

The Pastor and the Angel

The Angel sat calmly on a sizeable rock, occasionally flipping her lengthy hair and stretching out her slender arms. Her wings, which were as pasty white as her flesh, moved slightly as she breathed. Her clingy, sky-blue dress defined her curves well. And the fresh smell of baby powder floated from her, mixing with the sweet scent of honeysuckle vines and dank odor of stale creek water.

Pastor Lester Philips sat opposite on a log. Calmness wasn't his friend today. Tears streaked his pale face. His body ached with his deeds. His trembling hand clutched a large, cordless drill. Before him lay a narrow fishing boat, aged deep green. Freshly made holes lined the sides and punched through the bottom.

He had cleared the boat of oars, a cooler, and life preservers. But there was something still in the boat, a man with anchor and ropes fixing him to the boat. He lay sprawled with white shirt and tan pants stained dark crimson. Flies squirmed around his gaping mouth and blood caked chest.

Not too far from the trio rested the still water of Horse Creek, an almost forgotten body of thinned snakes and muck fish.

The Angel watched Lester and waited. Lester had sat frozen for some time since the Angel appeared before him.

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He broke his silence with a wail and then cried. He tried to pray and followed that with more crying. All the while, he still clung to the drill.

“Well,” the Angel said with kindness. “Are you ready to talk to me? Tell me about it?”

Lester glared at her and swallowed. He dimly became aware of the cooling wetness in his pants, something that had come from the sudden appearance of the Angel and given him an acidic odor of urine and sweat like he had bathed in them.

“No,” he abruptly said. “No, not really.”

The Angel nodded and went back to waiting.

Lester continued to stare at her. Reality came rushing back. He thought that maybe she had brought it with her like a warm, heartfelt hello from a distant friend. But something underneath it felt like a lament goodbye. And here he was with what he had done. And reality showed him every little detail of it.

For the past few weeks, it had all been slips of hurried time with endless moments of wellbeing, desire, and longing. And before him were the unexpected results.

“Now. I guess,” he said, and the Angel nodded with a gentle smile.

“You may start at the beginning that led you here,” she said. “But don’t get too bogged down in details. We don’t have all day.”

“It started at the end of May. It was a bad day ending in bad storms.” Lester put the drill down on the ground and wiped at his eyes. “It was my fifth Sunday preaching. The

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sermon was about friendship and kindness for our neighbors.”

“Lester,” the Angel interrupted. “Remember that I said we don’t have all day.”

“Yes. Okay.” He swallowed. “It was the first day Jessica Jones volunteered to help do some paper work for the church. I kidded her about her name, Jessica Jones. JJ. I told Jessica her name sounded like a comic book hero’s girlfriend.

“Hours passed, and we spent that day working on building expense forms. Then the weather changed.”

* * *

“That’s not good.” Jessica pointed out the window.

“No, it’s not.” Lester joined her. The two were in the Third Baptist Church backroom, which was in the process of being converted into Lester’s office.

He turned on a small TV that had been left behind years ago by a long forgotten church member.

“And this isn’t good either,” Lester said.

A skinny weatherman knelt and pointed out the radar hook of a large tornado in Brighten County nearing Dalemount. And that’s exactly where Third Baptist Church sat.

Lester looked back out the window. He watched the church sign sway and the lettering spelling “Jesus is in the heart of all men” blow away.

“Lester, what are we going to do?” Jessica asked near crying.

“First, we’re going to stay calm.” Lester spoke with confidence, fake but strong.

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“Second, we’re going to get in the bathroom.”

“Don’t we have to open some windows?”

“If the tornado wants them open, it’ll do it itself.” Lester took Jessica’s hand and led her to the bathroom.

They knelt on the floor, and Lester prayed. Outside, Hell came. The church shook. Thunder and wind deafened all. And lightning blinded all those watching.

But inside the bathroom, Lester and Jessica were not part of the storm.

“I’m scared,” Jessica moaned and latched onto Lester. He stopped his prayer to hold her.

