

**A Sinister Grin
Ron Houston**

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A Sinister Grin

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Tales from The Satellite

a bizarre collection of short stories that focuses on the staff and patrons of a legendary nightclub known as The Satellite Lounge. It's an intoxicating blend of laughter, tears and thrills. Whether you're enjoying your favorite cocktail at happy hour, or engaging in lively barstool conversations, the Satellite lounge is the place to be seen or unseen. This book will take many to a place they have never been... and many more to a place they will never want to leave.

The Devastation of Mr. Drake

This chilling new novel explores the aspects of women who expose themselves as prey to a hidden predator. It dwells deep in the mind of a madman who uses the Satellite Lounge as his hunting ground. This story will disturb the reader as it answers the question, What if Mr. Right is all wrong? The Devastation of Mr. Drake, pushes the envelope as it deals with real issues that plague women such as abandonment, single-parenthood, domestic violence, safe sex, loneliness and hidden agendas in order to possess men.

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Creepy-adjective, having or causing a sensation of repulsion, horror, or fear, as of creatures crawling on the skin. -**World English Dictionary**

**Give Yourself The
CREEPS**

A Sinister Grin

The crack that creaked was not the dawn; but the floor the old man walked upon. For it was noon when he awoke, styling his warmth with a dingy coat. Lanky and bent an old man was he, with gnarled yellow teeth amounting to three. With clothes always stained he always complained in a mood disregarding affection. He liked it that way for “Who?” he would say, “is worthy of my attention?”

Swaying in compliance with the wind, his shack was to rot, as he was to decay, movement to strong either here or there would bring to this lumber its meaningful grave. By the stove he poured his noon coffee then glanced at the calendar nearby. “October,” he said, “is nearly over.” He sipped and then snorted, “Oh my! Have I been deceived? Am I to believe that tomorrow is All Hallows Eve?” With a slap on his knee the shack quivered. He laughed and his home rocked and swayed. He jumped and the floorboards did rattle. “By gum, that’s my favorite day!”

“When the brats come a callin’ and beggin’ for sacks of goodies to eat, I’ll give their poor hearts a great panic, with a most horrid sight as their treat. In the window I’ll sit a great pumpkin, all whittled, carved, and trimmed. I’ll fashion a grotesque jack-o-lantern, and give it a sinister grin. I’ll put it right here on this table, with a candle inside of it lit. When children come lookin’ inside here, the vision will render them sick.”

With no time to waste he ran to the place that he once referred to as a patch. But alas there’s no pumpkins just rotted old stumps and over-grown thistles and thatch. “Egad, am I crazy? Am I really that lazy that I missed the whole plantin’ season? If I can’t take delight in causing tots fright, it would prove to myself to be treason.”

He sat on his back porch and pouted. A tear slowly crept down his chin. Then he looked over yonder and saw it, and gave way to a sinister grin. In a spot out some two hundred paces on the widow O’Grady’s land, sat a pumpkin so large and radiant, from that distance still looked very grand. “I know that it’s wrong, I can feel it. What I’m thinkin’ I know is a sin. But I know in my heart I will steal it, and I’ll wait until dusk to begin.”

The widow O’Grady was a kind old lady with dog Bowser she lived ‘cross the lane. She’s sweet, quiet, and proper, and Bowser, very well trained. Her house was sound and perfect. Her side of the lane was so bright. In contrast, the shack over yonder, always gloomy and dark as night.

“It’s dark now, and time to get to it.” The thief made his way to her patch. A pumpkin that grand is extremely well rooted, “No bother,” as he lifted his axe.

The widow O’Grady was knitting, in an old rocking chair she sat. Old Bowser lay curled by the fire, the spot where he usually napped.

Up and down the axe came about he wasted no time in attacking. Heaves and moans, and creaky old bones made more noise than the actual hacking.

