

The Right Thing

When Elva Easley retired from the Sears call center at age seventy to draw her social security check, she had in mind that she'd fill her days with activities, like the sewing group, at the nearby community center. And she'd do more volunteer work at Second Baptist Church where she was a member.

Second Baptist Church was a small, predominantly Black church on the west side of Little Rock, Arkansas, where her son, Beldon, had once been an associate minister under the head Pastor, Pastor Harlan James, for eight months running. As an associate minister, Beldon had preached five sermons during that time. She'd recorded his sermons on her phone and still watched them from time to time. It had been three years since he'd stepped foot in that church—or any church—but she prayed for his salvation and his return everyday. At the moment he seemed to be living with a girlfriend, a customer whom he'd met at Costco, his recent place of employment.

A few days after her last day of work she and Jimmy Lee sat in their well-worn living room while the local news droned on their TV. She glanced at her mild-mannered nervous husband with her usual disappointment. Jimmy Lee had just gotten a haircut at his regular barbershop, his gray tightly coiled curls cropped close to his head, his gray white beard and mustache against his brown skin, neatly trimmed. He was still fairly handsome, his build still lean and straight compared to her plump rounded frame. But she found him stupid, though she would defend him fiercely if anyone else spoke of him that way.

“Haircut looks good, Jimmy Lee. You sure needed it. How's the fellas at the shop?”

“Fine, fine.”

“Good day at work?”

“Yeah, just fine, dear.”

She'd dreamed of a bigger house, a bigger name, a nicer car, but the jobs he'd been suited for—which were perfectly fine jobs of shipping clerk, purchase order clerk for various big box retail stores—did not afford her those dreams. In less than a year, he intended to retire as well. They both moved slower and slower as they aged. She had no more hope for Jimmy Lee Easley.

The one recent redemption was that when Beldon began to preach four years ago, Jimmy Lee joined her at church service on Sundays and Bible study on Wednesday nights, the only time in their fifty-year marriage he'd attended church on a regular basis. And just a few months before she retired, he was installed as a Deacon of the church. A Deacon of the church! The new position made Elva a *Deaconess* and gave her some of the status she desired. She'd bought herself a new white suit with silver trim and a matching hat to honor their new standing. That was something.

She still hung her hopes on Beldon. Yet that hope was also fading. Early in her marriage, she had prayed for three children, but her prayers were answered with one. Minister Beldon Easley—she was the only one who called him Minister these days and mostly in her own mind—who was thirty-eight years old and, in her motherly mind because of his warm brown skin and dimpled chin, was a tall, dark, and handsome young man who could have been a model or actor. He'd served two years in the United States Navy and his eight-by-ten Navy portrait was in a prominent frame on a shelf in their TV unit. The church program that documented his first sermon as an associate minister was also framed and displayed on the same shelf.

When her cell phone rang, Jimmy Lee from his recliner eyed her as she answered.

“Hey,” she said. She ignored Jimmy Lee's raised eyebrows.

“Hey Mama.”

She welcomed Beldon's phone calls and visits, even when he was asking for money, which was

often. “How you doing over there?”

“Okay. Things are going okay, but I need some help.”

Elva blinked. “Um hum.”

“We need about five hundred dollars to make rent.”

“That's a lot, son. I'm just a few days retired. Can it wait?”

“I know this might be a bind, Mama, but if you can help, you know I'd love you forever.”

“I'll talk to your Dad.”

Jimmy Lee glanced at her, then back to the TV.

“Why don't you come over today? I'll cook something.”

“I don't know--”

“Well, how you gonna get the money?”

“All right. All right. I'll be by in a bit.”

To Jimmy Lee she said, “Beldon’s coming by for dinner. He needs to make up for his rent.

About five hundred dollars.”

“Five hundred dollars!!?”

“Well, he hasn't asked in a while.” Which wasn't true. She'd given him two hundred dollars last month. “This will help him stay caught up on rent. He can manage the rest.” Which also wasn't entirely true. She was certain he was behind on the payments for his truck. She also suspected he was donating plasma for extra money.

