

**Sunday Best**

“Matthew Bartholomew Stevens, you quit your fidgeting this instant! Do you want a whopping?”

“No, Mama.”

“For goodness sake, you’re ten years old. You’re too old to be fussing over a simple hair combing.”

The boy winced as Mama’s comb raked through his unwieldy, blonde hair. Peeking one eye at the mirror, he saw his spiky hair forced down into a comb-over by the pressure of his mother’s wrist along with globs and globs of hair gel. To Matt, it felt like a baseball glove had been shoved over his head.

“There, all done,” Mama declared with a small smile. “See, that wasn’t so bad, was it?”

“It itches.”

“Oh hush you. Now go fetch your jacket and tie from the bed. I’ll help you put it on, and would you put that football away?”

“But Dad said he’d play catch with me before church.”

The smile disappeared from Mama’s face before she slowly moved beside Matt. The finely-pressed and stiff fabric of her white dress groaned as she kneeled beside him. Her tightly coiled hair, trapped in a tight golden bun, didn’t move an inch as she snatched the blue tie from his bedspread. He watched as the fabric looped up, down, and around before being yanked tightly against his throat.

“Your father was asked to visit Mrs. Vaughn before service today, so he left early.”

“But he promised!”

“So he did.”

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Matt mumbled incoherently as Mama finished straightening his tie. Glancing upward, he casually checked to see if she was acknowledging his annoyance. His gaze softened though as he realized that Mama wasn't even looking at him. Her own eyes were averted from him, directed towards his bedroom window, her bottom lip hidden underneath a row of seething teeth. Matt wondered what she could be looking at. Maybe the ice cream truck had finally started making its rounds on Sundays?

“Mom?”

“Hm? Oh. Hurry up and put your shoes on, young man, and head downstairs. I don't want the laces to be all out of order like last week, either. Straight laces, understand me?”

“Yes, Mama.”

Bowing his head, the boy dug out his church shoes from underneath his bed as Mama scooted from the room. As he crawled underneath the bed, his sleeves threatening to rip as he stretched his arm out to grab the black soles, Matt swore to himself that he wouldn't chuck his church shoes underneath his bed ever again. While it was fun to just kick them off upon arriving back in his room, the punishment of burrowing around to retrieve them outweighed that small moment of relief every Sunday afternoon.

Remerging with only a couple of bumps, Matt sprawled onto the carpet and wrestled on his suffocating leather shoes. They put up a good fight, but the adolescent eventually won the day with a resounding stomp against his bedpost to knock the right loafer into place. Fed up with the weekly struggle, Matt quickly looped the strings together into a small knot and reported to his mirror for a quick look-over before Mama's inspection.

A sigh escaped from his lips as his gloomy eyes swept over the mirror. This wasn't his reflection. It couldn't be! Where was the pair of Nike High-Tops he had gotten for his birthday

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last month? Where was that gnarly scrape on his elbow, his medal for besting Nelson in the jungle gym on Thursday? Where were the dirt and grass stains worn into his shorts from the countless football games he and the guys played every Friday? Where was his lucky shark-tooth necklace he wore every single day of the week? Well...every day except one.

“This sucks, man,” Matt complained as the stranger in the mirror gave him a mean-spirited look. “Why do we have to wear these stuffy old clothes every Sunday anyways? Never have to any other day.”

“Because we’re the Reverend’s family, and as such, we have to set an example for the rest of the congregation. We can’t show up looking like deadbeats and charlatans, now can we?”

Matt turned his head towards his door in time to see his little sister, Rachel, skip through it. Her curly golden hair was tucked underneath a white, wide-brimmed hat with a pink ribbon tied around the base. Her pristinely-pressed, rosy dress fluttered through the air and the obnoxiously pink shoes wrapped around her tiny feet danced across the room as she plopped onto the bed.

Snearing at Little Miss Perfect for invading his room once again, Matt stomped over to his toy chest. Throwing up the wooden lid, the boy rummaged through its contents. He didn’t even glance over to his sister as he asked.

“Where’d you hear that?”

“That what?”

Matt lifted his head momentarily from his search to give his sister a glare.

“Don’t what me. That word: char-something.”

“Charlatans,” Rachel corrected before sticking her tongue out. Matt returned the gesture before resumed his excavation.

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“What’s it mean?”

“I don’t know, just heard it is all.”

“Did you mess with my stuff?”

“The voices woke me up again last night. But when I went downstairs to check, only Mama and Daddy were there. They gave me a glass of water!”