Bowser took notice of something. He got up, whimpered and cried. "What's the matter boy, do you hear something?" He howled so she looked outside. "Who's out there?" She yelled. Bowser barked up a storm. Like a statue the old man stood still. "Get off of my land or I'll shoot! With a shotgun I'm incredibly skilled!" The widow aimed high at the target. "Get off of my land or you're dead!" The fired shot hit the axe handle, by inches just missing his head.

The old thief took flight, disappeared in the night. He made it back home empty handed. "That pumpkin's just right, I will have it tonight. I'll just carefully go back and grab it."

"Come, come now Bowser, it's over. Go back by the fire and sleep. Tomorrow the children will be here, so I'll bake them fresh pies to eat."

The old cuss went back for his bounty. The hike back to the patch seemed quite long. His fist shook to the moon in frustration, when he saw that the pumpkin was gone. To O'Grady's house crept the old villain. Through the window peered the old rat. The old lady was none the wiser, of the evil that lurked out back.

In the kitchen he saw the old widow, with the top of the pumpkin off. She removed all the guts in the middle; it was orange, slimy and soft.

"Mind the shell, you old hag from hell," he whispered the words real low. "As soon as I can I will grab it. I need it for my horror show."

Bowser arose; he sensed danger was near, in the kitchen he ran to combat it. He disrupted the table, knocked the bowl to the floor, 'SPLUT' the pumpkin pulp splatted. "Land a Goshen, so much commotion. Look at the mess you made fella! Heed my warning, you settle down or you'll be confined to the cellar."

The creepy old man was still peering. Under her window he leered. He was waiting his chance to commit his crime, and hoped not to get shot in the rear. His creaky old bones started popping; Bowser knew he heard something this time. He tried to alert her by barking. To the cellar she dragged him behind.

"I told you bad boy, I have too much to do. I'm so nervous I can hardly think. If my husband were here he would tell you, 'you could drive an old person to drink'."

"There's a prowler out there can't you hear him? I'm trying to tell you that now." All she could hear as the cellar door closed was "Yap, yap, yip, howl, bow wow wow."

"Madame's in imminent danger. I'd die if she ever got hurt. It was only by her loving kindness, that she plucked my poor soul from the dirt. When the demon spawn son of my owner, placed me and my siblings in graves, my tail must have wagged up a notice, otherwise I'd never be saved. We lay there so cold, only one hour old, us four upside down in the ground. Too young to have faith and too weak to cry, would anyone respond to my sound? The other three died, I was fading fast, and the beat of my heart was frail. When my angel of life; O'Grady's new wife, saved me by pulling my tail."

Upstairs the widow was not pleased. Missing spices caused baking to stop. "I don't even have treats for the children. To the store I must run to shop. I'll have be quick; Bowser will never know, that I stepped out of the house in a hurry. Then I'd be back, quick as a wink, before my poor precious can worry."

The creepy old man tried the window; it opened so he could get in. "I too shall be quick with my business." Then he gave a sinister grin.

The pumpkin shell looked like a diamond. He walked slowly to savor suspense. "I'll go out through the window I came in, then the carving of fear will commence." But before he could reach his treasure, the floor was still slippery with gunk; his arms and legs went four different ways, and met on the floor with a 'THUMP'.

Bowser stood straight to attention; His victory was about to prevail. Through the cellar door entry

he busted, just like a bat out of hell. "I'll save you my mistress!" barked Bowser. "I'm ready to fight that's a fact!" When the dust cleared, he needed a moment, for he came face to face with an axe.

"I'll split you in two you flea bitten mutt, you'd been better off down in your jail!" Old Bowser barked out a furious growl, translation: "I'll see you in hell!"

But the creepy old man had pulp on his hands, when he swung he lost hold of his weapon. He jumped out the window with the shell in hand, and knew that he had to quick step it.

The chase was on, the old man was gone, but Bowser was close behind. The old man could see his back window, once through it he knew he'd be fine. He was hoping, "Ah yes, it's open! I'll dive right through, what the heck." But his head only cleared the windowsill, 'fore the window crashed down on his neck.

His severed head flew and landed askew, on the table set for the great pumpkin. It couldn't have happened in a million years. The candle dead centered inside him.

