

## Salvation



*“Oh, that I had wings like a dove! For then I would fly away, and be at rest.” Psalm 55:6*

I sit in the hard, unforgiving pew for what feels like the thousandth time in my marriage. My husband, the beloved reverend, proclaims and condemns from the pulpit. His movements remind me of a puppet coming loose from its strings. His arms flail to the high heavens. As he nears the end of his sermon his voice rises and echoes off the high ceilings of the sanctuary. The sound of his voice is like dull glass falling upon my ears.

My four children, trained in silence, surround me. My eldest son, Ethan, nearly ten years old, watches his father with an admiration I lost long ago. The two girls, Beth and Susanna, ages six and four, clasp their hands together, as if to avoid being knocked over by the force of their father's voice. There is an empty space on the pew between Susanna and me. I think of the daughter who should be occupying it but who never will again. My youngest child, Benjamin, only one year old, lies sleeping in my arms. His weight is heavy and comforting, and I cling to him as tightly as my husband clutches his Bible.

Timothy, my husband, waves the holy book in front of him. He shouts commandments, denounces sinners, praises those who have been reborn in the spirit of his Lord. I watch and listen as though he is a salesman peddling his wares. I have heard these things every day of our marriage. Over the dinner table. In the car. At the grocery store. Even in the bedroom, though these lectures have become less frequent since he began sleeping in his office a little over a year ago.

Benjamin stirs in my arms, bringing me out of my thoughts. I gaze upon his smooth,

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ivory skin. His dark eyelashes touch his cheek and make me smile with maternal love. He settles again and I shift my eyes to my husband once more. The sunlight streaming through the stained glass window illuminates the spot on his head where he has begun to bald. The glow reflecting off the bare skin of his scalp almost looks like a halo.

I am unable to stifle a small giggle. My children look at me, the two girls smiling, Ethan looking upset by the disturbance. Timothy turns his face towards me with dark, penetrating eyes. I sense the congregation looking at me, wondering what the reverend's good wife has done to cause his apparent frustration.

I manage to quiet down, settling once again into the role they all expect of me. The reverend's wife, the Sunday wife, the mother of the reverend's children. I feign devout silence and think about the prism of light reflecting off my husband's bald head and about how all of this is a lie, such a deep, grotesque charade.

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Sunday night dinner is the usual affair. Timothy sits at the head of the table and thanks the Lord for this bounty before us. I hold the hands of my daughters and watch my husband as he mumbles praises with his eyes closed tightly. Ethan's posture mirrors that of his father, and I wonder to myself if his wife will one day mirror me.

The prayer over, Timothy waits for me to serve the meal, to him first, the children next, myself last. My duty done, I begin to eat the dinner I have prepared. Ethan eats with great concentration. Beth hides her peas under the slice of bread on the side of her plate. Susanna follows her example.

"The Youth Group is raising money for their missions trip," says Timothy. "They're having a spaghetti supper on Thursday. They'll need plastic bowls and silverware."

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“I’ll need to pick them up Wednesday,” I say.

“You can use the car if it’s just for that,” says Timothy. He dabs his napkin on his chin but misses a speck of mashed potato.

Ethan looks up from his plate and says, “I told them you can help us serve the meal on Thursday, Mom.”

“Sweetie, I’d love to,” I say, “but it’s so short notice. I told the girls I would bring them to their friend’s birthday party, and then I have to run some other errands.”

Sometimes it frightens me how similar Ethan and Timothy look. Their eyes hold the same cold, penetrating gaze. “But, Mom,” says my son in a tone of voice I know he has learned from his father, “it’s for my Youth Group.”

I begin to apologize but Timothy cuts me off. “Don’t worry, Ethan,” he says as he dabs at his chin again, clearing it this time. He shapes his lips into a sneer and stares at me. “Your mother will be there.”

I say nothing. I know there is no point in arguing. Timothy’s gaze is triumphant as I nod and say to my son, “Yes, Ethan. I’ll take care of it.”

His job done with me, Timothy turns his attention to the girls and scolds them for trying to hide their unwanted peas in their napkins. They pout and finish their meal in silence. He is training them in the ways of submission.

He looks once more at me. “I almost forgot,” he says. “Ida Thompson wants you to bake five mini loaves of your banana bread for the bake sale tomorrow.”