Matt rolled his eyes. Girls could be so dumb.

“Were you in my stuff?!”

“No! Jeez...”

“Aha! Here it is!” Matt snatched his necklace from the bottom of the chest, a triumphant smirk plastered on his face.

“Matthew! Rachel! Get down here, now. It’s time to leave.”

“Coming Mama,” Rachel said, leaping off the bed and dashing from the room. Matt pocketed his prized possession before shuffling after her.

By the time he caught up, Mama was already finishing up Rachel’s inspection with the baby tucked neatly into her arm. She gave a nod of approval and Rachel raced out the door to the car. Preparing himself for his inevitable lecture, Matt marched onto the chopping block.

Mama’s gaze scoured his entire appearance, moving from head to toe. She lingered on his feet for a few seconds before a defeated sigh escaped from her stiff lips.

“Didn’t I specifically tell you to make sure your laces were straight?”

“No... Yes, Mama.”

“You know what your Father would say right now?”

“That this is the reason I need to go to church every week.”

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Mama's glazed eyes were covered for a moment by her hand wiping down her face. A pang of guilt stung Matt like a wasp upon seeing the disappointment in her face. She always knew how to make him feel bad. He ducked his head and began trying to dig a hole to China with his feet in the carpet. Anything to escape that disappointed stare.

"I'm sorry, Mama. I promise I'll do better. I'll try and not be me. Like you and Dad always want."

"Don't say that, sweetheart."

His eyes widened in surprise as he felt Mama's soft hand lift his chin off his chest. A warm, kind smile like the one you have after getting a slice of piping-hot apple pie filled her face. He hadn't seen Mama smile like that in weeks.

"Tell you what, we're already running late. I'll let the laces slide this week if you promise to do the dishes tonight?"

"You've got yourself a deal!" Matt said, throwing his arms around his mother's waist. "Thanks Mama! Thank you, thank you, thank you!"

Mama pecked him on the forehead. As he ran to the car, the smile slowly slid off her face and she muttered.

"Let's just hope your father doesn't notice."

Matt pinched his nose as he and Rachel waited at the door to the Nursery while the baby was dropped off. He always hated the smell of that place. It just didn't sit right with him. He used to ask Mama when Rachel was being dropped off there if the room was even real. Sure didn't smell like it.

"Alright, she's all set, Mrs. Stevens."

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“Thank you, Mary. Let’s go children.”

Putting a hand on each of their shoulders, Mama steered the two down the hall and towards the chapel. The greeting area, where everyone came in, was jam-packed. All the men in black suits were saying hello to the men in navy suits and all the women in dresses were saying hello to the women in pant-suits. The sound of laughter and mindless chatter was deafening to Matt as they wove their way through the throng towards the wooden double doors leading to the chapel. He always thought it was weird that all these people could be so rowdy out here, but after going through those doors they were as silent as he had to be in detention.

“Betty! Oh Betty, over here!”

Mama paused and her head swiveled like a camera on a tripod. Finally, she spotted the woman calling out to her and put on a gracious smile as she politely waved to the woman. When Matt saw that big, lime-green, dress cutting a path through the crowd towards them, he groaned. Not Tommy’s mom. Every Sunday she wore that ugly dress to church. He always teased Tommy by saying it looked like his mom was dunked in slime before every service.

“Hello, Tracy. How are you?”

“I’m splendid, thank you, Betty. I hope your husband has a good sermon for us today!”

“Everyone says he always does.”

“Well, I’m praying for an extra special one today! This will be the first time Thomas will be attending service. I finally convinced him to come instead of hiding in Sunday School. I say to him: ‘You’re in the 5<sup>th</sup> grade now, Thomas. You’re a big boy, so you should go Big Boy Church.’”

Matt winced for his friend. He must be so embarrassed, and of course now he had to see it for himself. Leaning his head over to look around Tommy’s mom and her wide hips, the

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blonde boy spotted his best friend lurking in his mother's shadow. His eyes were wide with terror and his face was the color of the brightest red in the crayon box. When he saw Matt staring at him, he nearly leapt out of the little grey suit he had been jammed into.

Snickering, Matt's mouth opened to give Tommy a good ribbing and hopefully get him to start a fun wrestling match. The words died in his mouth though as he saw the fervent shaking of his friend's head and the pleading look in his eye. Oh, that's right. This wasn't Tommy, this was Sunday Tommy. Tommy would laugh it up at a good joke and would be the first one rolling in the mud for a quick tussle. Sunday Tommy wasn't allowed to talk. Matt always hated running into his friends on Sunday.