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“That’s when I noticed....” He stumbled on his words. “I noticed how beautiful she was. She had the softest hair, just waves of fire. And her eyes were so pale like a washed out ocean.”

“And married,” the Angel said.

“Yes, and married.”

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“Shh,” Lester told Jessica. “It’s almost over now.” Jessica sobbed softly on his shoulder.

“No, it’s not,” she said.

“Just listen. It’s not even raining anymore.”

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“No, not that.”

“Then what is it?” Lester knew that question was going to take him down a path. One he may not want to go down. But he asked it anyway, feeling it was right to ask.

“It’s just been so long since somebody held me.”

Lester didn’t know what to say. He reached for his faith and comforting words. But found only silence inside.

“Lester,” Jessica began. “Would you excuse me? I need to use the bathroom.”

The church had only one bathroom. And Lester was more than relieved to leave it to her.

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“And that’s how it started?” The Angel reclined on the rock.

“Yes. We spent the next Sunday together. But not that way. Not yet.” Lester rubbed his eyes again. Mag flies and gnats buzzed around his face and eyes as if starving. “We were just working on the accounting stuff. The church wanted to do some remodeling.”

“And nothing happened then?”

“No, nothing did. I didn’t bring up what she told me even though I wanted to. I really did.”

“So what happened next?”

“Another Sunday. Another tornado.” Lester slumped forward. “And we were in the bathroom again. I was holding her. And I was liking it.”

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Jessica cried softly on Lester's shoulder. Lester knew it wasn't because of the weather. He tried to comfort her with words of hope from scripture. And he tried to hold her tight. His hands moved up her smooth back, and she winced.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

"My back," she began. "It's just a little sore. Nothing to worry about."

She eased back so he could see her face, the dewy tears dripping from her cheeks, her eyes kind but lying.

"He hits you doesn't he?" Lester asked. "He" was Deacon Robert Jones. And Deacon Jones had been a part of the church for almost all his life and had been Deacon for nine years. There were some people who actually believed on Sundays he stood in the front left corner of the church and held the roof up. And if he hadn't been married before Jessica, Deacon Jones would be Pastor Jones.

Lester really did expect Jessica to answer him with a denial or a shameful nod. Instead, she leaned in and kissed him. It was like no other kiss for him, deep, searching, and lengthy. And instead of awaking something in him, it was more of a resurrection, life thrusting back into a dead thing.

When they exhausted themselves, they stopped and stared at each other in shame and despair.

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“I told her that it was a mistake, something that was a sin,” Lester told the Angel. “I told her it could never happen again, and that we need to pray over it.”

“But you didn’t,” the Angel said.

“No. In stead of praying, Jessica begged that we could just pretend it never happened and go on being friends and working together.”

“And you did.”

“Yes, and then came another Sunday. And another tornado like they were out to get us. Not one ever touched down in Dalemout, but they just kept coming. And Jessica and I ended up in the bathroom together, ended up in each other arms. And we made love.” Lester choked and coughed for a second. “We made love during the storm on the bathroom floor.”

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Jessica rolled over and lay still with blouse open, bra undone, breasts full and heaving. Her panties and panty hose tangled together at her feet.

Lester’s pants and underwear were down and his shirt open minus a few buttons. He rested on his side while covering himself with his left hand.

The two were still for some time, hushed and listening to the weather rage.

Jessica rolled back to Lester and clung to him. She cried, and he held her again.

“Wonderful,” she told him. “You make me feel wonderful. It’s been so long.”

“We’ve really messed up,” Lester said in a numbed voice. He was lost in the aftermath of her flesh, smell, and taste. For that moment, he believed everything was right in the world.

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But he knew that was a lie.

“I’m sorry,” Jessica said. “It’s just so hard.”

She began telling him things then, slaps, punches, endless words of hate, rough and exposing sex ending in bleeding, all things ending in bleeding.

Lester held her as she did, as she cried her words. He cried too.