“He needs our help.” She glared at Jimmy Lee, daring him to deny her generosity. He lowered the leg rest of his recliner and stood with a grunt, then went to their bedroom to check the dresser where he kept his hidden stash. He knew that if they didn't help him with rent, Elva would insist the boy move back in his old room if he were evicted. Not that Beldon would choose living with them as his first choice. Having him there, however, would mean their hidden money stash would be raided all

the time since Beldon often found it regardless of how well it was hidden. Jimmy Lee would have to return to keeping it all in the bank account that neither Elva nor Beldon could access.

Elva defrosted some previously cooked chicken leg quarters in the microwave, seasoned them, and put them in a pan and into the oven to heat. She cooked rice and microwaved a can of corn with butter and pepper in a bowl and used some of the corn along with cheese and frozen broccoli to make her cheese vegetable corn bread.

She had tried her best with Beldon. She remembered with pride how at a Bible Study one night at Second Baptist Church, just a few years ago, while others sat at the aligned tables with their water bottles and Bibles, she'd placed a box of vanilla wafers and a half-pint of cold milk in front of Beldon as a surprise and he smiled more like her son at eight years old than like a man in his thirties. That was the kind of love and connection she had with her son. Elva had ignored the stares of the other mothers and the men in the room while Jimmy Lee stared down at his open Bible.

When Beldon came into the house, he patted the back of the recliner and said “Hey Pop,” then walked through to the kitchen and kissed her on the cheek in his usual greeting

“Hey, pour you and your father some iced tea.”

He did so and walked back to sit on the couch, commenting on whatever show was on TV. Elva fixed three plates of food. She handed one to Beldon, then one to Jimmy Lee.

“Y'all want another slice of cornbread?”

In unison they said, “No thanks.”

After setting her own plate and iced tea on her side table, Elva sat heavily in her easy chair and watched each of them. Jimmy Lee took a bite of his chicken then a forkful of rice. Beldon set his plate on his lap to look at his phone and reply to a text. She sipped her tea, feeling uneasy about the money. She thought about all the careers Beldon had not followed through on. He was *not* a Navy man. (She suspected he was dishonorably discharged before his three-year tour, but she didn't press his story

about 'getting out early'.) He was *not* a teacher, though he'd been a substitute teacher for over a year in their school district. He was *not* a barber, the schooling of which was backed by an education loan they'd cosigned for and had just paid the final payment with their last tax refund. He was *not* a fireman because he didn't pass the physical training course or exam. And he was *not* an associate minister on his way to becoming a head Pastor of some church. He was mostly unemployed, broke, chain-smoking Camel cigarettes in and outside his pickup truck, and likely drinking too much alcohol based on the amount of gum he chewed. Yet she held on to the thought that he was finding his way.

“Hey. Me and Smoke just got married.” he announced. “That's really why I need the money.”

“Married!?” Elva said.

Jimmy Lee looked back and forth between them.

They had only met Smoke once. Her real name was something like Samantha. Or Samara.

“Why on earth would you marry Smoke?” Elva said, “Is she pregnant?”

“No, she's not pregnant. And marrying seemed like a good idea. She's good people. We love each other.”

“Beldon!”

“What?”

“You didn't think to invite us? Include us? What kind of sense does that make?”

“I knew you wouldn't approve.”

“And you did it anyway?”

He shrugged. “I just felt it was the adult thing to do.”

Elva held her plate about an inch above the side table then dropped it. Jimmy Lee continued to eat. Beldon took a bite of chicken.

“I'm sorry, Mama,” he said, mouth full. “Really. But I'm a grown man now. It just seemed like the right thing.”

“So what am I supposed to tell the church?”

He shrugged again. “Tell them what you like. Does it matter?” He wiped the palm of his hand across his mouth.

Elva looked at the side table, shook her head. “Lord!”

Perhaps that was the moment that led her to seek another way to redeem herself as a parent. To reinvent her vision of motherhood. Though it was still possible that Smoke was actually pregnant and Beldon was omitting that fact or that in the near future there might be grandchildren, the thought of grandchildren didn't seem as comforting as the other thought that came to her: that she could foster young children in need and leave a better legacy.

