

Last Sermon

By Jennifer N. Shannon

By the time I got there, the church was full. I had never seen it this crowded. Even when we'd have the annual Christmas play, which was the highlight of the year, maybe 60 would show up, but this summer morning, each brown matte pew, was jam-packed with people from all over town. I was able to squeeze between Betty Wright and Dora Henderson. Both had wide hips and seven children between them. I didn't really know the kids but had seen them here or there. They were all in the row in front of us, perfectly behaved, fearful that one of their mother's heavy handed pinch or thump might surprise them if they were mischievous. As I crammed into my seat I found my shoulders awkwardly pinned behind the left and right arms of the two women. I tried to get their attention, turning my head to look at one, waiting a moment before turning to the other, smiling uneasily, squirming just enough to signal my discomfort. Betty nor Dora even glanced in my direction, obviously annoyed they had to make room for me. They just stared straight ahead and incessantly waved the funeral home branded church fans.

Hot and uncomfortable, I sat as still as possible. My eyes wandered the room, noticing every person's posture: quiet, anxious and assuming. And each with a fan. Even the seven kids in front of me had one. All the way down to the smallest. As I sat, fan-less, surveying my surroundings, I realized the only real movements were those fans. All of them hissing in rhythm, as they pushed the stale Georgia heat, which was already mired with doubt, from side to side.

Reverend Henry, draped in a black robe, heavy around his shoulders, stepped onto the pulpit, already wiping perspiration from his forehead back towards the center of a

bald spot that was shaped like an oval. I remember my first real encounter with the great Reverend. He had only been pastor for a few months and I was going off to college. The interaction itself was quick. Kind of awkward. We saw each other in the grocery store. I was with my dad. After a few pleasantries between them, Reverend Henry turned in my direction, lifted my hand from its limp position beside my leg, placed it in his and patted lightly. He stared me in the face with his dark brown eyes and bright glistening teeth and said, "Congratulations Penny, I know you'll do well in college. Just study hard and stay focused." He held my hand and that grin for several seconds too long before saying goodbye and picking up a box of cereal in which he flung aimlessly into his cart. I watched him walk away with a bit of arrogance and bounce in his step. He never looked back, just continued down the aisle before turning the corner.

My thoughts of that moment with Reverend Henry were interrupted when he opened the bible, flipped a few pages, paused, took a deep breath and closed the book. The fans slowed as if less movement would help everyone hear him more clearly although he hadn't said anything. He just looked aimlessly into the audience. Everyone waiting. Some skeptically, fidgeting in their seats, facial expressions wrought with accusations, others confident and assured, still in complete adoration of the man.

Seemed as if he started a couple of times. Opened his mouth, closed it right back. Searching for the beginning of his sermon.

"Good morning, church," he finally said, looking out at the 150 plus faces that were staring back. Some returned the greeting; most sat silently, fans speeding back up again.

He tightly clinched his handkerchief before shifting his hands to the sides of the wooden block that shielded the sight of his quivering legs from the congregation.

"I'm sorry," he spoke, gently, softly. Inaudible to almost everyone.

"Speak up" was yelled from the front row. It was Frank Covington. The last time I saw him was a few months ago. He was sitting in Oscar's at the end of the bar. I was in the middle. I didn't much know him but we tipped our glasses toward each other anyway. I'd been in there long enough to know he was on his fifth or sixth shot and I my third. It had been a long day for me. Daddy was seemingly worse, the doctors weren't encouraging and I was alone. I was an only child whose sole responsibility in life had become taking care of her father while simultaneously planning his funeral. I wasn't ready to bear that weight at my age. Probably never would be. So when I looked over at Frank and thought about losing the one person I truly loved, I decided to take one more for the road. One became another, then at least one more. It was late when I staggered out. Frank stayed. I didn't go home until the next morning.

