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Burning Bridges As We Go
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Wolf at the Door

Few of us remember a time before the car. Before roads and driver's licenses and the wonder of the open road letting you travel just about anywhere you wanted to go. Once upon a time, we rooted in the same generational spot making our home out of the earth. Born, raised, living and dying all on the same tract of land till it became both a blessing and a curse.

The automobile came along and life improved. Increased our movement and affluence. Allowed us the freedom to roam, and the honor to decide when and where we desired. With a car, you could head out of town to explore – just like the Vanderbilts or Rothschilds - and still be home by nightfall to sleep in your own bed. And you could encounter new people. New cultures. Sample local cuisine or purchase a trinket or two and put a few coins back into the local coffers. Southerners appreciated this. They did not mind out of town folk who admired their food and people and culture.

The automobile changed the South in ways existing since before the civil war. Older, more stagnant customs came into the light – rituals too difficult to justify - which outsiders had great trouble accepting. The Deep South hated this. They loved their towns, despite their flaws, and did not want “big city dwellers” driving down from “northern” states to protest a place they neither lived in nor truly cared about. To the Deep South, northern “aggression” meant strangers interfering with local politics and customs - however unsavory - stirring up conflict and then, when dissenting mobs came for them, quickly escaping north, racing for the town borders. Sadly, some weren't fast enough and the mob caught them. Then there was trouble both sides eventually regretted.

But generally, the car was a benefit to all people and helped change the face of American culture for the better.

My grandfather was one of those southerners. He loved his 1960 sky blue Buick LeSabre for no other reason than it let him drive his family to and from church every Sunday wearing their "Sunday best" without ruining their clothes getting there. No walking dirt trails or riding a horse or sitting in an open carriage till dust and grit covered their nice dresses and hats and coats, Gabardine slacks and polyester ties. It was that way for him as a boy and still that way when I was a kid growing up in his household.

Still, Granddad best remembers a time when the Youth Pastor, Brother "J.B." – whose presence one summer long ago irreversibly changed our family's future – drove a white 1959 Cadillac Coupe De Ville with red velvet plush interior and V8, inline four, 325-horsepowered engine. Not just as a convenience, but as a matter of affluent standing and pride among the community. A car befitting his status as a "man of God" who personally drove to and from church every day. Except Mondays.

"Boy!" J.B. scolded from the back pew of the church, "Y'all need to quit all that dancing and take a seat before God strikes you down. What y'all doin' ain't proper."

J.B. reached out and tapped Johnnie on the shoulder pointing to the wooden pew to his right. "Sit there boy! Ain't been no call for Elvis at the altar. Not yet, anyways. And y'all sure ain't no Elvis. No Elvis indeed," he chuckled.

"Yessir," Johnnie replied. Though not because he was embarrassed or believed he would go to hell for dancing in church - even in a Baptist church - but because he knew his mother would be frustrated hearing how J.B. had singled him out from half a dozen other parishioners "moving with the Spirit." Apparently, he had been doing something different.

Johnnie also knew his Uncle Clement was sure to hear about this. His uncle being the head pastor of the same church who regularly received complaints from J.B. about "the sin in that

boy.” And his uncle certainly would mention the incident to his mother. So Johnnie recognized sitting was preferable to arguing.

“People gossip, honey,” Johnnie’s mother, Sarah, advised, “Like it was gospel.”

“Yeah, but why do they have to act so high and mighty when they do? No one was like that at our last church. They weren’t so *judgie* there as they are here.”

“Maybe so, honey, but it tends to be that way in most churches. Trust me on that one. And your uncle wasn’t the head pastor there like he is here. People feel the need to gossip to your uncle. It’s their way. So let’s not upset him any more than necessary or cast him in a bad light with his congregation. Your uncle’s done a lot for us.”

Uncle Clément’s church was the Living Waters Baptist Church - located on the outskirts of Calcasieu Parish - who had taken Johnnie, his sister, and his mother in after Johnnie’s father had died working as a derrick man on an oil rig off the Florida panhandle.

“Heart attack,” is what the doctor called it. “A massive coronary brought on by a myocardial infarction.” Johnnie had no idea what that meant, but he knew how to find out. He went to the town library and asked for a medical dictionary to look it up.

“My-o-Car-de-all in-FARK-shun,” Johnnie pronounced carefully as he read from the book the librarian had given him, “resulting from a sudden *in-ter-ruption* of blood flow and *de-fic-ien-cy* of oxygen to the heart muscles, causing the heart to stop beating. Wow.”

The librarian, Mrs. Piers, was impressed. Johnnie, all of twelve, walked into her library and quietly asked permission to use a medical dictionary. Most people demanded what they wanted like they owned the place. This boy asked respectfully. He wouldn’t say *why* he wanted the dictionary other than he was curious. But she could see it was important to him.

“The book is over here,” Mrs. Piers said walking the boy to the medical section and pulling a copy of Saunders Encyclopedia and Dictionary of Medicine from the shelf. Then she walked the boy back to a table frankly curious, but too polite to ask. “Take as much time as you need. Let me know if I can help further.” She smiled and went back to her desk.

There are times in a librarian's career when they witness moments of pure learning by a student. When comprehension clicks and the student lights up like a firefly because they figured something never known to them before. Such immense joy in those moments, this world of comprehension, both for librarian and student alike. The love of learning.

