

Elijah Ascended

Elijah's fish was dead on floor under the mantle. It was a deep maroon beta with a dark blue tail, and it was dead with water scattered around it. He looked up at the lonely sunken castle left in the fish bowl, the colored marbles of ocean floor. The gorilla he'd dropped in for fun was a little fuzzy with algae. Everybody but Elijah had ignored the fish. In his head or out loud when no one was home, he'd called it a variety of vulgar, playful names because it was the last living thing he could be his self around and say juvenile shit to.

Often Elijah had called it Bud because that's what the fish was to him truly. In their time together never once had Bud forgone obligations for selfish reasons, or doubted Elijah's worth or sincerity. He would just blink, mouth O's, and storm around his bowl. When the family was out of earshot, Elijah had passed much time with Bud, complaining, or saying curse words to get them out of his system, or he would try to find answers to his big questions in the way Bud swished his tail.

Elijah picked up his friend, held him in his palm, ran a finger over his tiny scales. He told himself that dudes running for mayor in small towns don't cry over a dead fish. That being a husband and stepfather and teacher prohibited him from crying over a dead fish. It did not stop him from wanting to, or from shedding two small tears that he quickly smeared across his cheeks and chalked up to allergies if anybody was watching. He wondered why his little man would take his own life like this. At the pet store the attendants told Elijah that betas have a yen for going airborne on any random occasion. But Bud had never even lipped the surface of the water before. As far as Elijah knew,

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he'd never once tried to taste air from curiosity. His mind ran to sabotage, murder, before thinking that was a silly thing to think.

He walked the fish to bathroom, but to flush his friend and send him to such a nasty grave turned Elijah's stomach. He saw himself in the mirror holding Bud and looking utterly beat up. He wondered about a better sendoff. He took a breath and straightened himself, reminded himself he was a candidate for public office and must have the balls for quick, creative decision. He walked to the kitchen, grabbed a mason jar and lid from the cabinet, filled it with water, dropped in his friend and screwed it shut. Walking back through the house, he took the gorilla from the fish bowl and added it to the jar with Bud, carried the package to the yard and buried it in the crumbly, mulchy dirt under an oak tree. He tamped down the grave and wondered whether he should say some words, but an out-loud eulogy for a fish seemed like a little much, so he tried to just feel good about their time together, but he couldn't quite get that right. He ended up sighing big and turning around.

And there stood the way, way blond, not exactly heavily, but precisely made-up fourteen-year old Sierra staring at Elijah with her dead eyes. It startled Elijah enough that he yelled out, "Shit." Sierra didn't blink. She stared as Elijah squirmed over his curse word. He closed his eyes and said, "Don't tell your mother I cussed."

Sierra leaned her head to the side, perfect wavy hair listing in the breeze. In so many ways Sierra seemed the antithesis of her mother, Charlotte. Elijah saw Charlotte as worldly, kind, eccentric, exciting. He got an old-soul, wise feeling from her, only partly to do with the fifteen-year age difference that separated them. Long before Elijah had come along, she'd had a child out of wedlock in this small, judgey town when she was

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plenty old enough to know better, after she'd gone off and gotten a liberal education, which was a whole other thing, and she had never cared what anybody said about it. She was an artistic woman that wrote decent enough poems, made shit out of found objects, painted well, and wore flowy, complicated, slightly outrageous things.

Elijah fell for her right when they met. There'd been a county wide education forum on motivating students early in Elijah's first school year, not long after he'd moved there. Of the dozens of teachers that could have taken part, Elijah was one of three do-gooders that showed up from the high school. Charlotte was one of maybe thirty parents with enough sense to care about their child's learning. They bumped into each other during the meet and greet and got to talking lit and the importance of reading with care. Then she went on this big thing about how "college" it was for him to use the word *bildungsroman* in casual conversation, and he lost his mind in love with her.