The mess in the back was disgusting, thought Bowser who gagged at the sight. Wood splinters and glass, an old lifeless ass, and a pumpkin made a very tense night.

"Trick or treat!" sang the children, all decked out in costumes quite dandy. The widow O'Grady was happy, as she generously gave them all candy. "Now be on your way, and be careful. There's another house there over yonder." The children waved as they left her. "What will we get next?" They all wondered.

The run down old shack sure looked spooky, and on Halloween night that was good. "Trick or treat!" but no one answered, the kids wondered if anyone would. "There's a light in the window," said Annie. "So surely there's somebody home." They tiptoed so all could see in, then froze and turned white as limestone. Their hair stood on end, and they trembled, none of them making a sound. They all dropped their bags of candy, leaving puddles of pee all around.

Lickety-split they went running. When finally able to scream, they were home clutching their parents, explaining the terror they'd seen.

In the window the man's head was drying, as it baked from the candle's warm glow. The melted wax oozed from the haggard mouth, and looked like the froth of a troll. From one eye blood ran to the cheek where it dried, in the other no eyeball in sight. Through the socket the glow of the candle, was a beacon that shone through the night.

All night this went on, children stopping for treats then running away forever damaged. The sight was one no man could endure, so how was a poor child to manage? Sad was the fact; no one knew that round back, a lifeless corpse rotted in sin. But from a window's view, old Bowser knew, as he sat with a sinister grin.

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COOKIE

"I should have given her to my mother until we got to the car. When I saw the winding banister in that huge building, I knew Cookie would love galloping down it when we left. Although we played the full hour while mother visited my sick aunt, I couldn't bare to be separated from her. I needed Cookie the way my brother needed to suck his thumb. I saw the spankings he got while my parents tried to break him of that habit before he started kindergarten. Not even a brief trip inside my mother's purse would keep Cookie and me apart.

“So while my mother held my left hand, I stretched with my right to let Cookie gallop four floors down by way of the banister, but I dropped her. My eyes never left hers, as she fell between the floors. It was as if in slow motion. When she landed, a little boy grabbed her and ran into his apartment. Through screams and tears I managed to point out the exact apartment to my mother.

“The lady who answered was not really mean, but she sure wasn’t nice. She asked her son if he had my toy pony. She believed him when he denied having Cookie. My mother knew he had her, but she said nothing as she carried me to the car kicking and screaming. It was at that point that I knew I couldn’t live without Cookie. Silently my mother drove to Woolworth’s to get another vinyl carousel pony with the beautiful cherubic face.

“Those others were poor imitations of Cookie. She was white with a beautifully curled yellow mane. In the store were pink ones with red manes and gray ones with blue manes. I remained devastated until my father’s success in finding the beautiful white pony. I never let Cookie out of my sight after that. I couldn’t live without her. Mother used to use her to get me to eat. I wouldn’t even lie for fear she’d take Cookie away.

“I’m sorry. Guess it’s my last opportunity to ramble. It’s amazing what you think about when you’re about to die. Do you like seafood, Mr. McCray? Help yourself, I’m stuffed.”

“No thanks,” McCray said. “Whatever happened to Cookie?”

“What happens to any childhood ideals? They get packed away to make room for adulthood. Things that pacify you as a child usually get ripped away with time. Do you have any children, Mr. McCray?”

“I have a six-year-old son.”

“Don’t rush him, he’ll grow up soon enough. One of the casualties of being a grown-up is the loss of trust. I’m sure you wouldn’t want him to end up like me. Do you think I’m crazy?”

“I never judged you, Al.”

“No you didn’t. You’re the only one who stood by me. Thanks.”

“I was appointed by the State to stand by you.”

“But you believed me, didn’t you?”

“I did my job, Al.”

“Well, for doing your job...thanks.”

Two guards approached the cell. “Allen Dempsey, it’s time.”

Allen stood and offered his hand to Frank McCray. “I trust you’ll stay till the end. You’re the closest thing to a family member I got. I’d hate to die alone.”

