

ZORA

I used to imagine myself as a tiny shoot on a tall brown tree, the gnarled roots of that tree tangled and twisted beneath the black earth. Our roots run so deep, my family can trace its origins back generations. To my great, great, great grandfather who followed the drinking gourd all the way to freedom. To slave ships with lyrical names that belied the horrors taking place in their wide bellies. To the shores of the west coast of Africa where one of our own returned, a single, dark, shining prince, unfettered by imposed forgetfulness, refusing to relinquish his name.

We are a tree with roots and long-limbed branches reaching skyward—a tree with tiny green shoots like me, emerging from something solid and substantial. When we are in season, we scent the air with our bright, fragrant blossoms.

But this Sunday morning I feel alienated from the dignity and hardiness of my ancestors. I don't feel like a Psalm 1:3 sistah—a tree planted by the rivers of water, that bringeth forth her fruit in her season. Her leaf also shall not wither; and whatsoever she doeth shall prosper.

And that was just the King James Version. Don't make me pull out my *Amplified Bible* and quote that Scripture three times fast.

Sometimes I long for that old-time religion that's good enough for me. No, I take that back—I long for it all the time now.

I scan the sanctuary. I need God to speak to me today. For *real*. That's one reason I'm sitting in the third row. Besides being Daddy's "amen" corner (the reason I sit here most Sundays), the first three

rows make up what we call Prophet's Row on the sly. In this esteemed section, you're more likely to get "a Word" from God. I've received them on several occasions; I was told three different times that the Lord had a husband for me, and one prophet went so far as to say that he'd be a godly man with a pastoral call. I stopped sitting there for six months after that.

Once, a prophetess visited us at Light of Life Christian Center and said God told her to give a woman in our congregation the silver fox coat right off her back. I know the recipient: Ms. Pamela Darden, a squat, obese woman with a widow's mite, a bad wig, and three hefty daughters. Not one of the Darden women can keep a man, even if they shackle him to their bedposts, and it has nothing to do with their weight. They possess an air of quiet desperation, only it refuses to stay quiet and they end up making a big stink of their manlessness at every opportunity that arises.

The Darden women don't have much, and Ms. Pamela, the breadwinner, still takes care of her grown daughters while they "wait on the Lord." But Ms. Pamela remains faithful. She tithes and gives offerings far above her means, grasping for the promised but ever-eluding hundred-fold return on her investment. She's like a compulsive gambler tugging on the sleeve of a one-armed bandit like it was God's own. Just one more silver fox coat. Or maybe a house. Or maybe help my girls get a job, God. Send me a Word, and money, money, money. *Puh-leese, Lawd.*

I'm feeling you today, Ms. Pamela, every desperate Puh-leese, Lawd, puh-leese, Lawd, puh-leeeeeeees! I actually admire your crazy desperation. It takes courage to be that honest with God. That needy. My parents groomed me to not need anything.

Trade ya.

And Ms. Pamela, I've been watching you. I know you got behind in your car note, scrambling to pay all those online dating service bills your girls stuck you with when they believed more in Match.com and eHarmony than their mama's hard work. I know if you thought somebody needed it, you'd give them the silver fox right off your back. I know you've lived a hard life, and you've had more than your share of boyfriends after your husband left you, and you're still a little twisted from it. You still love rather freely, only now you love for Christ alone. It's *how* you love for Him that's so extravagant. You show up for whoever needs Him, with whatever you can give. That widow's mite of yours goes farther than the fattest wallets of some of our wealthiest members, including Daddy. You love Jesus like you don't have a bit of sense.

God bless you, Ms. Pamela Darden. God help you in this place.

Service hasn't started yet, so I step away from my chair over to the second row where Ms. Pamela and her daughters sit now. They don't sit in the third row anymore, upgrading, probably, to sit closer to "the anointing." I hope that works out for them. I tap Ms. Pamela on the shoulder. Fortunately, she's at the end of the row so I don't have to step over her daughters, Tessa, Vernice, and Noelle.

I reach out to give her a hug. For all the hard edges of her life, her face, at least in church, is only softness and light. She takes me in with her warm brown eyes and draws me into cinnamon-colored big mama arms. Gives me an embrace scented with baby powder and rose water. There is a bit of hope for me to hold on to in that squeeze.

There's this facade I'm forced to endure, that everybody loves *The Bishop's* daughter, whether they do or not. And then there is Ms. Pamela, who actually loves me.

"How you doin', Miss Zora?"