When she was finished, they made love again, slowing time and getting lost somewhere else.

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“Okay.” The Angel brought a slender leg up and propped on it. “So that’s how it began, tender, caring passion and possession. How’d we get here?”

“In a very bad way.” Lester felt his stomach twist in pain. There wasn’t anything in it to come up. He’d already taken care of that hours ago. And now all he had were dry heaves to tear at his innards. That passed after a moment, and he continued.

“I knew something was wrong right away,” Lester said. “I’m not talking about what we were doing being wrong. I knew that. But other things were wrong.

“Monday morning I got up and walked out to the meager garden I was trying to grow. I sat against the broken fence that runs around it. I sat there with my bible and nothing came.”

“Nothing?” the Angel asked.

“Usually, I get a feeling of where to turn to in the bible.”

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“For?”

“Wednesday’s sermon.” Lester sighed. “Friday mornings are for Sunday sermons. Nothing came so I forced it.”

* * *

Pastor Phillips paced in front of the unusually large congregation of people who had gathered for Wednesday’s sermon. Troubled times of economy or weather often pushed church capacity.

Lester’s body soaked in his suit, his sour smell filling his nose and mouth. His nervous eyes swam over the back rows avoiding the front where Jessica and Robert sat.

“How can he be a righteous man before the Lord?” Lester asked his congregation. “He who raises his hand in anger. But not at those who offend God. But not at those who take life as if they’re God. How can he be a righteous man before the Lord if he takes up his hand in anger on those who he loves? Those who love him? The brother. The child. The wife.”

Amens, Hallelujahs, and Praise the Lords followed. Lester heard them as if down in a hole and felt no comfort in them.

He had more to say, but he feared he’d just give out and lay on the floor twitching if he continued. He had said what he wanted and called for prayer and song.

Mumbling silent prayers begging for forgiveness and then the forgetting the words of “Go tell it on the Mountain,” Lester managed to hold together until the end of service. After

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all had left, he sat in his car and cried over his bible.

Sunday morning came down hard on Lester. He rehashed an older sermon about charity and replaced some words hoping nobody would notice.

He wanted to do another more tailored for certain members. But he never found the words to do so.

After, and the “after” part had kept him awake long into the night, Jessica stayed behind to help again.

* * *

“I spent my morning meaning to say it’s over,” Lester told the Angel. “I didn’t sit around trying to find those words. I knew them. And I was going to say them.”

“But you didn’t say them did you?” The Angel gently smiled, and Lester felt pitied.

* * *

Lester stood with open mouth trying to get words to come out. Jessica walked to him, kissed him, and then held onto him.

With the warmth of her body against him, Lester felt something inside burn.

And while they made love on his office floor, outside darkness came with fury.

Long before the weather calmed, the two lay wrapped in a blanket from the storeroom.

“What are we going to do?” Jessica asked with tears in her eyes. She nuzzled against Lester’s neck. He held her and was still. He couldn’t answer her. All Lester knew that with

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her in his arms, everything was okay, swimming in Heaven's ocean, and everything wasn't okay, drowning in Hell's sea.

* * *

"Did you think yourselves in a moral play?" the Angel asked. "Lovers crossing stars."

"No, not really." Lester whimpered and began crying again. "She said she didn't know what she would have done if she hadn't found me."

"And you took that to mean she would spend the rest of eternity with you?"

"Yes, I guess I did." Lester's eyes fell upon the man in the boat. The one who had sat quietly and listened without interruption.

"The time has come for your tale's ending," the Angel said calmly with head raised.

Lester wept.

* * *

Darkness loomed on the horizon and occasionally boomed. But the sun shown brightly on Lester and his garden. He could clearly see glints of it in his tears as they dried on the worn leather of his bible.

His crying had stopped, but he still ached. He gave up trying to find words for Wednesday's sermon. He searched for himself and his situation and for Jessica and her situation.

God's words eluded him, perhaps chased away by Jessica, her squeaky laugh, her twisting smile, her giving flesh.