“I’ll be there till the end.”

The guards placed handcuffs on the prisoner.

“Frank, let me ask you one more thing. Have you ever watched a man die?”

“No.”

“Neither have I.”

There was a somber mood in the observation room. Aside from Frank, the few in attendance consisted of two guards, the prosecuting attorney, Bennett Greene and the daughter of the murdered couple. Frank was just as uneasy enduring the stabbing glares from the daughter, as he was to witnessing an execution for the first time. Allen always attested to his innocence. He had worked for the couple. They were remodeling their home while their daughter was away at college.

According to Allen, he would always have his lunch alone on the back porch. On the day in question, he had to go home for lunch to retrieve a forgotten item. When he returned, the couple had been bludgeoned to death with his hammer. Now it was Allen’s turn to die. For the first time Frank McCray hated his profession. When it was over the daughter marched up to him and spat in his face.

“Don’t let it get to you, Frank. She doesn’t understand that you were just doing your job,” Bennett said.

Frank said nothing as he left the observation room. He understood the young woman’s pain and realized she was embarking upon a difficult journey toward healing. The unfortunate fact of the matter was that her parents were not coming back, but their killer was brought to justice. The system worked and he was part of that system.

There was another fact that he would’ve never revealed unless hard pressed. He liked Allen Dempsey. Aside from being a brutal killer, Allen was a nice guy. Frank headed for the elevator when one of the guards approached him.

“Mr. McCray! We just cleaned out Dempsey’s cell and found this under his dinner cart.”

The guard handed him a toy carousel pony. The color was chipped and faded, but it was exactly the way Allen described it.

“Go figure, Frank. A killer like that still held on to something innocent.”

Frank stood frozen in the prison corridor. He stared at the toy pony while Allen Dempsey’s words bombarded his thoughts.

“I couldn’t live without her. Mother used to use her to get me to eat. I wouldn’t even lie for fear she’d take Cookie away.”

The drive home was a blur. After years of appeals and visits to Death Row, Frank realized that doing his job meant merely going through the motions. He heard only what he wanted to hear. Like everyone else, he wanted justice served, no matter what. The facts that fell hard on him were simple;

Allen couldn't eat without Cookie. He never mentioned the toy for fear of it being taken away, possibly as evidence. The carousel pony even helped him through his last meal. She stayed with him till the end. And an innocent man was executed.

It was late when Frank arrived home. Instead of going to bed he sat on the edge of his son's bed and watched him sleep. The small boy stirred and woke with a smile.

"Hi, Daddy."

"I brought you something."

He laid the toy pony on his son's chest and was rewarded with a big hug. Frank held onto his son for dear life.

"Daddy, don't cry. Big boys don't cry."

"Cry whenever you have to, son." He stared deep into the boy's eyes.

"Enjoy your childhood, let's grow up slow."

"Ok daddy. What's the pony's name?"

"Let's call her Cookie."

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Bonus Preview The Rogue Prophet

Plot summary: For the members of The Church of Advancing Light, Bishop Ezekiel Barnes' hellfire preaching is religion as usual. No one is aware of the dark secrets of the church or of the measures the bishop will take to see his ministry to the next level.

Lawrence Garnier is a loser with a real but limited gift of foresight. While others believe he has a divine blessing, he is convinced that his talent is a curse. It's only after Lawrence joins the ministry of Bishop Barnes, that he realizes his talent is only the tip of a horrific iceberg between good and evil. This novel dares its reader to question everything, at a time when faith is the only thing a person has left to cling to. Ready or not, now is the time to face these questions.

"Just When You Thought It Was Safe To Believe."

Chapter 1

"Hell no! You waltz your raggedy-ass in here wanting out? It ain't that easy. Fact is, I ain't done with you yet. Yeah I'm filthy rich, but there's a whole lot more to get, and you're gonna get it for me. As for your brother, I ain't helping his punk-ass either. This is your fault. You wasn't shit until I came along. You took your gift for granted. I turned you into the Prophet and you fucked up.