She forced Elijah to grow up in ways that he was wild about and that he despised sometimes, but in general he felt a distressingly deep love for the woman. He found his feeling for her not necessarily waning, but certainly different since she'd found the Lord, went in wholeheartedly, adjusted her whole being and bearing, and outlawed sinful behavior in the house. And there was no one on earth that knew Elijah's creeping-in despair except for Bud.

Sierra looked past her stepfather then back to him with no emotion. Whatever she was wearing, Elijah thought it was too much. Bright, tight, short. All of that. "I don't care if you say 'shit'," she said.

He winced. "I swear, if your mother hears you."

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“I’ll tell her where I heard it.” She nodded toward Elijah’s fish grave. “Are you hiding something?” she asked.

He’d know this girl five years, never done a thing wrong to her. Elijah always did what he and Charlotte considered was his best. Still, Sierra’s go-to with him was suspicion and whatever anarchy she could get away with. She was arch all the time. Just arch as shit. Charlotte had been something of a Montessori mom and had let her child learn manners at her own pace. Along the way she must have come across arcane scriptures on governance. Kids in Elijah’s senior English classes, three and four years older than Sierra, would ask, “*She’s your daughter?*” and make a face like they felt sorry for him. He got the sense that Sierra not only ran 9th grade, but also held an alarming measure of sway several grades over her level. And she could defy and undermine Elijah in cunning ways, without a whisper of obviousness, without a whiff of hesitation.

With the newfound religion in the house, Sierra was finding policies even she couldn’t buck against without drawing fire: a stricter dress code, no more cellphone until she could drive, no boyfriends in her room, politeness as the norm. So Elijah and the girl had settled into a tacit understanding where she would be civil in front of Charlotte, but the girl would be recalcitrant when her mother was off at church or something. Elijah pictured himself sort of filling the role for Sierra that Bud had filled for him, allowing her to be what she wanted, and that it was the most generous thing he could do for his stepdaughter.

“The fish died,” he said.

She looked past him again and didn’t say anything.

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Elijah said, “Under vaguely suspicious circumstances.” He just said it. He didn’t think he meant anything by it, or meant to imply to Sierra that he thought she had a hand in Bud’s death. She turned her dead eyes on him, though, and said, as if she were commenting on something bland as the place of whole grains in a healthy diet, “If I wanted to kill your fish, I’d do it in front of you.” She pulled a cellphone from a pocket and started texting.

“Where did you get that?” he asked.

“A friend.”

“Put it away. Your mother is going to take that from you.”

Without looking up she said, “Sucks that fish died. I’ve seen you talking to it. You two must’ve been close.”

His eyes got wide. She looked up from her phone and said, “Everybody needs somebody to talk to, right?” With that she turned and walked back to the house, not looking up from her phone again. This wasn’t fighting the city council for more park restoration dollars or convincing constituents that the new rodeo arena could wait until the roads in the poor parts of town had been repaved. This wasn’t even settling a class down after some girl beat the daylight out of her group partner with a shoe. This was getting lorded over by a little girl.

Elijah was running in a field of three for the small town’s mayor spot, and he looked like a chump doing it. Around town he was variously accused of being too young, too liberal,

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too city-like, too not-from-here, too residually college-like. The other two guys split ninety percent of the votes between them. The meager little left for Elijah were mostly congregants of Charlotte's new church. He called it Charlotte's even though he went there, too. Several months before he officially threw his name in to run, Elijah begged Charlotte to come appear religious with him. He knew that not having a church home would make getting a single vote impossible.

"No, I won't go," she'd said on a Saturday night while they sat in bed. "Those same people have been jerks to me ever since Sierra. No. Hell, before that even."

"It'll look half-assed if I go by myself."

"Who gives a damn what they think, Elijah? You're the best candidate with the best ideas. The dummies should at least be able to see that without me or you having to play church."

"You know they won't listen to me if they think I'm a heathen. And you were the one convinced me to be political anyway. Least you could do is go to church a little."

She raised her eyebrows and looked down her nose at him until he shut up about it, turned off his light, and rolled over.

Despite all her hard acting, the next morning she woke him up wearing her best, least wild dress saying, "Come the fuck on."

