Swing Low, Sweet Chariot : A novel

Greg Mason

Follow this and additional works at: http://digital.usfsp.edu/honorstheses

Recommended Citation
http://digital.usfsp.edu/honorstheses/102

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Theses at Digital USFSP. It has been accepted for inclusion in USFSP Honors Program Theses (Undergraduate) by an authorized administrator of Digital USFSP.
Swing Low, Sweet Chariot
Act One – Nettie’s Birthday

_Scene one: Heavy-Handed Foreshadowing and Modern Fire-and-Brimstone_

“I shall die this year.”

Nettie says this to Theresa. We’ll come in over Nettie’s right shoulder, a head-and-shoulders shot of her reflection in the mirror. We’ll come in close to capture the crow’s nests, the heavy, wrinkled jowls, the eyes—once so dark and captivating, now milky and fading. She applies make-up, and we watch a few of the wrinkles disappear under thick caking. We’ll pull back out so that we can see the reflection of Theresa’s profile over Nettie’s other shoulder. She holds a pillbox—one of those morning/noon/night, Monday to Sunday, twenty-one tiny containers and lids in a book-size, white plastic affair emblazoned with some drug company logo in a deep purple—and she sorts medicines from a nearby nightstand. Her neat, poised, trim, and youthful figure in an equally neat, poised, trim, and youthful pink A-frame provide a stark contrast to Nettie’s wrinkled old face and wrinkled old dress. (Theresa’s slender figure will also make the future much more obvious as it happens). Her dark skin and darker hair make Nettie’s caramel complexion and snow-owl hair seem that much lighter, that much more washed out, an almost-ghost. It’s a great shot; freeze-frame, magnify to a six-foot by eight-foot print and slap it on a museum wall, people could stand for hours and contemplate time, youth, age, death. The moment goes by in a second, a few short perfect frames. Theresa puts down the pillbox and turns to speak.

“Oh, don’t talk like that, Net. It’s just another birthday. A big one, eighty! Your brother L.J. has a big breakfast cooking for us, Pastor [Music Director] has a special song for you, and we’re eating at Della Pizza with the Bauers for lunch. When’s the last time you had pizza? Now, if you’re ready, let’s go eat.”

Theresa turns to exit the room. Nettie looks straight ahead into the reflection of her own eyes, unmoving, unflinching.

“I shall die. Reese, He done told me.”

Theresa stops. Tension instantly becomes visible in her back. She seems to compose herself, then soften, and when she turns around her face speaks of concern and compassion.

“Are you sure, Nettie?” she asks softly. She looks back towards the open bedroom door.

“Are you going to tell L.J.?”
In the mirror, Nettie looks down. Possibly this is to put her make-up away – we do hear something rustling – but the on-screen effect is that she breaks her own eye-contact and looks down. The gesture puts an almost subconscious sense of shame into her next statement.

“No. No, I don’t reckon. He’s told me about L.J., too. Something big is coming for him; I don’t know what. L.J.’s always had this big destiny about him, Reese. Powerful. He’s done a lot, but something else is coming. I feel it when he enters a room. I thought we’d both die before it happened, for shame. But He done told me, L.J. has something big to do this year. So do I; something big happens before I go on up. But let’s not bother L.J. with it; okay? This is between us.”

Theresa nods. We watch Theresa’s lithe figure walk through the doorframe. Nettie turns around, and we’ll turn our view with her, but we’ll hang back as she exits. The view isn’t kind; Nettie’s large bottom nearly touches both sides of the wide doorframe, and her dress looks off-the-rack from a plus-size discount store. Bad floral print, atrocious ruffled collar, straight lines, bulky, too-big – the way some larger people try to hide their bodies behind walls of fabric, but only succeed in making themselves seem even larger and formless. We’ll wait until she exits, “walking into the light” of the off-screen living room, and then fade-to-black.

Scene Two: Breakfast

This scene takes place in the kitchen/dining/living area in L.J.’s home. The house is small – less than 900 square feet, and has the same hallway-less set-up as many modern apartments. The kitchen and living room are separated only by the dining room table, at which L.J. and Nettie now sit. Theresa serves food – french toast, eggs benedict, fresh fruit, and fresh orange juice. We know it’s fresh by the presence of the juicer in the back ground. The quality and style of the meal contrast the simple home, but true aficionados will recognize the copper pans, the $300 knives, and other high-end details in the kitchen that indicate a love of cooking and an excess of money. The small living room – we’ll pan around for a moment as they get settled in to eat – has bookcase after bookcase filled endlessly with books. A quick look across the spines gives us titles like The Invisible Man, X, The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, several works on Native American history, Christian texts of all sorts, and works by Hesse, Proust, Voltaire... all intermingled in apparently no order. Coming back around, we get our first look at L.J. Tall and lean, he shares Nettie’s complexion and hair color. Thin wire-framed glasses lend to his air of intelligence (and to hidden money: those are designer frames). He looks younger
than her, maybe by a decade (but in truth by under three years), and only the thin cane leaning
nearby speaks of infirmity. In the background, we’ve heard them pray, begin eating, and snippets
of conversation, but now we focus in.

“I just don’t see why you drive over an hour, when there’s plenty of good churches right
here,” Nettie says.

L.J. sighs that universal, exasperated, we’ve-had-this-conversation-ad-nausem sigh. His
tone isn’t confrontational, just didactic. “You know why, Net. I work there. I’ve worked there for
almost forty years, back when we had seven hundred people and all of the things we now do
were just dreams, when Pastor Bauer was just a kid with a pellet-gun, shooting at bats and
squirrels, reading his math books during Sunday Service. We thought our church was big then,
but it was just a building stuck up on a hill, surrounded by cattle that dirtied up the parking lot.
It’s my home. I’ve watched almost everyone in it come, grow up, have kids. You can go where
you like; Theresa just promised to go to church, not this church, and you two can take the van
and go find a closer church if you want. But you won’t.”

“Because He told me to go to church with you. He didn’t say “go to this church” or that
church, he said, “Go to church with L.J.”

“So why are you asking me, again? Ask Him!”

“Because He didn’t say you had to go there, neither! You’re smarter than all the pastors
that work there; you could start your own church!”

“Lord, you’re eighty, Net. So I’m seventy-seven. Almost seventy-eight. I can’t do all
that. Besides, I’ve got my own church. I’ve been doing prison ministry now for that same forty
years; you want to go to church in Fulton County Jail?”

Theresa looks scared. L.J.’s voice is deep, loud, and rumbles like an earthquake; his
words have a precise diction, (he has the non-accent common to many orators, lacking the heavy
Southern, black accent that Nettie and Theresa share), and — though they aren’t quite arguing —
his voice shakes the glass in front of him slightly. Nettie doesn’t answer, and Theresa begins
clearing the table.

“Reese, you really don’t have to do that, I can do it when we get home,” L.J. says.

Like many conversations, something has gone wrong; no one wanted to fight or discuss
this again, and nothing in the silence can fix it. We’ll zoom out and back up a little, as if we’re
slowly moving away from the awkwardness, and fade-to-black.
Scene Three: Interior, L.J.'s Van

Silence still. In the passenger seat, Nettie sits looking out the window. They've already come around I-285 and up GA 400 a bit, out past [city] but not so far that the controlled access has ended. The side of the highway looks like stretches of trees covered in a thick green netting—the notorious Georgia Kudzu—broken occasionally by exits or shops. Theresa sits in the back seat, holding a business card. While the card isn't visible to L.J. or Nettie, we (having taken an angle that makes it seem like we are in the spare back seat) can clearly see that it is an appointment card for a family planning facility. Her face is indecipherable; we can only tell that she is thinking about the card. L.J. flips on the radio. The typical hum and static of a non-profit channel comes alive, and those familiar with the area will recognize Powers and Swain, two prominent Black Christian leaders who host a talk show called "Rethinking Religion". While not marketed as such, the show is primarily aimed at African-American audiences and typically plays on Gospel channels. They seem to be in yet another discussion of the growing attraction of young Black men to Islam.

Swain: "When we are told that the reasons these black youths are so willing to join Islamic groups are not just a lack of black Christian male role models, not just an attraction to the Islamic influences of the civil rights movement of forty-some years ago, not just a rejection of Christianity as a white faith, and thus not part of the same system of oppression that has haunted us for generations—essentially, when we are told that this is not solely a black issue—but that it is also and perhaps mainly a rejection of the hypocrisy they see in Christian leaders, versus the attraction to the holiness and conviction of faith that they see in Islamic leaders, well I think we need then to switch gears and focus on this as a Christian issue more than a black issue."

Powers: "But it is a black—and distinctly black—issue. You don't see the white majority converting to Islam in droves. You don't see white preachers talking about how vitally important it is to our faith to counteract this movement. You just gave me three reasons that are distinctly black issues and two that are not. Really four-to-one if you consider that those Islamic leaders are almost exclusively black, and if not black, they are middle eastern, a group that surely in this day and age can be identified as marginalized and feared—perhaps even hated—by the white majority; now that's something I think most black youths can identify with. And your reasons are the exact reasons that these Islamic leaders—who do in fact descend from, at least in a spiritual lineage, those Islamic leaders of the civil rights era—these are the exact reasons that these leaders
target young black males. Let’s face it; no one’s driving up to Alpharetta, up to the Country Clubs and Saint You-Know-Who’s and trying to convert the whites. They aren’t driving up to Gainesville, to the chicken plants, trying to convert the Mexicans. No, it’s happening in your downtown YMCA’s, at your neighborhood ghetto theaters, right outside Grady Hospital. It’s black leaders, targeting black youths, pointing out that they ARE ready for a separation from a white faith. Consider Earl Paulk, the leader of a local church of over seven thousand Atlantans, mostly blacks. But he’s white. And a few years ago we find out his nephew is really his son, and that he’s been fooling around in the pulpit for over thirty years. Now, how much more separation is caused when this white man, with a black congregation, falls from grace? No thank you, I’ll trust my black [Islamic spiritual leader] who grew up in [Atlanta ghetto] livin’ on mac and cheese, ramon noodles, and distant gunfire. That’s what these kids are thinking. Black identity figures into this equation very heavily, and we must approach this as an issue for the whole black community."

The first voice responds, “But it is your black Christian leaders, too. Take….”

Nettie leans forward and turns the radio down.

“L.J., get in the left lane,” she says.

“But I’m not going so fast,” he starts.

“I said get in the left lane.”

L.J. does so. He drives for a moment and then turns to ask Theresa about it. Out of the passenger window, we see a tan blur, darting in from the right. L.J. resists the temptation to brake, and the deer passes safely behind the van and on into the median. Then, a screech from tires and the sound of breaking glass. We’ll whip around to see what happened and catch a glimpse of the deer staggering from the road, and a small red two-door sedan – probably a Toyota or Honda – sitting in the far opposite lane. L.J spots a turnaround rapidly approaching – for official use only, the sign reads- and quickly turns the van around. Theresa is already dialing 911, so he parks a few car lengths back from the sedan, off the shoulder, and approaches the car from the passenger side. We’ll stay in the van with Theresa and Nettie; Theresa finishes her call and begins talking excitedly.

“How did you know, Net? We would have hit that deer, wouldn’t we? We’d be dead!”

Theresa flips down her visor and opens the vanity mirror. “He told me.”
“Well, what’s it sound like? You never tell me that part. I mean, did you hear a voice going, “Hey, get in the other lane or you’ll hit a deer?”

Theresa chuckles. “It ain’t like that. I just know. It’s like my own thoughts, just sudden and different from whatever I was just thinking about. I just thought, “Tell L.J. to change lanes.” After all these years, I don’t question why. I just say it. L.J. doesn’t question why. He just does it. When we were teens I told him not to go out one night and he did, and he got shot in the leg, and he has a cane to this day. None of us understood it then. Now he just listens. Guess he don’t want to get shot again.”

“What’s it like, being a prophet?”

Theresa chuckles again. “I ain’t no prophetess. God probably tells people things all the time. It ain’t no roaring fire or wind, the bible calls it a still, small voice. Half the time people probably just think they thought it, the other half they think they crazy. But I can tell the difference.”

Her mood seems to change again; she becomes more somber and looks back out of the window.

“It’s not all fun,” she continues. “Sometimes I know these things about people, stuff I should say to them, out in public, to strangers. And I won’t want to tell them, so I try not to, but I get sick to my stomach and the floor gets wobbly if I don’t. So now I do; I tell peoples they got cancer and need to go to the hospital, I tell women I never met that if they don’t leave he will just beat them to death, I tell people things like ‘Call your ex-wife today’ or ‘Don’t take your car to work; take your truck.’ They all look at me like I’m crazy, and most of the time I never find out what happened. Sometimes, it’s to people I know, like Denesha down the road. I told her not to eat the hamburger she bought at Kroger, and she did, and she got the food poisoning. And I didn’t even know she’d gone to the store! I ain’t brought it up yet, but I know you’re pregnant. He said you’re pregnant and you’re gonna name the baby after me. He said so. And I guess he didn’t want us all to die today, so he told me to get L.J. to change lanes.”