She thought more and more about it after Beldon left that evening with their five hundred dollars stuffed into his wallet. That night she had a dream about a little girl, or maybe two little girls, and tucking them in twin beds. When she opened her eyes the next morning, she smiled in her pillow and whispered a short prayer about it. She had the time now and she had her Jesus. She could do this. She thought about how she could clear out the extra room they used as both a storage room and her sewing room. She didn't sew as much as she used to, due to the high cost of fabrics and eye strain due to vision changes. She'd keep Beldon's room available for anytime he or any other guest might need it. She took these swirling thoughts and ideas as a sign from God that yes, yes, yes, despite her age, despite Jimmy Lee's age—Jimmy Lee continued to snore softly beside her—she was called to do this.

Over the next two weeks, she prayed for the right time to tell Jimmy Lee about her plan. To convince him that this was God's call on her life now that she was retired and that this was the right thing to do since he, too, would soon be retired. First, she talked with Sister Stella Grandview from church, who had once been a foster parent a few years back. Sister Stella and her husband had also been child advocacy court support volunteers, to assist and accompany children in family court. Over a cup of coffee at a nearby restaurant, she told Elva about their foster experiences over the years.

“Now, Sister Elva,” she said, “children have a lot of energy. Way more energy than you might think. It's a difficult thing to manage as we get older you know.”

Elva smiled. “Sister Stella, I've got faith that this is the right thing to do. God will give us strength.”

“But it's real important to realize this. We decided to stop after our last foster son, Gerald, aged out.” She smiled. “He still keeps in touch with us. But as a younger child he and most of the others we kept, had a lot of energy. And some had behavior problems that were difficult to handle. Mercy!”

“It'll be fine,” Elva said, “God will give us strength.”

With Jimmy Lee, she broached the subject at dinner one evening, while picking over her salad and said, “Jimmy Lee, you remember a long time ago how we wanted to adopt a child?”

“That was a long time ago, dear. Way before we had Beldon.”

“Well, I think it's time we served our community and fostered a child. Or children.”

“What?”

“You know. Become foster parents.”

Jimmy Lee stared at her, a fork of meatloaf just in front of his mouth.

“I know you might think it's crazy, but I feel God telling me to do this. Telling us to do this.”

“Us?” He lowered the fork to his plate.

“I've actually got a number to call to see how to get started. And I talked to Sister Stella.”

“Wait. Now wait. Is this wise? I mean—”

“If we have enough faith, we'll be fine. God is in this thing. And if Sister Stella and her husband can do it, we can do it, too.”

Jimmy Lee blinked over and over.

“But we're old,” he said.

“We're only as old as we feel. God will give us strength. We just gotta have faith. Besides, I'm

retired, you'll soon be retired, and some child out there needs us.”

It took weeks, plenty of paperwork, plus scheduled home visits, for the application and approval process. During that time she had cleared out the extra room day by day, little by little, with help from Jimmy Lee. When she finally told Beldon, he said,

“Are you serious, Mama?”

“Yes son. I'm perfectly serious.”

“This has to be a joke, though. You can't be serious.”

She insisted Beldon drive her to Big Lots to use his truck in order to get the two new twin beds she wanted. On the drive home with the beds loaded on the back of his truck, he continued to ask:

“Are you sure about this? It seems like you've made up your mind, but are you sure, Mama? Are you absolutely sure about this?”

“I'm sure,” she repeated. “I'm sure. Absolutely sure. God has led me to this decision and I feel like it's the right thing to do.”

At home, Jimmy Lee helped Beldon unload the truck.

“Beldon,” she said, “since you're here and you've already done this much, I need you to put these beds together for me. Please.”

“Mama, I'm tired. Can it wait?”

“No, it can't wait, 'cause there's no telling when I'll see you again. Me and Jimmy Lee don't need to be trying to do it when we got you here. I'll fix you a sandwich and fry up some french fries. Just do it.”

“Mama—”

“Just do it, son. It's the least you can do for your new little sister or brother.”

“What?” She saw him roll his eyes before he turned away from her.

Jimmy Lee sighed. “Hey. We’ll work on it together. I’ll get my screw driver.”

Eventually, Elva Easley and Jimmy Lee Easley brought home Ray Ann Jones, a thin oak brown girl about to turn six and her three-year-old brother Carter Jones. Both children had short black Afros, cut to the same length. The first night together Elva enjoyed the new brightness that filled her home where even her old furniture and worn but recently shampooed carpet appeared new. She stepped lightly through the house in guarded and nervous excitement. The children looked around timidly at first, glancing up often at Elva who smiled down at them and was certain God was smiling down on her. When they glanced at Jimmy Lee, he looked away.

