

HOW THE WEIGHTY MAY FALL

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“I’m a lifelong parishioner, and I’ve always tithed. Always, Reverend. Why would anyone who says they’re dedicated to the mission of the church not give to help her? I’ve never understood these newer people who’ve been coming here over the years,” Jerry said. He leaned forward to speak more quietly. “You know, the migrants who come to eat our food, listen to our sermons and take our communion all without giving to help the ministry.”

Reverend Chandler was listening, this much Jerry knew, because the expression on his face looked concerned, which Jerry knew was the right expression to be having in response to his concerns about the decline of the tithe.

“Jerry,” Reverend Chandler said, “I wonder about that. Who would you say that our parish is for?”

Jerry looked delighted. “Well we’re here for the Christian, whoever he is or wherever he’s at in his journey. But if he doesn’t want to give back, well I think that’s ignorance. Plain old arrogance and ignorance.” He sat back and heard the chair creak beneath him. He pressed his thumbs together and smiled.

Jerry believed it was right for the Reverend to be compensated for all that he did, and that no pastor should be without proper transportation, which was why he’d rallied to raise funds (most of which came from his bank account) to buy him the ‘97 Civic that he was standing before. It was late now, and when the Reverend offered to give him a ride home, Jerry declined, knowing that his pastor didn’t need to be going to more trouble than he was already going to in pastoring the flock that he was. Even more, thought Jerry, the Reverend was putting his life into the ministry and never asking, as Jerry thought he should be, for more tithing through his sermons, but instead only casually saying he knew God would help him up and along on his way when he’d need it most.

Of course, Jerry knew he believed this too. He knew his Bible said somewhere that God helps out the people he loves, the people who dedicate themselves to doing good for Jesus. And it was guys like himself, he knew, that God seemed destined to use to accomplish this. Jerry wanted to leave his young pastor

with a little message of his own, so he'd smiled, waved, and walked out of the parking lot of St. John's Christian Church while whistling himself a tune.

Normally, Jerry drove his truck the five miles into Bakersfield to get to church. For the last eight years he'd driven it every Sunday morning for service, every Wednesday night for Bible study, and every other Saturday evening for coffee with the Reverend. However, on Thursday his transmission started slipping, so when Saturday came, he'd reluctantly taken the bus.

There was a stop directly in front of Jerry's house on Central Avenue. This line went clear into downtown, stopping a block from St. John's. The line had been put in more than ten years before, much to Jerry's protest, for whom Jerry believed must be the sake of his migrant neighbors. Short, Hispanic people began lining up in front of his house every morning. Some would be smoking cigarettes and some would leave what looked like cornhusks with hot sauce for Jerry to have to rake up and dump into his trash. Jerry didn't care for the bus and the kind it delivered. It was spreading poverty for all he knew. Bakersfield was where he was born sixty-four years earlier, and compared to his childhood days, today it had been lost to the ways of what he thought to be the ghetto. Whatever happened to good old gentrification, where a man who'd done most everything right in his life wouldn't need to worry about picking up trash in the morning or getting robbed at night?

As he'd stepped aboard he thought everyone looked strange and rather poor. All more than likely immigrants on their way to berry picking. Jerry thought back to when picking in Bakersfield was done entirely by white people.

When he was one stop from church he noticed the look he'd been given by a Hispanic woman when she'd stood from the back of the bus and walked up and

readied herself to exit. She looked down at where he was sitting, glancing at either side of him. Jerry looked down too, expecting to see something of hers tucked behind the seat. But he didn't and felt annoyed that she was looking at him at all. She then moved her eyebrows up as she bobbed and motioned with her head from side to side, like she was trying to emphasize something. Then she pointed, first at the empty seat to his left, and then to the one with his backpack on his right.

“Ay pendejo,” she muttered as she stepped off the bus.

Jerry didn't know this word but sensed her disrespect in saying it so he glared at her out his window, hoping she'd look. But she didn't, and as the bus pulled away he'd only become more annoyed. So these are the bus-riding types? Different languages and disrespect for their fellow man? It was at that point that Jerry decided that he'd never ride the bus again. Transmission or no transmission, he'd rather walk than become subject to mockery. After all his years of giving back to the community of Bakersfield, the least he deserved was a little respect.