Johnnie discovered something new that day, and his face lit up, though the reason for learning was bittersweet. First he took out a piece of paper from his pocket and spread it out revealing the word he had written down. Spelling it phonetically as "mi-car-tea-tum in-fark-shun" based on the way the doctor had pronounced it aloud. At the library, it took him several minutes, but he was able to locate the word in the dictionary, read the word, and understand what it described as being exactly what had happened to his father.

Heart attack. Myocardial infarction. You rotten bastard, Johnnie understood, You killed my dad!

"He went quickly, Sarah," Dr. Emerson explained to Johnnie's mother at the hospital, "Dead most likely before he even realized what was happening. I'm sure he didn't suffer. My condolences though."

Sarah smiled at Dr. Emerson. But whether her late husband suffered or not during his last few minutes on earth was not what she worried about. Nor the reason her brow was furrowed so deeply in consternation. She had just realized she would have to pay for her husband's funeral - with money she did not have and her late husband's last check nowhere near sufficient enough to cover - and still keep a roof over her and her children's heads. That was what she worried about. Not whether her husband had died pleasantly or not.

Uncle Clement surprised everyone when he stepped in. "The church will take care of the funeral and burial costs, Sarah. And we would like to bury Mike out in the old plot with our kin if that's alright with you. He's still family after all."

It was alright with her, but she knew Mike would have hated the idea.

“Buried with those self-righteous stiff for all eternity,” he would have howled, “After all the years I worked to scrape them off my boots! No way! You can have all their *God-bless-you* and *God-be-with-you* hypocrisies! I want nothing more to do with them!”

Well, Mike, she thought, you're dead so it doesn't matter what you think. I have other priorities to consider now, your company in the afterlife not being one of them.

One of those “*priorities*” had just appeared as she and Clement walked around the rectory discussing Mike’s funeral arrangements. Her 15-year old daughter, Maggie, had tagged along and taken a seat in one of the pews. And within less than five minutes, J.B. emerged from his nearby office and taken a seat right next to her.

Taken a seat? Sarah thought, Hell, he's practically sitting in her lap like Santa Claus. That sanctimonious lecher.

Earlier in the year, Maggie’s womanhood arrived and now just about everyone noticed how richly she had blossomed. J.B. obviously had. He kept patting her hands whispering, “you poor dear,” and “he’s in a better place,” all the while staring down her blouse and grinning at her like the wolf who would much rather “console” Maggie back in his private office than out here in the rectory. Sarah knew how these young preachers could be. All “love and holy spirit” till they got you alone, put the make on you, and encouraged you to stop resisting the devil in his den. Then they blamed their weakness on “temptation,” condemned the seduced woman as harlot, and insisted everyone follow suit by ostracizing her as well. Oh, men were so weak and predictable. And such complete pains in the ass at all the wrong times. Present company included.

“Pastor Abernathy?” Uncle Clement called out, “J.B.!” when he didn’t respond.

“Uh, yes Pastor Nolan?”

“Would y’all mind running over to Bedelia’s and asking her to bring the sheet music she’s gonna be playing for the service. I’d like Sarah to hear the selections made.”

“No problem,” J.B. replied, “Be glad to help.” Though he didn’t look happy about it nor did he care for the way he had been sent off like a schoolboy on an errand. Only he was too careful to let it show on his face.

“Why thank you, J.B. *Bless your heart.*”

Maggie, for her part, remained seated in the pew trying to look demure and mournfully disinterested. But secretly she was thrilled by J.B.’s attention. He was charming in a Rhett Butler kind of way. Whom her friend, Becky Jo, had taken to calling “the cat’s meow” because he was always well dressed and his fingernails trimmed short and clean.

“And he has those big hands to boot,” Becky Jo giggled.

Becky Jo, fifteen and Maggie’s best friend, had begun her womanhood too, but not with anything close to the same generous proportions Maggie received. As yet, men had not really noticed her. But they certainly noticed Maggie.

“Y’all are the luckiest,” Becky Jo crooned to Maggie any time a man looked her way. “They ‘bout fall all over theyselves tryin’ to get y’all’s attention. You can have any y’all like too, I bet. The handsome ones and not so handsome. I wish that could be me.”

Maggie didn’t care too deeply about such things yet. *Fiddle Deedee* is what she thought. A sentiment her favorite heroine, Scarlet O’Hara, would have spoken. But she was lying. She did care a lot, especially for the right man to come along. Someone who would take her places, buy her pretty dresses, and elevate her to the lady of the manor status like Scarlett O’Hara. Get her out of this hick town. Raise her above common. She hated being a grungy derrick man’s daughter living on the edge of the bayou and not in town like proper folk. At least living in her uncle’s house next to the church had been a step up from where they had been. But not much. She wanted more.

Life magazine may claim we are living in modern times, Maggie thought, but down here a woman still needs her looks to get by. And a solid prospect to get by with. She would be damned if she was going to fall in love with some cajun hick, get pregnant, and live as a common peasant like her mother. No, she was going to use what she had to move up and out

and never look back. To never again feel embarrassed about where she lived, who her parents were, or all the things she couldn't afford. Johnnie had his brains. She had her body. And as far as she could tell, choosing the right man to make her dreams come true would require both. So she stayed pure and watchful.