"Go ahead. Speak up," was yelled a second time by Frank who was growing more and more impatient. I watched as Reverend Henry adjusted the position of the microphone. It didn't work. Didn't need to. There was no sophisticated sound system for the small church that sat on a dirt road in the middle of vast trees, hills and red Georgia clay. It had natural acoustics. Sound just bounced off the dense walls and cradled deep within the entire space. Besides Reverend Henry's voice was deep and strong. He'd say "open your bible's" and it could be heard down the road. But this day was different. His voice was calm and any threats of a soul-stirring message was greatly diminished when the first words out caused someone to holler "speak up." It was the fourth Sunday of the

month, normally the children's day to sing and usher so the service always went a bit faster. Let out early. The people who normally came were a little more casual but not by much. You'd only get a handful to come. 20, 30 max. This time the whole community filed in. Mostly being nosy. Some to be certain. Others to ostracize. Me, to be a witness.

I was never much into church. I mean yeah, I went but not religiously like everyone else. I didn't really need church to tell me nothing about God. I just felt Him, but I wanted some way to keep me centered and being in a town full of people who knew every move you made and when, I conformed in a sense. Grew up here but never planned to return. Daddy got sick, found myself dating, no screwing, some piece of a man who I knew from high school. Now five years later, I'm still here. Hanging out alone in the local bar. No real friends. No real life. I've even found myself sitting with the rest of the town to hear Reverend Henry after those allegations.

I don't know what I expected. What I wanted. Thinking about the things I'd done, the affairs I'd had, choices I had made against people I called my friends, it was unfair for me to point the finger but that didn't stop me from getting up extra early, dressing, kissing my dad on his sweaty forehead and driving five miles up the road in his 76' pickup.

"I'm sorry," he said again. Louder this time, yet still quietly. People began to stir, whisper among each other. Watched as he shrank before our eyes. A 6'4 man, broad and handsome, had literally become small. Had lost all credibility with two words that should have redeemed him. But something made me think his "I'm sorry's" weren't for us. He stood there, covered in sweat, nervous and quiet, ready to take whatever we served him. I heard someone shout, "how could you?" another said, "yeah, we trusted you" while yet another cried meekly "ye without sin, cast the first stone." Reverend Henry simply raised

his right hand, signaling for calm. No matter how small he appeared, he still had presence. Everyone immediately shut their mouths and went back to muted attention.

The heat was massive. It soaked up the energy in the room. Made it hollow. It was only 10am and this day was already going to be unforgettable. It would be the talk of the town for months, maybe even years. For most folks, it had been the anticipation of the week. Made front page of the newspaper. "Reverend to address concerns" was printed bold and in black piercing font. My dad couldn't figure out all the fuss. He was not well enough to go to service but could certainly read. "So what," he said this morning. Breathing cautiously as the words eased out through one side of his mouth while the other grasped his brown wooden pipe. "Y'all so damn hypocritical. Running down to hear a man every Sunday, long as he fits what you believe and soon as he mess up, you ready to give up all ya faith. Ask me, you was putting it in the wrong somebody to begin wit'."

Daddy was right, but like I said, I was just going to be a witness. Yeah, I was a member of the church but going once or twice a month was me biding my time until I moved back to Atlanta. If it wasn't for my ailing dad, I could have been married by now or even better, divorced. Pushing 30 and all I've done, is go to college, make a little money, move to the big city and return home again. And if the highlight of my time here just happened to include a lying, suspecting preacher, I'd take it. I wanted to be in the audience to see how they was gon' treat him after. To see if he was gon' lie or be truthful. If he would be back next week, in the same spot towering above us, a little taller than he looked right now. In this town, almost everything was forgiven, especially for a man of the cloth. Even if the young fellow cried his heart out and described things only the Reverend's wife, Barbara Jean, who sat cowering behind me, should know.

He opened his mouth again, hesitant but more confident. "I know what they're saying about me. They've called me all kinds of names. Said I've done things that are ungodly and against everything I believe in and stand for." He paused, looked right at me or at least I thought he was before his eyes darted toward someone else. He continued, "and I've thought long and hard about how to defend the accusations." His voice trailed off, "if I should defend them at all."

The only sounds were the birds chirping or crickets rubbing their legs together to distract us. Every once in a while a floorboard shifted or the walls took a few breaths, anticipating, just like we were.

"Now I'm by no means perfect but I've tried to live right, tried to be truthful to you. To myself. To God. And now I'm at this crossroads. Facing a test I wasn't ready to take. Not sure if I'll pass or fail but I stand here anyway. Grievously sorry for all the pain I've caused each of you. I'm sorry for the divides this has created amongst us. Our church is on two different sides now. One ready to persecute, the other ready to defend. It's time for me to take responsibility and start over. Start new. Start fresh."

