

Baptism in Summer

Standing at his pulpit, the pastor smoothed his robe, straightened his tie knot, and waved his choir to an end. He raised his arms and welcomed the eyes of the congregation. It was summer, and he was ready to serve.

“Thank you, and Amen!” he boomed. As always, the pastor paused between each phrase for emphasis, manipulating the room’s rhythm.

“Welcome to our service today.” He took a moment to shine, silently surveying his congregation. The kids looked tired and some of the parents too, but most everyone was eager. He felt their faith in him.

“Today... we have some music for you, as you’ve already heard...”

The pastor heard sporadic *Amens* and *Yeses* and applause from the pews. Some folks were more vocal than others, but people’s contributions mostly seemed random, the way bird songs come from all over in the morning.

“Today... we have some prayer for you...”

More *Amens* and clapping.

“Today... we have some.. *questions* for you...” The pastor smiled.

“Okay, but you only get one!” someone joked. The pastor scanned his audience for the guilty party, and everyone laughed.

The pastor loved this, the art of preaching. He’d grown up watching his father preach down south. Sometime before their move to the city, the pastor quietly learned from his father that pastoring is indeed an art. And this, pastoring artfully, had become a singular focus for the pastor, his only real desire since his father had passed. Of course, pastoring is

a whole lot more than just preaching. There's the midweek counseling, being the face of the church, which means showing up to events at least weekly, and little things like managing the books. So, to consider pastoring a "singular focus" wasn't really fair. His father had reminded him that pastorwork is both work and art, but it's *work* first. The pastor knew in reality, though, that the work, so to say the money for the church, would figure itself out. He needed to master the art.

"And to finish our service today, my Brothers and Sisters," the pastor continued, "we have a baptism!"

His congregation rose to their feet and shouted *Amens* and *Yeses* and *Yes, Fathers*.

"The baptism of our newest member...Moses Porter."

The pastor lowered his left arm slowly, palm up, and ended with his hand directed at a boy in the front row. Moses, somewhere in the neighborhood of puberty, wore a white gown. He turned and gave half a smile. Every kid seemed to want attention but never *too* much. Never the attention of the whole room, which today must've been hundreds of people.

"Yes, Brother Mo!" someone shouted.

Moses hadn't found his faith yet. To be fair, the boy hadn't had much *exposure* to religion, other than half of the fifth grade at a Catholic school. Apparently he'd gotten kicked out. Said it was because he was throwing donuts onto the expressway from an overpass by the school.

About a year ago, his parents had come to the Baptist faith and had brought him with. Moses was hardly a professed believer, but his parents agreed that a commitment

from the church might inspire commitment from the boy. That turned out not to be the case. Over the past few weeks, as he and the pastor prepared for his baptism, Mo had routinely shown up late, sold his baptismal robe online, flirted with choir girls, and if given the opportunity, would drop his head and damn near instantaneously fall asleep. Mo was so irreverent that the pastor called a meeting with him and his parents the previous Sunday.

“Goodness Gracious!” he’d told Mo’s parents. “This boy don’t wanna listen to *nothin*. We only have so many hours in the day. Now tell me, if I gotta explain things three, *four* times to Mo, how we gonna be able to put on something special!” Mo’s parents listened intently and acknowledged the importance of the baptism. “I mean, this is *your* day, Mo. Don’t you want it to be somethin’ nice?” he’d asked the boy. “At *least* do it for your parents. They work *hard* for you! Family comes first, son, I know you know that.” Mo responded as he always did, like a light bulb had lit, with a confident nod and determined eyebrows, as if he’d *finally* gotten it. As if responsibility was a brand new concept and that *this* was the moment that they were gonna make progress. But rule-breaking seemed to be its own craft and Mo, already something like a master, became more convincing in his lies the more he repented. He was honing his craft! A sinful craft! As convincing as the boy was though, he never changed, and the pastor figured he never would.

The pastor continued, understanding that Mo’s actual behavior had nothing to do with the rest of the congregation, and so it was no business of the theirs. “Mo comes today to be baptized, and he’s worked hard to get here, so baptize him we will!”

The congregation roared again. Cued by the older folks starting to sit down, the pastor finally lowered his arms. He assessed the room, genuinely blessed to be where he was, doing what he was. It was his calling, his work, and his art.