“You all will be staying with us for a while,” Elva said as she showed them their room, “in our house.”

Ray Ann's face brightened, but Carter did not speak. She took her brother's hand and said, “It's okay, Carter.” Elva unpacked their sparse backpacks which held only a few changes of clothes, a second pair of sneakers and a few personal grooming items. Ray Ann asked more questions as they followed Elva through the house.

“Was this really their new house?”

“Would they stay here?”

“Do you have a dog?”

“What's your name?”

Elva responded to each question, laughing and to the last question she said, “Call me Mama Elva please. And you can call um, Mr Easley...um...”

“Mr Easley?” Ray Ann asked.

“Well, for now, yes. Call him Mr Easley.”

After that first day of excitement, the adjustment to small children and the heightened emotion of children who had been abandoned dampened Elva's enthusiasm. Elva gathered a little of the back

story of their parents—that the mother was a drug addict and had a serious mental illness like bipolar disorder, and the father had been killed, stabbed in their apartment, in some kind of argument with an acquaintance, which the children may have witnessed.

She kept telling herself—and others—that she was doing God's work. At church she clung to the pride surrounding her decision. She introduced the children to everyone, taught them how to respond with a “Nice to meet you”. She talked to anyone who'd listen about how God had blessed her with these two foster children and how God was giving her the strength to do what she needed to do. On Sundays, with her two new wards in new outfits, she was energized at church.

But at home, Elva grew more and more overwhelmed by all the newly required tasks. She prepared meals and snacks every day. She shopped for groceries more frequently and with more thought. New clothes and young children meant more laundry and fussing over outfits. Ray Ann favored the sweat pants or leggings over the cute play dresses Elva purchased and Carter needed a lot of help because he barely knew how to dress himself. Elva now had to orchestrate bath time, bedtime stories and hair care, plus navigate pediatrician visits and school registration.

The children constantly sought attention, primarily by asking for snacks or drinks, demonstrating an impossible, unending hunger and insatiable thirst. They were frightened of the dark and had trouble settling down to sleep. Elva would read stories to them, but they wanted her to repeat them more times than she wanted to read them. For weeks they slept fitfully through the night, crying out. And Carter often wet the bed.

It was hard to piece together a history and an understanding of children so young, but Elva felt confident that she could provide a stable home and make a difference. Ray Ann was affectionate, often climbing onto the laps of Elva or Jimmy Lee. Elva was welcoming, but Jimmy Lee complained of the pain in his legs and hips and, after a few moments, would gently place her back on her feet. Carter stood nearby or sat on the floor by Jimmy Lee's recliner but did not climb on anyone's lap. He grew

more comfortable talking to Mama Elva and Mr Easley, mostly to ask for snacks, but remained reserved and quiet compared to his sister. His preference was to talk to his sister, often in whispers. And he stiffened when touched or hugged by Elva, but quietly welcomed a kiss on the cheek at bed time and holding her hand while out.

The mother eventually signed away her rights to the children and there was no other family. Elva decided that God had spoken to her once again—to actually adopt. Jimmy Lee was quiet about this turn of events, still uncomfortable and stiff around little people he didn't understand and simply said,

“This is too much, Elva.”

“No it isn't Jimmy Lee. It's what God would want. They have no other family, it's just us.”

Jimmy Lee withdrew as much as possible. The bombarding energy of small children overwhelmed him and he slept (and pretended sleep) more and more in his recliner or their bedroom while the kids circled, chattered, or whined about him like hungry puppies. He barely responded to them tapping his chair or his knee for his attention and each time they tested out the word “Daddy”, he jumped/twitched.

Elva continued to complain. “I need you to work with me, Jimmy Lee. Can you lend me a hand at least with Carter to get him bathed and dressed everyday? Can you at least do that?”

Because Elva kept mentioning that this was God's work, he tried to at least smile at the children. But he had little to say. Between Beldon's continuing requests for money and the additional costs related to Ray Ann and Carter, Jimmy Lee no longer spoke of retirement. He found safety and more usefulness at work than at home.

