jesus. God can save my dad, like he's saved me.

My life is different now. I prayed with the pastor in his office at the church about a week ago, and that's where I declared that my life will be different from now on. I do not have the shame or the fear that I once had. I

do not live for myself, like I once did. And all this and so much more is changing in me. I wonder if my dad, well, I hope my dad could feel the same.

Donny comes back into the room we've been working in, and he stops when he sees the look on my face.

“What’s the matter?”

A few tears drop from my eyes. I take the rag from my pocket and quickly wipe my face. I say, “Oh, excuse me.” I sniff. “I just get to thinking about salvation so much lately.”

Donny steps across the room to me and places his hand on my shoulder. He smiles, but he doesn't say anything more. Brothers don't always need words.



Janis sits next to me for prayer meeting tonight. She helps me stay focused because I know she'll ask me what I prayed about at the end. I feel like all I do is pray. My mind returns to rejoicing and blessing and requesting strength from God without me really being aware of it all day long. On the way to prayer meeting tonight, I prayed. I knew I would see Janis, and I prayed that God would make me the man for her. When I see her, I pray for her. When I think of her, I pray for her. She's sitting here next to me, her eyes closed tightly and her hands opened toward heaven, and I greatly admire her.

After some time in silence, one of the church leaders stands to address the group. He runs through a list of members who we've been continually praying for as they face some difficult obstacle in their lives so that we may cheer them on or grieve with them. It's these kind of things that I didn't know would happen in the church. I never realized a church could be a family. When we face sickness or trial, loss or hopelessness, we do not face these alone. And this is what returns my heart and my mind to constant rejoicing, that I have found such a blessing and been so loved and accepted, and I will not face life alone because God has provided His people to

walk with me. The list that he reads from includes everyone from new little babies to elderly home-bound members, showing me that throughout all the changes of life, there is this pillar to lean on.

He continues the meeting with a call to the altar. He welcomes anyone in need of healing to come kneel at the front and present their earnest request to God. A few people get up from their seat and take a place, bending their knees, bowing their heads. The leader calls again to the rest of us still seated, asking that we join our brothers and sisters in prayer. Janis is up from her seat and walks directly to a young woman who has knelt to pray. She places her hand on the woman's back, closes her eyes and lifts up her head. I stay seated, watching her. Again, her eyes squint shut, and her lips move slightly, a few words escaping in a whisper. These are my favorite moments in the church. They are undeniably powerful.

Before the meeting is concluded, the leader stands once more and leads the group in a final prayer. A few people give a strong, "Amen," in response. The people trickle out of the room. I keep my seat until Janis departs from the young woman, after they stand together and talk for a few minutes. She finds me and we leave together.



It's Monday morning, a cold one. I lift my stiffened fingers up to my face and blow my breath over them as I arrive at the house I've been called to repair. The brick houses in this neighborhood are some of the oldest in the city. That can make them an electrical challenge. I park my truck, grab my tools, and size up the job ahead of me. It'll be a long day.

It's the stillness this morning that has my mind return to holy things. I almost can't think over the fullness in my heart that has come over me. It seems to happen more and more. I whisper a prayer as I move through the quiet house.

I thought I would stumble into my life. I thought it would just sorta happen to me. It's how I became the person I was, it was just what was around me. But it's changed now, I'm changed. I have a different sense about life, almost like I have something to do with it. I blink at the electrical box now in front of me, trying to memorize it.

What a life I have in front of me. I have to be good, because I can ruin it easily. I'm redeemed from the old life, and the new life is up to me. That's what fills my heart, to think of all the possibilities of my new life, to think of God leading me. Will I be an electrician in my new life? I identify the wiring problem after a few minutes looking around.

It's just like the man said yesterday in church, "Every man and woman answers the call according to their gifts from God." I do believe that. Janis has her gift of music that she shares, playing the songs and teaching the young ones. She liked what the preacher had to say. At the end of the service, he said something like, "if any of y'all feel like God's calling you, would you come forward and let us have prayer with you." And Janis, seated beside me, said, "Let's go up there."

So that's what we did. I knelt there and prayed. The moment plays back in my mind as if it's happening right in front of me, and I stop just short of stepping up onto my ladder.

I have made God the Lord of my life. He led me to Janis, to make her my wife. I don't think he's done leading me yet. I'm starting to realize what I did at that service, saying yes, and this fullness in my heart. . .it's overwhelming. I have this urgency to respond, like God is here. My voice rings through the quiet house, "Yes Lord! I am willing!" And tears begin to fall from my eyes. My breath is pushing quicker through my lips. "Praise God! Let it be in me!" I am making my commitment right here. I pledge my life. I want the life that God has for me, I want to fulfill His call to the ministry.