“How did you know I was pregnant?” Theresa asks. We can hear the quiver in her voice.

“Child, I just told you. I just know. He told me.”

The conversation is cut off as L.J. enters the van.

“She’s going to be fine,” he says. “Some bruises and burns from the airbag, not much else. She’s got some signs of shock, though, so they’re taking her to get checked out.”
Swing Low, Sweet Chariot

Nettie closes her vanity mirror. Theresa slips a card back into her purse. L.J. shakes his head.

"Strangest thing, though. We couldn’t find the deer. No blood, no fur, no tracks. Strange."

We’ll look out past the car, past the police who are still talking to a young woman, maybe nineteen or twenty years old, and into the woods. We see the deer’s absence, and fade-to-black.

Scene Four: City Upon a Hill

Still in the van, we can see a long string of vehicles stretching out ahead. L.J. turns off the main road and we wind away from the traffic, past a sign that reads “City Upon a Hill – Delivery Entrance next right->” and we begin to visually feel the ascent. As we go up, we can see the lower parking lot – thousands of cars parked, hundreds in motion, flaggers waving them into spaces in rows, nearby busses parked for loading, another bus toiling up another incline maybe a quarter-mile from us. We begin to see the church: a vast network of buildings, a polylithic white stucco temple-city nestled on a man-made plateau. Then we’re in the midst of it, seeing the service and delivery entrances to the school buildings, the gymnasium, two separate five-story office buildings, and finally the chapel itself: taller than a three story building, larger than most museums or concert halls, partially domed, with a white cross longer than a school bus jutting into the sky (and to the observant, a small red light on the top of the cross, barely visible during the day, to keep planes from hitting it), outdone only by the broadcast tower adjacent to one of the office buildings.

L.J. parks us right near the delivery entrance amidst a fleet of black SUVs. Theresa gets a wheelchair out of the back of the van and Nettie gets in. The chair is wide enough for Nettie to sit comfortably, which looks to be the reason for bringing it. Theresa guides her into the building, through a back hallway, and we soon emerge near the stage. From this point – ground floor next to the stage, looking out into the seating – the sanctuary resembles an auditorium. Stadium seating sweeps upward, a balcony stretches the expanse, interrupted by an opaque-glassed room, and camera crews – three stationary, four mobile – are scattered throughout. All told the sanctuary can hold 25,000 parishioners, and people in Sunday best already fill half the seats and all of the aisles. Theresa wheels Nettie towards the handicapped section on the first row of the left wing. L.J.’s seat is in the center front row, a place reserved for pastors and their families. This is more out of pragmatism than respect; associate pastors are often called to the stage. He
drops his bible on a chair and shakes hands with a man who could be a pro-wrestler for the CIA; a massive torso crammed into a black suit, sunglasses on inside, translucent wire running into an earpiece. He wears a gold nametag with black writing that reads “Nathan Edwards – Associate Pastor – Usher Coordinator”.

“Hey Pastor Nathan, sorry I’m late. We witnessed an accident. Where can I help?” L.J. says.

“It’s cool, Pastor Walker. We had you greeting people this morning, but we have more than enough people today. Three-hundred part-timers and over one hundred volunteers, I’m running out of places to send them. You can just take it easy. You don’t even need a headset today.”

“Alright. Joe had some questions for me, so if anyone needs me I’m up in the Sound Room.”

People cram the stairs, moving towards the balconies – the bottom level must already be full – so he waits for the elevator. We’ll go with him. When he enters the sound booth, the sounds of the congregation, the music swelling from the band, even his own footsteps and fwump! Of his cane are all silenced by the thick soundproofing of the sound booth’s walls and carpets. Here, six men sit at various places around five tables. An array of electronics – lighted buttons, sliders, dials, over a dozen flat-screen monitors, things with seemingly incomprehensible functions – fill each table with organized clutter. Each of the six men wears a headset with one earphone and a microphone, with a cord snaking down somewhere into the technological jungle. Dubbed the “Sound Room” because Pastor Bauer felt that “Control Room” had a negative connotation, this room is most expensive room in the church; its design and components cost more than the entire sanctuary. The six men hunched over the tables control not only the sound, but also the lighting, the thermostat, the [brand-name] five-by-seven-foot projection screens that flank the stage, and a teleprompting system that goes to a display screen buried in the pulpit itself, so that messages can be passed directly to the speaker. Most importantly, the men in this room control the movements of the seven camera crews below.

“Two, pan left. See the woman in green? Arms up? Is she already crying, during the opening music? Zoom in on her,” one of the men says.
Another man barks into his headset, “Three, go back right! Two rows up... see Judge Morrow? Yeah, his wife has on the red sweater. That’s him. Keep an eye on him, okay? Let’s get some of his reactions today.”

“Wow, she really is crying. Two, stay on her. Six, look around for more hands-up-eye-closed. One, bring it back out a bit; [music director] thinks if we avoid close-ups he’ll look skinnier.” The speaker’s nametag reads “Joe Svrenis – Producer”.

At the front of the sound room, a wall of thick, one-way, sound-insulated glass separates the room from the sanctuary itself. The room occupies the middle section of the balcony, and out of the glass we have an uninterrupted view of the stage itself. During the expansion and redesign of the church, almost a decade ago, the new sanctuary was constructed around one principle: All eyes to the front! The curve of the seating rows, every aisle between rows of seats, every banister of every staircase leading down from the balcony into the sanctuary, the staircases themselves – every conceivable line in the entire room points front and center, to the pulpit itself.

L.J. looks out of this glass for a few minutes, and we continue to hear the men giving orders to the camera crews. Then he turns. He looks a little pale, and he walks a little unsteadily towards the door. Joe pulls off his headset for a moment and asks, “All you alright, Pastor Walker?”

“Yes,” L.J. manages to reply. “You look busy, so I’ll catch up with you afterwards. I think I am going to go sit down for a bit.”

He leaves the room, and we follow him through the double doors. He is sweating and panicked. We follow him down a corridor, past a convenient sign that reads “← Pastor’s Offices”, and to a door labeled “L.J. Walker, P.H.D., Associate Pastor, Licensed Christian Psychologist.” He fumbles for his keys, opens the door, closes it behind him, and practically collapses into his desk chair. He begins to breathe heavily, and then (fortunately for us) talks out loud.

“Oh Lord, how am I going to stand up in front of all those people? Twenty-five thousand people. Twenty-five million viewers on television. Forty-nine countries! Twelve languages! This is a church about healing, how am I supposed to limp up there with this cane of mine, squint
through these glasses, and say anything worth listening to? No one else to do it, so he tells me. Everyone else is going to Africa. Two weeks. Six services – morning and night on Sundays, one on Wednesdays, five covered by guest speakers but one! One Sunday morning! Lord, Pastor Bauer knows I haven’t spoken on that stage since we built it. Three hundred, five-hundred people, I can do. I did that radio show one time, thousands of listeners. But this pulpit!

Lord, I understand what Theresa means, looking down at that stage. Everything she says about this church being a spectacle, everybody looking down at one man instead of up at You. And I understand that we don’t have anyone to speak – three hundred part time, sixty-two full time employees and twenty-five thousand congregants and no one to speak! But I can’t do this. I don’t know what to say. I don’t know what to talk about. Prison’s easy; I’ve got plenty to talk about with them. Captive audience. Ha! The drug addiction group on Wednesdays, easy enough, and it’s a large group! But what do I say to twenty-five million people? How do I not look like some fool, up there on a platform for a church that talks about healing, with this old broken body? Is this your will? What would you have me say? Are we going to talk about this?”

Of course, no answer. The next moment is filled by the non-silence of L.J.’s rapid breath, the sound of the clock ticking. He pulls up a calendar on his computer screen – appointment times, meeting times, services at the jail – all shaded differently. One Sunday, six weeks out, stands out in a stark, blood red, with white lettering. A single word is typed there. “Preach.” Instead of fade-to-black, we’ll zoom in on the red.

Scene 5: Bauer’s Sermon

Interior, Sanctuary. L.J. is slipping through the aisles to his seat. On the stage, Pastor Neil Bauer is in full swing. We’ve missed the praise and worship ceremony, the tithe collection, and – unfortunately – the special song for Nettie. We’ve also missed the beginning of the sermon, so we’re not quite sure why a miniature plastic toy sits on the podium, looking like a robotic monster. Unlike L.J., Bauer hasn’t tried to hide his Southern accent behind years of speech therapy. He is unabashedly Southern, he is Texan Southern, he is Bush Southern. He’s also handsome, photogenic, charismatic: we’d have to cast a Grant or a Clooney to play him, and he looks to be in his late forties or early fifties. The suit is [brand]. He’s talking amiably, friendly, almost banter-like, and appears to be telling a story about a recent trip to a fast-food restaurant.
The audience is laughing, but it is reserved—anyone familiar with Bauer knows that he can turn this moment around into a heart-thundering, Moses-on-the-Mount, conscious-rattling riptide of oration. They laugh, but they anticipate, waiting for the thunder, and we can hear it in their laughs.

“And this little blonde boy, maybe seven or eight, is playing with this toy. He’s focused, you know that real serious way kids have when they are really homed in on their playing.”

(Real sounds like “reeeel”, serious like “seer-ee-awse”.)

“And this toy,” Bauer holds up the plastic monster, “is, I mean, it is neat. Turn it one way, and it’s a ball.” He picks up the toy and twists it. Over the sound system, we heard the click! And the toy forms a solid plastic ball, just a few inches in diameter.

“And now when you spin it, it pops back out into a creature…”

He spins the ball on the podium. It wobbles and falls to the carpet. He looks dismayed, and the audience laughs. He picks it up.

“Oh, it did work. See, now it’s this robo-dino-monster thing again. Neat, huh?”

He holds the toy back up, and we can see it back in the original form. Camera One angles in for a close-up of the toy. We’ll look up at one of the giant screens flanking the pulpit, and we’ll angle up to this screen—a close-up of a close-up—while he continues.

“And so I’m watching this kid—this boy, maybe third, fourth grade, wondering what he’s learned in school, what it’s like to be this child, remembering my own childhood—I’m watching him spin and spin this toy, popping it out, closing it back up, over and over…”

On the screen two giant hands continually transform the creature; ball, monster, ball, monster…

“Until he seems to have gotten this down perfectly. And then he gets it back in a ball, spins it, and as it pops out, he yells, ‘By the power of the dragon, I command you to destroy!’”

Bauer yells this part himself, his voice booming and rattling in the speakers. Camera One zooms quickly out—the giant screens visually fleeing from the small toy, until they are back to
their customary head-and-shoulders shot – and we’ll zoom around to focus back – full body – on Bauer. In the background we’ll pass by the choir for a second, we’ll see the startled faces, surprised by the noise, some of them having obviously been woken up by the noise and now in various stages of composure recovery.

“I know, I know. Out of nowhere. And, of course, his mother tells him to quite down. She’s doing what – her makeup? – or something, and she just looks. You know that look; your momma gave you that look. He stops yelling, but now ever time he spins the toy, it pops out perfectly, and as it spins he says, “By the power of the dragon, I command you to destroy.”

Bauer pauses for a sip of water. It seems an accident that he holds it label-out, that we can clearly see the kind of water he drinks, magnified on the giant screens.

“Now I’m not saying that the company who makes this toy – Kaibutsu Toys, out of Japan – is trying to mislead our children, any more than any other toy company out there, trying to come up with something our kids will just have to have. And the show – I did some research after seeing this – the show about the toy, it’s the same as the Pokemon, Digimon, whatever-mon fad my older kids went through. Little monster toys that battle each other, and the kids play that they are tamers, controllers, or friends of these monsters. But on this show, this show, the tamers are called generals, and they report to one of five dragons, each associated with one of five different elements. You know, fire, water, all that. And instead of controlling these monsters, keeping them in cages of whatever, the generals summon them with magic that they learned from these dragons. Think about that.

I’m not saying that this company is trying to mislead our children, but come on! Five dragons, one in the North, West, East, and two in the South. Guess what shape those points make? And these dragons – remember that Revelations calls the Antichrist a dragon that falls from the sky, taking one-third of the stars with him – these dragons teach their generals magic to summon monsters, and these monsters exist to destroy? And the generals on the show, they’re all kids, and they are the role our children take when playing with these toys.