Though, not all Sunday people were bad. There was Justin, the mean 7<sup>th</sup> grader who would always steal his lunch money at school. Sunday Justin helped pass around the offering plate. Then there was Mrs. Wallace, who was always yelling and screaming at him not to skateboard on her sidewalk. Sunday Mrs. Wallace made sure to give him a candy every week. There was also Mr. Thornton, who was always coming out of that darkly-lit store with brown-paper bags. Once Mr. Thornton's truck ran over his old bike. He had to jump off at the last second not to be run over, but Mr. Thornton never told anyone about it and gave him 20 bucks not to tell his parents. Sunday Mr. Thornton was the greeter at the door who handed out those little pamphlets to everyone.

"Oh, I'm sorry, Betty. I got off track there. I just think it's so wonderful that our little lambs are finally joining the rest of the flock!"

"Yes, it is great. Well, it was good to hear from you, Tracy, but we should really be getting inside. I think service is about to begin," Mama said.

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“Oh, but of course. Sorry to keep you. Come along, Thomas. We need to find the best seats for your first sermon!”

Tommy mouthed for help as he was dragged away by his mother back into the flock. Matt simply gave him a sympathetic look and a small shrug as he was herded through the double doors.

He kept his head down, his mother’s hand resting firmly on the nape of his neck, while being led down the center aisle. Inside the chapel, the building’s air conditioning didn’t work well so the sweltering summer heat lingered inside the room like steam in a sauna. Trapped underneath his wool jacket and pants, Matt felt like he was slowly being roasted alive. The beads of sweat were beginning to pool atop his skin, causing an unbearable itch to spring up all over his body. He attempted to scratch his arm, but a stern look from Mama told him that wasn’t acceptable behavior now. Gritting his teeth, Matt tried to ignore his irritated skin as he was steered to the front row to their designated seats directly in front of the stage.

Standing in front of them was Dad, having a pleasant chat with Mr. Robert and Mr. Andrews about what hymns the choir should sing. Even in this furnace, Matt couldn’t see him sweating. Not a single hair was out of place on his perfectly combed, black head. Not a single wrinkle or any of the small sweat stains that marked the other two men’s robes blemished Dad’s deep blue suit. Whenever he was here, in this chapel, Dad looked completely at home.

“Daddy!” Rachel said as she rushed him. Her little arms wrapped around his leg.

“Rachel, can’t you see that I’m speaking with Mr. Robert and Mr. Andrews? You’re being extremely impolite, dear. I’m sorry about this gentlemen.”

“Oh, don’t worry about it.”



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“Yes, it’s quite alright. We’ll just go with numbers: 47, 73, and 102. We better go to inform the choir. Reverend.”

Both men nodded their heads at Dad before scurrying up the stage. Matt always thought it was weird to see grown-ups wearing those long, white dresses. The one time he had laughed at them though he had gotten the worst whopping of his life when they got home. Since then, Matt had learned to keep his laughter bottled up inside.

“Aren’t you happy to see me, Daddy?” Tears were beginning to well up in Rachel’s blue eyes.

Dad gave her a small smile and placed a hand on her shoulder.

“Of course I am. You’re my special little angel after all.”

Rachel’s toothy smile quickly returned to her face and she clung to Dad’s leg even tighter.

“Hello, son. Had a good morning so far?”

Matt looked down at Dad’s spotless shoes.

“You promised we’d play catch before church...”

“What was that? Speak up, bud. I can’t hear you when you mumble like that.

“Nothing...It’s been okay, I guess.”

Dad gave him an approving nod and a quick pat of the head.

“Well that’s good to hear. Hopefully...Wait a second. Why are your laces more crooked than a dog’s hind leg, boy? I told you to make sure the children were presentable, Betty.”

Dad was giving Mama the same drawn look of disappointment she had given Matt earlier. Mama didn’t avert her gaze like he had though. She stared right into Dad’s face, her gaunt cheeks unmoving and her lips pursed.

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“Sorry, dear.”

“I just hope no one else sees,” Dad said, his eyes moving around the room to ensure no one was watching. “We’ll talk about this later, but I don’t want you to be in a huff all through service.”

“Okay, dear.”

Mama gave Dad a small smile as he pecked her on the cheek, but to Matt, her face seemed frozen. Matt grabbed at his tie, trying to loosen it. No matter what he did though, it just seemed to get tighter.

After a moment of silence, Dad looked over the family before prying Rachel off his leg and sitting her down onto the pew.