“This is the day which the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it,” the pastor called out. “The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with you.”

“And also with you!” his audience responded in unison.

He continued. “The risen Christ is with us.”

“Praise the Lord!” in unison.

“Praise the Lord, indeed. You may all be seated.”

The pastor, soaked in sweat already, slowly wiped his mustache then his forehead with a towel. Goodness, it was burning. Hotter than a honeymoon hotel. The air conditioning was broken, half the windows wouldn't open anymore, and the church's handyman had moved to another church because they paid him more. Most people held accessories for the heat, men with towels and women with fans, kids with whatever their parents let them hold. The room's orange air was thick and moved only when the people did. Specks of dust hovered, looking stuck, like grains of salt in honey.

“Now you all tell me, Brothers and Sisters,” he continued.

It was standard practice to make the sermon relatable from the start. To create a doorway through which to usher the congregation into the scriptures. His father had stressed this, telling him to “Be a pastor of the people. Meet them where they are, how they live, right from the start of the sermon.” And the pastor wasn't naive. He knew that people needed a bit of hand-holding to feel the Bible. These were good people, no doubt, but

sequacious people. They were gonna follow, but he needed to lead, and part of that leadership was breaking through. Understanding their lives.

The pastor had decided to engage the audience with an open-ended question, something non-rhetorical. Throughout his decades of faith, he could only remember a handful of sermons that actually called for responses.

“What, Brothers and Sisters, comes to mind when you think summer in the city...?”

An onslaught of answers came from the pews:

“Violence!”

“Beach muscles!”

“Toe-tags!”

“Gunshots!”

“The cookout!”

“Stayin’ indoors!”

“This heat!”

“Young kids dyin!”

“The pool!”

“Mischief!”

“More police!”

“Shooters!”

Like a split piñata, people scattered their stressors around the church. Immediately he realized why pastors don’t ask open-ended questions. *Of course* he knew about the violence in the city, but he hadn’t planned to address it today. It was only a sixty-minute service! Only last week he’d been at a town hall meeting about the summer’s gun violence. It went for *four hours*, and they’d ended up where they’d started! They talm’bout shootings and violence. Weekly service is to *confirm*, not to debate! To *uplift*, not to dwell! That’s why people like it. They come each week as a reminder, not a discussion. And even just preparation-wise, *they* wouldn’t know, but planning for a Sunday service could take the whole week. *Especially* a baptism. It ain’t easy tyin’ real-life examples to the scriptures. So

to change your program mid-service? Goodness Gracious! Church wasn't made for surprises.

And just like that, everything flipped. The pastor smoothed his robe again, *just* as he'd done to start the sermon, but now the action felt anxious rather than powerful. Standing solo on stage, he felt on-the-spot instead of in control. He was still sweating, but now it was scared-sweat, not heat-sweat.

To cope, the pastor reiterated the only response he could remember that wasn't explicitly violent. "Mischief!" he echoed and shot a pay-attention-young-man sort of glance at Mo. "When you hear summer, you think *mischief*? Well, Brothers and Sisters, we may need to set aside some extra hours for God this week." He held a half-grin but felt awkward, knowing that his punchline had missed. Summer meant more to these people. It meant more violence and shootings and warring, things that weren't supposed to correlate to the season.

Some chunk of the crowd chuckled, but the damage was done. He'd missed. The pastor felt the sorrow in the room. The power of a bad joke. Especially from a pastor! He knew how quickly people lose faith, and he could feel them slipping away. Even Moses, sitting up front in a white cloak, looked somber, eyes aimed at the base of the pastor's pulpit. And only now the pastor remembered that Mo's seventeen year-old brother had been shot and killed the summer before. The day after the shooting, Mo had come to the church to meet with the pastor. He had shown up on time, and he was silent and crying. The pastor hadn't blinked as the boy walked straight to him, wrapped his arms around him, and wept. They had held each other for close to a minute. When Mo could breathe regular again,

the pastor had broken tough but necessary news. He'd told him that "This is living in the city, son. Good people get hurt, and everyone here has a sad story." It was tough love but essential love.