“When am I supposed to have time to make them?” I ask. “I still need to help Ethan with his homework, give the girls their bath, and wash the dishes tonight.”

Timothy’s eyes narrow. The familiar sneer crosses his face again. “Relax, Lydia,” he

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says, that damn smirk dancing on his lips. “It’s not like you have to feed five thousand people.”

I do not reply. I recognize the cold threat in my husband’s eyes. I finish my meal in silence. After Timothy retreats to his office to work on his next sermon, I help my son with his homework, bathe my daughters, put the children to bed, and wash the dishes. And of course, I bake the bread.

Now I lie in my bed, alone, surrounded by darkness. My alarm clock ticks the minutes away beside me. I remember, and I wonder, and I wait.

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*The Father.*

I mourn for my children. I watch, helpless, voiceless, as my husband instructs them to adhere to his archaic, patriarchal beliefs. Instead of bedtime stories of fairy tales and knights in shining armor, my children hear of Biblical parables and a murdered carpenter nailed to a wooden cross.

The father will punish and condemn, judge and accuse. He will teach his children the ways of the religion he preaches, a religion that rejects imagination and enforces conformity to its rules and rituals. A religion that drowns you in the name of salvation. The father will be the one to submerge his children under the weight of empty promises.

But what was my husband before he was a father? Sometimes the present obscures the view of the past. I see his faults now and wonder how I didn’t back then. It’s been over a decade since the first time I saw Timothy, at his father’s church one bleak Sunday morning. Timothy likes to think God brought us together that day, in the holiest of houses, but I know that is not true. I let him believe what he wants. But the only reason I’d gone to the church that day was

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because a friend had dragged me there. My mouth still tasted like sandpaper, the memory of stale beer I'd consumed at an anti-Vietnam war rally the night before on campus.

During the sermon, to which I paid little attention, I caught him staring at me. He was handsome then, though his light brown hair was already thinning. His eyes twinkled despite their darkness. After the service, he approached me as I stood waiting for my friend to return from the bathroom. During our brief conversation, I found myself attracted to his voice. It was a preacher's voice - earnest, smooth, convincing.

"Did you enjoy the sermon?" he asked me after we had introduced ourselves.

"It was wonderful," I lied as I studied the depths of his strange, sparkling eyes.

"I hope I can lift up a congregation as well as my father someday," he mused aloud, more to himself than to me. He grinned at me, revealing clean white teeth.

"I'm sure you will," I replied.

"I'm sure you could lift up a room as well," Timothy said. I blushed, surprised by the compliment. "When I saw you walk in this morning, I couldn't take my eyes off you. God blessed you with incredible beauty."

I was nineteen and inexperienced. I had never had a boyfriend. Nor had I had any male role models in my life. My father had died before I could walk, and my mother had never remarried. She had also neglected to teach me about romantic relationships before she died of cancer when I was only twelve years old. After that I was raised by my aunt, a strict, old-fashioned woman who had never been married herself and who believed that premarital sex was a sin that she could never forgive even if God might.

That Sunday morning after church, I found myself agreeing to meet Timothy for coffee the following afternoon. He had a way of captivating me with his smile and voice, making me

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agree with anything he said, whether I believed it or not. Soon, I fell in love with him. And eventually he allowed himself to say he loved me back, under one condition: my baptism, the proof he required of my worth before he would return my love and make me his own.

Perhaps my love, my future husband and father of my children, was kinder before our marriage. Maybe he simply hid his true nature better back then. Or - and this is the thing I fear most - maybe he has always revealed his true nature to me, but I was too naïve to see it.

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These thoughts are interrupted when I think I hear a noise down the hall. I freeze, then pull the blankets tighter around me. I marvel at this familiar fear, astonished and repulsed at the same time by its force.

When is the moment the innocent is made aware of evil? I listen intently but hear nothing. The house is silent, so silent it feels empty. I relax, only slightly, and allow my thoughts to wander out of the confines of my imprisoned mind.

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*The Son*

Ethan was a mistake. His arrival came before I was ready, when I was only twenty. Timothy and I had been together less than a year. It was the summer before I was to begin my third year in art school, where I was attending on a scholarship. Timothy was twenty-five and about to replace his father as reverend of their church. The elder reverend had made plans to move out west, where he and Timothy's mother resided until they died in a car accident seven years later.