After a few moments in prayer and adoration, in worship, I wipe at my face and look around me. It's as if there is new color in all of it. Everything is the same, I'm standing in this unfamiliar house just as I was moments ago, but now it's alive. I pick up my tools and step up to the ladder again. This is today's job, but this is not what God has for me. I complete my task quickly, pack up and head home.

Janis is there. She has been putting things together for us in our new home. I can't imagine what I'd do without her. As soon as I can, I tell her everything as it happened. I tell her about the commitment I've made.

God bless that woman, she lights up. She accepts it and makes it her commitment, too. As we sit at the table, I take her hand and pray for us. I give thanks for the blessing of our marriage, and the future God has for us. Janis opens her eyes and looks to me. Just as simply as she accepts me, she guides me. She says, “Well, you need to go to college.”



This Sunday morning, I am renewed in my faith just by showing up to church. And at the same time, I am burdened. The message we heard this morning was about reaching others to tell them about new life in Christ. At the end, the preacher called for anyone to come kneel and pray about it, and I went. I was thinking of my dad. And I still am. The desire to go to him and talk with him is pressing on my heart. I can't help but think that if I don't go, he will never be saved. That's why Janis and I are on our way to Stuart this afternoon.

I never had a difficult relationship with dad. Growing up, he was so serious, I just stayed out of his way and did what I was told. Now I'm older, I can see how he cared for us in what he did. He always made sure we were at church, but he never went in himself. The farmers stayed outside and talked. I haven't heard him speak to his faith, whether it was there or not, but of course, I wasn't thinking about it before.

I admit, I'm nervous to bring up the topic with him. I just have this feeling about it, but I worry I'm making a fool of myself, driving all the way just for a conversation he could easily reject. And what will he say? What will I say?

We pull up to the house. Before I can even take it in, there's mom bursting out the door to greet us, just like she always, always did. She rushes to us, worried that our sudden visit means something terrible. Then dad steps out and all I can think to say is, “I need to talk to you.”

Inside with everyone seated at the table, I have a calm come over me, and I know that it's the right time. I know I'm doing right. I tell dad about what the preacher said this morning, about the new life that Jesus gives

to anyone who freely accepts it. And I'm not stumbling over it, I deliver it just as it was meant to be. I tell dad about my new life. I tell him, "I felt like God wanted me to come talk to you."

When I finish, dad begins to tell me a story in return. He says, "I think you know it's been hard for me trying to keep things running. Well, maybe I have been careless, or I don't know what. But it's amazing that you've come today because, just last week, I was hauling the tractor over the bridge in the back pasture. You know, that old, old wooden bridge. I just couldn't explain to you how it happened, but one moment I'm driving it, the next, I'm pinned underneath it in the ditch. I had the struggle of my life crawling out from there. And amazingly, nothing broken, no damage to me or the machine, but I had a dose of reality, you might say. I had to sit there for quite awhile and wait for someone to come by and help me get home. While I sat, I just thought, what could have happened? If the same thing had taken place with a different outcome, if I had been killed, what then?"

He pauses, looking down at his hands. "I know I wouldn't..." He clears his throat. He looks up and I see something in his face I haven't seen before, and I can't believe he's open to talking like this. He shifts in his chair a bit and then he asks, "Son, how can I be saved? And know that it's real?"

No doubt it was the right time. My dad and I talked for a couple hours at the table. He had questions, and I tried to answer them, mostly from my own experience. We called the pastor from Stuart to give more clarity to this eventful conversation, and he came right away. He asked dad to give a testimony to the whole congregation, and I can't believe it, he agreed. He'll be standing up in front of the church people he's known all his life in Stuart, and he'll tell them he's made a change. I am leaving the house today knowing that my dad has made a change.



game day

The Sooners did not play well last night. The starter group, in my opinion, is too young and full of themselves. They know they've got the talent, but they don't play to the point of getting worn out enough to sit out, they play to look good. And they play the whole game sloppy, without giving anyone else a chance. I just plain don't like how they played.

I look up at my reflection in the mirror and notice I'm muttering to myself. I push the comb through my hair once more, fasten my tie. I replace the bandage over my eye, and step out of the bathroom.

I call out through the house, "Janis, are you about ready?" and then here she comes, around the corner, her purse in hand. She's ready. A step behind her, the top of her head just touching her mother's shoulder, Cheryl insists she's ready, too, and pokes her thumb back at her sister. She says, "Carol needed some help with the sash." And here's Carol, her arms crossed over her dress, squashing the bow tied at her waist.

"Okay now, let's get going." I hurry across the room, the girls follow, and we load up into the car to go to church.