"I'm good, Ms. Pamela."

God will forgive me for that lie if He forgives all the liars here who claim they have faith, healing, and prosperity when they're riddled with doubt, sick, and broke day after day. At least I hope He will.

"How are you this morning?" I ask her with sincerity, not trying to gauge whether or not she's outconfessing, -believing, and -receiving me.

She clears her throat, the resulting rumble a frightening death rattle that forces my hand to my own throat. "Girl, I'm healed in the name of Jesus," she says.

Which means she's sick. She wheezes instead of breathes, follows it with a raspy cough that sounds as if her lungs are about to come out of her throat.

"Are you okay, Ms. Pamela?"

A breathy, "I'm healed by the stripes of Jesus."

She can barely get the name of Jesus out before she's seized by a coughing fit.

"Have you seen a doctor?"

"I have faith." Another coughing fit.

I think she's going to have an asthma attack with that faith.

She takes my hand and squeezes it. "Just touch and agree with me in prayer, baby."

She releases my hand. I've touched her, but I don't agree. I'm about to tell her that I will take her to the hospital. I'll take her right now, but then she smiles at me.

“Worship is about to start. You better go take your seat. Remember what happened to me in that seat? Don’t want to miss your blessing.”

Worship? We’re not about to worship. We’re about to start singing the *Songs of Faith* that our worship leader must have seen on a late night TV infomercial after he got tired of watching reruns of *The X-Files*.

I shuffle back to my seat, praying diligently for Ms. Pamela’s healing. I pray that somehow I can forget the craziness of the conversation we just had. She’s going to die of pneumonia. What is she doing? What am I?

I want to fly away from here, and I’ll put her on my back and fly her out with me.

*One of these mornings bright and fair
I want to cross over to see my Lord.
Going to take my wings and fly the air.
I want to cross over to see my Lord.*

Now that’s a real song of faith.

Don’t you go singing Negro spirituals, Zora. Don’t you do that during the ridiculous *Songs of Faith*.

We are fifteen hundred strong this morning, and that’s just the first service, an ocean of people standing in front of their chairs—not pews. It looks like a conference hall in here, with a cross. We don’t do *church*. We are a *Christian Center*, and I’d like to know who thought of that. I mean, once upon a time, the black church really was a *center* of life, civil and social justice, and community change, along with worship. But that sure isn’t what’s going on here.

We worship—a generous description—in decidedly uninspired spaces, complete with every amenity, including a coffee bar and a bookstore and gift shop, which sells a multitude of booklets with titles like “Victory in the Tongue,” “Confess Your Way to Health,” and “God Prosper Me.” A concession stand even sells overpriced junk food, just like a *conference hall!*

I remember visiting my grandfather’s church—a real church—as a little girl and holding a hymnbook that I was too young to read. I remember hearing the old folks singing songs they didn’t have to look at the pages to know.

But the songs I’m hearing now aren’t *my* songs of faith. These songs make my eyes roll back to the whites, and I can’t believe we’ve actually adopted the unforgettable ditties—now flashing before me in PowerPoint letters as big as my head—for *worship*.

At least we have a bangin’ choir that responds with great swelling voices to whatever our Kirk-Franklin-wannabe music director yells at them: *Come on! Come on! Nah! Ha! Uh, uh, here we go nah!*

Should I even complain? Aren’t these songs musical reminders, as if we need it, that God wants us to prosper and be in good health, even as our souls prosper?

Isn’t that what God wants?

Oh, for a rousing chorus of “Go Down, Moses.”

Let my people go.

We need a Moses in the house, all right, instead of these forked-tongue prophets of prosperity, their gold-weighted backs permanently curved toward offering baskets, reeking of new money

and the ache of unrelenting hunger. It always strikes me as odd how these self-appointed messengers of God always pronounce *blessings* on us, mostly material ones. Not one of them has said, “Hey, deacon, you need to stop sleeping with the secretary.” Nobody tells the youth group that God has a problem with the abortions half the girls use as birth control.

Now mind you, Light of Life Christian Center wholeheartedly condemns these unfortunate lifestyle choices, as LLCC’s PR materials clearly state. But people have a way of being human. And humans have a way of sinning. Besides, who around here has time to teach anyone about living holy when we’re all chasing abundance and a life of no lack, especially when the evidence of our *blessedness* is stuff?

And we have stuff. Lots of stuff. And we have prophets with promises of new cars and houses we’ll build from the ground up. Our dirty deeds remain hidden, obscured by all the glorious things we’ve amassed.