Temptations were there to be had though. And Maggie felt the rush of hormones same as Becky Jo. But, as handsome as some men could be, and as flattering as their attention was, and as strong as her desire could get, Maggie knew there were also dangers. Her father had been handsome and look where that got their mother. Pregnant and poor after one night of carnal pleasure in the back seat of a car.

"I may not have much experience," Maggie told Becky Jo, "but I know handsome don't always make for the right kind of man." *Or the right kind of life*, she thought.

Maggie had to be careful. Her new effect on men had become both a blessing and a curse. At first, she struggled to tell if men were really interested in her, or just interested in getting her alone and naked somewhere. Men could be flattering when they wanted. The older men always more subtle, while the younger ones practically putting up their paws and panting like puppy dogs begging to be petted, all excited with tails a-wagging. But a few times, after one or two became too aggressive, and she tried to shoo them away, angry. That scared her. Really scared her. What would happen if she went off with a man she thought was nice only to discover he was a wolf who turned aggressive after she denied him something he wanted? It was known to happen. Sometimes that meanness turned physical, even immoral, and there lied the real danger. Whispered about here and there. The ruined girl cast out. The boy barely admonished. That was the most frightening outcome of all. Maggie didn't want to think of *that* way of life.

Still Maggie wasn't bothered by J.B.'s attention. He was charming in a way most men weren't. And she could tell he was interested, despite being a preacher and all, so Maggie felt a few moments with J.B. could be safe practice. That's why she wasn't upset by his attention or why his behavior failed to raise red flags with her. But she was the only one.

"I'm sorry, J.B.," Johnnie said after he sat back down in the pew, "I will be more careful about dancing with the music. I just got caught up praisin' Jesus is all. Sorry again."

"Not a problem, Johnnie," he replied, "It's good to praise Jesus. But y'all mustn't dishonor him in his house."

"I won't. I promise."

"See that y'all don't."

In all fairness, Johnnie didn't hate J.B. for calling out his "sinful nature." The bible was filled with men who had sinned, repented, and still been blessed by God. But he didn't understand how a grown man, who had gone away to college specifically to study the bible and become a pastor, could be so ignorant to what the bible actually read. Johnnie promised himself, when his day came, he would be more scrupulous and stick to what the bible actually said. Not all that stuff J.B. pretended it did.

When he explained this to his mom, she smiled knowingly.

"You are a wonderful boy, Johnnie. Very smart and sensitive. So I hope you will wait a bit longer before taking on the hypocrisy of organized religion. At least until next year when you turn thirteen. It's a big job. "

"Oh, Mom."

"Speaking of waiting, isn't Mrs. Piers expecting you down at the library to help her sort and label the new books that arrived?"

"Yes, ma'am. I forgot."

Johnnie could kick himself for forgetting. That whole business with J.B. must have thrown him off his game. He gulped down the rest of his gumbo, grabbed his bag, and took off running with a "Bye, Mom!" out the back door.

Several blocks down at the library, Mrs. Piers was deep in thought despite several boxes of recently delivered books sitting next to her desk waiting to be unpacked. She wasn't avoiding the work since sorting and labeling had always been an enjoyable task. And organizing books from box to shelf appealed to her meticulous nature. But she wasn't so young anymore. She knew it. Her body knew it. Hell, most townsfolk knew it. They now called her "Old Lady Piers" because of it, which wasn't as endearing a nickname as they thought even if it was reflective of how old she had become.

"She practically hammered the first nail in the place," was the common sentiment among town folk concerning her age and involvement with the library. "Methuselah *hissself* checked out the first library book from her."

What you don't realize, Mrs. Piers' thought, is how improbable it has been for our small town to raise a library rivaling most big city collections. Acquired on no less than a tenth of their operating budgets.

Mrs. Piers predecessor and mentor, Mrs. Rachel Crabtree, explained it like this, "Our library, my dear, has a canon of literature extending well beyond most townsfolk's reading capability. But don't let that trouble you a bit. Nor reduce your efforts to build a great library and get people to read within. It is still to their benefit. And gives them something to strive for, live up to, and take pride in. Even if they don't. Which most won't."

"None?"

"Oh, there are a few, dear. And they will be the people who bring you joy. But as far as job satisfaction goes, you'll just have to get used to caring for people who don't always appreciate what you do."

"I see."

"I hope you do. I am glad to have you here."

Mrs. Piers did end up with her fair share of disappointments over the years. But none more pronounced than age taking away her eyesight. Stigmatism had caught up to her making

reading difficult and her job more challenging. All those words growing smaller and smaller, now nothing more than tiny black blurs on the page. She felt very bitter about it.

“You’re going to need glasses eventually, dear,” Mrs. Crabtree once advised, “It comes with the territory. All these catalogs have a way of shrinking over the years. And it isn’t like Dewey decimal is going to suddenly enlarge his coding font to super-size. Or the index card files larger in square footage.”

It took a while, but it happened. And it became so noticeable, her patrons had to suppress their frustration with her little mistakes. Like bringing a book written by William Styron instead of, say, Lord Byron like requested. Or The Prince versus The Prize. And so on. Many of her devoted patrons whispered to each other how she should increase her eyeglass strength again, but none were brave enough to broach the subject with her. It wouldn’t have made a difference if they had. Her glasses were already at the thickest density commercially available so no luck there.

