

PROLOGUE

For by your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you
will be condemned (Matthew 12:37)

May 1994

I had sex in the front passenger seat of his Honda Civic at midnight on my nineteenth birthday. We were in the park, about a mile from the university where we were both freshmen. The back seat was filled with guitars, speaker amplifiers, and dozens of feet of cable, which is why we were in the front seat having our way with each other. We had been in too much of a hurry to move everything.

What should we have done? Taken the time to dump all his stuff out onto the gravel parking lot just so we could stretch out for our few minutes of pleasure, and then, thoroughly tired, load it all back in? No. We needed to save our energy.

It was just as well that the back seat was completely occupied. Even if it was empty, it wouldn't have afforded any

more comfort. Screwing in an automobile is never comfortable, and it was never intended to be. It was only ever meant to be quick. If all went well, I would be back in my dorm room soon cramming for a final exam and asleep within the hour.

The windows steamed as we christened his car and our hot breath hit the cool glass. A scratchy male voice on the radio sang of freedom and self-respect, but no matter. I was just trying to keep my left foot from shifting the car into reverse. All my self-respect had been lost when I stripped from the waist down for a boy whose intentions were questionable, but the stale air reeked of freedom. It was evident in every thrust and released into the air with each gasp that escaped my lips.

I gripped the headrest with one hand to brace myself and squeezed his t-shirted back with the other. "Oh God, yes!" I yelled aloud. It was followed soon after by his muffled moans as he buried his face in my neck.

The boy, his pale legs trembling and temples slick with sweat, climbed off me and returned to the driver's seat. As he was scrambling to put his clothes back on I turned away from him to look at the orange neon sign stapled to a tree that screamed no after-dark trespassing. I saw it when we first pulled into the park, and it seemed to glow as a silent reminder that we were about to break the law. But now it didn't shine as brightly, as if it knew it had failed to do its job.

I felt a twinge and realized the seatbelt hook had bruised my hip. By morning the mark was round and angry and purplish black, about the size of a half-dollar. In the light of that new day I stood naked before a mirror, staring at the bruise, wondering why I had given myself over to a boy instead of books. Over the next few days as it healed I pushed on it hard from time to time with my index finger to remind myself of the pain—a tender, aching pain.

I rolled the window down as we made a right out of the parking lot onto Main Street.

About a block into the ride home he looked at his watch—a present I had bought him for Christmas—and strained his eyes in the dark to read the time.

“Don’t you have a final exam in a few hours?” he asked.

“Mm-hmm,” I said. “8:00 a.m.”

“You definitely won’t have enough time to study and sleep.”

“Yeah, I’ll be pulling an all-nighter.”

He arched his eyebrows and leaned over to speak in my direction as he looked at the road. “How about another quickie, then? What’s ten more minutes, right?”

“Aren’t you spent?”

“Yeah, but I think I can rise to the occasion.”

I sighed at his predictability and chose to ignore his bad pun. “No. I have to get back.”

His eyes narrowed and he grinned at me. "Fuck your exam. Let's have our own all-nighter."

I stared hard at the road ahead and avoided his proposal. "It's so funny that during sex we scream out for God, whose name is the epitome of holiness, but yet to whom sex is a sin from which we must be absolved." I snapped my head in his direction. "Why do you think that is?"

His dark green eyes grew big, but he didn't look at me. He remained focused on the road. "I don't know."

"Just seems ironic. Don't you think?"

He ran a hand through his almond-brown hair. "All this God stuff—you really gotta let it go."

"Maybe we should ask Christine. She would know." I knew mentioning her name would strike a nerve.

He pounded the steering wheel with a balled up fist. "Leave her out of it!"

I jumped in my seat, startled but undeterred, like a hungry hyena fighting for sovereignty over a fresh carcass with an unrelenting lion. "Don't you agree that religious freaks like her are the ones who seem to sin the most?" I asked.

I should've known better than to ask questions. Talking about her was something he just didn't do. Verbalizing our affair was something he just didn't do. Talking made things just

too real for him. So I wasn't surprised that he gave no response.

So I continued. "Christians dress themselves up every Sunday, and preachers cloak themselves in robes of the finest materials, and then they all pray together in gilded, gold-laced temples hoping that the beauty of it all will save their souls."

I had no such worries about the fate of my soul.

To most people, what we were doing was wrong. It was a sin. But it didn't feel that way to me. There was nothing for me to be sorry for, no guilt for me to feel. It just felt like we were living on the edge. Sure, I always felt dirty afterwards. But I never knew remorse.

My words fell to the floor and were met with more silence. Finally, he gave me a sidewise glance. Then he grinned, that closed-lipped crooked smile I had grown so used to.

"Feel better?" he asked, his anger dissipated.

Well, no. I didn't. And it wasn't because of his silence. I had grown used to that too. He hadn't done much talking lately, and I was never quite sure what he was thinking. Hell, did I ever know what he was truly thinking, ever?

But that's not what bothered me either. That wasn't the source of my anger that night. I didn't feel better because he couldn't come out and say it: I was right. The few words he

chose to say weren't the ones I needed to hear. Which were, I was right...and she was wrong.

We arrived at my dorm. I had not noticed because I was too wrapped up in my own thoughts. But when I saw familiar kids come into view, hanging out and smoking in a familiar parking lot, and when his car came to a gentle stop, I noticed. I was home.

I turned to look at him. He was looking at me.

"Are you going to put your pants on?" he asked.

I looked down and noticed my bare legs. I had forgotten all about my underwear and jeans that lay crumpled in a pile on the floor in the back seat.

Throwing my clothes on I said to him, "Do you think God and Jesus would have wanted the world to be this way? Filled with hedonistic hypocrites?"

No response.

"Do you?"

He let go of the steering wheel and his arms fell with a slump in his lap. "I don't know. I can't think right now. I'm too tired."

I smiled. His two most important organs had abandoned him, limp from exhaustion. "All right. Goodnight, Matthew," I said, kissing him on the cheek. "Thanks for the ride."

As I shut the car door and walked away, I realized that that was the beginning of the end.