I wish just *one* of the songs on the screen inspired the kind of awe that would make adulterous deacons and aborting teenagers fall right on their faces. I want to fall on my face too, not so much because I’m a sinner, and I am—though we aren’t allowed to call ourselves sinners. We even changed the words to “Amazing Grace” and made ourselves “someone” instead of “wretches.” I almost fainted when I found out the real lyrics said *wretch*. No, I want to fall down before God because it has to be amazing to love and revere Him that way.

Holy, holy, holy. Lord, God almighty. That’s how they do it in heaven.

We aren’t a fall-on-your-face church, though if the choir is doin’

its thing we can shout the paint off the walls. We don't have to fall down though. That isn't necessary. We don't even have to get our expensive clothes soiled by getting slain in the Spirit anymore. We are little gods. We confess not our sins, but promises, and we shall have whatsoever we say.

Jesus' word to the *church*—not the Christian Center—in Laodicea in the book of Revelation?

Because thou sayest, I am rich, and increased with goods, and have need of nothing; and knowest not that thou art wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked.

But I *am* rich, Jesus. My parents are crazy paid. I have everything I need, want, desire, and more. I drive a Lexus. I have the perfect, Denzel Washington look-alike boyfriend. My Kate Spade handbag cost more than my salary pays in a week—the salary I earn at my daddy's church. I'm a Black American Princess, black Ivy League educated, who wants for nothing except everything Jesus is talking about in these verses.

“I counsel thee to buy of me gold tried in the fire, that thou mayest be rich; and white raiment, that thou mayest be clothed, and that the shame of thy nakedness do not appear; and anoint thine eyes with eyesalve, that thou mayest see.”

That's not the kind of thing I tend to buy when I go shopping, Lord. I don't know where to buy gold tried in the fire. Can you purchase white raiment with a platinum Visa? Is that eyesalve available at Nordstrom?

“As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten: be zealous therefore, and repent.”

Did you just say, “*Repent*”? Like John the Baptist?

Sorry, Lord. We never get that kind of prophecy around here. The people won't give a good love offering for "a Word" like that. Repent implies we are wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked, and that does not jibe with our statement of Faith, with a capital *F*.

Oh, God. I can't stand another moment in this pseudosanctuary country club. I need to go to a hospital for the spiritually ill.

My bad. We aren't allowed to be ill at LLCC. Sickness is evidence that you don't have enough faith. Isn't that right, Ms. Pamela? Keep confessing until you drop dead.

What's gonna happen to you, Ms. Pamela? What are we going to do? I've got to help us.

The singing finally stops. Daddy tells us to hold up our Bibles. We do this every Sunday. I repeat the words I know so well, Bible held high above my head.

"This is my Bible. I can have what it says I can have. I can be what it says I can be."

I can have what it says I can have.

Gold tried in the fire. White raiment.

I can be what it says I can be.

"As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten."

I can be rebuked. I can be chastened.

Daddy starts in on Genesis 1:28. Blessings. Fruitfulness. Multiplying. But I keep hearing Jesus talking about wretchedness, misery, and blindness.

I've gotta get out of here.

I stand up and step away from the chairs and Prophet's Row, and walk right down the center of the aisle, Daddy's voice fading from my hearing. I can sense the Plexiglas podium growing smaller and

smaller behind me, as do all his ideas about taking dominion over every living thing that moveth upon the earth.

Can he discern, with all that divine revelation he claims to have, that my heart has splintered into a thousand pieces?

In the April-sweetened air, I let myself hurt for the Laodicians I've just walked out on, and for the Laodician I've let myself become. I reach my black Lexus without comfort, praying for God to send Ms. Pamela a Word from Him, and God, please, please, please, let it be, "Go outside so Zora can take you to the emergency room."

Please, God. That ain't much to ask for.

NICKY

An old rugged cross made of maple wood that my great, great grandfather carved is the focal point of our altar at True Believer Gospel Tabernacle, and now my dad stands in front of it at the pulpit, red faced and earnest, like his father before him, and his father before him, and his father before him. This is the legacy of the Parker men.

Blah, blah, blah.

The cross is about the coolest thing we've got going. Everything goes downhill from there. From the synthetic blood-red carpet—I don't have to tell you whose blood the color is supposed to represent—to the crushed-velvet cushioned pews—a really bad idea, might I add—to the corny stained-glass windows done by the biggest drunken hack in town. I mean, if you gotta do stained glass, the least you could do is get a real artist to do it. Trite stained glass is just *wrong*. Visually, we're a mess.