No, I don’t think that Kaibutsu Toys is intentionally training our children to be warriors for the Antichrist, but the devil doesn’t need our explicit cooperation, does he? And I’m not saying that we should boycott this company or the fast-food chain that puts these toys in their
kids meals. It’s our job as parents to be on guard, to put down our books and make-up cases and observe the influences in our children’s lives, to look out for these dangers. The paths of unrighteousness are many, but only one straight-and-narrow! Temptation everywhere, real dangers everywhere, pedophiles, kidnappers, perverts on every corner, school systems trying to teach our children that being homosexual is just fine, that evolution is real, that it’s not ok to pray in school... and now I have to watch out for the toys in their children’s’ meals? As my oldest says, ‘Seriously?’

But we have to. Oh, we have to. This isn’t some boogey-man, some monster in the closest or under our bed. Our enemy is real, and he wants nothing more, nothing more, than to turn our children towards darkness. And it sickens me to see this happen with something as innocent as a toy.”

Bauer picks they toy up and looks at it, his expression thoughtful. He transforms the creature back into ball-state, and then tosses it up and down in his hand, as if contemplating its weight.

“How many doors for the enemy do you think this opens? How many childhood falls, broken bones, and playground fights do you think this causes? I’m not talking about just how violence on television encourages our children to act. I’m talking about the supernatural, the fallen third of the stars, the demons that we invite into our lives by objects like this. Demons of aggression, for a toy like this. Demons lust in our music, demons of anger in toy guns, demons of pride roaming our schools, convincing us that we are too smart to need God’s help, too smart to believe in God at all. There’s just so many. It makes me so... angry. Frustrated. Helpless.”

He turns suddenly and throws the ball. His stance instantly reminds the audience of all the stories he’s told about playing baseball in college. The ball flies sixty, maybe seventy feet, and shatters against the sanctuary wall. He turns back to Camera One.

“I’m not saying that you should boycott Kaibutsu Toys, or stores that sell these toys, or the restaurant that puts them in children’s meals. And I’m not saying that you should – as I have done – go through your children’s toys and ask yourself, ask God, are these harmful? Are we inviting the devil into our lives, into our children’s bedrooms? No, I’m not telling you what’s right. As a parent, that’s for you to decide. Now, let’s pray.”
What comes next surprises anyone who hasn’t been to a Pentecostal, a Charismatic, or any other spirit-filled church. The Catholic or Baptist expects Bauer to close his eyes and launch into a solemn prayer. Instead, he takes off his jacket and lays it over the podium, and then walks to the stage steps as the band begins to play. He rolls up his sleeves as he walks. Meanwhile, people begin streaming from the aisles down to the open area in front of the stage. Other people stand up in front of their chairs, arms raised, eyes closed, face tilted upwards towards heaven. Ushers slip past the forming crowd towards the steps. Bauer’s feet hit the floor and a woman bee-lines for him, arms raised, tears streaming down her cheeks. (We recognize her as the woman who was crying even before the music service started.) Bauer stretches forth an arm and places his hand on the woman’s cheek. He says something, but his microphone has been turned off and we hear only the band’s music. The woman reacts as if electrified: her arms flail, her head shakes, her knees buckle and then give. An usher is miraculously there, catching her, laying her down, and covering her skirt with a large purple cloth. Bauer moves on without pause, touching person after person. Sometimes it takes an instant, sometimes half a minute, but they almost all fall. Once down, some appear sleeping: eyes closed, unmoving, almost completely unconscious. Others flail about, as if seized by epilepsy, limbs still moving, mouths gaping open and then closed, open closed, like fish. Some appear to be having lucid dreams: eyes closed, but with slight movement, and constantly mumbling. Bauer keeps moving, barely pausing. He smiles once, when a gentleman falls and the usher behind him falls too, both ending up sprawled in an unconscious tangle on the floor. Another usher appears instantly to separate them and make them comfortable.

We’re in this crowd, and Bauer appears headed right for us. He reaches out right and left, causing waves of people to fall into the arms of waiting ushers. He looks like Bruce Lee against a sea of enemies, like Moses and the Red Sea. He’s almost on us. He touches a woman on the head, an athletic blonde of about thirty, in jeans and t-shirt. She sways slightly and he moves on. But she doesn’t fall, and she turns to watch him move away – facing us unintentionally. Her gaze, her mouth, her entire being seem mournful. Then Bauer stretches the camera towards our lens, filling our view, and the world seems to slip vertically. We fall away from the hand, Bauer steps out of our vision, we see the mournful woman, then the balcony, the lights above, and then it all goes to black, suddenly, without fade.
When we fade back in, the crowd has dispersed. The sanctuary is almost empty; we see the last couple of dozen people working their way out of the exits. Bauer stands near Nettie’s wheelchair. Theresa sits close-by, drying her eyes on one of the large purple cloths.

“Are you ladies ready to go get some food?,” he asks.

Nettie locks eyes with him.

“He wants you to beware of the Tiger,” Nettie replies.

“Excuse me, what?” Bauer asks.

“Oh, hon, I don’t get it either. He just said you need to beware of the Tiger. Now let’s go eat.”

“Ok, well, thank you. Have you seen your brother?” he asks. His tone is unreadable.

“ He’s up on the stage, talking to someone in the choir.”

Bauer turns, and we turn with him. LJ stands, resting on his cane, talking to a ruddy, heavy-set man in an immaculate Armani suit, brought together by an Hermes scarf. Bauer – and we will as well – angles in on LJ, coming in close to join the conversation.

“It’s such a beautiful song,” the heavy man says. “The old Negro spirituals are some of the most uplifting hymns I’ve ever encountered. A Black slave owned by a Native American wrote it, you say? I never even knew Native Americans could own slaves!”

“Pastor [music director], are you joining us for some Pizza?” Bauer asks.

“Oh, no, you know I can’t eat all of that grease.”

The irony of the fat man telling this to the two skinny men goes unnoticed among the three; a disparity ignored by what must be long familiarity. Don’t we all fall into routines that seem silly to outsiders?

“LJ, you’re up on the stage!” Bauer says.
LJ grins. “I decided to try exposure therapy; I’ll keep coming up here little by little until it doesn’t terrify me. I use this all of the time with clients. Most of your fears like flying, snakes, or bridges can be overcome simply by approaching them in small increments. Sometimes it works in just six sessions, more often it takes fifteen, and in a few cases it could take more than a year. I’ve got six weeks.”

“Well you’re doing great,” Bauer says. He looks down again at LJ’s cane, just a glimpse, and we will as well. LJ’s hand shakes ever so slightly on the cane. We see it, we know Bauer has seen it, and looking back into LJ’s eyes, we can tell he’s noticed the glance. “Just great,” Bauer says. “Let’s go eat.”

They turn to leave the stage, and we’ll fade to black.

Act 2 - Relationships

Scene One: The Bauers

This scene takes place in the Bauer household, a large mansion in one of Atlanta’s more exclusive country club communities. We open in the bedroom of Naomi Bauer, the eldest Bauer daughter. The room could be any rich teenage girl’s room: posters of bands (although Christian) on the walls, old stuffed animals adorning bookcases and chairs, a desk with a laptop front-and-center, and books pushed to the side, i-pod and cell-phone prominent, clothes draped on furniture, a tennis racket leaning against a wall. Labels – Dolce and Gabana jeans, Berkin handbag, Dior t-shirts – are conspicuous and ubiquitous.

On the bed, Naomi and her best friend, Bethany, are curled up, facing each other, with the receiver to a baby monitor between them. It’s currently off. Even in her pajamas, Naomi has her mother’s flawless beauty, and we don’t need to see pom-poms or outfits to imagine her as a cheerleader, or a homecoming queen. Compared to her, pretty Bethany looks plain.

“I can’t believe you have this,” Bethany says. “How did you even...”

“Lydia did it years ago. The monitor is buried under their bed, plugged in somehow. She gave it to me when Dad started going through her room on a regular basis, looking for pot.”

“She smokes pot? So many secrets tonight!”
“Don’t be a retard. She doesn’t smoke pot, she won’t drink, she won’t do anything that could hurt her grades or lessen her chance at valedictorian. I’m so glad she goes to a different school. No, ever since they caught her having sex, Dad’s convinced that she does everything wrong. He’s searched her room like once a week for two years now. They search her car, too. Which is stupid; she just leaves everything she doesn’t want him to see in her art desk at school or at her boyfriend’s house. Come on, I really want to hear them fight!”

“How do you know they are fighting? What if they’re having sex?”


She flips on the monitor and we instantly hear Bauer’s voice, yelling. The girls jerk away, and Naomi turns the monitor down a bit.

“Guess you were right,” Bethany says.

Watching them lay there doesn’t really help us any, so we’ll cut through the house to the Bauer’s bedroom. Big enough to hold LJ’s home, the room – like most of the house – has the unmistakable aesthetic of design for design’s sake, and not for comfort. Bauer’s on his feet, half-dressed in the same suit from the sermon this morning.

“Is that what this is about?” he yells.

His wife, Emily, appears in the bathroom doorway. At 38 years old, with seven children, Emily possesses an ethereal beauty. She was the cheerleader, the homecoming queen, the prom queen, the student body president, the pageant winner. She still turns every head, of every age, when she enters a room. Even Bauer, with all of his charisma, seems outclassed.

“What did you think this was about? What was it this time, Neil? How did you make your fortune at work today? Do you own stock in a rival toy company? Is there a fast-food restaurant encroaching on the sales of your beloved pizza joint? Did you need to stir up a commotion before the release of your next book? Get some press? Start a boycott, get on CNN again?”

“Em, you know it’s not like that! I do what I do for the Lord, because it’s right! We – we actually owned stock in that restaurant! I ditched it months ago, thank God. Not for this, though! This is no ploy. You saw the toy, you heard the same thing I did..”
"Of course I heard it, she’s my child, you know! I’m surprised you even heard it, as much as you care about them. How could you go up there and talk about her like that? And break her toy? You threw it, from the stage? Is that proper child-rearing, Pastor Bauer? Insult your children, break their toys publicly…”

"Of course I care; I didn’t insult her! I didn’t even use her name! I made it a boy!"

"Oh and how do you think that makes her feel? Or do you even think? Half the congregation whispers rumors that we had seven children just because you wanted a boy so badly, to fulfill some prophecy God gave you about ‘the son of your right hand shall do greater works than even his father’ or some nonsense, God we’ve heard it all before. You, me, the congregation, your own kids. Grace is five years old, Neil. She’s not stupid. She’s heard the rumors. She’s asked me, “Mommy, did daddy want me to be a boy?” And then you go up in front of millions of people and tell a story about her, a negative story, and you make her a boy. Are you trying to give our children issues?"

"Does it all come back to this? I feel like we’ve had one fight in fifteen years. The same fight, over and over, always about how I wanted a boy. I did! We had two girls, and we both agreed that a third would be nice, a boy would be nice. Then we had a girl, and another, and another, and I gave up on boys a long time ago! Even with Grace, we both knew she’d be a girl before we ever found out. But you never drop it. You have three arguments: I wanted boys, I’m a bad father, I make lots of money. And you say these things over and over, without ever really supporting your argument, without ever really building your case…"

Emily comes in the room from the bathroom. She seems to be forcing her composure. While she talks loudly, she doesn’t scream. She shakes a little, but she does not cry.

"You want an argument, mister perfect father? Why don’t you tell me all about Lydia’s appointment with the guidance counselor this week?"

Bauer’s face falls.

"That was this week?" he asks.

Emily nods.
"Well, what did she do this time? Or who?" Bauer asks.

"She didn’t do anyone, you ass. Mrs. Whitson, that’s the lady’s name, by the way, she wanted to talk about colleges. Lydia had told her about you demanding that she goes to a Christian college, and Mrs. Whitson just wanted to “stress to us” – her words, not mine – that Lydia can get into any school she wants. Harvard, Yale, Brown, Oxford! Probably on a full scholarship. They got her SAT scores back a while ago, of course she never told us, and she scored a 1570! That Brian kid is having trouble in his Calculus class. If he doesn’t get an A, then Lydia’s ahead for valedictorian. She has after-school activities, community service, and her art. She can go anywhere, study anything, and the school just wants to encourage us to let her do so."

"Full Scholarship? I can write a check up front, all four years, to any school that we want her to go to. Emily, do you remember what Duke was like? Freshman year, I got offered more sex and drugs than I got offered financial aid or help on my schoolwork. We had that guy on our hall, who could get his hands on anything in half an hour. He had so many women come through there that he barely shut the door to have sex. He used to brag about the virgins. Do you want our daughters to be one of those? Lydia is going to a Christian school. Hopefully Berry, where Naomi can help us take care of her.”

"Lydia isn’t exactly a virgin to be deflowered, Neil. And while I am as concerned about her as you are, I have to admit that it would be good to see her interested in something, instead of spending all of her time hating you. She was excited, Neil. When do you ever see her excited?"

"Of course she’s excited. She’s excited about getting to some place where she can run free, unrestrained, doing whatever she wants. But I’m her father, and her spiritual father, and it’s my divine duty to keep her from backsliding right on down into Hell. Do you want that, Em? Do you want our daughter to fall into Satan’s grasp?"