There was no fighting or dragging her to church after that. The next week she volunteered tagging along, then spent the next days with a weird, out-there look on her face. Week after that, she heard the call. Elijah had never been as stunned as when she left his side in the pew and made her way to the steps before the altar to pray.

Something in the worship or the live-right messages grabbed hold of Charlotte, and after

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that, she fell into the rhythms of church life and devotion, as if this were the thing she'd been waiting for to make her whole, to complete who she was meant to be all along. She still went on Sundays when Elijah wanted a day off. She started going Wednesday nights. The cursing stopped and prayers before meals began. Little meek ones at first, increasing in precision and fervor along the way. Her drinking dropped from moderate to one glass of wine a week. She sought forgiveness for her sins and prayed for the salvation of her family. It was a small boon for the campaign, as boon as boon got for something so petered out from the start, but the faith affected his home life in disturbing ways. Where home had been a haven for him, where he could truly cut loose from the restrictions of the town and job, it was instead just another place to live with a filter. Lewd jokes and coarse words stung Charlotte. Adventurous sex had become a mockery of lovemaking's intents and purposes. He became stuck in a loop of fake campaign smiles, foul language being bitten off the tip of his tongue, and buried impulses.

Charlotte tried often to talk to Elijah about it. Whether to convert him or just parse the mysteries of her new God, he didn't know. He'd go along with it for a few minutes then lean into an excuse of exhaustion or a headache so he could politely cover-up of his complete disinterest. He'd registered the tiny changes in her face each time he shut her down, the range from disappointed to cold knowing his game.

The town was small enough that Elijah could visit each home, knocking on the doors and asking for a vote. On weekends he took the family with him, but he wondered what good

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any of it did him. Each house seemed to have the same answer: a sad smile, tilted head, and apologies that they were voting for someone else. Whenever he could actually get inside a house, Elijah would turn on his prepared speech about improving the lives of the poor, crime reductions, a farmers market, community driven effort. People would listen politely enough, but he could see himself struggling in the reflections in their eyes. Charlotte would often break into his ignored dialogue and play the church card, how he had single-handedly turned Charlotte on a righteous course after years of sin. As much as it skeeved him out, this would gain him traction with most any voter he faced. They would at least feign interest in his proposals once they heard he was devoted to family and God.

“Elijah ascended,” Charlotte would tell people, glowing with the light of heaven, turning the Biblical Elijah’s life and death, his flaming chariot into heaven, into her own metaphor and slogan for a withering campaign.

Sierra would survey the people and their living rooms with no expression, but turn into a different person when the voters talked to her.

“And what grade are you in, darling?” they’d ask.

“I’m in ninth this year, but I can’t wait be a senior so I can be in Elijah’s class,” she’d say with a perfect smile.

“You’re such a pretty girl,” they’d say.

She would actually blush and say, “Oh, thank you so much.”

Then she would excuse herself to the restroom and set off to wander the other rooms, poking around into God knows what, while the adults talked. A few days after Bud died, she drifted into the den of a young couple’s house while Elijah was discussing

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what the town could do in the way of keeping the sides of the roads clean, and Charlotte was jumping in with church this and church that. “Hey, Dad,” she said. “You should come see their fish tank.”

Sierra never called Elijah anything. For five years she had no name for him. He didn't know how he felt about it now. He excused himself while Charlotte kept on with the couple. He heard the woman ask Charlotte where she got her blouse. He followed Sierra through the house. They walked down the hall and into a den where Elijah's eyes were drawn to a five-foot long, blue-glowing tank with vivid, spiny fish gliding around between rocks and castles. He and Sierra both were kind of mesmerized by the colors and motions. “Hell of a lot better than yours,” Sierra said.

Elijah nodded. He walked closer and watched an angelfish and lionfish avoid each other. He lost himself in the way they moved.

Sierra stood next to him. After a little she said, “Mom doesn't pay a lot of attention to me anymore.”

He looked to her, but she was staring at the fish, face glowing in cast off light of the tank, and wouldn't turn. He put his eyes back on the boxed-up fish and took a big breath. “Me either.”