"Now, since I'm a man of the cloth, I'm gonna rebuild what you tore down. But you need to know this; if you walk out on me . . . you're dead! Plain and simple. You getting mad now? Look at you swelling all up. I'm hard on you cause I love ya boy. You're like an old hound-dog that you got to kick sometimes just to show him you care. Otherwise he'll just lie around licking his balls,

which serves no purpose. I built this empire from the sweat of my balls, Lawrence, your purpose is to lick my balls. So you see how important you are?

“In the meantime, you need to pull your raggedy-ass together, get in that pulpit, and realize whose thumb you're under. Don't try and skip out on me. You can't go nowhere that I can't find you. And when I do, you'll take that eternal dirt-nap. Me and the Lord work in mysterious ways. Now get out! Oh, one more thing . . . Welcome back to the ministry.”

In shame and silence, I turned and walked toward the door. Before leaving Bishop Barnes' chamber, I stopped. *Do it*, I thought. I reached inside of my wrinkled suit coat for the gun tucked in my belt.

“Hey!” shouted the bishop. “Remember you're the Prophet. This is a big night. Great wealth is gonna come from this, so get your shit together. Get into character, and never forget who your family is.”

That did it, I grimaced and went for my gun. My intentions were halted as young Julius walked in.

“Mr. Garnier,” his voice was soft. “Thanks for trying. I won't need your help anymore.”

I stared intently into Julius' eyes. The boy did not blink. I tried to smile but couldn't. *Wow, what a kid*, I thought. He tried to let me off the hook, but his eyes told me what I already knew. I let him down. That's what I've always done, let everybody down. My eyes were filled with tears. I dropped my head and walked to the nearby restroom.

I ran water into the sink and splashed my face three times before I looked into the mirror. I didn't recognize myself. My once dark complexion was now ash-gray. Tears sped down my weathered cheeks like water off a crocodile's back. My once strong six-two frame seemed unstable and weighted with heavy burdens. Dressed in an unkempt maroon suit with gold pin stripes I looked like the ringmaster of a failed circus. But it was the face that peered back at me that frightened me the most. My lips were swollen and blistered. They screamed for moisture. I was gaunt with sunken eyes. I looked sixty-one instead of thirty-one.

“You've failed again Lawrence,” I muttered. “You should have ended it right there inside the bishop's chamber.”

What I needed to do would never make things right again, but it could keep things from getting worse for a small few. The Honorable Bishop Ezekiel Barnes was evil incarnate and needed to be stopped. But I couldn't stop him, not here, not tonight . . . but soon. More tears fell. “Dear God, I've got to escape,” I whispered. I could hear the choir as they began to sing, *'I Ain't No Ways Tired.'* Not me. I was tired. Tired of all that had transpired. And what about Rachel?

“What did I do to you, Rachel?”

She didn't deserve any of this. It was my fault. The scriptures say that the truth shall set you free. I knew that I would never be free. Even if I escaped the bishop, I would still be in bondage. Two searing questions have haunted me a lifetime. First, did I turn my back on family? Second, did I see it? All that I have suffered was due to the gift. It was the gift that led me to the bishop and to this night. I am Lawrence Garnier, and I'm cursed with a gift.

The gift is the power to see the future. The immediate future. It has a range of exactly one week. When I get a flash, it's sure to happen the next minute or any time within seven complete days. I can only see the immediate future of a person in my presence. The only future I can't see is my own.

One can only wonder about the outcome of a special child with a peculiar gift. What if both were nurtured properly? I pondered that very question as I stood before the strange unrecognizable image in the mirror. If only I could've had a small glimpse of my own future, maybe I could have done things differently. All I had now were the hows and whys. How was it all going to end? Why couldn't a flash of my future be just as easy as a reflection of my past?

A past that started in this very bathroom, in this very church . . . The Church of Advancing

Light. It was four years back, on the day of my brother's wedding. I had been at this very same sink, looking in this very same mirror. The reflection back then was much fresher, younger and totally different. I was admiring how well I looked in my black tuxedo, when my brother Mitchell walked in.