Now the pastor stood silently, taking a moment to gather himself. He couldn't have paused for more than a second or two, but he could tell a splinter of doubt had slid into the minds of his congregation. They started side conversations, a sure sign of a lack of faith in him, which he was forced to permit and let die. And like a splinter, his audience's doubt would only deepen the longer he waited to remove it.

Soon after he'd been ordained, the pastor recalled a conversation he'd had with his father. Dad had said, "A pulpit with a microphone is clearly meant for one-way communication. That's why the churchcomers, a designation coined by Dad, according to Dad, have to answer everything together! So they can be heard but never question! Sunday service ain't the time for that. They start askin' questions, and you'll have your hands full." At the time, the pastor had considered it a bit closed-minded, but he eventually came around. Church wouldn't work otherwise. But now the pastor was at the congregation's mercy. The church was spinning. He heard:

"Lawd, these young kids are wild," from a woman.

"That's for sure. It didn't used to be like this." A middle-aged man held up a fist. "We used to throw *hands* to settle beef. These young kids with these guns is crazy."

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“Yes. Yesss. And who said ‘cookout’?” another woman said as she looked around with conviction. “I wanna cook out too, but you can’t have a cookout in the summer without some kinda drama.”

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“Where’s all this violence comin’ from!?”

“I know where. It’s these kids who ain’t got no one watchin’ ‘em. Don’t have no one to raise ‘em right.”

“Well, these young folks need *work!*” another said.

“They need work, but I don’t see none of ‘em here. They could use some *faith*, too.”

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“I’m prayin’ for the cold, ya feel me? Ain’t no one on the block in the winter. And y’all know silence is golden.”

The pastor noticed Mo, still sitting quiet in the first pew, looking around, absorbing the scene, then looking up again expectant, as if to say, “Are you gonna take control of this?”

The pastor felt vulnerable standing at pulpit alone, unusually silent. So, he lifted his arms again, and tried to recover. But now, as if contagious, his congregation’s doubt had seized *him*. The deflation of the service disabled him. Endorphins spent, the pastor felt himself thinking, which was the *last* thing he wanted to feel. It was happening again.

Occasionally when he was expected to speak publicly, which was at least every Sunday, he would fall into a devilish cycle of thinking about the fact that he wasn’t talking, then thinking about *the problem* of thinking instead of talking, and so on. He could tell the room was returning its attention to him. He thought of the image of himself from the

congregation's perspective. He, standing at the pulpit, arms lifted yet speechless, lookin' like Jesus himself, pegged to a cross! It was off-brand! His brand was loose and confident. Shoot, if he messed up bad enough, people would probably start taking videos of the disaster. Probably post it online. He'd seen it happen to other pastors. He thought about his father, who'd not once lost control on stage. He remembered what Dad once said about a visiting preacher who was visibly nervous. Sitting next to him in the pew, Dad had held up two fists, smashed them together, and loud-whispered, "Look at that man. Sweatin' like a pig passing a peach pit. He look a bit nervous to *me*! Ha-ha! You *know* his ass cheeks is tight! I bet you could crack a *wal*-nut between his ass cheeks! Ha-ha!" The pastor's face was now limp, but his insides were taut. He felt like dead weight. And he might as well have been, if he wasn't gonna say anything. Drenched in sweat, he got out of his head for a second, and noticed Mo, looking clueless, staring at him. Gracious! The poor kid didn't even know what a baptism meant. He just knew he was supposed to show up thirty minutes early for service today. Look at him. He wasn't even supposed to be dressed up in his *robe* yet. His *replacement robe*!

The pastor realized that he'd been standing speechless for too long and needed to do *something*. These people were gonna start filing out! Panicked and lacking ideas, he put his hands on the podium, dropped his head, and closed his eyes, as if he were praying. The pastor, now blind, could only hope that the congregation would follow. He sensed Dad looking down on him, embarrassed by his son. This wasn't art. Dad, who had preached for forty-three years, hadn't choked once. But sure enough, the pastor gradually heard less and

less chatter. Apparently everyone in the room was following suit, praying. If they were onto him, they'd be getting louder, not quieter.

He slowly raised his head, knowing full-well that subtle ain't really a thing when you're at the pulpit. But he lifted his head, as secret as he could, to confirm...

Sure enough! The entire room was sitting, heads dipped and hands braided, praying. That was everyone except Mo, who was still seated and staring, but now moving his hands wildly and mouthing things at the pastor. This boy was still playin around! He had no limits!