With the adoption finally finalized, maybe a year after the kids were initially placed, Elva was both proud and exhausted. She spoke a testimony in front of the church about the final adoption, still

proud of the outward appearance of her sacrifice, still needing to bring attention to it. Eventually, as exhaustion took over every fiber of her body, even her interest and attendance at church waned.

The kids grew quickly. And their energy was boundless. Ray Ann, unable to sit still, moved constantly and talked constantly and had behavioral issues at school that required parent-teacher conferences and a meeting with the principal. They were not compliant children and often did not do what Elva asked them to do. She grew increasingly impatient, repeating herself, yelling, shouting and trying time-outs as the agency class and handouts instructed, needing to let them know who was in charge.

“You two should be grateful for everything I'm doing for you,” she said, “Why aren't you more grateful?”

The first time she grabbed Ray Ann and shook her, it was over spilled juice at the kitchen table.

“You are not LISTENING! I told you to sit down and eat your FOOD!” She swatted her on her bottom twice.

Elva was horrified at herself, at her rage, and at her stinging palm. Why wasn't God helping her to stay cool and calm? Or helping her get these kids in line? Ray Ann was inconsolable and cried, then ran to her room. Carter carefully climbed down from his chair and quietly followed his sister. Jimmy Lee slipped out the back door. After some minutes of hearing Ray Ann crying, Elva went in their room and found Carter sitting on the floor at the foot of Ray Ann's bed and Ray Ann hiding under her bed. Elva sat on Carter's bed and said,

“Ray Ann, I'm sorry but you've got to LISTEN to me. I keep telling both of you the same things over and over and over. You two should be more grateful and more obedient 'cause of everything I've done for you. I need you to listen and do what I tell you.”

But that first physical show of anger expanded to more of the same uncontrollable acts. She began to justify that the kids, now her full responsibility in name and appearance, needed stronger

discipline, which included a physical response. But this frightened her and she decided to attend an additional parenting class offered by the agency. The first class she attended was mandatory during the initial process and had made no sense to her. But she felt she had no choice but to try again, because obviously she had to figure out how to gain control. She needed answers. But she found very few answers in class. Or anywhere.

She continued to plead with Jimmy Lee for help and support, but he remained reluctant and distant, either steadfast in his recliner or hiding elsewhere when home. She complained to Beldon as well, on the few occasions he'd answer her calls or visit, demanding that he help out. On her latest call she asked once again, "Beldon, do you think you can take your little brother and little sister for a few days?"

"Mama, no. Like I told you before, that's not gonna work."

"I just need a break. Please."

"I'm sorry, Mama, but I'm not the one. Remember how I tried to tell you I didn't think this was a good idea?"

"But I'm doing what God told me to do."

"Are you sure?"

"Of course, I'm sure," she said, blinking and breathing rapidly, "God will provide," she continued. "But you need to step up, Beldon. For once in your life, you really need to step up."

"No disrespect Mama, but like I said before I didn't agree to any of this. I don't do well with kids. I figured that out when I was teaching. And I can't even think of those two as my little brother and sister."

"But that's because you need to get more involved."

"But I can't. Not like you want."

"Why can't you take on some responsibility for once in your life?"

Beldon sighed. “This, these kids, are not my responsibility. I'm not your husband.”

“Fine! Just fine! Did Smoke tell you to say stuff like that? You know you and Smoke ain't gonna work out. There's no way that God is in that!”

“All right, Mama. All right.”

“Mark my words!” she said and hung up the phone.

There was no help. Nowhere. Not from Jimmy Lee. Not from Ray Ann nor Carter. Not from the agency. Not from Beldon. Maybe—though she did not want to admit this—not even from God. She wearily stared at the TV from her easy chair, her swollen feet up on a footstool, her knees throbbing. Jimmy Lee sat in his recliner dozing before the television. The children played in their room, giving each other instructions. She heard a pounding on the wall or one of them jumping on the bed.

She stared into the future of her failure, at the years to come. Her forced smile could no longer lift the weighted obligation she'd signed up for, the drudgery that loomed ahead. Even while her heavy heart continued to beat life into her, a sensation of death fell over her. And the pearly gates of heaven, where she'd placed her hopes and happiness, slipped further and further away.