He heard Charlotte say loud enough for him hear, “Well, I guess we'd better get out of your hair.” Elijah straightened himself up and turned to Sierra. “Thanks,” he said. He didn't know if he should hug her or rustle her hair or what. He wanted to do something, but he never knew what with her. She tapped on the top right corner of the tank before he had time to do anything awkward. Elijah looked and saw a dead clownfish floating at the top. He said what jumped to his mind. “They just follow you around.”

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She had a look on her face he'd never seen, an emotion stitched across it that was so strange he thought her face seemed like a calf walking for the first time, struggling with its muscles to do something it was virgin to. She looked sad. Or hurt. It was the awfulest thing. She said, "Fuck you, dude," and walked out. Elijah stood still, mouthing at the air, trying to say words. Sierra had a stomachache after that, and they all went home, done for the day.

Charlotte had been slowly taking down art pieces over the last few months. Whether it was her own work or things she had picked up over many years, they all found their way to storage and were gradually replaced one-for-one with Charlotte's personal renderings of New Testament scenes and too-sweet, inspirational pictures of peaceful houses with Bible verses written on them. A few days after Elijah sent his and Sierra's relationship to hell, he watched Charlotte take down the very last of her secular paintings and install a sappy mother-daughter thing on the living room wall. He felt like something slippery was wiggling in his hands.

Sierra glided into the room and glared at Elijah. Her eyes then passed over to her mother's doings and back to Elijah. She had an eyebrow raised and her mouth arranged itself in a petulant way, and he didn't know which of her parents she meant it for. He thought, and hated himself immediately for it, that a common enemy might be the thing that could bring him back to Sierra's graces.

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Elijah squeezed his hand tight to steel himself and said, “Not your best work, doll.”

Charlotte whipped around from her painting in her capris, button-down blouse, and tennis shoes.

“What’s wrong with it?” she asked.

He couldn’t say he thought it was sentimental shit or that Sierra surely thought it was dumb. “Your brushwork has gotten a little loose lately. I don’t know. You’re the painter, but don’t you think it’s a little—”

“Sloppy?” she asked.

“Well.”

Charlotte stared at him and tapped her middle finger against her leg. Elijah looked over at Sierra who was faking vacancy, staring into her pocket mirror and twirling her hair.

Charlotte’s head shook back and forth a little and she asked, “What the fuck do you know about it?” Her bad language caught them all off guard. Everybody got the big eyes. Elijah and Sierra stared blankly at Charlotte. She set her face in a rage, stepped over to Elijah, and punched him in the arm. “Jerk,” she said, and she whipped herself away in her new clothes.

Elijah didn’t move after her. He turned to Sierra who stood up, and with eyes still down in her mirror, and casually flipped him off before heading out.

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Elijah was fed up enough with the cold shoulder from one side and guerilla tactics from the other to brave what he figured might be the most goddamn horrific conversation of his life. Charlotte hadn't spoken to Elijah in forty-eight hours. She would barely be in the same room as him. She'd made a ghost of herself, moving around the house quietly, her face looking stunned and busy like she was speaking to God. At night, instead of them coming to sanctuary in their room, Elijah would wait in bed, reading or making notes for the upcoming mayoral debate while Charlotte stayed up with her Bible somewhere else. She'd slide in only after he was asleep. He felt hung out to dry, like that footprints-in-the-sand-Jesus-picture Charlotte had hanging in the bathroom, only he wasn't being carried through his hard time. He was just fucking abandoned, leaving his mark in the sand all by himself. He did, though, manage to do some humiliating and minor campaigning, poorly and alone. And he managed to prepare some debate talking points poorly and alone.

Sierra had gone completely rogue. Without her mother to run interference, she had taken to open hate acts. She whispered an array of awful words at Elijah whenever she passed him. Motherfucked him every which way. One time he had a water glass on the table, and she drifted by, held her hair back, and let drip a loogie into his drink without breaking stride. He walked in on her squeezing all his high-dollar sensitive teeth toothpaste into the toilet. She looked back when she heard him, finished what she was doing, and dropped the tube in the commode. He was in her way, and she shooed him with her hands and kept moving.