Mrs. Piers knew there were a couple of ancient, oversized magnifying pieces with wooden handles down in the storage room that could help her read clearer. *But, I’ll be damned if I use those ridiculously large behemoths, she thought, Remember how they laughed at you for using them, Rachel. You were so sweet in return. Took it all in stride. But it was wrong of them. I’m not so sweet as you and I’ll be damned if I let them laugh at me that way.*

Still Mrs. Piers couldn’t complain too greatly. She was healthy for her age and thankful she still had a wonderful library of books to care for. And young people like Johnnie who volunteered to help her. She needed their sharp eyesight and boundless energy now more than ever.

That she happened to love the boy deeply and felt him a kindred spirit ever since the day he showed up asking for a medical dictionary was an unexpected benefit. Johnnie felt the same though he would not have known how to explain it. Mrs. Piers was just a lot of fun to hang out with once you got past her prim and stern demeanor.

“She’s nice, Mom,” Johnnie told Sarah, “And she knows just about every book written in the whole world.”

“Well, not every single one,” Mrs. Piers reassured Sarah later when they met, “But it never hurts one’s reputation for people to think so.”

Sarah and Mrs. Piers fast discovered they were aligned on almost every principal of life including community, men, children, family, church, and social responsibility despite the different paths they had chosen to walk. As such, they became the kind of friends who trusted and could confide in each other. A blessing for both. And a benefit for Johnnie who had a hunger to learn. Johnnie would tell you he learned something new every time he hung out at the library with Mrs. Piers. He learned stories from her, about her, about the town, about the world, and about the world of literature. And about the meaning of life. According to Mrs. Piers, anyway.

One of the strangest things Johnnie learned was Mrs. Piers didn’t approve of Russian literature. He discovered this while explaining how his new 7th grade English teacher, Mr. Bales, had introduced *Crime and Punishment* to the class, a particular favorite of his, and wanted each student to research Dostoevsky and write an essay about his life and works. Johnnie wondered if Mrs. Piers could recommend any particular book to get him started since the paper was due in a week.

“Dostoevsky is far too depressing for a 7th grade class,” Mrs. Piers explained. “Oh, he writes well enough for some great big self-referential, self-aggrandizing, sulky twit. But all that melodrama. And his themes are far too contrived and full of immature conclusions. So annoying! The man was a syphilitic degenerate, you know, thanks to all the prostitutes he frequented throughout his life. Went to his brain, I’m sure. For my money, your teacher should have introduced you to Camus or Sartre. They’re both much more eloquent and insightful.”

Johnnie was impressed. So he quoted Mrs. Piers in his essay. And that got him into some hot water. Mr. Bales - a recent Yankee immigrant from Maryland who had written his senior doctorate on Dostoevsky - sent Johnnie to the principal’s office not only for quoting Mrs. Piers, but for arguing with him about the legitimacy of her opinions.

“Off you go, Mr. Nolan!” he bellowed, “I will have none of your sacrilege. If you refuse to learn, then I am at a loss. You will excuse yourself and report to the principal’s office immediately to explain why.”

The principal, Byron Eldridge - who had known Mrs. Piers since he was a boy, having himself spent countless Saturday’s in her library reading Edgar Rice Burroughs – suppressed a laugh when Johnnie told him why he was being sent to see him.

“Keep your chin up, Mr. Nolan,” Mr. Eldridge offered gently, “You’re a smart young man and I look forward to many more years reading your fine work. Remember, the best writing is always honest, especially when it has been sharpened by disagreement.”

Despite his encouragement, Mr. Eldridge did not overturn Mr. Bale’s given grade and let Johnnie know he would have to accept the C. Mr. Eldridge made it a practice never to openly challenge any teacher in their classroom as long as it concerned an academic issue. It set a bad precedent. So Johnnie was left with a C paper along with Mr. Bales’ assessment of his so-called “profane content” essay.

Still, after school in private, Mr. Eldridge had a word with Mr. Bales. And to Mr. Bales credit, after some initial reluctance, he came around to understand Mr. Eldridge’s point how giving a reduced grade to a well written paper with properly quoted opinions just because the teacher didn’t agree with the opinions quoted was considered censorship at T.H. Watkins.

“Hell, it’s a miracle these children even write considering the country they historically come from. We should celebrate their academic work and fan the flames of their desire to learn. Not diminish. Hold them to a rigorous higher standard certainly but provide the stairs to climb when you do. If you see what I’m about.”

Censorship, Mr. Eldridge suggested, called into question Mr. Bales’ chance to receive tenure the next time his tenure was sure to come up before the board. Censorship was not to be the tradition as long as Mr. Eldridge supervised the school curriculum.

“I see,” Mr. Bales replied. Though young and pious, he wasn’t stupid. He would be more careful with his own opinions, and the grades he offered, in the future.

Mrs. Piers, when Johnnie gave her the essay, laughed long and hard over the comment the English teacher had written across the top of the paper. Which she was now seriously considering framing and hanging behind her desk.