"Man, I'm really nervous," said Mitchell. "What's with all your primping? You'd think you were the one getting married today."

"No big brother, I'm much too fine and too hung over to jump the broom."

"Yeah, well Rachel is gonna hit you in the head with a broom for not coming home after the bachelor party last night."

"Now Mitch, you know I love to sow my wild oats."

"Lawrence, you've been in Cincinnati for twenty-four hours now and haven't yet met your new sister-in-law."

"I promise we'll get along famously. Besides this whole wedding and marriage thing seems to be happening really fast."

"Well, I'm not getting any younger, Lawrence. I'm thirty-seven. I think it's time for me to settle down."

"I'm just saying, it's a little abrupt, that's all."

"Now you're sounding like sis."

"Don't say that, Mitch. Virginia wouldn't come to the wedding no matter what,"

"Yeah, she'll never change."

"But that's not me, Mitch. I'm here to stand beside you. I'm here to stand beside both Rachel and you. Even though you forgot my birthday two weeks ago."

"Oh, that's right! you're twenty-seven now. Damn time does fly. Did Virginia do anything for you?"

"Yeah, she had a few of the women from the mission decorate the lunchroom and cook a birthday dinner. You know she wasn't gonna come off any money. She's still a tightwad."

"Yeah, but a few of the mission girls invited me to their rooms and gave me some great presents."

"I bet. Are you always gonna be a whore?"

"Hey, sometimes I get tired. Besides, I'd stay broke if it wasn't for those lost ladies' contributions."

"Well anyway, consider that first-class plane ticket, your birthday gift. Man, I can't get over the fact that my little brother is twenty-seven. Do you still think about Lyle?"

"Everyday. And in my mind, the half-hour difference in our births, is the only distance between us."

"Do you still get the headaches?"

"Yeah, when I get flashes."

"He's been gone a long time," Mitchell said sadly.

"Yes, he has . . . but I'm here. For my brother's wedding."

"Thanks man. I love you."

As we embraced, I felt a dull pain in my head. Visions flashed of Mitchell holding an infant girl. I broke away from my brother.

"What?" asked Mitchell.

"So, that's why you rushed a marriage?"

"Come on now. I love Rachel and I'm not getting any younger. She comes from a very affluent family. Don't judge me, Lawrence."

"I want the best for you, Mitch."

"She is. Come stand by me . . . by us."

THE WEDDING

The main auditorium of the church was large, with seating for five hundred, though it never came close to capacity. Three wide aisles separated the pews and dead-ended in front of a large stage. Stairs on both the left and right side gave access to the stage. To the far left of the stage was the bandstand, which included an elaborate Wurlitzer organ, drums, and two guitars. To the far right were stairs that accessed an additional bleacher-type stage where the church choir stretched across the entire width of the stage. Just below the choir stand at center stage was a grandiose pulpit where the Honorable Bishop Ezekiel Barnes stood.

Bishop Barnes was a strong looking man of great presence. He looked younger than his fifty-five years. He was handsome with his light skin and hazel eyes. His grooming was impeccable from his well-manicured nails, his pencil mustache, and his fine grade of half-black hair combed back. His hair was white to the right of his center-parted hairline and black on the left. This gave him a sinister look rather than distinguished. He strongly resembled a pompous Cab Calloway as he stood in the pulpit with his arms crossed clutching the Bible.

As Mitchell and I walked down the center aisle, the bishop's trance-like gaze disturbed me. The groom and I positioned ourselves in front of the stage below the pulpit. We faced the rear of the church, and the procession began. The maid of honor walked down first. Next three groomsmen escorted three bridesmaids down the aisle. Once everyone was in position, the music changed to the traditional, *Wedding March*.

Escorted by her father, the bride proceeded down the aisle. I had only spoken to Rachel a few times over the phone. I felt bad that I didn't come home after the bachelor party. I felt even worse that a stripper and a bottle of Johnnie Walker Black would keep me from doing what I should have done. I wondered why my brother rushed to marry, until I saw her. The bride was a veiled apparition that seemed to float with every step.