This morning I'll be sharing a message at a church in Oklahoma City. The good preacher there is retiring, and they want me to preach in the interim. I know the men of the church from playing golf with them last year. But then my accident happened, I released my swing and my golf ball struck a rock just in front of me and shot up into my eye, shattering my glasses. I've been in Oklahoma City frequently since then for eye surgeries instead of golf games. But it'll be good to be with the church people, and I hope they do not mind a preacher with a patch over his face.

It's early when we arrive. The girls head off to their Sunday school class and leave me to sit quietly in the church office. The hour before service begins is important to a pastor. It helps me after a long week of preparing to pray over my message. I read through the notes I've made, and I talk it over with God. Sometimes I will make changes or add something in. It's this focus I need to get properly aligned to what God has for me to say. I've learned that with the practice I've had for these ten years since I preached my first, it comes more naturally now to be still in prayer. And I have come to believe that as long as my preparations are pure and my mind is empty of my own problems and things going on, that God will come alongside and direct me. He really will. The message

I have today is one that I'm excited to bring to the attention of God's people, and so it is my prayer, too, that they will be restored and find hope and comfort in the words I have to share.

Sitting up at the front of the sanctuary with my notes and my black leather-bound Bible on my knee, I join my voice with the congregation to lift up praises to heaven in song at the start of the service. My beautiful family fills in the space next to me, singing with almost angelic voices. Once again, I'm reminded, this is right. This is just exactly where I ought to be.

The music leader completes the song and gives an introduction for me, then I take my place behind the pulpit. I smile out at the people who have gathered this morning, shuffle my pages around, open my Bible, and begin.

I have some exciting news to share with you this morning. You are invited to a party, a celebration. It's one party I think you will enjoy. Everyone you have ever held dear is going to be there. Your mother, your dad, the grandmother you never got to know. Everyone whose life you admired will be in attendance with you.

I think you've caught on, we're talking about the party of the kingdom of heaven. I am aware that for some Christians my sentiment seems too simple and lofty. But I say, so what? There has to come a time when we decide whether the Good News of the Gospel is true, that "God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son that whosoever believes in Him will not perish, but have everlasting life." If it is true, we ought to shout it from the roof tops! If it is false, we out to acknowledge that a fraud has been perpetrated and close up shop. We wouldn't do that, church. We know the truth.

C.S. Lewis put it well when he spoke of the Apostles and early Christians and those who came after leaving their mark on the earth precisely because their minds were occupied with heaven. He says it is a symptom of Christians having largely ceased to think of the other world that they have become so ineffective in bringing about change in this world. I want to see the people of God making changes in our broken world, and if we would have our eyes on heaven, we would do it. I want our neighbors to see joy on our faces. I want the world to see how much we love each other. I want others to know when they look at us that there is good in this world.

So I want to remind you that when this world and all that is in it ceases to exist, there will still be those who are more alive than ever before—alive and vibrant and happy because they have survived with their identities intact in the presence of the One whose very nature is love. There will be laughter and singing and fellowship and peace beyond

human imagination, and you and I are invited. The entire Bible climaxes with our invitation. Let us read from Revelation chapter 22 and verse 17: ‘The Spirit and the bride say, “Come!” And let the one who hears say, “Come!” Let the one who is thirsty come; and let the one who wishes take the free gift of the water of life.’ Three times the invitation is given. The sovereign God of all the universe extends to you his personal invitation.

Before you start making excuses for why you cannot come to the celebration, I hope you will permit me to spell out exactly what that invitation means.

First of all, this is a COME AS YOU ARE party. Say you haven’t anything to wear. Your hair isn’t fixed, your shoes are worn, your best suit is soiled. It doesn’t matter. You’ll be made new.

Say you feel ashamed of yourself. Your face bears the mark of your sins, your shoulders are stooped from needless burdens you’ve carried all your life, your arteries are clogged with bitterness and resentment. That’s okay. He will take those things from you at the door.

But what if you have made poor choices in secret, what you if you are hiding skeletons in your closet? It makes no difference. There won’t be anyone there who deserves their invitation. You are invited to COME AS YOU ARE. No one is turned away regardless of what is found in their past.

You are invited to a COME AS YOU ARE party. You really don’t believe that, do you? In fact you would prefer that God would add some conditions—especially for other people. No, that is not the case. You will not find rules or regulations on this invitation. It is for all.

Here is the second bit of good news, ADMISSION IS FREE. Oh wow! Out of the pure love of the Creator, the debt has been paid. Pure, unadulterated love coming from the Father, evidenced in the life of His Son. But does this mean you’ve been serving on these church committees for nothing? Does it mean that all the hours you’ve given in service won’t be taken into account at all? Yes, that’s right—if you had hoped it would earn God’s favor.