“Mrs. Piers,” Mr. Bales wrote in red ink, *“may be a town treasure, but she is not a reliable source to quote from concerning Mr. Dostoevsky. Please use more appropriate avenues of fact gathering on your next paper.”*

It was true Mrs. Piers had opinions about books. She did not prefer foreign language books from Japan, Africa, Spain, South America, Russia, what have you, because they had to be translated into English in order to be read in the western hemisphere. Language was poetry to her and any book needing translation always wrecked the prose when transposed into another language. She felt if you couldn't read the book in its original tongue then either learn the language or put the book down. That included the bible, which she studied in its original Aramaic, Hebrew, Greek, and Latin, thanks to her father, and so was familiar with the Torah, the Septuagint and the Latin Vulgate.

“The only way to honor books,” Mrs. Piers explained, “and to honor any given author is to read their work in its intended language. Literature is sacrosanct and reading the most wonderful, poignant, intimate, and worthy of all passions demanding hours of discipline to read, absorb, and analyze. And in return, the reader is granted from *Seshat* on high an education, knowledge, beauty, and worth to their life. A far greater value.”

Conversely, Mrs. Piers held authors to a greater responsibility than the reader. If the reader was to honor the writer, then the author was surely required to provide quality written work to read. If both did their job, they brought honor and distinction to the world. And joy and creativity, intimacy and beauty. If they didn't, they should be cast off. Which meant, in her library, no pulp author's trite or banal work would ever grace her shelves alongside the greater works of classic and contemporary literature. It would be like dressing a pig in human clothing and letting them sit at the table for supper. Pearls before swine as they say.

“Why, that's censorship if'n I ever heard it,” some of Mrs. Piers lessor educated patrons accused.

"It certainly is not censorship if those detestable works are still available elsewhere. Like the trash bins out behind the A&P. You may find a copy there," Mrs. Piers rebutted, "In my library, it is simply a matter of quality control."

To be fair, Mrs. Piers opinions extended equally to all literary genres. In her library, you had the great authors like Chaucer, Keats, and Shelley as much as Bukowski, Rand, Mamet, Vonnegut, and Munro. Even more to the delight of her younger patrons, she kept graphic novels, if they met her high standards, including Maus, Watchmen, X-Men, and The City of Ember.

Ironically, Mrs. Pier's unwavering standards had seriously upset several townsfolk who were passionate about Stephen King.

"She won't buy a single one of his books for us to read. Not a single one. All cause she says he ain't a good writer. What she talkin' bout? Not a good writer? All his books be bestsellers! Don't tell me he cain't write!"

"Yes, the man can write," admitted Mayor Jackson listening to each constituent's complaint.

"Y'all are the mayor. Can she do that? I don't care how long she been *lie-barian*, or how smart she think she be. She don't have no right to refuse us. We's citizens. We pay taxes. That be why she have a damn library in the first place."

"Yes, of course. I'll look into it."

Mayor Jackson tried his best, but it was a delicate matter to mess with Mrs. Piers or her library. He knew well she was a veritable institution not easily replaced. He could threaten to fire her, but that would be political suicide. And possibly personal and financial ruin. Mrs. Piers had her detractors sure. And she could be a pain in the ass by a large margin. But many of her one time library "students" had become powerful judges, bank managers, preachers, professors, and even grass roots social warriors who could mobilize a large following in an instant. Firing Mrs. Piers would be like waving a red flag. Or more like clubbing Betsy Ross in front of the whole town as she sewed America's first flag for George Washington. It just wasn't done by anyone with half a brain and a full political career to think of. Mayor Jackson had a full brain.

In disappointment, those same citizens went on to form their own Stephen King book club and grew close by bonding over mutual animosity toward Mrs. Piers. And within a few years turned themselves into a charitable organization that not only founded several literacy programs in nearby communities, but even inspired a few other communities to build a few mobile libraries for outreach in poorer parts of the country. With a full complement of Stephen King books on hand, where appropriate, thrown in for good measure.

“As far as I’m concerned,” Mrs. Piers suggested, “Any lover of Stephen King, or hacks like him, no matter the extent of good deeds done in their name, have literary standards lower than a dung beetle’s belly button. And furthermore, good riddance. It’s doubtful his fans are able to appreciate truly excellent literature anyway. So why should I placate them further? Good standards, as far as my library is concerned, holds good standards for good reason and shall not be sullied by inferior work.”

This is what Mrs. Piers was thinking when Johnnie came quietly into the library with only the slightest squeak of the back door hinge alerting anyone to his arrival. Mrs. Piers had taught him to enter reverentially and be respectful of all patrons within. Which is why he stood and waited patiently in front of her desk till she noticed him.

“Y’all been quiet a long minute, Mrs. Piers. What were you thinking about?”

“Oh, something along the lines of whether you would prefer to swim in a pool full of chocolate pudding or a pool full of maple syrup.”

“No you were not,” Johnnie laughed.

“You doubt my veracity Young Mr. Nolan?”

“No, ma’am.”

“Good. Now maybe we should cease any further confabulation so as not to offend my impeccable integrity and get to work labeling these new books. What do you say?”

“Yes ma’am.” Johnnie wished he could talk like Mrs. Piers. She sounded smart when she talked.