The moon was out at three quarters and the stars were attempting to emulate it all around the central Californian valley's blackened sky. Jerry imagined enjoying them from his back porch, sipping iced tea or cocoa, depending on the weather. What a nice idea, he thought. He might even heat up some cocoa tonight when he got home. From church, Jerry walked along Main Street east until it ended. From there he planned to cut up one street to Central Avenue, which he'd then follow until home.

At Main's ending he looked back to his church to see if Reverend Chandler's Civic was still there. He was far enough now that he could get away with stealing a glance. More than anything, though, he was curious to see if the Reverend would

follow him. But there weren't any cars out. No headlights or sounds of movement came from Main Street. The only lights were streetlights, and the only sounds were the faint buzzing noises they made. Jerry walked on, now more certain than ever that he really would be walking all the way home tonight.

After turning onto Central and walking ten more blocks, he figured himself to be about a mile away from church. He peered back again. Still nothing. His legs felt fine, his old heart well, but he was getting a little thirsty. On the left he could see the gas station on the corner where he always filled up his truck. He'd tried to avoid entering its convenience store on the chance of getting into a conversation with someone he didn't really want to talk to. Now, though, he figured he might have to, but that it was worth it if he could get a cup of water from the soda fountain. One cup was all he'd need, and then he'd be back on the road. He pushed through the door and heard a couple bells chime his entrance. Jerry looked to the counter and saw a pair of dark brown eyes staring back at him.

"Evening," the person behind the dark eyes said. Jerry tried not to do anything other than make his way to the fountain. The clerk followed him with his gaze. "Chilly night, ain't it?"

Jerry looked back and nodded once. He found the soda fountain and searched for a small styrofoam cup, or at least something smaller than the absurdly large soda cups.

"Yeah," the clerk said, "cold alright. Good thing you're driving."

"Good thing," Jerry said back.

The clerk came out from behind the counter with his arms crossed. He stared out at the empty fueling lot. He was dark-skinned and younger than Jerry by at least

twenty years, and fitter by plenty more. Another Hispanic, Jerry thought. Probably born here.

“Man,” the clerk said. “Pretty slow tonight. Especially this time of year in the winter. Nobody ever comes to town this time of year.”

Jerry wanted to say something, mostly to prove that the clerk didn't know as much about Bakersfield as he did. It was once a city rich in culture. Festivals, a long history of agriculture, a hub for transportation. These were what got it on the map. Jerry didn't like the way this clerk spoke about his city, albeit simply about its weather, at all. Too casual. Arms too crossed and looking too bored. Don't kids read anymore? That's why kids are so dumb, he thought. Because they aren't even smart enough to know they should pick up a book and read! Jerry knew that was a great thought and he cracked a little smile to himself. He looked up and noticed the clerk's sideways expression.

“Why are you smiling? That's not funny at all,” the clerk said.

Jerry realized he might have missed something the clerk had just said and tried to remember, but nothing came. “Uh, just water,” Jerry said, his smile vanished. He stood up more straight and said with more authority: “Water.”

The clerk uncrossed his arms and took two steps toward Jerry. He didn't look bored anymore. “Look man,” the clerk said. “Just trying to be friendly, okay? It's the best thing to do in a place like this at this time of night.”

Jerry glanced at the watch around his heavy wrist. His meeting with Reverend Chandler was to end at 8:00. His watch read 8:54. “Right. I'm sure that's true.” He said looking up at the clerk. “Just a little thirsty is all.”

“Thirsty, huh?” the clerk said without moving.

“Yeah. Like I said, I just need a little water.”

The clerk looked down at Jerry’s thick tennis shoes, his weathered and baggy work jeans, the sweater that contained his gut. Then he looked at Jerry inquisitively. “Hey, have we met?”

Jerry certainly didn’t think so. Why would they have met? Here was a kid who worked at a convenience store that Jerry tried to avoid; a kid probably half-heartedly enrolled in community college, or otherwise a dropout planning to run a liquor store for the rest of his life. Either way, his parents were probably immigrants and Jerry was against immigration because of the overpopulation. Jerry stared back at the clerk without a word.

“Yeah, I know you,” the clerk went on. “Dang man, I know exactly who you are.”

“No,” Jerry said. “No. That’s a mistake. I don’t know you.”

“You live four miles down the road,” he said.

Jerry was about to object but didn’t.

“Yeah, you live in a little white house all by yourself with a truck that’s always parked out front.”

Jerry didn’t want to hear anything more. He started to leave.