I’m so thankful for those of you who are going the extra mile in service to God and your neighbors. This world would be a miserable and lonely place without you. But listen, I have to tell you that it will not help you gain entrance into the celebration. The admission price has already been paid.

It is a party to be anticipated. Your good works won't get you in. It's free. But there is one more thing to be said. The party is HERE and NOW.

Eternal life is our promise, and this means no beginning and no end. Heaven is the present moment. It is any place that God is. You can experience heaven right now.

I heard a story about a little fellow whose mother had died. His father was trying hard to be both mom and dad under difficult circumstances. The father had scheduled a picnic for the two of them. The little fellow had never been on a picnic. He was excited—so excited that the night before, he couldn't sleep. In the dark, quiet house at night, there was the patter of little feet down the hall to the father's room. The son shook his dad awake. He asks, "What's the matter?" The little fellow says, "Oh dad, tomorrow is going to be so wonderful. I just can't sleep, I'm so excited!" The father chuckles and coughs in his sleepy daze, and replies, "Son, it won't be so wonderful if we don't get any sleep. Now go back to your bed." Not too long after, the ritual is repeated. The father, sleeping soundly, suddenly finds himself awake again, the boy's hand on his shoulder. He asks, "What is it?" And this time, very serious, the boy says, "Dad, I just want to thank you for tomorrow."

My prayer this morning will echo that of the excited little boy. Father, I just want to thank you for tomorrow. We live in the excitement of tomorrow today. Church, that's how we are able to overcome the obstacles in this life. The excitement for tomorrow is what motivates our work today. The party waiting for us in heaven lives with us in our hearts right now. Don't you feel it there? If you have truly come to know the life that is given in Christ, you will know that heaven is here. And if you haven't yet accepted this gift of life, know that it is so close to you now, it's available for you. It flows through this church, through these people.

Let's close in prayer together. Thank you, father, for tomorrow. Thank you for making us a new creation, for changing our hearts and our lives to look more like you, and to dwell with you in eternity. Amen.

Bright morning sunlight fills the sanctuary. A few major keys are struck on the piano's chords. The dozens of people filling the pews bow their heads with their eyes closed. Some of them whisper words quietly. Others sing along to the hymn. They are united by music and light in the solemnity of this Sunday morning. Their souls find rest.

IV

Jana

raspberries

My family rolls out of the house and makes the trip across town to grandpa and grandma's for dinner. Tonight my uncle is grilling hotdogs and hamburgers, and grandma makes a jello salad which will be largely untouched, as always. My dad parks our minivan in the driveway, next to my aunt's Honda, and the six of us hop out. No one gets past the front door without a big hug and warm welcome from grandpa and grandma. Grandpa pats my back, and grandma smiles with a shining face. They are happy to see me.

My cousin is here. We spend very little time deciding what we should play together. There's a box of toys left behind at the grandparents house that their kids didn't take with them when they became adults. We can play with these or we can go to the park down the street past the cul-de-sac. Sometimes another girl from the neighborhood will play with us. She has a scooter, and she talks really loud. But we choose the dolls. My cousin has the best collection of doll clothes, doll homes, even doll cars. In the extra bedroom of our grandparent's home, we sit on the floor and make up stories to act out, until something else happens or it's time to eat.

The adults in the living room talk about serious things. Leon fills in the family on the latest from his dealings with McDonald's. The church he has pastored for years, the one that my parents were married in, where all of us grandkids were baptized, has caught the attention of the fast food restaurant industry. He lets everyone know that they have made their final offer to buy the property, and he will accept it. His daughters and their husbands have questions, certainly, and they begin to sort out what all this means together.

The heat of the afternoon has faded, the serious conversation closes, and I make my way outside where the coolness of the evening begins. In the backyard I say hello to my uncle who has the grill smoking by now. He has an extra special bratwurst over the fire, he tells me, but I'm not interested since I know 'special' really means 'spicy' coming from him. My brothers pick up the golf clubs that grandpa has laying around and start hitting golf balls. The neighbor's dogs on the other side of the fence aren't happy about it. For each ball that's hit, there's a series of barks.

Grandpa comes outside and we look at his plants. This is another ritual often repeated at the house. He walks around the perimeter of the yard and reports on the life and trials of the tomatoes growing up onto their wire structures, and the roses at the back of the yard in their raised beds, and the raspberries, I love the raspberries, growing up onto a fence that Grandpa posted for them. He says the tomatoes are getting eaten by squirrels or some other pest. He says last year he had more raspberries than this year, but he always says that.