For her part, Mrs. Piers really appreciated Johnnie. He was a delightful, respectful boy who bore little similarity to the other boys his age. They were often rambunctious, uncoordinated, and full of loud body noises. She still cared about them, as she did for all the children who came to her library, but most made her sad knowing few would ever take advantage of what literature and libraries could do for them. Not like Johnnie who seemed to have a natural curiosity, loaded with questions, always in search of a book to provide the answer. Johnnie had a stillness to him few could match. With a love of reading which, just like the day she met him, re-affirmed her sense she needed to care for the boy by nurturing his great curiosity, book by book. She hoped he would go far in life.

After an hour of labeling and sorting, Johnnie was the first to break the silence. "I was thinking I might want to be a doctor."

"A doctor, hmmm? What happened to being a fireman? You were set on that last week. That's why I had you read Fahrenheit 451. Which you still haven't told me if you liked or not."

"I liked it I guess. But it didn't seem realistic. People wouldn't just go around burning books like that, would they?"

"No, not really. Not yet anyway. Not here," Mrs. Piers replied, "But I can imagine a time. People here at least know they would have to burn me along with the books before I would ever let something like that happen. Like a book witch maybe. But that wasn't what Bradbury was inferring now was it. Do you know what he was really trying to say?"

"That it's dangerous to censor ideas. It makes us worse as a people. More racist and evil somehow."

"Good lad. You earned yourself a reward for that one. We can end here for the day, and you can go downstairs to pick out a book. Tell your mom I'll stop by later with a few baskets of blackberries from my back field. Those damn vines are taking over the whole yard again and I can't keep the field mice out. I might have to call Mr. McCready and have him burn the field again."

“*Oh boy!*” Johnnie thought. He wanted to run downstairs out of excitement, but he, of course, knew better. Still, when Mrs. Piers closed the stairwell door behind him, he jumped two steps at a time till he reached the bottom landing. Getting a personal book from Mrs. Piers, one he could own and not have to return to the library, was special. It only happened twice before, but each time meant a great deal.

The basement was immense. So big it stretched from corner to corner, street to street filling up the entire block below the central downtown building that housed not only the library, but the mayor’s office, city council chambers, the DA’s office, the Public Defenders, the courthouse, the post office, the community center, and a dozen other civil service agencies. Lots of space and lots of books down in the basement where no one, except Mrs. Piers and a few trusted confidants, knew existed.

Mrs. Piers told Johnnie the basement had originally been built as part of the town’s pre-civil war expansion which had, thankfully survived after the civil war - or after what the locals liked to refer to as “the *real* Yankee invasion.” It had been used in connection with the Underground Railroad. And at the turn of the century until the Great Depression, as grain and feed storage complete with a bootleg speakeasy only accessible from the back alley. During WWII, it shifted to a bomb shelter for air raids that never occurred. And after, was closed off. Mrs. Pier’s predecessor, Mrs. Crabtree - who also served as the town mayor while their men were sent off to fight overseas - realized the basement’s potential and closed it off.

She first enlisted her retired carpenter husband and had him tear out every door leading down to the basement before paving over the openings with framed cement. Every entrance except one. The interior library door from the librarian’s office at the back of the library. Mrs. Crabtree even re-drew the building schematics herself, eliminating any traces of the basement in the master plan, and founded the first secret literary society this side of the Mason-Dixon Line. When the men of the town returned home from war, those who did didn’t seemed to recall there had once even been a basement. Only the most trusted were granted access.

Underneath the town library, the society of Liber Vitae Caritas – “Libraries are the Fountain of Life” – began with two members, Mrs. Crabtree and her young apprentice Judith Ann Piers.

Each librarian since being tasked as keeper of the secret basement. Which Mrs. Piers was only too willing to do.

Over the years, the basement's curated inventory multiplied till row upon row of bookshelves came to house hundreds of thousands of books. Mrs. Crabtree had started the collection. Mrs. Piers continued to add, store, and preserve it. Over time, a trusted academic, or a fellow librarian, or sometimes a well deserving citizen would be granted entrance to the society and the underground library. And to their amazement every time, discovered a collection that extended well before the Age of Enlightenment and rivaled, if not exceeded most research libraries. A truly great accomplishment.

The first time Johnnie had been rewarded with choosing his own book from the basement, he stood in awe for nearly an hour looking out over the expanse of shelved books.

"WOW!" was all he could say to Mrs. Piers' great delight. Then after wandering for an hour, Mrs. Piers called him back and gave him a tour so he could orient himself to not only where he was, but what section he was in. At the end, he picked a Frank Baum book, The Marvelous Land of Oz, published in 1904, because he liked reading about the adventures of the Tinman and the Scarecrow. That same book - which Johnnie kept in a hidden place in the back of his closet - was valuable. But, of course, he would never tell anyone he even had the book let alone sell it. He was far too sentimental about it.

The second time Johnnie was granted access, he chose A Tree Grows in Brooklyn by Betty Smith to Mrs. Piers' great delight. He didn't tell her why, but he wanted a copy of his own because he had greatly sympathized with the heroine, Franny, after recognizing how many similarities existed between their alcoholic fathers.

Now, on his third trip downstairs, Johnnie was having difficulty choosing. He would love to own his own copy of The Mutiny on the Bounty by Charles Nordoff, which was sitting on a shelf farthest to the right, third row down in the "war is absurd" section. But he had recently read Cold Comfort Farm by Stella Gibbons and nearly busted a gut laughing. It would be great to have Gibbon's book in his own library. All of two of them. Now soon to be three.