His father was livid when Timothy confessed our sins to him. He made us sit in his living room to discuss what we would do. Timothy and his father stared at me without saying anything

for several moments. His mother sat next to her husband on the couch, staring at the floor. She said nothing throughout the entire conversation. I sat alone on the other side of the room, curled over my belly.

Timothy's father finally spoke. "You two will get married as soon as possible. That is the only option. I do not want people to look at my grandchild and know it was conceived in sin."

Timothy said nothing in defense of our love or our future child. Ever since he had found out I was pregnant, he had become distant towards me, refusing to kiss me, looking at me as though I was the reason for his downfall. My hurt turned to anger as I stared at the two of them, the elder reverend and his child casting judgment from the ugly plaid couch.

"Your son didn't seem to think it was sinful at the time," I said. Timothy stared at me in a way that frightened me. I saw him clench his fists. His father's jaw tightened.

"I know my son was led into temptation by you," he snarled. "Now he cannot leave you. You will be married. That is final." He stood up from the couch, grabbing his wife's hand, pulling her along with him. They left the room. Timothy and I sat on opposite sides of the room, staring at each other in silence.

I had no other options. After my aunt found out I was pregnant, she had refused to speak to me, let alone help me. What else was I to do with a child on the way and no other means of support? Abortion wouldn't be made legal until a couple years later – and even if it were, it would not have been an option for me. How could I face Timothy knowing that in his mind, I had murdered an innocent child? The only thing worse than an unplanned pregnancy was a planned execution of the mistake. I never returned to school. Any dreams I'd had of becoming a painter or professor of art had vanished the moment I saw the positive pink cross on the pregnancy test.

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Timothy and I were married two months later, in September. I couldn't believe that no one questioned why our "premature" child, born in April, weighed in at a healthy eight pounds, six ounces. But who would doubt the word of a reverend and his wife?

Benjamin's conception had not been planned either. Sometimes, I suppose, certain forces have your fate laid out before you in such a way that you are powerless to resist. Often, as I stare at my youngest child, I wonder how something so beautiful can come from something so ugly.

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What secrets does a reverend's wife possess? I myself have three, a kind of holy trinity of hidden truths and lies. One of these secrets is shared with the reverend himself. The others, I keep hidden, and I wonder if, and when, and how my husband will ever discover them. For now I hold onto them. In late hours such as these, as I lie alone in my bed, one of these secrets haunts me. The other, I call my saving grace.

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*"The words of his mouth were smoother than butter, but war was in his heart." Psalms 55:21.*

I have four children now, but I gave birth to five. Susanna had a twin sister, Adah.

One hot, dry summer day, a few months before the twins' third birthday, Timothy and I took the children down to the river. Timothy wanted to sit alone on the riverbank to think about a sermon he was planning. He hid in his Bible as the children and I splashed in the shallow edge of the water.

Beth wanted ice cream from the shop that was just down the road from the river. I told her to ask her father.



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“You don’t need any,” Timothy said after she pled her case to him.

Ethan approached his father. “I kind of want some, too, Dad,” he said. “Would it be all right if Beth and I share a small one?”

Timothy smiled at his son. “As long as it’s small,” he said. He turned to me. “I’ll watch the twins while you drive them up there.”

I nodded and kissed Susanna and Adah goodbye. “I’ll be right back,” I told them. I left them on the grassy bank picking dandelions.

I was gone no more than thirty minutes. I paid little attention to an ambulance that raced past the ice cream shop as I ordered a small sundae for Beth and Ethan. When we returned to the river, the ambulance was parked near the water, lights flashing. Onlookers from neighboring houses, including the mousy woman who had let my husband in her kitchen to call for help, crowded the bank.

“What the hell happened?” I cried as I struggled against Timothy to run up to the covered stretcher in the ambulance.

“I was trying to read to them,” he said, “and it took me just a second to realize they had gotten up and wandered away....”

“They’re two years old,” I screamed, still fighting to reach my still and silent child. “Why would you read the Bible to them? They can’t understand!”

The reverend continued to explain what had happened. “They ran off down to the water, so I went after them,” he said. “Susanna tripped and fell. By the time I had picked her up to make sure she was all right, Adah had already.... I couldn’t get to her in time.”