The women show up again from inside the house to tell us it's almost time to eat. I help Grandma in the kitchen. She asks me to fill the plastic cups with ice and set out the paper plates. Everyone gathers around and grandpa leads us in prayer. I bow my head and close my hands in front of my face. He gives thanks for our food and our time together. He speaks loud and long for prayer. I peek out from between my fingers and watch as he sways back and forth on his heels, his hands lifted, his eyes closed. His prayers have a rhythm, his phrases turn circles. Up and down. Back and forth. I repeat my "amen" with everyone else and we fill up our plates. The adults sit in the living room and eat off the foldable TV tray tables. Sometimes one of the men shouts at the TV if a referee makes a bad call or something. I eat my hot dog and drink my sweet tea. My brothers talk about a video game. The grandparents ask us about school. On the walls, framed in glass, our own smiling faces look back at us.

For dessert, we go to the garden once more to pick the raspberries and enjoy their sweetness with our ice cream. It's my favorite thing. Grandpa's raspberries are very important to me for this reason. We get a big bowl and take it to the backyard to collect them. Grandpa helps me pick out the best ones. He points out the raspberries that have been eaten up by bugs, and warns me to avoid them. My eyes are trained on the brightest red I can spot within the bush of green leaves. Some raspberries squish in my hands and leave red juice dripping down my arms. We go back inside with our bounty. My mother and my aunt start to scoop a bowl for everyone.

The football game on the TV is at halftime and there's a pop singer performing on a stage. No one pays attention to it. We love dessert.

With the sun still up for a few more minutes, my brother and I return to the backyard. He tells me a piece of the serious conversation he heard, "McDonald's bought our church." We think this is very exciting and funny, imagining the familiar arches of the 'M' replacing the cross in the baptistry. We climb the fence and lift ourselves onto the roof of grandpa's shed. Sitting with my knees bent to my chest, I look out over the neighborhood cast in an orange evening glow, and silently I enjoy my lonely feeling.

Back inside, the family discusses what game we want to play. We go over what happened last time we played this one, and who is always cheating at that one. Eventually, the decision is made. It's Catchphrase, a game of charades. We laugh just about the whole time, mostly at Grandma. Everyone forgets everything else that's going on. My mom frequently wipes at joyful tears on her cheeks.



A storm blew through this afternoon, and we haven't heard from the grandparents yet. The kids from the neighborhood and I packed into a storm shelter. Their pets whined at our feet knowing something was wrong. Several pensive, sweaty moments went by, then the adults finally brought us out. I wanted to be relieved, but the uncertainty in their faces kept the feeling away.

I step outside, first noticing the stillness, taking in the blackened sky. In the violent winds, everything has shifted. I pick up small pieces of paper trash littering our yard that have been carried far and wide. There's a family photo laying here, someone else's family. I keep it in the hope that it could one day be returned.

Everyone else is active and anxious, looking up at the sky or staring down at their phone trying to will it to send a call. No one is able to get through to grandpa's cell phone, and by now, based on the footage scrolling on the tv, we know that their home is near severely impacted areas. The dust in the sky is starting to settle, and a

familiar orange red hue replaces the blackness. Cars line our street, not moving. No one is able to make progress into the affected neighborhoods for all the debris in the way. But despite this, my dad and brothers load up the truck with some tools, feeling desperate to locate the family and attempt whatever rescue is needed. I watch them pull out of the neighborhood, and send a short prayer ahead of them. “*God, please.*”

Facing the storm is not the hard part. Living in Moore, tornadoes come as no surprise. We’ve seen plenty. It’s almost a game to us to test how long we can stand to watch them form over our heads before we seek shelter. Personally, I hate this game. I take comfort in my knowledge from science class where we recently discussed exactly what it is and why it happens. The warm air meets the cold air, and they get mixed up in the sky as they pass each other on the plain. The difficult part is afterwards, seeing the wreckage left behind and deciding if it’s worth recovering. I already know the bowling lanes have been taken out in this storm, and the movie theater. I wonder if those will be gone forever. But we know why it happens, we see it often enough. It’s not like us to stumble through the rubble seeking answers. The solemn, metaphysical questions that come to mind when we see the homes of families we love collapsed into heaps never escape from the mouths of people from Moore. We get a close enough look at the clouds to know how deeply impersonal they are.

Hours later in the dark of night, the rescue group returns. Without our phones able to connect, this is my mother and I’s first sign of relief. They tell us they were able to get to the grandparents, and they are all right. The information is slowly revealed as they reel from the shock. Their house was hit, but it’s still standing. Their neighbors were not so fortunate.

The next day we return, all of us this time. We’re a cleaning crew now that the rescue is done. It is a little easier to maneuver through the strewn streets. We finally reach the house and realize how close they were to losing it to the twisting cloud. It’s one of four that are still intact on this street. Everywhere I look I see the insides of the neighbor’s houses. But unlike the day before, the sun is brightly shining, and several other cleaning crews slowly pick at the surrounding piles.