“Johnnie?!” Mrs. Piers called from the top of the stairs. “You need to come up here. Your mom just called and needs you home. I’m going to close up and drive you, so hurry now.”

Two rare occurrences in one afternoon. A new book and his mother calling him home. Johnnie hoped it would be nowhere as bad as the last time she called him home to tell him his father had died and they were moving. That had sucked. Still, he quickly headed upstairs.

Sarah sat in the kitchen waiting for her children to return with a cup of coffee sitting on the table cooling down in front of her. She didn’t often drink coffee in the afternoon, one in the morning was enough, but today felt different. A nice hot cup of coffee to go with the conversation she was about to have with her kids would be helpful.

When Johnnie and Maggie joined her at the table, Sarah recited the line their father always used to start family meetings. “Well, there’s a wolf at the door and the sheep are in the yard. What are we going to do?”

“Mom, is it bad?”

“No, Maggie. Some would say just the opposite. Your Uncle Clement has asked me to marry him.” Sarah almost laughed out loud seeing the surprised look on both her children’s faces. Johnnie, God love him, was the first to recover.

“Are you in love with him? Like you were with Dad?”

“No, honey. I’m not. No one can ever replace your dad. But I am seriously considering accepting his offer. It could mean financial security for us for a long time. And your uncle is a decent man. He will treat us right.”

“Why?” Maggie asked, “Why would you tie yourself down to *THIS* again? How do you know he doesn’t secretly drink? Or that he’s not as nice as he pretends? You’re free now. We’re free. We don’t have to stay close to home because of Dad’s job now. We can get in the car and go anywhere we want. Move to New York. Or maybe California!”

“I wish we could. I wish that were true, Maggie. But the truth is I have no money. I tried saving as much as I could over the years, but life happened, food and shelter and clothing happened, your father’s drinking happened, hospital bills happened. I raised kids and waitressed when I could. But that doesn’t give you a lot of life options. Marrying your uncle guarantees stability and will allow both of you to attend college. And maybe explore the world after. And have better choices to choose from than either your dad or I had.”

“Sounds like you already made up your mind. Are you asking or telling us?”

“I’m asking Maggie. This affects you as well. I know it will require some adjustments on all our part to fit in with the church and be part of your uncle’s congregation. But that doesn’t mean we give up anything. We are still the family I care most about. And the truth is, I’m tired. I could use a place where we don’t have to struggle every day just to get by.”

With that, Sarah took Maggie and Johnnie’s hands, hands she had held every day since the first they were born. Looking at her children, Sarah let the tears she had been holding back for a long time fall. “I want the best for you! And *this*,” she gestured around, “as far as the Lord has graced us, can be a home if we want it to be.”

“Okay Mom. I agree.”

“Thank you Johnnie.”

“Me too, Mom. But only because I love you. Not because I think it’s right.”

“Thank you Maggie.”

“Do we wait to tell Uncle Clement? Boy will he be surprised!”

“No, I told him I would have an answer for him after I spoke with you two. He’ll be along soon enough. I thought it only fair not to make him wait too long for an answer.”

Clement was indeed on his way to his home, deep in thought. He had never wanted to get married, had never planned to, even though he knew it would help his position with the church

elders. They had, over the years, expressed increasing vehemence about his single status feeling such a state was un-Christian and too fraught with temptation. Baptists weren't Catholics after all. Baptist's believed a man served God best when he had a Christian wife at home to support and care for him. So he wouldn't be distracted or tempted elsewhere and bring scandal.

"A man," quoted Elder Bishop Tomlinson, "is to leave his father and mother and be joined with a wife. Genesis 2:24. Chapter and verse. A *man*, is to be fruitful and multiply. Genesis 1:24. Chapter and verse. So what y'all waiting on, son?"

That Clement was an intelligent, thoughtful pastor who loved and served his congregation every day despite not being married wasn't enough for them. That he had never once given any indication he had but the most honorable of intentions did even less to dissuade their opinion. The elders felt the bible was clear on the matter.

"To be sure there are many fine Christian women here at Living Waters," Clement counseled, "And a man would count himself blessed many times over to have the honor of marrying any one of your fine and beautiful daughters. But the Holy Spirit has impressed upon me to wait. He has made it clear I am to be patient till He opens a path before me. And, gentlemen, I intend to do just that. I am not in a position to defy the Holy Spirit of God."

Clement hoped that would appease the elders for a while. Hard to go against the Holy Spirit when so invoked. But their patience wouldn't last forever. It was likely, almost guaranteed, they would vote him out no matter how faithfully he served. Unless he acquiesced to their expectations.

Even so, Clement did not really believe he was being prompted to wait. Nor did he ever intend to "fall in love" again. He felt love once, or something akin to love, as a teenager when he took up with a local girl who had not felt the same for him. He did not like himself very much during that period of his life, mostly because he knew he was letting her use him for her own purposes. She was ruining him, not being respectful toward him, and enjoying the control she had over him. Like it was all a game to her. But still he couldn't stop debasing himself and groveling for her. For six months, he was obsessed with feelings of anxiety, desperation, and

lust for her unrequited attention. And when she finally tired of toying with him - when she publicly broke him in front of the entire senior baseball team and their girlfriends while simultaneously taking up with their star right fielder - Clement determined he would never allow himself to be susceptible to such foolishness ever again. He immediately changed course choosing a christian college to matriculate to, Chapel Hill, rather than take the baseball scholarship offered by LSU. And he felt at peace with his decision ever since.