Mitchell and I were very close. Partly because of the death of our brother, my twin, but mostly because of what our father put us through. I knew Mitchell well, and I remembered the promise that we both made to our older sister Virginia while we were very young. Never marry. Mitchell had many girlfriends before he left New Orleans to come to Cincinnati to teach in the public school system. Mitchell would make it a point to bring me around them all for a regular check. But what was it that made him so sure about Rachel? What type of woman could make a man break his vow of singleness. A man that had so much of his father in him?

Bishop Barnes began once everyone was in position. "We're having a cleaving this afternoon!" his voice was thunderous. "I'm so happy to do the Lord's work, especially when two of his servants choose to join in holy matrimony. It makes my heart leap with joy! I'm joyful because the spirit is strong when ever two or more of his servants gather together.

"With all the friends, family and church members here this afternoon, the spirit is definitely strong. But for Mitchell and Rachel the spirit is now going to be stronger in their household because of cleaving two into one flesh. But marriage, just like everything else comes with instructions. Now I've met with these two in private and went over, in detail, their prospective roles in this marriage. I've counseled Rachel from the book of Proverbs on how to be a capable wife. I've counseled Mitchell from the book of Ephesians on loving his wife the same way Christ loved the congregation. This couple has been advised in the direction in which the Lord wants their marriage to go. I will continue to be an adviser to this couple and will continue to admonish them for many years to come.

"It's just like a fine automobile. Now everyone who knows me knows my love for the Mercedes Benz. It's a truly wonderful vehicle, but I needed to learn how to drive before I ever got behind the wheel. I also needed to know how to service this fine vehicle to keep it in proper operational order. Rachel is a fine woman who needs the proper servicing, the proper up-keep and the proper direction to

be the capable wife in a successful marriage. Mitchell you are the head of your wife, the navigator of your marriage. God has placed you in the driver's seat. So drive carefully.

"Now someone very dear to this couple will pray on their behalf before we deliver the vows. Mitchell's brother and best man here today is also a holy servant of God. Ladies and gentlemen, Minister Lawrence Garnier."

I stepped to the front of the stage just below the pulpit. "Heavenly Father, in your house this afternoon, a marvelous union is being strengthened with your bond of unity. This union of love is being witnessed by your servants, your children. All of who wish the best for Mitchell and Rachel. But I want to ask a very unusual favor of you today. Please, if by chance you only hear one prayer today, please hear mine? Lord, it's not out of selfishness that I ask this of you; it's out of pure love . . ."

[As Lawrence prayed, the bishop surveyed the whole wedding assembly. He saw the bowed heads of his members, friends and families of the couple. He gazed at the Father of the bride, Mr. Ralph Draper. Mr. Draper was a very influential and wealthy politician. Bishop Barnes was glad Mr. Draper was a baptized member of The Church of Advancing Light. It was only on the merit and ample donations of Mr. Draper that the bishop would even consider opening up his church to the unbaptized for a wedding. So providing the church's dinning hall for the reception showed everyone his ever-so-holy self-sacrificing spirit. Finally, he watched Lawrence. He admired his eloquent speech as he prayed. Lawrence continued.]

"And love for the woman that my brother chose to spend the rest of his life with. Father I want the very best for these two. Though I'm sure everyone here shares the same well-wishes that I do, I pray that if you, by some unusual circumstance, only have room to answer one more prayer, let it be mine. Amen."

As everyone uttered amen in unison and raised their heads, Bishop Barnes took a brief moment and stared at me as he stepped back into position.

"Will the bride and groom please approach the microphone?" said the bishop.

As the vows were exchanged, I took note of Rachel's happiness. I felt the innocent goodness of the woman my brother had chosen. I felt shame for not returning from the bachelor party to meet face to face with my future sister-in-law. Shame came honestly to the Garnier brothers.