Inside the house, it is dustier than I’ve ever seen it before. The windows facing the street have attracted piles of dust, and the windows at the back are piles of glass on the floor. Before I begin to sweep, I look out over the street, and catch a glimpse of grandpa. He’s standing there in the driveway with a woman, his neighbor. She’s balancing a small box between her arms while wiping away the tears on her face. Grandpa listens to her speak,

nods patiently, gives her all his attention. I can sense from this distance the comfort he gives. Behind them, piles of lumber that used to be the roof of the house stick out in every direction.

Grandpa, with his own house in disarray, spends the day with the neighbors who have lost more. And that makes him supernatural to me.

When he talks about the tornado, he'll say, "Oh, it was louder than anything. I got grandma in the hallway with the mattress around us. She sang the hymns and I prayed. It was terrible, terrible." And then he'll be silent for a few minutes.



I came up to the church this afternoon. My brother needed something from the house that he and I are sharing, so I'm just making the drop off. He's working in this church now, the church that grandpa built years ago after McDonald's gave him a million dollars for the old one. He has since retired. Now the small congregation is cared for by a new pastor, a very pleasant man with a sweet family. My brother is working with the youth; he's basically building up a youth group from nothing. I'm happy for him. He's growing to be like grandpa. And amidst all the turbulence of our adolescence, he has managed to keep his faith. I can't say the same for me.

In the middle of the week, the church is silent and unused. I am walking the halls alone, taking advantage of the quiet moments to do some wistful thinking, my favorite thing to do. My memory machine is almost short-circuiting. There is so much within this building that has been so important in my life, yet after a stretch of a few short years, it's only a building again.

In the restroom, a pleasant memory comes into view. I'm standing in front of a full length mirror, at half the height I am now, as one of the dear women of the church is making final adjustments to my gorgeous Christmas dress. She has worked silky royal blue fabric into the sweetest shape, and embellished it with gold

ribbon. Overlaying the skirt of the dress is a netted sheer with gold stars all over it. It's my one of a kind dress; she made it just for me. I bob up and down with excitement on the stool she asked me to step on. The memory fades. I look at myself in the same mirror, and my existence feels flat in comparison.

Down the hall is a grand office for the pastor. He's gone out this afternoon, so the door is locked. No matter, I remember it so well. I remember as a child leaving my Sunday school classroom to come in here and stretch out on the couch. I was only permitted the rest because I wasn't feeling well that day, but I felt extra special to be there with grandpa as he prepared for the sermon. From where I laid, I can still see him frowning down at a stack of paper, his glasses perched at the tip of his nose. The window behind him allowed the sunlight to spill over his shoulders. His very important books darken the bookshelves around him. I had never seen grandpa at work before.

I turn from the door. That memory hurt quite a bit. I'm not sure why it made me sad.

Around the corner from here is the fellowship hall, the name church people use for a multi-purpose room. Really, it's just where we eat. I step inside the long rectangular room and the smell takes me back to the potlucks and parties of my youth. I wonder how many slices of generic cake with electric blue icing I have stuffed myself with in here.

I take the choir entrance into the sanctuary. It's a few steps up a dark stairwell before a small door that opens onto the stage. I look out over the empty rows of pews. This room is almost too much, too full of moments, and I already feel my emotions rolling in like waves about to break the threshold. My mind grips onto the most recent ones. It's my brother and I sharing sheet music, practicing worship songs. Since he started working here, he's asked me a few times to play music with him for the service. Standing here now that feeling returns, the sneaky insincerity I use as a costume to perform for church people. I'm not sure when it happened, I grew up singing at church on this very stage and many others, but somewhere, somehow I lost my sincerity, my conviction in the music. I know I can't keep singing and feeling this way. It feels awful.

I've been cutting ties between myself and the church for a while. I mean, my whole life was in it, but I don't care for it the same way, and it doesn't seem to notice as we drift apart.

My family noticed my drifting. They aren't letting me go as easily, and I've been angry because of it. I've been angry at so much. I turn a lot of things sour, like this afternoon, when all I had to do was drop by to see my

brother but instead I ghost the halls, recalling visions of my childhood, inviting nostalgia to somberly dance with me.



The nightly build up of traffic between Oklahoma City and Moore has put me behind several minutes for dinner. I have plans with the grandparents for my traditional birthday meal. They always let me pick the place, but they like to eat rather early. I couldn't get away from my homework quickly enough to get ahead of the rush. I just know they are already sitting there at the restaurant, not ordering anything because of course they'll wait on me. I wish they would enjoy an appetizer through my tardiness at least. Not likely.

My journey finally completed, I pull into the parking lot. Through the floor-to-ceiling windows, I see them and hurry to the table.