So when the unfortunate death of his brother put Sarah and her children into his life, Clement was surprised when he realized the Holy Spirit *WAS* actually not only prompting him to care for them but to marry Sarah. Sarah was an honorable woman, hardworking, with a good “head on her shoulders,” and a lovely disposition as they say. Salt of the earth. That she was in a precarious situation and would see the benefit from a union of convenience, one that wouldn’t require her to be “in love,” was a bonus. And their marriage, Clement knew, would not only satisfy the elders but have biblical precedence to back it up.

Clement learned about Levirate marriage while attending Chapel Hill Seminary. Levirate marriage being a type of marriage discussed in Deuteronomy in which the brother of a deceased man is obliged to marry his brother's widow. In a positive sense, it served as protection for a widow and her children, ensuring that they had a male provider and protector. Especially in patriarchal communities where women were still essentially regarded as adjuncts to their husbands. Like at Living Waters.

Clement knew Sarah and her children would benefit from such a union as well. His brother, Mike, though a decent enough person once, had not been good with money and died penniless. Sarah, at the moment, didn’t have many options which wouldn’t require her to uproot her and her children’s entire lives further. Johnnie was thriving, sure, but being taken from the education Mrs. Piers was providing him would be akin to shooting a mockingbird. Clement wasn’t about to do that. And Maggie. Well, Maggie needed protection. She had blossomed and many men, including J.B., had noticed.

Clement did not like J.B. in the least and had secretly been trying to get him fired for years. He was a wolf in sheep’s clothing who had infiltrated the flock. Oh, J.B. thought he was slick, but

Clement knew about all the affairs he courted with underage girls including the 15-year-old daughter of a poor parishioner whom J.B. had sent to a New Orleans clinic last year to get an abortion. Most of his affairs were silenced with family money and personal guilt after they ended. There were one or two girls – whose families raised a little ruckus – but J.B.’s family dealt with them quickly by threatening not only ruination for the girl, but her entire family and their standing in the community. J.B.’s family was among the oldest, richest, and most connected in the entire state and had little difficulty handling such “minor” problems. Those “little inconveniences” were nothing compared to the benefits the family received in PR from J.B.’s image as a “minister of God.” To let a few sexual indiscretions with “those little hussies” as J.B.’s mother intoned to trap them was unthinkable.

“How innocent can they be,” J.B.’s mother reasoned with his father, “if they give up their chastity so easily? No, they’re all tramps who just want to manipulate their way into our good family. Like J.B. was their ticket to a better life. I know about those kind of trashy women and I won’t have such a thing in my home. Not on my watch.”

Clement had had little luck secretly ending J.B.’s career as a “minister of God,” but he wasn’t done yet.

I’ll be damned first, Clement thought, before I let that son of a bitch hunt my niece for sport.

Marrying Sarah would not only put Maggie fully under his protection, but also give J.B. something to be careful about. Clement still had authority of position and had sufficiently powerful friends to be dangerous to tangle with openly.

And if push comes to shove, he thought, I’ll call in a few favors even J.B.’s family can’t protect him from. Even if it means scandal and burning down everything I’ve worked for.

It had not come to that. That was his in reserve atomic option. Hopefully, with God’s blessing, marrying Sarah would solve two birds with one stone – mollify the elders and dissuade J.B. altogether. Maybe J.B. would even move elsewhere. One could pray.

Clement was still deep in thought when he walked into the house and found Sarah, Maggie, and Johnnie sitting around the table talking. He couldn't help but hold his breath. No one looked upset. No one angry with him. Was that hope he was feeling?

When Sarah noticed Clement standing in the doorway, she smiled brightly, held out her hand, and asked him to join them at the table for a family discussion.

"Well, there's a wolf at the door and the sheep are in the yard," Sarah invited, "How are we going to answer?"

With love, thought Clement. With lots of God's love.

The End.

P.S. The inspiration for this story came from a Catholic tradition I read about called Indulgences. An indulgence, according to the Roman Catholic Church, was a means of remission for the temporal punishment of sins for a Catholic who had died and gone to purgatory. Basically, if a Catholic died with sins still hanging over their head, they were sent to purgatory to work it out. If they couldn't, they would be condemned to hell once Jesus returned to judge mankind. If they could, then heaven was their reward. The Catholic priests, especially during the early 11th through 14th centuries, took advantage of Indulgences like a used car salesman with a big, greasy smile. When a loved one died, the priests would visit their family and entreat them to purchase an Indulgence. For a small fee, the priest would intercede for the soul of the departed. If the family was amenable, the priest would continue interceding while lining their pocket with as much silver and coin as they could fleece from the family. All the while insisting their departed loved one was only a matter of a few prayers from tipping the scale toward heaven. Indulgences, just for your info, were also one of John Calvin's "95 theses" of protest which he nailed to the church door to protest the Catholic church's abuse toward its parishioners.