Like a bad meditation, an awful, mean-spirited, useless meditation, the pastor's mind returned to the image of himself, lookin' like a fool, speechless on stage. This was the kind of thing that could damage a pastor. He was a public figure, after all, someone for whom reputation mattered. It was mostly reputation! But every time he tried to gather his thoughts and move the service forward, all he could think about was that he wasn't saying anything at all. The pastor remembered exactly when he had first felt one of these wicked meditations. It was during standardized tests when he was in grade --

The pastor's thoughts were interrupted by Mo, who was now standing up. The pastor watched in horror as the boy, at a casual pace, approached the pulpit. Now Mo was wandering around. He'd completely lost control of his sermon. Dad would be rollin' over in his grave. He tried to wave off Mo, who ignored him, climbed onto the stage, and headed straight for the podium. The boy tried to grab the mic but couldn't reach it. Mo looked at the pastor confidently who, for lack of better of options, slid a step stool behind the podium, which Mo stepped on to.

The pastor looked out at the congregation. A few heads were up, having heard someone new on stage, but most of the congregation's heads were still bowed, perhaps praying still, but more likely just waiting for permission to break the pose.

"Hello, everyone." Mo's voice, too far from the microphone, was soft. The boy hardly cleared the podium. The congregation couldn't have been able to see the top half of his head. The pastor stood, breathing deeply and sweating, but didn't intervene. He'd never heard Mo use anything as formal as "Hello". He held his stare on the boy, which was better than meeting eyes with his members. Mo continued into the microphone, correcting his volume. People's heads started to rise.

"The pastor said I could talk to you all for just a minute."

People looked around, clearly expecting to hear from the boy, but not this early in the service.

"Thank you for your prayer, by the way."

Now the pastor noticed the last of the churchcomers' heads rise. When they saw Mo, a few whispers went around the church, but for the most part, the congregation listened.

"My brother died last summer. He got shot."

Everyone's whispers stopped. The room wasn't spinning anymore. No one said a word. Instead, everyone stared at Mo.

"C'mon, baby, tell your story!," a woman called out.

Mo continued, his voice polished and calm. "His name was Trey." The boy paused for dramatic affect, like he'd been paying attention to every detail the whole time.

“The day he died, he left a note. Said he was goin’ to the store. We thought he had gone up to the park or something. But he didn’t ever come home.”

It felt like everyone had stopped breathing. No one moved. The scene felt captured, no more animate than the mural on the ceiling above them.

“He taught me how to play chess and he walked with me to school and he’d buy me McDonald’s sometimes, if he had money. He said he was gonna buy me a dog one day because he knew I wanted one. I know that won’t happen now.”

The congregation still stared, speechless. But now most of them were crying or close to it. Their stressors seemed to have melted. The pastor himself felt choked up.

“Pastor told me that Trey is okay, though, and that he’s in Heaven. He also told me that this is what happens when you live in the city. He told me that *you* all have a sad story, too.”

The boy had been listening. At least some of the time.

The audience looked depleted, from the heat and the boy. They seemed emotionally hollow. Spiritually ready. He then looked at Mo, who leaned towards the microphone again. “I don’t wanna die, but I hope I get to see Trey soon.” The congregation applauded with passion.

The pastor, too, was moved by Mo’s improvised eulogy. He held his eyes open to dry them, and he felt the boy’s confession expand in his chest. Mo had seized the room. Beyond the heartfelt words, though, Mo provided a much-needed distraction. It had bought a bit of time. The churchcomers leaned forward in their pews, some even stood, waiting for what the boy might say next.

But, having said his piece, Mo now seemed lost for words. He shot an urgent glance at the pastor, who pivoted to see if the audience had noticed. Mo looked around the congregation for ideas, then looked down at the microphone.

The pastor stepped towards him, but Mo decided to continue. "Thank you everyone for listening..."

The pastor was frozen mid-step. He glared at Mo, waiting for some sort of indication that the boy was done speaking. Watching Mo, his sympathy turned to fear.

Mo charged ahead.

Our Father, whose art in Heaven,

What was this boy --!