So he reached Susanna in time. But Adah lay helpless, submerged.

In this way did the daughter drown in her reverend father’s ideas of truth.

After Adah's death I made Timothy sleep in his office. How could I share a bed with the man who had let my daughter drown? For several months he accepted my silence, my anger, my denial of him. But patience is a virtue my husband never learned.

I lay alone in my bed one night, still numb from what had happened. I heard a noise down the hall. Footsteps. My door opened, admitting in a sliver of light from the hallway. The reverend slithered in the door and shut it softly behind him.

The mattress sagged as he sat next to me. I lay as silent and still as Adah in her grave.

"I want another child," he said. After realizing I was not going to respond to him, he continued talking. "I know you're hurt, Lydia. I am, too. We both loved her. But we need to try to pick up the pieces and move on. She's with the Lord now."

"Leave me alone."

"Lydia, I've been patient. Just let me stay in here with you tonight."

"Go away, Timothy."

His voice, which had been smooth, almost soothing, turned angry. "I haven't been with you since before it happened."

I said nothing. A heavy silence hovered over and between us. I waited for him to leave. Suddenly I felt his breath on my ear, a low, persistent hiss.

"Don't you remember what it says in the Bible, Lydia? Ephesians 5:22. "*Wives, submit yourselves unto your husbands.*" His dark eyes, which had once held light, stared back at me like empty caverns.

"Timothy, please don't," I pleaded, horrified by the thought of what he was about to do, unwilling to believe he was capable of such evil. Yet in my heart I knew it was useless to try to

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resist.

The reverend's rough hands rolled me over onto my belly. His knee shoved my thighs apart. I felt the shame as he pushed my nightgown up around my hips and pulled my underwear down to my ankles. He was then on top of me, sinking me down into the mattress. As he forced his way inside me, my face lay smothered in the pillows. Panic overwhelmed me as I gasped for breath, seeking oxygen. I was drowning under the weight of the reverend's sin.

In this way did the reverend's wife beget him a son.

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I never know when he'll come into my room. My guard is always up, like an animal being stalked by its predator. Every night I wait until my instincts tell me it's safe to close my eyes and fall into troubled sleep, where the monster still somehow reaches me.

Leaving my husband is not an option; I know he would fight me to the death to retain custody of our children, and I fear he would win. And even if we were given joint custody, what would the father do to his children, what lies would he tell them, when I was not there to protect them? I stay for my children. I stay in the hope that my presence will comfort them when their father accuses them of being sinners. I stay so they will know unconditional love.

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### *The Holy Ghost*

After I had Benjamin, I began taking the pill. I use the allowance Timothy gives me each month to pay for it. I found a pharmacy two towns over that accepts cash and grants anonymity. Timothy, of course, is unaware. I hide the evidence in a place he would never think to look. As a wedding present, he gave me a Bible, which I keep safely tucked away high on my bookshelf; he thinks this is so it does not get damaged.

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The day I began taking the medicine, I took down the Bible and carved out a space between the pages just big enough for the pill package. *Hollow be Thy name*, I could not help but think as I carefully cut away the pages with a carving knife.

So now the monster can use me as he pleases. I will submit as he desires. I will lie still and allow his weight to press me down. I am safe in the knowledge that I will never give the reverend another child. I am saved by an entity he cannot see.

My saving grace.

This other secret, I have kept since before our marriage.

Timothy often speaks of the first time he knew he loved me. My baptism. “You were made beautiful as my father submerged you under the water,” he says. “When you came back onto the shore, your tears of joy for your new life affirmed my love for you.”

What Timothy does not know is that as I listened to the elder reverend recite hollow, meaningless passages in my ear, I realized I would never believe in this religion. I was filled with panic as the reverend began to bend me backwards into the water. I took one last breath before I went under, feeling the cool water against my skin. Just beneath the surface, I opened my eyes to try to see the sun floating over me like a ghost. The light of my new life, my new religion, hovered unreachable and dim above me. I emerged from the water seconds later, feeling an emptiness I had never known before.

As I trudged up the river bank to my future husband, my tears were not from the joy of feeling reborn. I cried because I had witnessed the death of myself, left freedom and truth drowning in the water behind me, submerged in the darkness, sinking into a deep, unfathomable nothingness.

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