“Well, it’s about that time. I’ll see you all during. Angel, keep giving me that smile all through service.”

“Okay, Daddy!”

With a smile on his face, Dad stood up onto the stage and announced that service was about to begin. Everyone took their seats as the last of the stragglers filtered into the chapel and found what few spots on the pews remained. As he sat down onto the hard wood, Matt scratched at his elbow before wiping his sleeve against his brow.

“Stop that, Matthew.”

“But it’s itchy! And it’s so hot in here, I feel like I’m melting, Mama.”

“Not in front of everyone. Try and control yourself.”

“Yes, Mama.”

As Dad read through a bulletin of announcements, Matt felt like his clothes were growing heavier and heavier. His jacket and tie slowly began to wrap tighter and tighter around him as the

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congregation stood in unison for today's hymns. As the sound of a hundred people echoing the words of "Blessed Assurance" filled the chapel, Matt attempted to loosen the knots forming in his stomach.

He tried everything he could think of. He rocked back and forth on his heels. He bounced up and down on his tip-toes. He grasped onto his hymn books with all his might. He even sang the words as loud as he could. Yet nothing could shake off that sticky-icky feeling that seemed to be running up and down his entire body.

By the time his Dad took his place at the podium and began his service, Matt's hand had found its way back to his arm. A small gasp of relief came from the boy as the itching sensation was relieved a little. It didn't last long though, as he felt a sharp pinch at his side. Looking over, Mama was staring straight ahead up at Dad, but Matt knew what that look on her face meant. Trapping his hands underneath his butt, he tried to distract himself by listening to Dad's sermon.

Unfortunately for Matt, he had already heard this one. Dad had been practicing it earlier in the week when he had gone to the study to ask for help with his Math. It was about how, as good Christians, we were all supposed to be "lights on a hill"; setting a shining example for all to see. After listening to it for almost a whole hour, Dad had explained to him that in order to bring in other people to the Church we had to focus on improving our own behavior. So that when nonbelievers looked at us, they'd go: "Look at how happy they are. I wish I could be like them."

Matt didn't really understand. Dad was always saying the reason he was gone so much was because it was important to help others. That it was his duty as the Reverend to assist the members of the congregation in any way he could. He said it was his job to put their needs before his own, but now he was saying to focus on self-improvement? Matt guessed this was just another thing he would "Understand when he's older."

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Bored with hearing it for a second time, Matt's attention wandered around the chapel, scavenging for anything to take his mind off the gnawing desire to tear out of his Sunday Bests. Finally, his eyes spotted something interesting. There was a girl staring at him!

Melissa Myers. The real tall girl with the long, black ponytail in his class. She was looking over from her seat across the aisle directly at him. Why in the world would she do that? When she noticed he was staring back at her, her green eyes quickly snapped back to Dad, her cheeks taking on a rosy tint. After a couple of seconds, she slowly turned her head back around to him.

A crooked smile crawled onto Matt's face. This would do he thought. If she was going to stare at him, then it was perfectly okay for him to make faces at her. Maybe that would keep him distracted for the rest of church.

Sticking his tongue out, Matt made the silliest face he could think of. Across the aisle, Melissa covered her mouth as she giggled at him. He prepared to make another face but that was quickly shut down by a sharp yank of his ear.

"Matthew, quit that this instant!" Mama hissed. "You'll embarrass your father."

"But Mama, I make faces at her all the time at school."

"You're not at school. You're at church. Behave like it."

For the rest of the sermon, Matt had to sit perfectly still. He wasn't even allowed to squirm, even a little, without receiving a jab in the side from Mama. By the time Dad finally wrapped up, he was almost ready to crawl out of his skin. When Mama finally said it was okay to get up, Matt bolted from his seat for the greeting area.

Every week after service ended, Dad had them all stand at the doors to say goodbye to everyone as they left the chapel. Mostly it consisted of all the wrinkled old ladies in their

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hundred year old dresses telling Dad how wonderful his sermon was and congratulating Mama for being so lucky. Matt was usually the last one to reach the door every week. He hated it; all those leathery hands pinching and poking him while he suffocated in his suit, praying for it to hurry up and end. This week though, he was willing to suffer all the cheek pinching in the world just to move around a little bit.

It was more of the same this week, until one lady stopped in front of Mama. Matt didn't recognize her from the Granny Gang and she hadn't stopped to talk to Dad either. She didn't wear a hat, and her auburn hair flowed down onto the shoulders of her purple dress. Mama was just as surprised it seemed, but her eyes lit up as a flicker of recognition passed through them and a big smile spread across her face. Matt felt his tie loosen a little as Mama and the lady shared a hug.