He didn't have Bud to talk him out of it or up to it. He went just in cold, no plan at all, but determined to at least make Charlotte say words. He sat next to her at the

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kitchen table. She was head down over a devotional book. Her fingers met on her brow to make a little cave over her face. She didn't speak, just kept reading. Elijah waited for what he thought was long enough for her to find a page break or finish a long paragraph.

"Charlotte," he said.

She raised one of her fingers. He waited again a full minute then said her name.

"I'm praying," she said.

Elijah started quickly and quietly tapping his finger on his leg. "Is that not something you can pause?"

Charlotte looked up and took a breath then rested her face in her hand and met his eyes. She said, in a heartbreaking and soft way, "You don't understand, do you?"

"Not even a little."

She looked off. "My church friends would say we're unequally yoked."

"I don't feel yoked, babe." He thought that was a good one. Even with all the new, weird stuff, marriage, to me, isn't work. It's generally, mostly, all, good things. He thought that was the message.

"I think that's probably the problem," she said.

"We don't have problems. We never have."

"I never needed anybody," she said quickly.

"I know."

"I didn't need you. I just liked you. I wasn't looking for anybody to take care of me and Sierra."

"I know."

"It's different now."

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“How is it different? What does church have to do with that?”

She stood up and started walking around in her sensible clothes. “It’s not church, Eli. I mean, that’s something to do with it, but it’s not the big thing.”

Elijah watched her walking. “What’s the big thing then? Tell me that.”

“I *need* now, and it feels weird. I need things you’re not giving me.”

“Need what? What am I not giving you?”

“I’m not sure yet. Look,” she said and sat down. “You’re wonderful. I’m so proud of who you are and what you’re doing. You’re great to me and Sierra. But something has changed in me. I think church is a part of it. Or maybe a symptom of it. I don’t know, but it’s real to me, even if I don’t really understand it or have a way to name it.”

Elijah chewed his cheek. He was tired of uncertainty, tired of feeling cheated, tired of waiting and seeing. He had a full three seconds to think about it before he said it. He weighed it out and looked ahead in time and still couldn’t hold it back. “Lord Jesus won’t just tell you?” he asked.

“Well, that’s unacceptable.”

“Excuse me?”

She stood up. “You’re being petty. And you’re mocking me.”

“I am not.”

“You said that like a little boy would.”

Elijah leaned back in his chair, looked up, muffled his mouth with his hands and said, “Fuck” three times. He composed himself and looked at her. “I’m not trying to be petty. I’m just looking to get this.”

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“Me, too,” she said quietly. They both stared at other things in the room. “I’m trying to do this genuinely. Like the right way.”

“Shouldn’t we work together then? The Bible is real big on marriage, right?”

“I think I’ve got to do me first. I don’t know if that’s right, but it’s what I feel. You’re not ready. Clearly.”

“Oh. Good. Ok. Wonderful.”

“I’m sorry.”

Elijah said, “This isn’t exactly the best time for me, you know. I could stand some more understanding out of you. You’ve gone weird. Running for mayor is stupid. Sierra hates me. I don’t have anybody lately. Jesus. I mean, my fish died.”

She sighed and said, “Yeah. I know.”

Her tone got to him, bothered him, touched something tender and aggravated. It was suggestive, almost, of dark behavior. His mind did wild flips. Did she know how and why and what he spoke to Bud? Did it offend her new self? He glared. “Did you kill my fish?”

She rolled her eyes huge as she could. “Are you kidding?”

He flopped back in his chair. “I don’t know anymore.”

“Whatever,” she said standing up. “I’m going to bed. How about you sit here and think about the silly and desperate question you just asked me.”