He lifted the handkerchief again, wiped his mouth as everyone listened intently. A few "amens" and "un huh's" flowered the room.

"So I've decided that as of today, August 25, 1983, I am stepping down as the pastor of this wonderful church. I can no longer lead this great community."

Before he could get the last word out, chatter and questions circulated every inch of the sanctuary. Some people were loud and irate, others bewildered, lost in disbelief. Me, I was full of emotion. An anxiousness that seemed unexplainable.

“I am not meant to be this church's leader, anymore. Goodbye everyone,” Reverend Henry finished as he unzipped his robe, delicately stepping out of the seemingly ordained piece of clothing. People were outraged, some got out of their seats, stood, eyes blaring, spitting threatening words meant to bully him into giving a real explanation. An admission of guilt or at least a few sentences to thwart the accusations. He stepped off the pulpit, eased his way past Frank and others and bravely walked through the narrow center aisle. He appeared stoic as his gaze briefly met mine before grabbing the hand of his wife as “I am not meant to be this church's leader anymore,” echoed through the vestibule.

I watched Reverend Henry, a man who awkwardly held my hand ten plus years ago, reach the double-doors and turn to look back at all he was leaving behind. For the first time that day I saw the emotion he had been holding inside as tears melted down his face. I remember similar emotion the night I staggered out of Oscar’s. I was supposed to meet Jimmy. He was married to someone who used to be a good friend. We were actually best friends until I sunk to the lowest level of my existence and betrayed her.

It started with a little subtle flirting. Probably some pent-up attraction from when we were teenagers. Then he called a few times. One too many shots and his contrived affection made me feel desired. At some point, I just forgot who he was and that was easy to do since I didn’t have a clue who I was. Before I knew it, we were meeting at The Inn, a motel outside of town. Once or twice turned into almost a year. The truth was I didn't care who I slept with as long as he took my mind somewhere else for a while. But Jimmy, he should have been off limits. And it wasn’t that he was so great or that our time together was so meaningful. He was just something to do. We barely kissed. We didn’t

really talk. There was no cuddling or sincere ‘happy to see each other’ smiles. It was a quick fuck at best but for some reason I’d show up anyway and lose a little more of myself each time. So just as I skidded across the parking lot to an abrupt stop at The Inn, I saw those same dark brown eyes meet mine as he rushed down the steps from one of the second floor rooms toward his brown Cadillac. I sat up straight, squinting my eyes to make sure. Drunk or not, at 3am there were only a couple reasons to be at the cheapest motel around. And saving souls wasn’t one of them.

Reverend Henry didn't look in my direction long. He was obviously trying not to be seen yet his face reeked of undeniable heartache. I kind of sunk down into the seat a little before wildly opening the door and falling out. I had drunk too much to know how to be subtle.

“Hey a Reverend,” I slurred.

He stopped and turned around. He looked mortified.

“Don't you fucking judge me. You're here too,” I said while making a weak attempt at pointing my finger and guilt back on him. He turned around and practically ran to his car. I got back inside the truck and slept until morning. Jimmy never showed.

I rose to my feet, anxiously staring at Reverend Henry. I wanted to say something. Anything so he’d know that someone else in the world was as lost and afraid and confused as he. But my mouth remained sealed. I didn’t know how to confess my wrongs so I simply stood there wondering if that boy was the person he had gone to see that night or if it was some two-dollar hooker who gave him a fix. Or some other reason altogether. Either way, as his tears fell, so did mine. I didn’t know if his were for the lie

he had been accused of living or for the truth that none of us would ever know but they were familiar. Like his release was partially my own.

After the calamity had ceased, I remained seated in the church, motionless. Comatose. Stuck in my own world of sorrow and lies. Holding on to my dad's illness as the reason I had not yet made my life mean more. Or behave like the person I really was. The woman he raised me to be.

Seated third row from the back, in my normal seat, I finally realized that the time had come for me to leave. Not because the fans were silently placed in the pews and the church was empty, but because I was.

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