“Sally, well isn't this a surprise! I didn't expect to see you here.”

“Well, here I am. Lovely service by the way. I wanted to congratulate you though, Betty. Your painting sold down at the gallery!”

“Really!?! That's...that's great news! What did they say? Who bought it? Which one did they buy?”

The lady in the purple dress opened her mouth to answer Mama, but she was cut off as Dad's voice intruded.

“I'm sorry, ladies, but you're holding up the line. Perhaps you could discuss your hobby some other time, honey, with Mrs...”

Mama's head snapped like a whip over to glare at Dad. He didn't seem to notice, as his polite smile was aimed at the lady in purple. Caught off guard by Dad's suggestion, she took a slight step back before answering.

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“Miss Sanders, and yes you’re right. I don’t mean to be a bother. I’ll call you tomorrow, Betty, with the all the juicy details!”

“That would be wonderful,” Mama said, her eyes never leaving Dad.

“Goodbye, Miss Sanders. I hope to see you here again next week.”

The lady in purple curtsied before scooting away as Matt fiddled with his tie. It had gotten tighter again. After watching her leave through the front door, Dad turned back to the people in line and returned to his routine. Mama however stood still as a statue, the only movement she made was the small tremble that shook her whole body.

“I can’t believe you would do that to me, John!”

“Betty, stop it. You’re acting like a child.”

With the click of the lock, Mama darted through the door and out of sight. Dad quickly followed after her, leaving Matt and Rachel alone in the foyer with the baby. Rachel picked up the little one and went into the playroom. Matt decided he had enough of Sunday for one day and started to untie his shoes. His feet were throbbing from being trapped inside them for so long. As he undid the first knot though, Matt suddenly heard his sister’s sing-song voice coming back into the room.

“Don’t you talk to me that way! Don’t you talk to me that way! Hehe!”

Matt cocked an eyebrow at his sister as she skipped right up next to him. A big dumb grin was on her face as she started to dance circles around him. Her little pink shoes clanking on the tiled floor like shackles against the iron bars of a cell. She finally stopped right in front of him, shoving her nose only a few inches away from his own. Matt recoiled slightly from the sudden invasion of privacy.

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“Why don’t you ever listen to me?” she asked.

“What?”

“Why do you always treat me like a child?”

“You’re crazy. Leave me alone.”

“Fine, I will if that’s what you want! You don’t really care anyways.”

Matt opened his mouth to respond, but he was cut off as Rachel’s tiny hands wrapped around his tie. With a mighty yank, she pulled the cloth tighter than ever before. His own hands clawed at his collar, but he was unable to relieve himself of the constricting noose around his neck.

Shouting suddenly filled his ears as Matt gasped for air. Rachel’s face turned to one of horror and she ran into the other room babbling that the voices were back. Mama came storming back into the foyer. Her hair had come undone from its tight bun and now hung around her like a wild lion’s mane. Her teeth were barred like fangs and her eyes were filled with a fire Matt had never seen before. The baby was once again cradled in her arms, but her hands were trembling as she reached for her keys.

Dad followed soon after, a clear glass filled with a dark liquid in hand, and a bemused expression on his face. Thinking he was in a good mood, Matt turned to Dad and croaked out to him as Mama’s hand rattled on the door knob.

“Dad, could you teach me how to untie this now? It’s choking me.”

“Okay, Betty, you’ve had your fun,” he said. “It’s time to be an adult again.”

“This isn’t a joke. I’m serious this time.”

Matt’s hands dug into the fabric of his blue tie, tiny rips beginning to appear in the cloth as the strands were pulled to their limits.

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“Oh really? You’re going to leave the Reverend of the Church? How will that go over, Betty? What will people think?”

Mama finally threw open the door, a loud bang echoing throughout the house as the door collided with the wall. Turning around slowly, she gave Dad one last look of contempt before saying.

“Frankly, *dear*, I don’t give a damn.”

Haha! Success! Matt let out a small shout of triumph as he ripped the tie away from his neck and cast it onto the floor. His cry was drowned out though by the shattering of glass. Finally freed of his noose, Matt raced up the stairs so he could discard the rest of his Sunday Bests in his room. Reaching into his pocket, he quickly retrieved his lucky necklace and threw it on as Dad turned to the stairs. A despondent look of shock was carved into his rigid features and his voice, barely above a murmur, asked.

“Did you need something, son?”

The only reply he received was the slamming of a door.