Emily deflates a little. Her voice lowers, her tone softens, and she seems to shrug off some of her tension. She looks beaten, but it’s merely a change of tactics.

"No, Neil, of course I don’t want that. You know I agree, this period will be a transition out of our home and into a home of her own, a life on her own, and we need to make that as
positive and safe as a transition as it can be. I just figured – I mean, at least if she went to Yale, my parents would be close to her…”

"Your liberal, sinful, "medicine is the only religion" father? Help keep our daughter from backsliding further? Em! You know he’d probably help her. He’d buy the keg and round up the boys for her! This is the guy who said “only the ignorant fail to acknowledge evolution”. He’s the one you want watching over our daughter?"

"My parents aren’t so bad, Neil. They go to church…”

"To some liberal Catholic church, that’s not spirit-filled! They acknowledge God, but they don’t heed his word. A sip of wine and a cracker on Sunday doesn’t keep you out of hell, Em. You know that.”

"I know. I chose to leave there. It’s just so... lifeless. But Neil, it’s better that out on her own. It’s better than Harvard or Duke or even Berry, where her 18 year old sister will surely be trying to find her own way. And don’t kid yourself that they won’t be able to get alcohol or boys at Berry, or even at Lee College. Some of the church-members have gone to those schools, or have children at those schools, and they say that everything is just as accessible there, just a little more hidden. Lydia slept with a boy at a Christian School, remember. She hated it; she got into more trouble there than she’s ever been in since we switched her to a public school. Before, she would do things just to cause a stir. Now, her school now thinks she’s an angel. Mrs. Whitson just raved about her. Can we consider it, Neil? Maybe backing off is the best way to keep her from going into total rebellion, from trying drugs just to spite you.”

"I’m absolutely firm on this, Em. She can choose which one, but it has to be a Christian College. There’s just no way.”

"Okay, okay. Well, you can tell her. Just like you can explain to Grace why you broke her toy in front of your live studio audience. I’m not covering for you anymore.”

"What about the united front, Em? Consistency in parenting? We agreed on that. It’s worked for years.”
“It worked when we agreed on things. When we talked about them. Now you just make all of the decisions and that’s that, and you leave me to calm them down. I’m done with it.”

“I’m the head of the household, Em. You know that. It’s my job – the job of all fathers – to look out for the spiritual well-being of the family. And as the woman, you’re supposed to be my helper. First Peter…”

“I don’t care about First Peter, Neil, I’m not justifying you to them anymore. We have seven children. I spend all of my days trying to run around and deal with the needs of seven kids, without the least bit of help from you, and then want to step in and make these commandments about the important things…”

The sound goes out. We’ll cut back to Naomi’s room, where she has turned the monitor off, and is putting it away.

“She called your dad an ass! I’ve never heard your mom cuss,” Bethany says.

“She’s so self-righteous, though. ‘I spend all of my days...’ She doesn’t know the first thing about us, does she? You know, Lydia may hate dad, but I kind of hate mom more. She was going to be a lawyer, Beth. She wanted to ‘change the system from the inside out.’ She was this cool hippie chick who played guitar between classes. Now she won’t even pick one up; she’s afraid to break a nail. She doesn’t spend all of her time on us; she spends all her time trying to give off the image of a perfect mom, a perfect wife. She spends just as much time at the church as he does, and when she’s home she’s on her cell-phone constantly. We have maids to clean, chefs to cook, a driver to take the youngest ones to school... god she’s as clueless as he is.”

“But that’s a good thing, right? I mean, we couldn’t possibly...”

Naomi cuts her off and holds up a finger to her lips. “Hold on, hear that?”

We do. We hear a sound of distant crying. Naomi is up and out of bed instantly. “Hold on, Beth, I think that’s Grace.” She slips out of the bedroom, and we’ll slip with her. The girls’ rooms are all on the same floor, near each other, and so we only need to go ten feet down the hall or so to reach the next room. The door is already slightly ajar, and Naomi now pushes this door open. The room is at least fifteen by twenty, and holds two double beds. Every outlet has a
nightlight, keeping the room partially lit. On one bed, we see a stirring figure buried under the covers: [name], the seven-year old. On the other bed, a child with auburn curls and wet eyes sits Lydia's arms. Lydia, the black sheep of the family, fills her role physically. Of the seven daughters, only she has dark brown, almost black, hair, and dark eyes. Even her skin is darker, though this comes through tanning. She has the scrawny build of a soccer-girl, and is far less curvy that her older sister.

"What's up," Naomi asks.

"Grace is having nightmares again," Lydia replies. "Wonder why she thinks there are demons in her toy box, and under her bed?"

"He's an ass," Naomi states. She goes to the toy box and opens the lid. We see a jumble of dolls, stuffed animals, plastic teacups, and the like. Many of the dolls and animals look like Japanese cartoon characters. "No demons here," Naomi says.

"He's under the dolls, and he's invisible," says Grace. Invisible comes out as "invusibul"; her cuteness is a movie cliché.

"Well, he'll hate this," Naomi says. She goes to a bookshelf and pulls out a children's bible. She takes it to the toy box and tosses it inside. She then closes the lid.

"What about the one under the bed?" Grace asks.

"There's not one under the bed," Lydia replies. "Naomi, did you just cuss? Tsk, Tsk. Such language."

"Mom did, too. They had a huge fight. Bethany and I listened to it. They were arguing about you going to college."

Naomi lays down on the ground and scoots under the bed. Lydia sits up.

"They were? When was this? What did they say?"

Naomi's voice comes to us slightly muffled.
“Mom seemed to be trying to convince Dad to let you go to Yale. He didn’t seem to want to change his mind. He still wants you to come to Berry, so Beth and I can look after you.”

“Wow, if only he knew. I guess she missed the Berkley part?” Lydia begins.

“Shut up! Hey, Grace, I found your Sampson and Delilah dolls.” Two dolls come flying out from under the bed.

“What about the demon?” Grace asks.

“Um, it looks like he left. Sampson probably beat him up. Nothing under here; if there was a demon he would have gotten me by now.” Naomi slides out from under the bed and hands the Sampson doll to Grace, who is almost asleep in Lydia’s arms.

“What if he comes back?” Grace asks. Naomi and Lydia look at each other.

“Beth’s here…” Naomi starts.

“It’s cool. Can you just bring me my cell-phone? I need an alarm for tomorrow; I have a test first thing in the morning.”

“Ew, first thing Monday morning? Is your professor a sadist?”

“No, he’s a handsome devil. Besides, it’s in philosophy? I can’t screw that up. I just need to be up on time.”

Naomi leaves, and Lydia lays down on the bed with Grace. She comes back for a minute to hand Lydia a cell-phone.

“Hey, I almost forgot. There’s a party, two weeks from now. Friday night, downtown, at Georgia Tech. Beth’s brother invited us. You wanna come? You could be our DD, since you won’t drink anyways. We’ll tell mom and dad that some movie is coming out and I’ll promise to chaperone you and your boyfriend.”

“I promised Faith I’d take her to the skate rink on Friday nights. Do you want to explain to her why I can’t?” Lydia answers.
"Well the party is late, and she has to be home by what, nine? Nine thirty? We could make it. We’ll say it’s a midnight showing."

"Yeah, cool. As long as Brett can come."

"Thanks! It will be fun." Naomi kisses Grace on the forehead, and goes back to her room. We’ll go with her.

When she opens her door, Bethany is under the covers. She lifts the covers to let Naomi in, and we can see that Bethany is naked.

"That’s more like it," Naomi says.

Naomi begins pulling off her nightshirt, and we’ll fade to black.

Scene Two: Cue Jordan

This scene takes place in Bauer’s office, the next day. We’ll fade from black to white, then fade in from white, to give the scene that bright morning feel, like we’re waking up to this. For all that we have noticed about the Bauers’ luxurious lifestyle, the office of Senior Pastor Neil Bauer is remarkably simple. Bauer sits in a large, worn, leather chair. He is behind an enormous, and plain, desk. The monitor on the desk is an old CRT clunker, and the pens in the jar are the cheap disposable kind. The desk also holds a telephone, but the rest of its expanse is clear. In front of the desk, two equally worn wingback armchairs sit empty. No books adorn the walls, no certificates or degrees. Just one photograph: him, Emily, and all seven children, posed Christmas-card style in front of a white backdrop.

Bauer’s reading the morning paper, the Atlanta Journal–Constitution. We can see the headline, “Christians to Boycott Toy and Restaurant Companies?” We hear a knock on the door, and Bauer lays the paper down on the ground beside him. We can see that he was circling information in the business section.

“Come on in,” Bauer says.

L.J. opens the door and walks in.

“Good morning, pastor,” L.J. says.
“Good morning pastor, to you too. Didn’t I say I didn’t want them to boycott anything?”

“That’s not why I’m here,” L.J. says. “Your next appointment, Miss Jordan [name], well I’m very concerned about her. She only agreed to see you, but from what Nancy was telling me, the woman may need serious help. Can you try to convince her to at least see me sometime? I’d like to get an evaluation on her and make sure we’re giving her everything she needs.”

“Sure, L.J., sure. You know I always pass over the counseling to you or someone with credentials. Most of the people who request an appointment with me, they aren’t seriously troubled. They just have some concern – their kid’s failing school, their husband cheated on them – something mundane but very serious and personal to them, and they just don’t want to talk about it with anyone. They want the pastor they see every Sunday and Wednesday. Honestly, sometimes it’s just little old ladies in their Sunday Best, dressed up to come see their handsome pastor. I’m not kidding. We just talk once or twice and they’ll be fine. But some of them have real issues, that need real therapy, which is why we have our own therapist right here, three days a week. Do you have a particular time slot that you know is open, in case I can get her in?”

“I’m free today, if she wants. I was anticipating being down at the prison, but I’ll have to go tonight. So my schedule is clear. I’ll be in my office, trying to think about what to say while you’re in Africa.”

“What to say? Just say what the Lord tells you to. What comes to mind. L.J., you’re older than all of us. You’re smarter than all of us. You’ve got three doctorates. You’re the smartest man I know. You’ve been doing this since I was a boy. Every time I have a problem, I come by and you say something, any little thing, and it just shakes my world and things fall into place. Surely, you have something up there to say to everyone. Fifteen years ago, when we started going to Africa, you told me you were too old to travel with us, and you’ve been ducking out of getting on that stage while I am gone for fifteen years. But there’s no one I’d rather have up there, no one I know better or trust more. You’ll know what to say.”

“About Africa, Pastor Bauer. You should know that some reporter has been calling, asking about ‘armed security forces’ and if they are appropriate for missionary work. I refused to talk about it.”
"I know, Nancy told me. They got hold of Nathan’s cell-phone number somehow and have been bugging him about it all last week. I’ll make a statement during the service on Wednesday."

A knock at the door interrupts the conversation. L.J. opens it. We recognize the lady – she’s the one who didn’t fall down. L.J. ushers her in and takes his leave, closing the door behind him. Bauer gets up, comes around the desk, and offers his hand.

"Good morning, you must be Miss [name]. Take a seat, if you please."

The lady doesn’t shake his hand, and she doesn’t sit down. Instead, she begins pacing almost immediately, and wringing her hands. Bauer returns to his seat. This is certainly no little old lady; the woman appears to be in her thirties, with an athletic build, and she wears a tank-top and sweatpants with two stripes down the side. Her long blonde hair is pulled back in a pony-tail.

"Call me Ann. Sorry about the handshake, I got here early and worked out by running up the hill. I didn’t have time to go over to the Gym and shower. I’m sure I smell."

"Sure, Ann, sure. You okay? Do you want to sit? Is it okay if I sit?"

Ann continues to pace the room, almost like prowling or stalking.

"That’s fine. I just hope you can help me. I’ve got a problem, I think it’s spiritual? I’ve seen doctors – I work in a hospital – and I’ve talked to people and no one has heard of it, no one can help. Some of them think I’m crazy. Maybe I am. I don’t usually pace in people’s offices, I’m just nervous. If you can’t help me then I don’t know what’s next."

"Well, I’m sure we can help. We have plenty of resources on hand, for whatever problem."

"No, no, I think it’s spiritual. Okay. This will sound weird, I am sure, but everywhere I look, all I can see is destruction and decay. The bus that shuttles people from the parking lot to the sanctuary? I ran past it today. The muffler is rusting. That’s the first thing I noticed. There’s a crack at the bottom of the driver’s side mirror. One of the concrete blocks in the sidewalk is broken in two. The door to your office has a two-inch scratch in it. Your suit is very nice, but
your cuffs are fraying. This is what I notice, all of the time. If there’s a car, I can find rust. If
there’s clothing, I can find a loose thread. It feels like the whole world is coming apart.”