Apparently, the boy had run out of things to say. He'd resorted to the one prayer that he knew. But Goodness Gracious! The Lord's Prayer wasn't, and had never been, part of the pastor's sermon. Or *any* Baptist service he'd ever seen, for that matter! Where was this boy gettin this!

But the audience was under Mo's spell. They hung on every word.

How low be thy name,
The king don't come,
Thighs will be done,
From Earth on up to Heaven.

And it wasn't until this moment, this dreadful misquoting of the Lord's Prayer, that the pastor realized how seldom Mo had actually attended church.

Give us today,
Our daily bread,
And lead us not,
To the Temptations,

But deliver us from people.

The pastor noticed the churchcomers starting to squish their faces in confusion. There would be no coming back from this - a stone-cold disaster.

And forgive us...

Mo paused and scratched his ear. The pastor looked at him desperately, hoping the boy would finish.

...And forgive us..this daily bread...
uh...

It seemed that Mo's imagination had run its course, as he now stood, mumbling nonsense into the mic.

Let us pray to the Holy Trinidad,
The Father, The Son, and The Holy Smoke...

What on Earth! The pastor snatched the microphone from the podium, and put a hand on Mo's back to move him off of the stage. The congregation stood and clapped and commended Mo on his words, though many looked confused.

But Mo's intervention, by God's will, had served a purpose. And to be fair, Mo's words on Trey were indeed powerful. And now, for whatever reason, maybe shocked back into consciousness, the pastor found his thoughts and continued his sermon.

"Ladies and Gentleman, give it up for Brother Moses!" the pastor, booming once again, was glad to have the microphone in hand and glad to be speaking again with confidence.

"Our service in this House of God is service to you all, to the people. So don't for *one second* think that you're not heard. I see the violence, too. Remember, I do the funerals. I've

stood right next to you as you've buried your children. I know, believe it, I *know* that our children are being seduced. We *all* know that The Devil don't skip work. Never. Not *one* day, Monday through Sunday. He don't even take half days."

His audience applauded, and his soul emerged. The pastor gained momentum like a swung wrecking ball, and carried the congregation relentlessly through the end of the service, including the extra half-hour required to baptize Moses. The service ended with every single member of the church on their feet. The pastor, relieved that he'd recovered and survived - no, *thrived* -, felt his authority as he waved the choir's last song to an end.

During lunch after the service, the pastor, unsure of their perception of his whole sermon, sat and ate with a few of the parents who'd attended. Some of these parents were the ones who had said that summer in the city reminded them of "violence" and "toe-tags" and "shooters". As the parents talked, he wondered how much his reputation had been damaged by his long, awkward pause during service. Audience's smelled blood, he knew. Dad had at least taught him that. That there's a cost for a certain kind of celebrity.

But then, in a beautiful moment, the people around him called attention to his performance. "But hold on, hold on," one of them said, calling for the table's attention. "Pastor, we gotta tip our hats to your sermon today." They told him that they'd never been so moved by a Sunday service and that Sometimes silence speaks louder than words. They specifically called out the pastor's long pause, the one that had so shaken him up so much. "You bled all over it, Pastor," someone said. They mentioned that it was the very strength in his silence that they needed today. They thanked him for taking the time to publicly receive their pain from the summer's violence. Thanked him for listening, because No one else will.

Someone then acknowledged Mo's story and thanked him for letting Mo tell it. They lauded the pastor's compassion and called the boy's words A surprise blessing.

By the time lunch ended, late afternoon was cooling, and the last of the congregation hobbled out of the church. The pastor noticed Mo, who had dried off and changed out his white gown. The boy looked spent, and his look of boredom had returned. He said a quick goodbye and Thanks for the baptism an'all that. As Mo walked away, the pastor considered again what had moved the boy to come on stage. Maybe the boy just needed to tell his story, hand a small piece of his pain off, as some people do. Or maybe the boy thought he needed help on his sermon, had seen that the pastor was stuck and decided to step in. Hard to say. What was certain was that God had come through fully, as God does. The pastor thanked God for giving him the generosity to let Mo tell his story. It was the boy's day, after all. And the child was still a young pup. With all young pups, it don't matter how loud you shout, they just ain't ready to listen.

Mo was the last to leave the church. The pastor watched the boy exit, beaming proudly, once again ready to serve.