And don't get me started on the message.

I know the sermon Dad is preaching so well I could give it myself, and have given it, in fact. Nobody noticed when I repeated it, either. It sounds like every other sermon he'll preach—the same phrasing, same inflection, same modulation. Truth be told, he's already recycled this exact sermon three or four times this year, and it's only April. I don't think the tree huggers had that in mind when they admonished us to reuse, but it seems to work for Dad. For us.

I look behind me, my gaze roaming around the congregation. The people look pleased as punch. I wish somebody—anybody—would shoot me in the head. The thought of my blood and brain matter flying in my dad's red face holds my interest more than his sermon.

Man, I have to stop watching all those forensic shows, but they make for great story possibilities—nothing like violent death to heat up the battle between good and evil. I always think in story. Not that anybody ever encouraged that. My parents almost burned me at the stake when I suggested the Bible is literature. I fancy myself a novelist, though God knows I'm more blocked than a nursing home population without prunes. But what I'm *not* writing interests me more than Dad's sermon. And it looks like, based on the earnest faces around me, our members are wolfing down his every word like starving dogs begging at the master's table.

I'm gonna blow. Big projectile vomiting, which I hope lands on my dad. Or maybe on the hackneyed, stained-glass scene of the anemic-looking good shepherd.

However, providence is with him. Dad, that is. Maybe with the anemic good shepherd too. Instead of regurgitating like my dad is doing, only in a different way, I decide to think about God. Now, I *could* just fantasize about what I'll do to my girlfriend once I marry

her—okay, I plan on getting a few favors once I put a rock on her finger. The mere thought of Rebecca, fair and unsullied, stirs the cauldron of lust constantly brewing in me. I ponder God for two seconds, Rebecca a full five minutes, and my ex, the stunning Brooke Bennett, for a good while longer.

I still think of Brooke fondly as a gorgeous version of the rich young ruler whom Jesus told to sell all he had and give it to the poor. Brookie wouldn't walk away heavy hearted and still rich as sin. She'd hit her knees and wash Jesus' feet with her tears. I know this. Innocent Rebecca would drop dead on the spot if she knew exactly *how well I know* Brooke, and how well she knows me. God, help us.

I met Brooke at Berkeley, I the prodigal son, and she a Bible thumper with a social conscience. Suddenly Bible Boy, who I'd heartily abandoned, returned with great zeal, and I tried my best to impress her with my advanced Scripture brainwashing, er, memorization. Brooke had me strung out like she was meth and I was in need of a thorough intervention.

By some miracle, I talked her into moving in with me and being my lover. Jesus promptly talked her out of it. I'd have married Brooke. I would have, but she loved Jesus more than me, as well she should have. She ended up joining some kind of Jesus-freak community and became a sprout-eating hippie nun who makes her own clothes. But sometimes I miss her.

A lot of times I do.

I really should have married her instead of making her. But maybe I did God a favor. After I deflowered her, she stopped *thinking* about giving to the poor and actually gave them everything she had. I deserved her hasty departure. And no, I don't actually think I did

God any favors, not at all. I wouldn't know how to do God a favor if He wrote it on my calendar accompanied by fiery angelic visitations. My best effort to serve Him has me sitting on the front pew, wishing someone would kill me rather than force me to endure one more sermon that moves nothing in me but my gag reflex.

I can't take one more minute of the lies I sit through Sunday after Sunday.

I get up and walk out, passing our pew dwellers without looking at them. Who cares if I disappear? If I vanish into thin air—personally raptured—right in front of them, nobody will notice. On second thought, Rebecca will. She's made it her job to scope me out during services, probably to see if my eyes stray to any female over age eleven and under fifty. She'll see me shuffle out, but will she be able to read the defeat branded like a scarlet letter on my face?

What of the words of Jesus, written right there in the New Testament, in red?

“If a man have an hundred sheep, and one of them be gone astray, doth he not leave the ninety and nine, and goeth into the mountains, and seeketh that which is gone astray? And if so be that he find it, verily I say unto you, he rejoiceth more of that sheep, than of the ninety and nine which went not astray.”

You have to forgive me. I think in the King James Version, having heard “it's the *only* true word of God that exists” drilled into me from the time I was a fetus. I don't care what translation of the Bible I use; all of them say a real shepherd goes after one lost sheep. Even the bad stained-glass shepherd is good enough to carry one of his straying sheep.