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Lester sat consumed with her. His mind turned and bent until his body shook.

And then he prayed.

“Why O Lord? Give me guidance. Give me strength to get us through this. For I am a sinner who is lost, O Lord. I am lost on the path you provided for me, O Lord.

“Why O Lord? Why O Lord couldn’t things have happened differently? Why couldn’t we have met before? Help me O Lord understand your will. Help me do your will, O Lord.”

And Lester prayed for some time until his mouth dried and throat burned.

He limped back to his modest house. He clung to the notion that all he had to do was get right with God again. Then he could go back to doing God’s work, His will. Then everything would be right in his life.

Lester planned to simply tell Jessica that it’s not his place to tell her what to do. But if she felt she’d be happier without Robert, then she should choose that path. And if she wanted a future with him after Robert, then Lester would tell her that could be a possibility, but only after Robert.

Lester stumbled into his house and placed his bible on the kitchen counter. He noticed the flashing light on his answering machine and knew it was a harbinger.

“Lester,” the machine said in Jessica’s hushed voice. “Lester, please pick up. Please. Oh, Robert’s flipping out. Lester please pick up. Oh. I need you to help me.” Click. Beep.

Lester stepped into what felt and moved like a dream, one that closed deep and pulled.

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He drove fast, watching the trees blur and wondering when did he get into his car. Then as the world slid in his direction, he turned into Robert and Jessica Jones' drive way.

Robert's blue Honda Civic sat coldly before his home. His ancient boat rested next to the house covered and well kept. Lester walked up to the car and noticed it had been parked in hedges that lined the driveway.

Lester felt his palms sweat and realized that he held his bible. He placed it on top of Robert's Civic.

He didn't knock. He didn't rush. Lester Philips walked calmly into the house and into the living room.

A lamp lay shattered. Pictures were torn from the wall. Chairs were over turned. And Robert Jones lay dead staining the carpet.

Lester saw him and wanted to pray for him. Lester turned Robert over searching for words. Robert's face slacked, and his body slumped together. A tiny red star glared at Robert's throat. At his chest was a trio of crimson smears with matching holes.

"Jessica?" Lester stood and cried out for her again.

"Lester?" Her voice came faint from the bedroom.

Lester now rushed expecting to find a bruised and broken Jessica. In the bedroom, he found her as he last saw her and almost wept with relief.

"Lester," she whined. "Oh, Lester. I just called you."

"It's okay." He took her into his arms. "It's okay now."

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They comforted each other and lost time. Lester told her over and over that it was going to be okay now, that God was helping them through this.

“You’re okay, right?” he asked her.

Jessica backed up and said she would be.

“I mean did he hurt you or anything?”

She shook her head and cried.

“He’s dead, right?” Jessica wiped her tears. “Oh, please check and see that he’s dead.”

“Okay,” Lester told her. “Sit right there on the bed, and I’ll be right back.”

Lester knew Robert was dead, but he wanted to humor Jessica, help calm her.

He walked to the living room and knelt beside Robert. Lester checked for pulse and waited for breath.

“Nothing,” he said and nodded.

The world once again changed for Lester Philips. If he had simply told Jessica that Robert was dead and hadn’t gone to check, maybe it wouldn’t have. Well, no more than it had already. This change slammed into Lester and took his breath.

“The lamp,” he whispered. The remains were scattered about on the rug, pink and white porcelain dust. It covered everything in a wide circle including Robert’s legs. And Lester knew that meant the lamp had been broken after Robert fell to the ground, after Robert had been shot. And the way he lay, with his arms outstretched, he couldn’t have reached the table where the lamp sat on his way down.

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“Jessica?” Lester returned to the bedroom and found Jessica packing.

“What are you doing?”

“We have to get out of here, Lester,” she firmly told him.

“No, we have to call the police,” Lester said. “Tell them what happened. They’ll believe you.” Just as the words left his mouth, the lamp flashed to him, and his faith in Jessica wavered.