“Yeah, no kidding, man, you’re the guy with the rake who lives at the bus stop. Everybody knows who you are.”

“No!” Jerry yelled and pushed through the door. He walked swiftly out to Central, trying to make it into a shadow in case the clerk would start looking out the window after him. He wasn’t scared of him, and he certainly didn’t care what he or any of his friends at the bus stop thought about him. Or did he? He certainly didn’t

like being known for where he lived. Jerry tried to move quickly, swinging his arms forward and back to propel him. Soon enough he'd be home getting warm and sipping hot cocoa, he thought. But in addition to being right about knowing he lived near the bus stop, the clerk had also been right in pointing out that Jerry was still four miles away from home.

Every fifty steps he thought he might say a prayer, just in case. But each time he'd gotten himself to start with a "Dear Lord" he saw headlights coming from in front or up from behind him. He tried making himself to look like what he thought any other man out for a walk on the road at night should look like. Shoulders rolled up and back; steps made light and quick. Twenty or thirty years ago he'd have jogged home and would have been there in half an hour. His body was heavy now, and his knees were less than reliable. He tried a prayer again. He thought he might ask the Lord for a Good Samaritan, or for someone around his age to pass him on the road who'd stop and holler that he too knew where Jerry lived and that he'd give him a ride. Jerry knew that it'd have to work out somewhat accidentally like this since he didn't really know anyone in Bakersfield other than Reverend Chandler.

"Dear Lord, I need—" But again he saw headlights coming up from behind. He kept himself moving forward, his shoulders no longer able to stay pulled back, but trying to keep as casual as possible. He huffed. His hips were starting to hurt, and his muscles were near exhaustion. Coming up on his right he could see a blue Call Box, which he knew meant he was almost halfway home. He could stop there and pretend like his car had broken down a little ways back. Was the Call Box halfway home from church or from the gas station? The headlights from behind had yet to pass and this made him feel uneasy, so he tried walking faster. His muscles were

growing numb, and his face was bunched and anguished from the pain in his hips and now his left knee. He passed the Call Box and tried to think positively. He reminded himself that he was now more than halfway home—less to go now than what he'd already completed. He peered back coolly and the headlights shone into his eyes. He wiped his forehead. The vehicle was straddling the white shoulder line and not moving any faster than he was. This, Jerry knew, meant that the car had to be following him. He tried to jog. His lungs were quickly cycling through whatever oxygen they could take in. He was beginning to panic, feeling his heart beating in his ears as he waited for the sound of the engine behind him to lurch forward.

Suddenly, he tripped. His body smacked the road and his head followed. Jerry felt the pain instantly on his forehead. But he didn't have time to assess it. He was heaving now and terrified and tried his best to rise. The car had stopped and all he could see were headlights and all he could hear was the sound of the engine idling. Then faintly, he heard a voice. It called his name. But he didn't recognize it. It couldn't be Reverend Chandler because the car was too big and the Reverend was probably already home. He held his knee up and saw the heavy fall he'd made had torn his pants. Blood was beginning down the inside of his pant leg. "Go away!" he yelled, but he sensed his cry wasn't loud enough to match the engine. "Go!" he yelled pathetically.

The passenger door opened and closed and a figure came forward. Jerry would have readied himself to fight had he not been already on the ground. Though it brought him no sense of calm, he knew all he could do was sit and wait to see what would happen. The figure came and stood in front of one of the headlights, and when it did, Jerry could see the driver had turned a side-mirror spotlight upon him. There

was the sound of a radio calling, and Jerry looked up at the face of the man in front of him.

He had brown skin and neat, black hair. The man's body was fit in his navy police officer's suit. "Jerry, are you okay?" The officer said. "I'm officer Gomez. My partner, officer Flores, is back in the car. We got a call from the gas station that you might be out here walking. Are you alright?"

"Go!" Jerry shouted again. He raised his hand to point and shook his head from side to side.

"Jerry," officer Gomez said. "We're only here to help." He knelt down in front of the cruiser. He was looking Jerry in the eye.

"No—I don't want your help. I don't want any of your help," Jerry said passing his eyes from officer Gomez to officer Flores. "What's wrong here is you—all of you. You're all what's wrong. All of you." A long droplet of blood from Jerry's forehead trickled down, hit his sweaty, white chin, and dripped into his jeans. He looked down, observing himself sprawled across the pavement. He couldn't think. His hands were trembling. He wanted nothing more than to be home.