“Wow, that must be intense for you. How long have you seen things like this?” Bauer
asks.

“As long as I can remember. As a child, I would peel the paint off of walls. I would just
find a crack, always a crack to be found, and peel it. I’d walk through the woods and find broken
branches in every tree. I’ve come across so many dead animals. At the hospital – I’m an ER
nurse- it helps because I think I can better see how people are broken. And I know which ones
will die, and who will make it. Even the doctors look to me now, just to see how I react, when
we’re in the OR. We still do all we can, but I just know.”

“So it’s helpful? Why are you so agitated by it, then?”

“Well I mean it’s helpful in some ways. Not in others. I feel like things break more
because I am around. My apartment alone: my stove, my heat, my dishwasher, and my
refrigerator all quit working in the same month. They sent in an electrician to figure it out. He
said my whole kitchen has bad wiring. The apartments are less than ten years old! They were all
done at the same time. I said he’d never seen anything like it in this complex, like whoever did
the wiring just got to mine and gave up. My car has to have constant repairs. I got a new one and
some ball-bearing in the transmission – if that makes sense – was made wrong and my whole
transmission went two weeks after I bought it.”

“What about your relationships? Are they affected?” Bauer asks. By this time, he has
consciously noticed his arousal, as she paces the floor he has caught himself looking at the back
of her sweatpants, where the sweat has made the fabric wet. Fortunately, Ann appears oblivious.
He makes himself keep eye-contact, and stares at the back of her head when she turns away. His
instinct is to get her out of his office –and into L.J.’s – as quickly as possible.

“Affected? That’s mild. Imagine if you could see, at the start of every relationship, the
seeds of its demise. My parents barely talk to me, my sister calls once in a while, and men! I
probably shouldn’t be saying this to you, but God! Every relationship is a disaster, so I think now
I just choose relationships that I know won’t work. The convict, the long-distance businessman, the married doctor, I’ve dated them all. At least I don’t get my hopes up.”

“And how do you expect me to help?” he asks.

Ann stops pacing and turns to him. She looks tearful.

“I don’t know. But you have to. Therapy, medication, meditation, prayer, nothing works. Some people say I just see these things because I am so focused on them, but I can’t NOT see them. I am constantly afraid that everything around me is going to end. Sometimes, I think what I see is the world coming undone. We’re close now, right? To the end? That’s what you say. Maybe if you can just help me, I don’t know, understand why God lets me see these things, or if it’s the devil get rid of it? You’ve healed people.”

Something in Bauer changes. We see him sit forward, tense up, and he looks not at her but begins to go through a desk drawer.

“Ann,” he says, “You need to come to Africa with us.”

“What? Why?”

“Well, we need more medical staff. I’ve gotten everyone I can think of, and we still need more. We run that clinic night and day for seven days. But that’s it, too. You see ruin here, you find the little holes in the mostly perfect world. Think about it. Here, when you treat someone, you’re treating something gone wrong in a world that is mostly right. A car accident, someone falling out of a tree, I don’t know what. But come to Africa, see what their world is like on a daily basis, and see how the simplest treatment that we have here – a pill for a parasite – can be the difference between life and death there. And it’s always been like that, Ann. It’s primal, it never ends. Maybe seeing it will help you realize that. When the Apocalypse comes, Ann, we’ll be taken up. And yes, things will be bad down here for a while, but then He will come build a new and perfect kingdom. Of course you can find imperfection in anything here. Decay, rot, destruction. We introduced that by sinning. It’s all a product of our sins. But if you were to come to Africa, you wouldn’t be powerless. The little you do there vastly improves the lives of those you touch.”
"You don’t think it will just make me worse? That I’ll freak out when I am surrounded by all of it? I can’t even ride MARTA, the bums make me too sad. They are falling apart alive."

"I don’t think so."

Bauer hands her an application form for a volunteer mission trip, and a brochure.

"Ann, there’s one more thing. You want healing? Well, let me tell you, come to Africa. There’s nothing like it. Here, people come up and get relieved of mysterious back pains, old aches, things that don’t show up on x-rays or CAT scans. It’s easy to see why people would discredit it. But in Africa? I’ve seen people re-grow feet! I’ve seen the blind healed, the deaf healed, genital mutilations undone, teeth re-grown! I don’t know why, Ann, but something is different there. We can’t even get it on tape, unfortunately. Our equipment messes up, goes missing, something. But you can feel it. You can see it. Maybe if you came — if you saw first-hand the works of God — then you’d find some sort of understanding.

Look, we have a very good psychologist here. One of the best; he’s been doing it longer than you’ve been alive. He deals with prisoners, addicts, rape victims, people with phobias, the insane. You can go to him — he’s got time free today — and you can sit there and listen to all the things you’ve probably heard before. Or you can do something different; drastically different, and hopefully find a new way to look at all of this. What do you say?"

Later, when it’s all said and done, they will — everyone will, we will — look back at this moment and call it the beginning. But it’s no more of a beginning than anything else. Beginnings, like so many things in this world, are a lie.

"I’ll think about it. I really will," Ann says. She turns to leave, and we’ll zoom in on her back, on the dark-grey, sweat-soaked spot, zooming in until it fills our vision, and we’ll cut.

Scene Three – Cue Buster

This scene takes place at Fulton County Jail. The room we are in looks like a classroom — folding tables and chairs, a whiteboard at the front. We hear L.J. dismiss the prisoners; "See you all next week!", and we see the guards leading them out. One stays behind for a moment.
"Pastor Walker, you gotta help me get back out of here. Theresa came today and told me she pregnant. She say she’s gonna keep the baby because God told her to. I’m gonna have a baby! She due in seven months, and I’m stuck in here for years."

"Buster, you were out for three months and you got your girlfriend pregnant. Then you missed parole, and you were arrested during a drug search at the home of a wanted felon. I pled your case for parole last time, what am I going to tell them this time? Now, I want to help. Theresa’s a good girl. She’s helping take care of Net, she’s doing her schoolwork, and she’s going to church. But your sentence is three years, period. They aren’t likely to be lenient and let you off early, with parole, when you’re in here serving the rest of a sentence that you were already paroled for. The best you can do is just keep coming to service every week, keep out of trouble, and try to learn something that will help you get a real job once you are out."

Buster stands up. He looks like an out-of-place NBA player; tall, lean, well-muscled, angry.

"I have to get out of here. You know I can’t do this, especially not knowing I have a kid out there."

"Well, I’ll help you however I can, Buster. But you’ve got to be prepared this time. They really aren’t going to be lenient on you, but I would still try to be on my best behavior and see if there is any chance. I stood up for you, and they believed me because so many of my boys don’t end up back in here. Statistically speaking, you’re more likely to end up back in here than you are to get a good job. You’ve got to convince them that you’re the exception. Watch who you hang with, who you talk to. Pray in your cell every day. If people heckle you, take it. This isn’t about being tough, Buster. You toughen up to survive in here and that’s all you’ll ever do: survive, in here. You need to be contrite. You need to show them that you’ve learned a lesson. Prison doesn’t reform – not statistically, anyway – but you need to convince them otherwise. Write those essays I told you about. Write down your life goals. Read the books. I didn’t give you this stuff just to make you look better for parole, you know. Are you going to come out of here and be a crack-head father? Choosing cocaine over baby formula? Or do you want to be a good father? Write an essay on what you’ll do differently, now that you have a child coming. Really think about it."
A guard interrupts. He leads Buster out. Buster looks sullen and unresponsive. Another guard comes up to L.J., to help him out. They begin walking down the hallway to the front guard station.

“Good sermon tonight, Pastor. And you’re right about Buster. They don’t like when they parole someone and then have to bring them right back. It’s going to be harder for him, this time.”

“I know, Randal. I know. Lord, my feet hurt tonight! I’ve been standing all day. How’s your family?”

“They’re good, they – hey, look, I always wanted to ask – what is the point of all the essays, anyways, if not to make them look better for parole?”

“Just some of my mind games, Randal. It’s been shown that if you make a person write an essay from a perspective that they don’t agree with, then they will move closer to accepting that position. So if I can get him to write an essay about choosing fatherhood over drugs, maybe in the future he will choose to do the right thing. See, he’ll have said it, in his own words. Even if he doesn’t think he means them, his argument will be sound – to him. It will be the best argument he can make. I can stand up here and talk about the bible all night, and tell these kids why they need to do the right thing, but those are my words, not theirs. Those are my thoughts, not theirs. So I get them to put their thoughts down on paper. And that – combined with counseling, addiction therapy, whatever else they need, may just be enough to keep them out of here.”

“Does that really work?”

“You know as well as I do, Randal. My boys come back one-fifth as often as other prisoners. It doesn’t work for everybody, but I’ve spent a lifetime making it work as well as it can.”

They reach the front guard station and L.J. signs out.

“Do you think it will work for Buster? He’s known for trying to be a hard-ass,” Randal says.
L.J. sighs. “I’ve seen worse cases turn themselves around, Randal. You have, too. But I’ve seen the most mild case, the ones caught for smoking pot or something minor, go home and shoot their neighbors. I’ve done this for over forty years, and I still can’t tell you who will make it outside of here.”

He opens the door to leave, and we’ll fade into the darkness of the night beyond.
Act 3 – Friday

Scene One – In His Own Words

This scene takes place the following Friday, in Bauer’s office. Bauer sits behind his desk, and in one of the wingbacks a muscular woman in a masculine power-suit sits leaning forward. On the desk is an iPod, with a microphone attached. As we slip into the other recliner – literally, coming around it and then lowering the frame to appear at a different position, maybe even with a nice tilt as we would “sit” down – we’ll take a glance at her. She seems angry, hostile, and intense – seeing this, people are quick to label her as a feminist lesbian. In truth, she’s married to a fitness guru, and we recognize her as [NAME], a true cut-throat journalist for a national newspaper. At forty, she is a long-term contributor to the paper, and has exposed marital scandals of senators, embezzlement by governors, and a fake charity run by an A-list actress.

“I’m surprised that you agreed to speak with me, Mister Bauer,” she begins.

“Well, when I heard that you were calling the members of our congregation, I wondered why you didn’t just call me? I tried to get your phone number, but no one wrote it down. So I was already trying to reach you when you called yesterday. I’m glad that you could make it down from New York on such short notice.”

“Hey, I don’t pay for the plane tickets. So, let’s start this at our source. A pilot-a former employee of the airline you use for your Africa Campaigns – claims that you take heavily armed guards – tactical vests, automatic weapons – with you on these “Missions of Mercy” – to use your words. The airline itself confirms that guns were checked in on several of the flights, and we’re working on finding out what types, how many, and to whom. I’m sure we’ll find it. Do you care to explain this?”

“We put down over a thousand volunteers for a solid week. We fly in food for everyone during that time, medicine for our 24-hour clinic – usually seventy to one hundred of those volunteers work in the clinic – and parts for whatever building project we’re working on. Wells, ovens, community centers. We work in large areas, often with no local government and armed
rebels nearby. So there’s a justified threat of someone trying to take these supplies by force, instead of letting us treat the villagers. We also have to consider the security of our volunteers.

The armed men – usually no more than twenty out of one thousand people – are members of our congregation who have security jobs here in Georgia. Highway patrol men, local police. These aren’t some ungoverned mercenary force, as you claimed to one of our members. They take with them whatever equipment they have, or are comfortable with. Usually this includes side-arms – pistols, Glocks- and hunting rifles.

The very first year we went to Africa, to the small village of [name], we took no guns. While we were there, we heard reports of a wild ape attacking villagers on the path to the river. It showed up while we were constructing a well. No one was hurt, but we had to wait four hours for someone to come from [city] with a gun to kill it. Afterwards, we were told that the villagers had sent for help, but no one came, and that they only came this time because we were here. And so the next year we asked the government – as we always do, as we did this year – if we should bring physical protection for ourselves, in the form of guns. We were told that no only was this okay, but that it was preferred. So we’re actually complying with the wishes of the national government.”

“It still seems contrary that a mission to bring medicine, to improve the community, and to convert hundreds of thousands of African citizens to Christianity should include weaponry. What about the allegation – also from this former pilot – that you feared an attack by Muslim elements in the surrounding area?”

“Look, your source – [name], I’m told, I never flew with him. I never spoke with him. So he can’t really claim to know anything about what I personally thought. I did think – we all thought, and still think – that an attack by hostile rebel forces is not only possible, but likely. And if it happened, we’d actually be outnumbered. The guns are more symbolic – they see armed men, they hear that we’ve shot a rabid dog dead with a single bullet– they know we’re armed. It’s enough to keep them away. In fifteen years, there’s never been a bullet fired at a human on either side. Just a few dogs, a couple of boar, and quite a few poisonous snakes that the men were too afraid to get close enough to so that they could use a machete.
The Dali Lama preaches peace, and yet he has armed guards with automatic rifles. This isn’t considered odd; it’s just an unfortunate fact of the local political situation. Are the Chinese worried about a few monks with guns? They could rocket the whole mountain out of existence, if they pleased. They choose not to. So why is the Dali Lama guarded? Maybe for the occasional insane person, but probably more as a precaution against wild animals. These places aren’t like your backyard, Mrs. [name.] They aren’t like our national parks. Real dangers exist. What use is building a well for a community if an angry ape will keep them away?"