We had too much of our father in us, and we both hated that fact. We hated our father, maybe not as much as our older sister Virginia did, but we did hate him. My brother and I promised our sister that we would end the cycle of our father's evil ways, by never marrying. I remember when the three of us were young. When the soundtrack of our life consisted only of screams and shattering glass. Huddled together under the basement steps, the oldest child, Virginia, comforted her younger siblings.

"It'll be over soon," she'd say. "I won't let him hurt you." Along with the comfort, the girl, who was only a child herself would release a ferocious growl. As the violence crashed down upon us, young Virginia swore never to let any man beat her that way. She swore never to marry. Then she'd looked down at us two frightened boys with our faces buried in her lap. "Promise me, both of you right now. Promise me you'll never marry. There's too much of daddy in you."

"I promise, Ginny," my reply was instant.

"You too, Mitchell," she demanded.

"I promise," he said.

"We're family and ain't nothing more important," she said.

Now, Rachel was family. I prayed for Rachel's sake that Mitchell had her best interest in mind. I prayed that my brother's love for his new bride was true.

"Ladies and Gentlemen, I present to you Mr. and Mrs. Mitchell Garnier."

The wedding party emptied in the main lobby in order to greet the guests and allow photo opportunity of the whole party. As soon as I got through the door, my new sister-in-law pounced.

"Finally, I get to hug my new brother-in-law!"

"Oh, you're squeezing all the air out of me Rachel," I said.

A sharp headache pierced my mind as it flashed visions of new life growing inside her.

"I should bean you in the head for making me wait all this time to see you," she said.

I gazed at Rachel through tearful eyes.

"What?" she asked.

"I'm just proud to have you in the family," I said.

"I wish Virginia was," she said.

"I'm sure she'll come around." I lied.

"You know, Lawrence, I've been talking you up around here. Bishop Barnes could use you here in the church. It would be great for Mitch to have you around all the time."

"Well, I -"

"Mitch and I aren't baptized at this church yet. We wanted to be married and get baptized together. So we certainly want you with us," she said. I felt her sincerity.

Just then Mitchell walked up. "Rachel, you told him the surprise?"

"No, not really," she said. "I'm going to tell him now. Your brother and I, along with my father, spoke to Bishop Barnes and he's willing to let you pursue your ministry from this church."

I stayed silent but glared at my brother.

"Do you know what this means?" asked Mitchell. "You can finally get away from Virginia and get paid for your work."

"Rachel excuse us," I said as I pulled my brother into the restroom.

"What the fuck's wrong with you, Mitch?"

"What are you talking about?"

"I had a flash when Rachel hugged me. She's pregnant, or she will be seven days from now."

"Wow that's soon, but it's still good."

"I had a flash when you hugged me too. Within a week you're gonna be a father to a little girl."

"Lawrence, the one has nothing to do with the other."

"Does Rachel know?"

"No. Not till she can handle it."

"Why did you marry her with this hanging over you. You shouldn't have married at all."

"You sound like sis now."

"You promised, you"

"We were kids, Lawrence! You can't expect childhood pacts to hold."

"Look what we went through as kids. Or did you forget who your father was. I guess Virginia was right, you're just like dad."

Mitchell started to throw a punch at me when Bishop Barnes walked in the restroom.

"Hey, I hit the jackpot finding the groom and the best man. The photographer wants some shots before the reception."

"Thanks, bishop, I was just leaving," Mitchell said as he walked out.

Bishop Barnes approached me. "Welcome to The Church of Advancing Light, where saints are welcomed but sinners are all we get. That was a very impressive prayer, son. We need to talk. I think your talents will fit well within my ministry."

"We'll talk, but I'd better catch up with the wedding party."

I watched the events of the past in the reflective eyes of my weathered image. In this very bathroom, time has come full circle. This is where the nightmare started and now it has to end. I kept telling myself that I did it for Rachel. Now, what I have to do is for me. I got the gun and every imaginable reason to end my own life. My ruined life has to be laid to rest once and for all. But I've got to suffer through it a little longer. I'll have plenty of time to take my own life after I kill the bishop.

...To be continued

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