"Sorry, hi! Sorry, I forgot the traffic would be so bad!"

Grandpa gets up from the table to give me a hug. He says, "Well there she is, happy birthday! Have a seat, have a seat."

I bend down to grandma's chair to give her a squeeze. Her walker is parked next to the table with her purse hung up on the handle. She pats my back, saying "Happy birthday, Jana, happy birthday." She beams a smile at me as I pull back and take my seat.

"I hope I didn't keep you guys waiting too long." I notice the table is empty, just like I anticipated.

He says, "No, no we don't mind it." And pulling from a pocket inside his coat, he presents a card. It's got my name in cursive on the envelope. The same thing for every one of my birthdays. I know there will be a crisp twenty dollar bill within it. I smile and accept the gift.

He sits back and looks at me. "Now tell us, how's Jana? How's the birthday girl?"

I blow out my breath and swing my eyes up to the ceiling, as if up there are floating all the things I've gotten myself into. "You know, I'm just hanging in there. I got my midterms back today. So my first grades are in for the semester."

Grandma says, "Oh my," and gives a nervous face. She asks, "Did you do okay?"

"Yep, I think so. Most of them are A's, one B. But I'm not too worried."

She nods, "That's good, Jana. Good for you."

Grandpa says, "We knew she was a smart one. She studies those books. I can't even read 'em."

Grandma and I laugh together at grandpa being silly.

A waiter comes by to take our order. Eventually our food arrives, hot and steamy. They have a lot of questions for me, and they love hearing anything I tell them. Without any direction, he makes a few adjustments for her to help with her plate. I realize how they're getting old. For every year we meet on my birthday, there's a longer list of things she can't do anymore.



outro

The news came from my cousin, my aunt's only child, my mother's only sister. She said she wasn't sure if anyone had told us, but we should know, our grandmother is in her last days.

I find myself in my grandparent's home with all the familiar things around. This home was specifically chosen to allow her movement through it while pushing a walker or being pushed in a wheelchair. There is a lift over the bed which we strap her into at night to raise her from the wheelchair and up onto the bed. She makes no objections, she appreciates the help in her way with a faint smile.

I think she likes it when I'm here at night to go through this routine. She brightens up to talk to me, though she can't find any words to say. I'm afraid she gets embarrassed when I help her into a diaper, so we both stay quiet for that part. Then I open the drawer where her pajamas are neatly folded, that's thanks to grandpa, or perhaps my aunt, and ask her to choose which pair she'd like to wear, attempting to sound cheerful. She chooses the pink ones. Grandpa takes one pant leg and I take the other, and together we clothe her body to keep her warm and secure for another night's rest. Last, she brushes her teeth, that's the only part of the routine she can do on her own.

Grandpa oversees all this, he knows the routine well. He makes sure she has all that she needs, and he's extra careful about the straps of the lift that go around her. He warns me that the straps can get tangled and make her uncomfortable. Other than a few instructions to me or to grandma, he stays quiet.

Now, she is no longer getting out of bed. Hospice care has brought in a hospital bed and placed it in the living room. It's small but its presence is felt throughout the house, casting a dark gloom, shifting and unsettling.

She's sleeping. I wanted to spend the whole day by her side, but how quickly the day passes. She's shaking. It's her hands and feet and mouth that give away the clues as to what disease is overcoming her, taking her strength. I brought a guitar to pluck out a few old hymns. Grandpa sang with me. His deep baritone voice and my unpracticed alto set the music in motion, keeping the time and the rhythm since we know the songs by heart. My guitar did not glide like our voices, it interrupted them, and I chuckled it off. I played it for grandma, and it was okay, and grandpa knew it was sincere.

My grandfather's strength only grows. I think loving her and caring for her gives him energy. He'll hold her hand and look into her eyes, the only part of her that responds, and say, "I love you." He repeats this to her often. I am so struck by how remarkable a person he is. He never seems to reach the end of his rope. He is patient and kind. He is solemn and wise. He considers her first in all things. His care may be matter-of-fact at times, and he may be a little rough around the edges, but he is always solid. He is always present. He is not soft, his strength carries each of us through.

She slips away from us, deeper into the disease until it will want more of her than she has to give.



Grandpa and I take a walk through his small garden. We note the colorful zinnias, always an important member of the garden for their roots in grandma's family, the Zinns. They look a little scorched to me along the concrete path. Then there are the enormous, gorgeous peonies. The best flower grandpa has grown in a few years, with the help of the dirt and sun, and the ants to open them up. I crouch down on my knees to sniff their perfume. Grandpa continues the tour, and we come to a magnolia tree he inherited from the previous owners. He tells me he can't understand how much water this tree needs, and shows me how the leaves have been slipping away. He asks me to take note of the buds, not opening up yet. I encourage him and share my excitement for the growth of the tree, how it will look through the seasons.