He remembered stuff instead, like when they first met and he was letting loose his big time ideas to a sympathetic ear, and she said, smiling electric, “You should be in charge one day.” How she had, over the years, praised things about him, his compassion for his students, his adaptability, his waking maturity. How she fostered his good and

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natural qualities he had and helped shape him into somebody he felt was worthy of position to do great good with. How he grew from her own bravery after years of facing down and never blanching at those who had run her down. How she made him feel worth a damn and made him worth a damn. How all this added up in her mind eventually that he should go for mayor of this shit heel town. How just when he put his hat in the ring, he'd just started feeling good and solid.

He didn't even know why the stupid thing had to happen. There hadn't been a debate in this town the last twenty years, but some jackass thought it'd be cute to dress Elijah and the other dudes up in red and white pin stripe suits, straw hats, and make them stand on actual stumps to give the town their plans. He almost puked in his lap on the drive over.

It was as bad as possible. The two old dudes he was up against, instead of arguing with each other, they turned all their nasty on Elijah. He couldn't string together five words without one of them breaking in with a God, guns, no taxes flash point that was always met with applause. They were basically the same person. They kept calling Elijah, who had a perfectly reasonable and adult haircut, "My long-hair opponent over there" and snickering to each other every time they did. It was embarrassing. It was outright collusion. They questioned his all of a sudden newfound religion, and Charlotte wasn't even there to defend him. They loved the show. They strutted around in their pin stripes, tipped their hats to ladies, played exactly the part they were supposed to. Everybody ate it up.

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Towards the end of it, not long after he decided not to say another word, Elijah scanned over the crowd. Sweating in his dumb suit, ashamed to be alive, standing on a ridiculous hunk of dead wood having no clue what to do with his hands and nowhere to hide, he saw Sierra sitting alone, watching him squirm. He couldn't tell about the look on her face this far off, whether it was a smirk or not.

With the two old dudes still debating, mostly agreeing, he stepped off the stage, hat in hand, and nobody noticed. They didn't stop the show for him, but just kept on as is, his humiliation complete enough to satisfy. He walked down the center aisle toward Sierra. She stood before he got to her and headed out the back door. Elijah found her in the parking lot clicking away at her phone. It wasn't quite dark yet.

“How'd you get here?” he asked.

She didn't raise her head from her phone. “Mom dropped me off.”

“She didn't want to stay?”

“No. She said you two were fighting about religious differences, among other things.”

“She'll just tell you anything, won't she?”

Sierra kept tapping on her phone. Elijah looked out over the tops of the cars, blew air into his cheeks then let it out. He poked her in the shoulder. “You glad you came?”

“Shit no. I only came to see you embarrass yourself, but that was all the way too much.”

Elijah nodded his head. “I don't think I'll be campaigning anymore.”

Sierra looked at him. “You sure?”

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He was genuinely shocked she'd made eye contact with him. "I thought you hated going around with me and your mom."

She looked back to her phone. "I do. But I didn't mind helping you."

He watched her, a complete mystery to him. Neither of them said anything for a minute. It was nice right there, that part of town. Christmas had long since passed, but the century-old buildings downtown still had lights on their roof lines and awnings. The small theatre had a glowing sign about a play some local actors were soon to put on. It was charming and sweet and nostalgic looking, if you could ignore the long empty shops.

"And fuck those dudes in there," Sierra said.

Elijah smiled, laughed even. It felt like forever since he'd done that. Then he asked, "You ready to go home?"

"Let's go get another fish," she said, face bright in her phone's light.

He looked at night drawing down on them and smiled again and said, "I think it's too late for that. Let's go eat somewhere."

Sierra looked him over and asked, "Are you going to wear that stupid shit?"

Elijah straightened his cuffs and hat and tried a twirl on his heels but ended up stumbling backward. Sierra smiled, and Elijah couldn't think of another time he'd made that happen. She quickly reset her face back to normal as if she remembered herself.

They walked to the car and got in. Elijah pulled them out of the parking lot to the highway. They drove through the small town looking for whatever restaurant looked the best to them both. There wasn't a lot to choose from.

Sierra asked, "What are we going to do if Mom leaves you for Jesus?"

He sighed and said in all seriousness, "Let's pray it doesn't come to that."