“Ok, leaving the gun issue for a moment. What about your comments that Africa is in this plight because of its refusal to accept Christ, and due to the Muslim influences there?”

“I think that statement takes some of the things I’ve said completely out of context. Certain things – the tradition of female genital mutilation, which the World Health Organization stands with us against – has undeniable Islamic foundations. It’s not part of the typical Islamic belief structure, but it is directly tied into these people’s view of the Islamic faith – it’s tied into their belief structure. You simply can’t argue with the fact that the Islamic world is far more oppressive to women, and is far more violent in general, than the Christian world. And I know you’re just going to throw that back at me – yes, Christianity has a history of oppressing women, and of violence, and racism. But it’s the Christian world that has made these great leaps in the right direction, operating under the Truth that we are all equal in God’s eyes. Everywhere, historically, has a history of oppressing women. But this ended first in Christian nations. We can talk all day about if you make a few thousand less than your male counterpart, but we have to step back and see that you don’t have to wear a veil in public, or have a man’s permission to travel, or risk getting publicly whipped for having a man unrelated to you in your home. These liberties came directly with Christianity, and this is what we’re going to Africa to spread.”

“But Christianity actively works to oppress gay and lesbian citizens.”

“I think my views on homosexuality have been pretty plainly stated elsewhere.”

“Yes, you said that ‘gays and lesbians have a higher rate of drug dependency and suicide because they know that they are sinning, and they try to bury this unhappiness.’ Whereas, most of the normal world sees this as an effect of marginalization. The oppression causes it; it’s not internal. Any comment?”
“Like I said, I think that my views on this subject are pretty clearly stated, and there’s no benefit to discussing it again. Any other questions?”

“Just this. Last week you stood up and denounced Kaibutsu Toys as ‘training our children to be warriors for the Antichrist.’ Now, of course, there are boycotts at major toy companies, and these toys are sitting unwanted on the shelves. Every major news outlet is running stories on this; it’s books on children wizards all over again, except this time, it’s working. Any thoughts?”

“We believe that there are demons, and that they attach themselves to certain things. There certainly are no such books in the libraries of my seven daughters. But even if you don’t see the spiritual side – if you don’t believe in demons – then you can surely still see that these objects teach dependence on falsehoods. A book about a child who solves his problems through magic does a child a disservice – it gives them no real solutions. Better to teach them to think. Even better to teach them to have faith. Similarly, a toy that teaches our children to wield magic as a tool for destruction, well it does the same thing, but also promotes violence. People who practice magic delinate between white magic and black magic. Now, both are the devil’s work, one is just made to seem more harmless. But black magic is labeled as magic with an intent to hurt, control, or manipulate. Both of the things you mention – the books, and Kaibutsu figurines – practice black magic. It teaches our children to try and hurt, control, or manipulate others. Do we want this?

I never called for a boycott. I spoke against it. But I back up the decision of those involved. It’s important for us to demand toys that are appropriate for our children from toymakers and distributors. They don’t just sell these toys, they push them. I’m sure after the boycott that whoever wants a Kaibutsu toy will be able to buy one at a reduced price. They will go on sale, and it will be advertised on television, and innocent people – not the Christians who are boycotting, who know better, but others – will fall for this and invite this evil in. Unless, of course, the boycotters succeed in getting the companies to stop carrying the toys, to cancel orders, and to send back their stock. At this point, we have to have solidarity in the boycott, or we do more damage than good.

“Look, it’s easy for people here to see certain things, like boycotting toys or guns on our police volunteers, and to make something… I don’t know what… out of it. What they miss is
that we are fighting – we have always been fighting – to protect our children, other children - children as far away from here in location and circumstance as rural villages in Africa - from a very real and dangerous Enemy. In Africa, he can use rebels or wild animals. In America, he can use pedophiles, Catholic priests, and even toys. But he is always after us, and he is most interested in our children. And we would be remiss if we did not try to counter every attack, every ploy, and every danger. What I hope – what I had hoped that people would take from last Sunday’s sermon – is that we realize just how many dangers exist, and how vigilant we must be.”

The interview appears to be over. Mrs. [name] is standing up, leaning towards the microphone. We’ll fade to black.

Scene Two – Some much needed action

We’ve seen the next scene in too many teen movies: college students spilling out of a two-story frat-house. We’ll struggle through the crowd at the steps, past the freshmen on bouncer detail – stopping only long enough to see them ID-ing the men, but not the women, for age – and into the thick smoke of cigarettes and marijuana. We’ll look around a bit, get a shot of the keg in the kitchen and, of course, some poor fool chugging away. (We’ll see him getting sick in the front lawn a little later.) We’ll catch Naomi’s voice and follow it up into a bedroom that contains two twin beds. A small crowd is in this room; Lydia and her hulking, muscular boyfriend sit on the floor, Naomi and Bethany sit next to each other on one bed, and two other couples occupy the other bed and more floor-space. Everyone, except Lydia, has a beer in hand, and empty bottles form a ring in the middle of the room. Lydia holds a bottle of water.

“Scott and I are still waiting,” the unknown girl on the second bed says. “I mean, we do stuff, but, like, not that. I mean, not that we’re definitely waiting for marriage, but, just, like, we’ve only been together nine months? And we want to be sure that we are getting married, one day. Right Scott?”

She looks at Scott, who responds by drinking his beer.

“Scott’s a horn-ball. If he can’t put it, you know, then he’ll take whatever. Hands, mouth, my...”
“Hey!” Beth says, and tries to sit up. “That’s nasty. He’s my brother, Lindsey. Can we talk about something else?” She fails to sit up, and lies her head down in Naomi’s lap instead. “That sucked. I should slow down.”

“Fine. Quinn, you tell the girls what sex is like,” Lindsey says. She turns to the unknown girl on the floor. “Quinn. Quinn! Pay attention, girl.”

Quinn’s boyfriend sits in the doorway, and Quinn has her head resting on his arm. She’s been She answers without looking up. “What? I kind of have to pee.”

“Sit up. You haven’t drank that much. Go ahead and tell the girls what sex feels like to a sinner,” Lindsey says.

“It feels like I might puke. Honey, help me up?” Her boyfriend staggers to his feet, and then helps her up and out of the room.

“Well, there goes that,” Lindsey says. “I guess we’ll never know.”

“Hey!” Naomi points at her sister. “Hey! Lydia can tell us. She and Brett are like Bam! Bam! Bam! Every chance they get.”

“Ew, that’s your sister,” Bethany says. “That’s worse than hearing about Scott.”

“Well, I mean, we talk about everything else. I’m using one of her tampons! Come on, Lydia. Out with it,” Naomi says.

Lydia shakes her head.

“Come on, babe, tell them what a stud I am,” Brett says. “Tell them what it’s like with old 52.”

“Did you seriously just refer to yourself by your jersey number, Brett?” Lydia asks. “You do realize you play high-school football for a shit team? You shouldn’t drink. It makes you cocky.”

“You just said cock. E,” Brett replies.

“And it makes you mentally incompetent. Ok, I’ll tell you. The first time, it’s supposed to hurt like hell, right? Well, it didn’t. The doctor said it usually doesn’t for women who are ‘used to vaginal insertions’ and then asked me a lot of questions about vibrators. Well it turns out that isn’t the whole reason; James was just, you know, small.

Now, sex feels like… hell. I don’t know. You know when you haven’t eaten, or you have too much energy, and you can’t focus on anything? That’s me without an orgasm every day. I
asked the doctor if I was a nympho or something and she said a high sex drive isn’t abnormal at my age. I mean, I still run three miles a day, and I just go crazy…”

“Well I’m glad to hear that this isn’t about love or anything,” Brett says. His tone drips with drunken sarcasm.

“Oh, come on. We’re all just kids, fucking around. I love you, but do I have any idea what that even means? You graduate in two months. I’m stuck at [high school] for another year. You’ll be up in Michigan, getting concussions on a regular basis. Do you think we’ll make it after this summer? Be real.”

Brett stands up. “I’m getting another beer.” But he storms out of the room.

“Oh, come on, Brett!” Lydia calls, and she gets up to follow after him.

“We’re going to get some, too,” Scott says. “You two need another? Whatever, I’ll get you some.” He gets off the bed and pulls Lindsey to her feet. They leave the room.

Bethany turns her head to look up at Lydia.

“I’m really pissed at you, you know,” Bethany says.

“What? Why?”

“You said you were a virgin. I mean, what do we do, huh? Does that not count?”

“Beth, it’s not like that. I mean, if Lindsey’s still a virgin after everything she’s done, then we must be, too.”

“Well then why did you ask what sex is like? Don’t we have sex?”

“I don’t know what we have! I never thought of it like that? Look, you told me to go out with that Darren guy, and we’ve been on three dates. He keeps wanting to kiss me, Beth, and I keep telling him that I can’t because of my faith. But I haven’t kissed him because…”

“You love me?”

“Of course I do. And last time he asked me if I didn’t wonder what it’s like to have sex. Not, he said, that he wanted to, or of course he wanted to because I’m so pretty, but he knew that we shouldn’t. And I really didn’t know what to say. I mean, we got through prom alright by going with guys who were way more into Jesus than we are, and Jake still wanted to kiss me that night. And I do wonder. You do to, or you used to? We used to talk about who we’d be with. We used to make out and pretend we were kissing boys. Did you just stop wondering?”

Bethany sits up and takes Naomi’s hands in her own.
“Naomi, I’m way too drunk for this conversation. The room is slipping a little. What’s your point? You want to sleep with a guy?”

“No! I mean, at least not while we’re... whatever. I just feel bad sometimes. I mean, if we’ve given up on boys, then are we gay? Is that wrong?”

“Hey, the bible doesn’t say anything about gay women. And we’re not... look, I wonder too. And at first we were just fooling around, and then, I mean, I don’t want anyone else.”

“Me either. But sometimes I feel guilty.”

“Don’t be.”

“I do.”

“Don’t be. Just kiss me.”

“But I...” Her words are cut off as Bethany kisses her. She seems to resist, and then gives in. “Whatever,” she says, and then pulls Bethany down on the bed. They kiss, and kiss, and we’ll look away, out of the doorway. We hear approaching feet, but they aren’t noticing. A man – a boy – what word do we use right at that cusp, those first few years of college, when men are still trying to become men? – appears in the doorway. He’s obviously drunk, and unfamiliar to us. He holds a cell phone, and he points it at the girls and we hear a click!

“Hey!” He shouts. “Look, I just got a picture of a Bauer girl going lesbo! I can sell this shit to CNN!”

“Send me that, Chuck!” someone yells.

Naomi and Bethany untangle out of the bed like snakes from a (snake home?).

“Give me that!” Naomi cries. She reaches for the cell-phone, but Chuck holds it above his head, still trying to type.

“Hey Dylan, I’m sending this to you too okay,” he says. “Don’t you go selling it, though!”

“Seriously, my brother’s in this frat. Give it back,” Bethany says. Naomi tries to pull his arm down, and he tries to pull away. He elbows her – we can’t tell if it’s an accident or not – in the chest and she falls back into the room.

We’re watching this all happen in the hall, out of the doorway. Lydia enters the frame far too quickly, she must have been running up the stairs, and shoves the palm of her right hand into Chuck’s chest, striking flat just below his ribcage. The blow knocks the air from him and lifts him off his feet. He flies clear out of our field of vision. We see her stoop over and pick the
Swing Low, Sweet Chariot 42

phone up. She then races to the bathroom. We’ll follow her, it’s just too good not to. She forces
the door open – Quinn’s boyfriend was resting against it, and he top­ples out of the way. Quinn is
still bent over the toilet. Lydia drops the phone on the ground and slams her foot into the screen
repeatedly. Then she picks up the parts and tosses them into the toilet, amid the contents of
Quinn’s misery.

“Courtesy flush!” She yells, and flushes the toilet. “Sorry, Quinn, you hanging in there?”
Quinn makes a noise, and Lydia pats her on the back and leaves the bathroom. We’ll
angle down the hall, past Lydia. Chuck is struggling to his feet, and people are crowding in.

“That bitch hit me!” he yells, and begins pushing his way towards us.

“You want a fucking story about a Bauer girl? How about the story where you get your
ass kicked by a little girl half your size, dumb-fuck?” Lydia yells back.