Once we've been through the garden, grandpa leads us to his study, a place untouched since 2009 with a layer of dust to prove it. There's a plastic shell of a computer on the desk. There are theology books and bibles filling the shelves. File cabinets take a corner of the room. Grandpa comments on the numerous plaques on the wall, which I realize I have never taken notice of before. They are monuments to my grandpa's goodness, and this is the one time he has uttered a word about them. They say things like, "faithful minister of 40 years," and, "Brother Sutterfield - Shepherd to his Flock." I look at each one as grandpa moves about the room, and I wonder what else I must have missed about him. He pulls open a file drawer to show me the neat organization of all his years of preaching in sermon notes. With a chuckle, he says, "I don't know why I keep them, they just sit here, like me." I ask if I can borrow them, and he's happy to hand them off.

I have only grown more curious about the person that my grandpa is, so I drop by his house often. It seems like he always has something to show me, or a new story to tell me. He will remember something from growing up, or remember the name of a person who used to attend his church. He has the details of someone's latest surgery or hospitalization. And the news, yes, he shares something of interest he saw on the news. As I listen, I think how lucky I am.

Reaching the end of the tour, grandpa turns to a photo framed on the wall. He says, "This must have been when I retired." It is a photo of Leon and Janis in the sanctuary of the church that grandpa built. He is in his gray suit with a red tie, and she has green flowers on her black dress. They stand together, his arm around her. I smile at the faces I love smiling at me. He continues, "I like this picture. We look like us."

refrain

Between grandpa's life and mine, there is more than biology or bloodline. There is everything that can be known in this life. There is the reality of death. And within it, I'd say there's an infinity of experience. Examining grandpa's life in search of the source of its meaning has brought me to this understanding: a family is a pattern which each individual is thrown into.

Each member in my family shares a belief in the God of the Bible. I haven't met a cousin or aunt who would declare an objection to this. As we live and move and breathe, we believe in a purpose that has been shown to us through the life of Jesus Christ. In each soul that has a biological connection to mine, I find reverence for the perfect ideal in all things, past, present and future, things of the mind and of the body and of human governance, and this ideal is better stated as God. God is perfecting, moving, changing around us, in us and through us. God is our desire to align ourselves to the perfection of all things. Perfection: "the quality of being free;" the transformation of all things to be made free.

What a wonder it is to find that each life who is connected to mine by blood should share this confidence in the existence of God. Each generation carries this belief as faithfully as those before. Yet I thought I stood in contrast to this. I thought that I got smarter than my family because I knew a world they didn't know. I called this the "real" world, the world where people were honest about their doubts, and in fact, happy to be free of faith. I thought I truly belonged in that world, writing those stories. I felt that I possessed a sophistication; I had nothing of the sort. The charm of this other world wore off when I saw its ugliness laid bare. I saw its lies that I had traded for truth. That's when I ran back home. This is the pattern, I see it repeated. It is not unique to me, it is necessary. I see it in grandpa's life. There is a moment of departure from the old way, the way that he must have been convinced was the old way that wouldn't operate in the world he walked in. Then there is a reconciliation with reality, or truth, or nature. And having his wits about him, he sees that the way forward is to change, to return.

I see our lives woven into the same fabric, and after studying the lines in mine, I see the same motifs emerge in his. And zooming out further to take in the piece as a whole, I see an image emerge from his life, my mother's and father's, my brothers', my own. Each of us returns and returns to an organizing truth which accounts for the beauty in our tapestry. I see that this truth is God. I feel mightily privileged to belong to a pattern of truth and of beauty. I feel lucky to belong to a people that have a desire for my personal discovery of truth.

I am realizing my adult mind. I used to be annoyed by restrictions of any kind. I used to promote an ideal of destruction. It occurs to me that an individual's development requires that every boundary should be pushed. I understand myself better with that realization. I understand my grandpa better, my parents better. I have come out of my boundary-pushing thinking. I have begun to look around and see more than myself reflected back at me. I have begun to see why the things of God are so important to my family, to every person who can draw a line from their lineage to mine. This book is my declaration of the goodness, mercy, hope and truth I see around me now that I am looking.

I noticed this pattern in my family while I was still young. I wrestled with it. I thought it was not for me, and I let this thought isolate me. Family, I come back into the fold with renewed faith. It has been the pleasure of my life to create the book that would tell you exactly that.

The last word belongs to grandpa. I asked him what was the most important principle that he lived by. His answer: "Be honest and love everybody. My philosophy in pastoring, from the beginning to the end, I wasn't smart enough to deal with theology, but to love the people, I could do that."





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