What of my dad, the shepherd, Reverend Nicholas Aaron Parker

Sr.? The man I'm named after. The man I can't seem to do anything but disappoint with every choice I make that isn't *his* choice. He's supposed to be all about the Bible.

"How shall I choose a career?" "Just go to the Holy Bible," he'll answer.

"How do I choose what I'll eat for lunch, Dad?" "The Holy Scriptures," he'll say, beaming.

"Should I wear the red polo shirt, or the blue- and yellow-striped one?" "Search the Scriptures, my boy."

Okay, it isn't that extreme, but man, it's close. Didn't he read the story of the good shepherd? He commissioned those awful windows for heaven's sake! Why didn't he know when I fled for California to pursue a degree in literature, which he found worthless, that I found *life*? Why didn't he know I waited, bleating and moaning in grief, the saddest sheep of all? Didn't he know I needed him to come for me?

I swing the door open and storm out, and nobody grabs my legs while I drag them across the steps of the vestibule. Nobody says, "Please, Nicky, don't go."

Don't go.

A few minutes later, I'm sitting in my black Chevy pickup, reading my contraband *NIV Men's Devotional Bible*, and I read, thinking of a Jesus who may actually want me enough to leave His ninety and nine to find me no matter where I stray to. I can't even concentrate on the words, I feel so twisted inside.

A tap at my window.

It's Rebecca. I roll the window down. "Hey."

"Hey, are you okay, Nicholas? I saw you walk out. Are you feeling all right?"

I look at her, seeing what my mom and dad see: a good girl. Pretty. Perky. Blonde, blue-eyed. Jesus loving. A True Love Waits girl. Someone they can groom into a good pastor's wife. Someone so much more malleable than myself.

And I like her. She's one of the sweetest people I've ever met. She's the freakin' bridge between me and my parents—the only thing I've done right since coming home to fix things with my father, like God told me to.

God, what did You mean? How do I put things right with him? Do I have to marry her? I don't want to marry her.

"I'm okay, Rebecca."

She stands there. She wants me to open the door. I don't want to open the door. I want her to go away, but she'll stand there until Jesus returns if I don't. I decide to stop acting like an animal, and actually get out of the car and go open the door for her. Get her seated in the truck. Close the door behind her. Get back in.

I wonder if she'd leave with me. I don't think she would.

When we're settled in, I risk asking her, "Do you ever wish you could run away?"

"From church?"

I don't say all the expletives before the word *yes* that pop into my head. I don't even say yes. I just watch her.

"Sometimes I wouldn't mind leaving home, but I love church. I love your dad and your mom. I love it here. I love this building. And the people. The old folks. The babies in the nursery. I've been here since I was eleven and your dad knocked on my door *himself* to see if me and my brother wanted to take the bus to Sunday school—the *pastor!*"

She's says *pastor* like it's a big freakin' deal. When she was eleven and he was knocking on her door evangelizing, I couldn't get him to have a conversation with me. The *pastor!*

She means it. That's the worst part. Or maybe it's the best part. I'm not even sure. She wants this life at Tabernacle. That's why my parents love her so much, because she shows up at the potluck with her casserole. And she shows up for the antiabortion rally. And for the women's breakfast, and basically every time the door opens.

Rebecca doesn't want to run away from church.

"Did you enjoy the sermon?"

Say no. Please say no.

"I didn't hear all of it, but it's very good."

Rebecca is good about recycling. She's a regular spiritual environmentalist.

Cut it out. She doesn't deserve that.

She reaches for my hand. I let her take it. I never let things go further than this, except in my thoughts. I wonder if I should just kiss her. Just surrender to this life. I don't even know what I'm holding out for. Kiss her. Fall in love. Go to seminary. Be the good son. You can do it, Nicky. That's why you're back home.

You're not a writer.

Ouch. It kills me to think it.

Rebecca must see me wince. "You sure you're okay?"

I don't even speak. I just nod.

"Why don't we go back in? It's almost time for communion."

"I'll be there in a few minutes."

I see her out of the truck like the good boyfriend, even though I suck to high heaven. Oh, what I wouldn't give to be Anglican today.

I've been sober since I left Cali, even though I don't go to meetings. My dad would be appalled if he thought I went to Alcoholics Anonymous. But dear God, if we served real wine instead of grape juice, I'd take the leftovers out of those tiny plastic cups and tie one on today. Then seek out the rest, served up straight from the bottle.

Jesus, help me. Help me.