

## Step Into My Shadow

The Reverend Paul Gray waded through the market stalls, pretending to ignore the whispering and giggling women. The monthly swap meet was a good place to be seen. His relaxed demeanor, handsome features and ready smile gave him ready access to any porch in town. His way with words insured that those same women would see that their husbands opened their wallets generously each Sunday. The oil fields were booming and they all had plenty.

“Good morning, Mr. Gonzales,” he greeted the middle aged man as he set the tools out on his table.

“Anything new today?”

“Good morning, Reverend. ‘Been slow this morning, but you could be my first customer? I have another work light – one on a tall stand.”

Reverend Gray looked at the scratched yellow and black work light. “Ten dollars?” he offered.

“Ten dollars for you, Reverend...and a piece of Mrs Johnson’s coffee cake?” Mr. Gonzales bargained.

Reverend Paul laughed. Selling coffee and pastries during morning setup made the swap meet vendors some of the best customers at the church booth. The swap meet booth had been his first idea in a long stream of successful church promotions. The once stagnant congregation was alive again with clubs, events and hope.

“You know her coffee cake goes fast. But if there is anything left, I’ll send some over.”

Reverend Gray left Mr. Gonzales with a ten-dollar bill and a promise to pick up the light later. He decided to make his way back to the church booth and check on lunch setup before quietly slipping away.

A cool, fall wind had begun to pick up and didn't at first notice the tug on his sleeve. Paul's smile quickly faded as he looked left and right to insure that no one was watching. "I told you that we can't be seen together," he scolded the young girl as he pushed her back into the canvas tent where she had been waiting.

Gail's eyes blinked heavily as she tried to hold back the welling tears. "But I need to talk to you," she managed to croak out before the first tear rolled down her cheek.

Gail Weatherly was a beautiful young girl. Her long brunette hair hung thin and straight past her shoulders. She was only eleven, but in her dark brown eyes she projected both a confidence of the woman she would become and an innocence of the child she was quickly leaving behind.

Paul's heart softened with her tears and he took her in his arms. Her head barely reached his chest. Her thin arms instinctively wrapped around his waist. He held her for a minute then tilted her chin up and looked into her eyes. "Ok. Tell me."

"My brother found the notebook," she sobbed. "He gave it to my mother. She said you were the Devil. She said that you were the Devil and should be punished."

That little boy liked trouble. And Mrs. Weatherly had already told him to stay away from Gail. But they were so close to finishing now.

“Mr Gray,” Gail whispered. “I think she went to get my father.”

The wind picked up a bit just then, stirring the gravel and causing the tent flaps to rustle. “It will be ok,” he reassured her. “Here, take the key and go to the shed. I’ll be there soon.” She nodded. He gave her another hug, holding her close for a few extra seconds.

“Wait until I leave, then go straight to the shed, Okay?”

Reverend Gray stopped by the church booth and remembered to have a piece of coffee cake sent over to Mr. Gonzales. He then put on his best smile and slowly began making his way to the parking lot.

Gail did arrive at the shed undetected and fumbled only briefly with the keys before unlocking the metal door. Inside, she flipped on the lights as well as the window air conditioner that would relieve the musty, dank smell. The cameras were set up and waiting and the bales of hay interlocked against the walls to provide some sound insulation.

Gail moved back to her own special spot at the back – a once closet that was now lined with mattresses. She still wasn’t completely comfortable with the video camera hanging down like a spider from the ceiling. Gail flipped the power on her soundboard, put on the headphones, and fine-tuned the reverb with a quick arpeggio scale. In front of her sat the music to “46 and 2” and a picture of Reverend Gray standing with the band and their gold record.

Only the boys were missing but their setups were here: Johnny Gonzales left the standup bass his Uncle once played, Pete Carroll’s 7-piece double bass DW drum set had arrived at the church only three weeks

ago marked “youth group,” and Eddie Butler’s cream and white Fender Telecaster. Reverend Gray had given them all hope for something outside of this town.

The Weatherly’s were waiting when Reverend Gray arrived in the parking lot. Mr. Weatherly was still dressed in his Carhart coveralls, stained with drilling mud and grease. Paul could smell the thick scent of old alcohol as he spoke his only words: “You sick bastard.”

Mrs. Weatherly only hissed, “Get him, Carl!”

The first blow of the five-pound sledge hammer likely ended Reverend Gray’s life. But there were so many other blows after that one that the sequence hardly mattered.

In the shed, Gail waited.