“No, Lester. We have to get out of here.”

“The lamp. How was it broke?” Lester felt his body weaken and grow cold.

Jessica looked at him with her wide, wet eyes for a moment.

“I don’t know. Maybe I knocked it over.”

Lester looked at her suitcase and saw the gun on a towel.

“Jessica, I need that.”

She motioned to it and stepped away.

“He’s dead right?” she began.

“Yes, Robert is dead.” Lester winced as he picked up the gun. The cold burned at his hand. He didn’t know much about guns, but he knew the revolver was a .38. And etched on the side he read Smith & Wesson.

Next to the towel lay a small envelope. His heart fell from his body as he noticed a ticket poking from it. “... ate 12B. 1:45 p.m.”

“Oh, Jessica.” Lester watched all the colors dampen in the room. All the sounds

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became echoes, the click of a watch somewhere, the hum of the air conditioner, his own halted breath. And he cried out to God.

He clawed for his faith, something to cling to and climb up from the drowning waters sucking at his insides.

“Lester, listen.” Jessica shook him until he focused on her. “You don’t understand. He would have killed me. I had to do it. I did it for us.”

“Us,” Lester said. “One plane ticket.”

“You don’t understand.”

Lester wanted to tell her she was wrong. He did understand. He understood that she murdered Robert and planned to run away. And Lester understood that they both had betrayed God, strayed from His path.

“Give me that thing. You can just stay here with Robert then.” Jessica grabbed and pulled at the gun. Lester pulled back on it, and the gun turned upward. Lester pulled the trigger.

He watched her eyes. As a small poof of bone and flesh came from the top of her head, her eyes focused on him and then went limp as she fell backwards.

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“I would have put the gun to my head and pulled the trigger if there’d been one more bullet.” Lester wept.

“Really?” The Angel crossed her legs.

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“Four bullets for Robert. One for Jessica. The revolver only had five. I checked.”

Lester slumped and tried to find words for a prayer.

“And Jessica’s body?” The Angel stood and stretched. Her mighty wings unfolded and filled the sky.

“Car. She’s in my car.” Lester turned away from the Angel with great fear. “I was going to put her with Robert. I know that’s wrong, but he’s already gone. And she’s already gone.”

“I see.” The Angel circled the boat to Lester. She took her time and seemed to enjoy each step and movement. She took an amazingly deep breath.

“Jessica and you were lovers,” the Angel began. “You lay together in a church. She took her husband’s life. And you had hopes of sharing a life with her.”

“Yes, oh God yes.” Lester wept louder.

“But she did not. And fate or chance took her life with your pull of a trigger. And now, you sit at creek’s edge planning to float their bodies out and let the waters have them.”

“Yes, I know it’s wrong. Everything was wrong. But I can make it right again. I can do God’s work again. Oh. God,” Lester cried and fell to the ground. He tried in vain to sob a prayer.

He sat up and looked upon the Angel.

“Help me. Help me O Angel of the Lord. Help me.”

The Angel looked at him and smiled curiously.

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“Oh, I’m not an Angel of the Lord. Not anymore,” she said and struck Lester down.

* * *

He saw the sky fade in and heard the water lapping at the boat. He sensed the boat bobble and tilt. He even heard water trickling in through the holes he had drilled.

The Angel looked down at him and smiled.

Lester tried to speak but nothing of his body worked but his eyes and ears.

“Just in case you were wondering,” the Angel said. “Jessica’s body is still in your car. I’m sure the local police will enjoy that one. But that isn’t your concern now.”

Lester tried to pray for the last time. He failed. The waters slowly washed over his head, and he saw the Angel floating above him, wings filling the sky. She shimmered through the water.

Briefly, Lester thought of Jessica’s eyes. Then he thought of his congregation’s eyes, all staring at him seeking answers. He thought of the Angel’s eyes as she had listened. Then he thought of God and felt his heart break and then still. He knew he would never see God’s eyes.

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