The boy-man lunges for Lydia and throws out an arm; we can’t tell if he is trying to
punch her or grab her. Either way, she simply steps back into the bathroom. He oversteps,
stumbles past us, and trips at the top of the stairs. He falls from step to step, careening off of
people who were trying to come see what the noise was about.

“Brett!” Lydia cries. We see Brett at the bottom. He begins to push towards the steps.
People cling to either side of the stair-case, where they are jostled by the falling body, but not
knocked over. Brett braces himself and Chuck as he comes off the last steps, then steers him over
to a couch.

“You okay, buddy?” Brett asks. The would-be-photographer takes a moment to collect
himself, and then tries to get up.

“What the fuck? She tripped me! I’ll beat that bitch!”

“You’re not beating anyone. Just chill.”

“Get the fuck off me!”

“Buddy, I’m not even touching you. But you’re drunk, I’m drunk, and this isn’t going
any further. Stay down.”

Chuck looks at Brett – we look at Brett- and maybe it’s his pose, or how collected he
seems even though he’s obviously drunk, or maybe it’s just his sheer size, but somehow the boy­
man and we all know it’s over. Naomi, Bethany, and Lydia all come down the stairs, purses in
hand.

“Brett, come on,” Lydia says, and they head for the door.
“What the fuck? You’re with her?” Chuck says, but he doesn’t try to stand up.

We’ll follow them to Lydia’s Escalade. They enter in silence – we’ll angle in from the hood. Lydia pulls the SUV away from the curb, the others slump down in their seats.

“Please don’t drive too fast, babe,” Brett says.

Silence fills the car for a few moments. Then Naomi asks, “Do you think he sent it to anyone?”

“Doesn’t matter,” Lydia says. “He didn’t get your faces; your hair was in the way. No one could have identified either of you. I mean, I would have known it was you, but no one could prove it.”

“Thanks, Lydia. Where the hell did you learn that?” Naomi asks.

“Learn what?” Lydia asks.

“You hit him! And you knew what you were doing.”

“Well, you know how I wanted to take karate a few years ago and Dad wouldn’t let me? He was in it as a kid and he struck at a board, and he says the board broke before he hit it? So he says it lets demons possess you?”

“Um, yeah, sure?”

“Ever notice how I go to art class twice a week and never get better at drawing? I go to a dojo that teaches Wing Chun, Jujitsu, and Kenpo. I’m on my second black belt in Jujitsu, Brett just got his brown.”

“Brett, you go to this karate stuff, too?” Naomi asks.

“Yeah. I mean, no, it’s Jujitsu. Coach wanted us to work on footwork, and Lydia said this would help. It was this or dancing. Hey, I might be sick.”

“Really?” Lydia asks. She pulls the car over. Looking around, we can see that we’ve not even made it back to the highway; she has pulled over in a neighborhood. Bethany stumbles out of the car and begins retching in someone’s bushes. Brett gets out as well and walks around the corner and out of site. We hear him unzip his jeans and begin to urinate. Lydia and Naomi get out as well.

“My boyfriend is pissing in someone’s yard.”

“Lydia, how do you keep this a secret? I mean, twice a week? Don’t you get bruises?”

“Naomi, I’ve been forging Dad’s signature on every document since I started high-school. You know how I’m always off at some Quiz-bowl, or History Challenge, or whatever?”
Some of that’s real. A lot of it isn’t. I’ve been to tournaments when they thought I was taking the SAT. Brett and I flew out to Colorado to see his dad last summer; I told Mom I was going to an exclusive art course. Brett and I photo-shopped a brochure and everything; we listed his dad as the director, and for a week Brett’s father answered the phone “Colorado Art Academy.” They never called. Honestly, I’m not sure they care. They barely ask about these things. We’re talking about colleges, and have they even offered to take me to see any? They let you drive up to Berry with Beth. We’ve not even talked about how I will look at schools. I mean, do you even think they’ll ask what movie we saw? Dad comes in once a week, trashes my room in one of his searches, and doesn’t ask me about anything else. If I get a bruise, I wear pants for a week, or a scarf. If it’s on my neck they think it’s a hickey. Hell, I’ve had a boyfriend that they don’t even know about for two solid years. You’ve been sleeping with Beth since – hell, when did that even start?”

“We were fourteen.”

“Fourteen! Wow, four years? You’ve been hiding this from them for four years. You aren’t good at it, Naomi, they are just blind. How many times have you come home drunk? They don’t notice. Really, four years? No one our age has a four-year relationship.”

“I don’t know when it... became a relationship.”

“But it is, right? Look. Welcome to my world. You can do whatever you want, and they won’t notice. I made a mistake once – I went to them and told them about having sex with James. I needed advice, and I needed them to get birth control. The doctor wouldn’t let me just bring in a signed form; she had to meet my parents. In exchange, they yanked me out of school, tried to send me to some Christian boot camp, and refused to let me see him again. Fuck that. I started lying – signing Dad’s name to stuff, writing my own sick notes – because they wouldn’t do it. I’d give Mom a form and it would sit there for weeks! I felt bad about it, but after James, I said fuck them.”

“How did you get out of the boarding school again?”

“That’s the other part. Fuck them, do what you want, and make damn sure you’ve got a really big ace in the hole. I’m going to Berkley, Naomi, and you don’t want to see what happens if they seriously try to stop me.”

“Hey, if they never noticed, how did you figure out about Beth and me?”

“It’s obvious!”
“Oh God! Who else do you think knows?”

“Who cares? Look, you know I don’t buy into all this Jesus-shit. And you don’t really, either. If dad finds out, he’ll flip his shit, for sure. And you’d better damn well make sure you’re out of the house before you have a coming out party. And it’s not that obvious. I just... I’m your sister, okay? I see more. I know you. Don’t forget that.”

Beth slouches her way back to the Escalade. They look around for Brett, only to realize that he’s already in the SUV. Lydia shrugs, and they open car doors. We’ll cut here.
Act 4 – Africa

Scene One – Africa, Day Two

Africa. We aren't sure what village, or even what country, we're in. We angle in, panorama, several hundred feet above the encampment. On the outskirts we see several semi-trucks and trailers, all shipped in on cargo ships days ago. We pass rows of identical eight-person tents, several hundred in number, laid out in a grid. On one side—downwind, we hope—are the latrines: a long line of plastic blue outhouses. As we near the center of camp, we cross over several larger tents, one with the intentionally obvious red medical cross symbol on the top and sides, before sighting the immense white tent-city that covers the main stage. Beyond this, a seemingly endless sea of black. Over a million African men, women, and children pack themselves in as close as they can. A few sit on dull gray blankets, most sit on the ground or remain standing. At the edges of the crowd, lines form near tents that appear to be serving water. Ringing the crowd, every few hundred feet, are mammoth speakers hoisted on poles. From these, distinct Southern Gospel is blaring, now overwhelming us as we come near.

We come around and drop down to a semi-trailer, complete with air-conditioning unit above—parked thirty or so feet behind the stage. A host of generators stands a few dozen feet off, and massive cables snake from them, under the trailer, and then back out towards the stage tent. The massive bulk of Nathan Edwards opens the back of the trailer to exit, and we'll scoot in before he closes the door. We hear the door close and the roar of the music and crowd dies down to a dim. Inside, a sea of electronics floats on tables that fold down from the wall. We recognize several men from the Sound Room at City Upon a Hill, though our producer Joe appears to be absent. The floor is grated, and we see large fans under the grates. The set-up looks straight out of a spy movie. Bauer stands in the center of it all. He throws his arms up.

“All of it, Jerry? We lost all of it?”

“All but yesterday’s concert, we had recorded the audio of that separately. We uploaded it by satellite, and Joe got it back at City. He said the file was corrupted, and asked us to resend it. We have back-up upon back-up, and every file is corrupted. Best I can figure is, we ran everything through here, and the main drive was bad. Or a cable somewhere. But here’s the
spooky part: we took tons of digital photos. Worthless, I know; we can’t prove anything with them. People would scream photo-manipulation in a heart-beat. But still, all of those photos are gone. Not just off the drives in here, but off the cards themselves. The cards are unreadable, unusable. We can’t even erase them and save new material.”

“No explanation?” Bauer asks.

“Well, like I said, maybe a drive in here is bad, maybe a cable. But the cameras, no. Some of the volunteers have already come in, asking us to look at their personal digital cameras, they seem to be on the fritz, too. We expected some of that – if you aren’t ready for the dust here, it can really mess with your gear. Many people are reporting their cameras as missing. But we anticipated that. We’re working on it, though. I ran down to the medical tent and borrowed a thermometer; so we know our thermostat isn’t faulty. The temperature is fine. We’re sending a man to the airport – it’s the only place we could UPS more supplies into – and he’ll be back late tomorrow. For now, though, we’re just going to record the audio for all of the sermons separately, and get what footage we can, however we can.”

“Alright then. Keep me updated.”

Bauer walks out of the tent and down to the medical tent. A long line stretches out, at least three hundred people, many sitting or even lying down on the ground. Some have obvious ailments – large tumors, goiters, or sores. Others simply seem ill: a yellowness about the eyes, a frail frame, a haunted look. Bauer walks past the line, nodding to a few here and there, waving. Some almost break out of line to come for him, but a sharp cry in an unknown tongue keeps them in place.

Inside, Jordan works among a team of medical staff, darting along aisles between over one hundred cots. She stops to help a small boy onto an empty cot, and begins recording his vitals onto a pad of paper. Bauer speaks briefly to an elderly man in surgical gear, and then comes over to Jordan.

“How are you holding up?” he asks.
“Good! Good. I mean, I cried myself to sleep last night, after working myself to exhaustion, but it actually might be working. The whole way here, I was convinced that the plane was going to crash. I even have this…”

Out of the pocket of her scrubs she pulls a short, thick screw.

“… From my plane seat, where it bolts to the floor? It just came right out as we took off. But once we got here, there’s just too much to focus on. We’re on the second day, and we already know we’ll be out of some supplies by tomorrow. Keeping things clean and sterile is next to impossible. Some people, we’ve had to diagnose and recommend to a hospital; we know they’ll never make the trip, and would probably get turned away at the doors. We’ve had a few die. But it doesn’t bother me as much here, I can’t say why. Mostly, though, I think it’s seeing all of the small things that would bother me at home — like how everyone’s clothes are falling apart — and still realizing that all but a few of these people are going to live. Maybe I just need to get away from doing ER, where there’s such a high mortality rate.”

“I’m glad to hear it. Will you be out at the sermon this afternoon?” Bauer asks.

“Probably not. I’ve been working since about 6 AM, but I just can’t seem to stop. That line doesn’t feel like it’s moving at all. Dajan, can you take him over to the blue area?”

An African man of perhaps twenty-five says something to the boy, who hops off the cot and follows the man across the tent.

“We marked out areas for the common treatments. It beats pushing around a cartful of pills” she explains. “It’s interesting. At the hospital, everything has been in the same place for years, with only small changes to increase our efficiency. Here, we’re relying on the experience of those who did this in years past, and still we’re finding ways to improve. Dr. Jacobs has asked me to be on the planning committee for next year!”

Bauer looks away for a moment, making eye contact with the doctor that he had spoken with before.

“I’m sorry, you must be really busy,” Jordan says.
"No. No! I’m just thinking, all the people that you know we can’t treat, they’re being invited to the sermons, right? Jordan, that’s part of what I wanted you to see. Real miracles! We can’t get them to a hospital? We can heal them right here! In just one day, I’ve seen a man’s broken fingers straighten back out, another man’s hearing come back, and a woman’s scars disappear. If we could get these people, the ones you already have documentation on, up to the altar during prayer I am sure they would be healed! They would be healed, and we could finally have proof! Fifteen years, Jordan, and we’ve never had any proof. Can you imagine? But you’ll see it for yourself. If you can’t make it today, try for tomorrow. I really want you at one of the sermons."

"Okay. I’ll try. I promise."

"Okay, well, I’ll check in on you later." Bauer takes his leave, stopping for few minutes to talk to the tall man. We stay with Jordan, watching them as she checks on another patient. Jordan sneaks a look every so often. Finally, the tall man raises his voice, and Bauer responds by issuing a loud, but indistinguishable, proclamation, and then storms out of the tent. The man comes directly over to Jordan.

"Jordan, now Pastor Bauer wants us to keep tabs on the people we cannot help, get them to the sermon during prayers, and then bring them back here after their miraculous healing. Do you know how much of our time that’s going to cost? How many people we won’t be able to treat because of this? What did you say to him?"

Jordan looks stunned. "Say? Nothing, Dr. Jacobs. I just told him that we can’t provide for everyone, but that I am surprised by how many we can treat. I mentioned that we’ll be running out of some supplies by tomorrow."

“Well, don’t expect them to give us any. I had to scrape to get what we have. All of these supplies were donated from hospitals that I have connections at. Most of these medications have already expired. I’m sorry, I don’t mean to snap. It’s just infuriating, to see all of this illness and not even have the basic equipment we need to treat it."

“You mean, there wasn’t any money for supplies?” Jordan asks.
“Goodness, no!” Dr. Jacobs laughs. “For ten years, we’ve run this medical tent off of donations alone, gathered by your colleagues here and myself. The church spends two million dollars a year on this campaign, and we don’t see a penny of it. Can you imagine what we’d accomplish with two million dollars a year? Look. Pastor Bauer is a good man, but this … look Ann, if you’re going to get involved, get used to this. Africa isn’t about our medical missions. We’re a side show. You can decide what the main focus is; I’m not getting involved there. But this,” he gestures around towards the sick in the tent,” isn’t it.”

We’ll pan around, focusing on the ill around the scene. In the blue marked area, a boy of five or six plays with a stick, drawing with it on the ground. A weary parent sits nearby. We’ll close-up on the boy, who seems to remain oblivious to his surroundings. We’ll stay focused on him – his dirty clothes, his emaciated form, the open scabs on his knees where he’s scraped them, like so many boys do, but had nothing to cover the scrapes with – just long enough to let his condition sink in. Then we’ll mercifully fade to black.

**Scene Two: Sunday Morning**

*This scene starts in Lydia’s bedroom. Lydia’s room looks nothing like a teenage girl’s room. Three walls – including the windows themselves – are covered by bookcases. A twin bed is pushed in front of several of the bookcases, and the middle of the room remains bare. A break in the bookcases reveals a closet door. Along the fourth wall are a bedroom door and a long table. On this table, three large monitors sit in a semicircle, and in front of them Lydia sits with a book in her lap. She’s wearing blue jeans (Diesel, for the observant) and a nice top (Marc Jacobs), which seems at odds with the Dior household. We’ll look over her shoulder. The left and right screens have various websites pulled up; the top of one site reads “World Health Organization.” The center screen contains a text document. The words “Africa” catch our eye. We hear a knock at the door. Lydia calls out, and Naomi opens it and then leans on the frame. She’s still in full-length flannel pajamas.*

“Are you going to church this morning?” Naomi asks. “I know mom said you don’t have to ‘cause dad’s not there.” Her words are slightly slurred, slowed down, and she looks bleary eyed. Her country twang is more prominent; “going” sounds like “go-ang”.

Lydia turns away from the monitor bank in front of her.
"After hearing dad talk about how Pastor Walker has stage-fright? Hell yes I’m going, just to see if he cracks!"

"Hey, he’s a nice old guy. Okay, well, can you take Abigail? I’m supposed to, but I don’t feel too good."

"You look like hell. Are you still drunk?"

"Pfft. Naw. Wake and bake, baby!"

"Seriously? You know it’s like seven AM, right?"

"How do you think I get through Sunday mornings? I just don’t feel good today, is all."

(Think comes out like “thank”.)

"Sure, I’ll take her. Not like I can fucking do any damn thing else today,” Lydia says, and turns her attention back to the screens.

Naomi comes over and lays on the twin bed.

"I can’t believe they grounded you for that. Are you sure you aren’t pissed at me?"

"For the thousandth time, I’m not pissed at you. I mean, better me than you, right? They think I kissed a girl and got in a fight, well that’s just one more thing for me, you know? No big deal. I still can’t believe the guy’s mom called and threatened to sue. What a douche. I have no idea how dad kept it out of the media, but damn it went away fast."

"Not really. I mean, at my school, there’s totally a rumor now about Beth and me. She’s pretty pissed about it; a couple of girls called her a lesbo on graduation day. Whatever. I don’t think anyone else is going to Berry."

"People at my school just kept asking about the fight. Brett keeps telling them what a bad-ass I am. I mean, I only hit that asshole once. But now everyone thinks I pushed him down the stairs."

"Well, I’m really sorry you got blamed for the kissing thing. How did you not get sent away after that? I thought you’d be at [Christian boot camp] for sure."
Lydia turns, and seems to be scrutinizing her sister. “Do you really want to know?” she asks.

“What do you mean? Of course I want to know. Know what?”

Lydia turns back to the computer. On the center screen, the text document goes away, and the screen is suddenly filled with a video image. We recognize the bedroom in the scene as the Bauer parents’ bedroom. The angle is from above, high up, and about a fifth of the right side of the screen is blocked by something too close to be distinguishable. The woman below, naked and bent forward over the bed, has slightly different hair, but is clearly Emily Bauer. The man standing behind her clearly isn’t Neil Bauer. They continue doing what they do, causing ripples of sheets.

“Oh my God! What the hell is that?” Naomi yells, and jumps up from the bed. She comes closer to the screens. “What the hell, Lydia?”

Lydia leans back in her chair. “That’s your mother and Joe Svrenis, Mr. Hollywood porn producer. The audio’s worse. Want to hear?”

“God, no! Turn it off, Lydia! What the hell?”

Lydia laughs, and then she clicks a button and the image goes away.

“You remember how dear old Joe came from Hollywood five or six years ago, and walked into dad’s office? He told dad all about how he used to film porn in Hollywood, and boozed and did coke and fucked whores and actresses, but one day he saw dad on T.V. and realized he needed to turn his life around? And that he was watching it thinking, ‘I could do better work than their production team’? And then he walked out with a job as the new producer for all of City’s television programs? And about a year later, how mom started helping with Joe’s Tuesday night recovery group? Well, guess why?”

Naomi turns around and goes back to sit on the bed. She looks horrified.

“Mom’s having an affair? How did you get this?”
“Had. She broke it off about a year ago, when dad threatened to send me to the boarding school again and I confronted her about it.”

“Does she know you have this?”

“God, no. She just knows that I know. I mean, she fucked him right here in this house, two or three times a week. Basically, like every day that she didn’t go to church. Grace was home during it.”

“What about Hope? Oh, god! Mom had hope in that time!”

“Yup. She’s actually pregnant in that video. Just a couple of months. I’ve got clips of them fucking later on, when she’s closer to seven months, if that’s your kind of thing.” Lydia is still turned towards the screen, but we can see her reflection in the screens. Her smile is vicious.

“No! Oh, shit. Is Hope his child?”

“Wouldn’t that be great? But no, I’ve got a great fight recorded after Hope was born where they are talking about a paternity test. Hope is definitely not Joe’s. I mean, I had to go back and really look to find when she had fucked dad, but it happened.”

“You’ve watched mom and dad have sex? Ew, Lydia! What the hell? How did you get all of this?”

“Well you know all those fed-ex envelopes that I kept at school, but just took to Brett’s house for the summer? I told mom and dad that they were artwork, because if I keep them sealed then it’s kind of like having proof of a copyright if someone steals my stuff. But most of it is this. I have cameras in their air ducts, microphones hidden inside lamps, all kinds of shit. I’ve also got dad’s office, his laptop, and all kinds of places and set-ups. I’m patched in to City. Brett’s mom’s house. We even wired in a couple of cameras on street-poles around here. It’s really hard doing their cars, though. Without wiring in a device, it has to rely on battery power, and that’s short-lived. And I’m afraid if I wired in something to the steering wheels then it would be found if they took the car in for repairs. Oh, and I can’t get their cellphones. Brett says it’s easy, but it’s just so illegal.”
“What the hell, Lydia? This ISN’T illegal? Why? Oh, God! This is how you knew about Beth and me! You have my room bugged!”

“Yep. For years now. Back when you hid cigarettes by unscrewing light switch sockets.”

“You’ve seen us have sex!”

“Not really, you always stay under the covers. Prudes.”

“Oh my God. Why, Lydia?”

Lydia finally turns around to look at Naomi.

“I don’t know, Naomi. Curiosity? I mean, I’m going to be a criminal justice major. I thought about being a P.I., or working for the CIA, FBI, or just being a lawyer. I used to listen to mom and dad on that baby monitor, just to hear what they said when I got in trouble. Then it became a habit, I guess. I put in the cameras and mikes in their bedroom a while ago. When mom started fucking Joe, I started putting them everywhere. I mean, they fucked on the kitchen table, in the bathroom, in the closet, in Abigail’s room, in the hall, the den, dad’s office, you name it. They fucked for four hours straight once, from the time Grace went down for a nap till the time she woke up.”

“They didn’t even try to hide it?”

“Well, sort of. Joe always took a City vehicle that wasn’t checked out to him, and nobody sees those as suspicious around here. They avoided the maids and cooks through careful scheduling. I don’t think they came close to getting caught.”

“Except by you! So you’re what, blackmailing mom?”

“Not really. I just told her that I knew she was having an affair, and with whom, and that I could give enough details to make sure people believed me. I told her that I wasn’t perfect, but she wasn’t perfect, and that it would be best for all if we just let each other do our own thing. She’s been okay since then. I mean, she like barely talks to me, but she writes whatever checks I need and she’s getting all of our financial info together for me to apply for financial aid. I don’t
need it, but I have to fill out the forms just to get my scholarships. She’s signing anything I need for my college applications, and she signed the consent form for my tattoos.”

“You have tattoos?”

“Three. So, I mean, it’s not really blackmail, but it kind of is. I asked my philosophy teacher – without details of course – about it, and my criminal justice teacher. Just, if a child knew something shameful about her parents, and she used it to get her way, is that blackmail, or unethical, or what? They both said that it might be a pretty shitty thing to do, but when the child is using it to get into Berkley instead of some piss-poor barely accredited “Christian College”, that it’s probably justified.

“Berry’s a good school!”

“Good enough. But it won’t open any doors for me, you know? Not like having Berkley on my degree.”

“I’m just… stunned. This is immense. I mean, I don’t feel comfortable in my room now! And mom… wow. I mean, I thought they’d get a divorce soon, but I had no idea. I… I want to go this morning. Joe’s there, right? He’s not in Africa. I want to see him.”

“You can’t say anything, Naomi! Nothing! Just let this be, okay? You’re off to school in two months and you’re out of this. I’ve got a year left and I’m just trying to make it through. I’m going to be valedictorian, and I’m going to Berkley. I just need some time with things as they are, to get everything in order. Dad’s so pissed about this fight thing that mom told me she ‘can’t cover’ for me anymore. Don’t fuck this up for me.”

“Or you’ll tell everyone I’m gay?”

“Are you? No. Your business is your business, Naomi. You’ve always encouraged me; this is about dad trying to control our lives. I mean, I could run away like some stupid teenager, or give in, or I can do whatever I can to make damn well sure I get my way. I’m trusting you not to fuck this up for me. Okay?”

“Well, I couldn’t say anything to him. I just want to see. Why him, you know? Of all people, why him?”
“Honestly, if you listen to the audio, it’s probably because he did nothing but told mom that she was pretty enough to be in porn. He wanted to film her, she said no. It’s why she would only see him here; she was scared he’d find a way to record it.”

“Wow. Irony in action.”

“Seriously. Well, they say we all have a Madonna and a whore inside. I guess mom has an inner porn star. I’m sure it’s much more complicated than someone telling her she’s pretty—she gets that from everyone— but that’s really most of what he said. ‘You’re flawless. You’re beautiful. You have perfect angles. You’re filmable.’ Over and over.”

“Were they in love?”

“Who knows. Mom cried for weeks after she dumped him, but I never found one place where they said ‘I love you’. Anyways, we’ve got to get going soon. Are you going to get ready?”

“Yeah, yeah. Hey, can you at least take the cameras out of my room?”

“I could, but how would you know that I hadn’t just put more in? Besides, don’t you want me watching after you? You know, in case you drink too much one night and forget to wake up?”

“That’s not funny. Okay, I’ll go get dressed. Are you wearing that?”

“Well, yeah. I’m going, but I’m not going all Susie Sunday. But, let’s try to ditch Abigail on mom and take Grace home with us. We’ll stop and get her some ice-cream. Abigail’s such a bitch for ratting us out about the party.”

“Oh come on. She’s nine.”

“So? She’s a snitch about everything. You’re just lucky that she’s too young to understand about you and Beth. You need to be careful.”

“Whatever. Beth and I had a huge fight last night. It’s why I drank so much.”

“Fuck. About what?”
“She kissed that Tommy guy at prom. She made out with him. And she’s gone to the movies with him, and even had him pull his dick out so she could see it.”

“Are you kidding? So she’s cheating on you? Wait, this is the super-power-jesus-freak that she went with because he’d never try anything? The boy everyone thinks is gay?”

“Yeah. Evidently he’s not. And she’s not sure she is, either. I mean, can she cheat on me? Is it cheating? We’re not a couple.”

“Fuck that. You’ve been dating exclusively for years now.”

“That’s just it. I mean, I told her that I had thought about kissing Jake, but I didn’t do it because of her. Then she tells me she made out with Tommy. She’s the one who encouraged me to go out with Jake. I asked her if she was trying to get me to be with him, and she didn’t really answer. She said maybe we needed to try boys, or just other people, but still see each other, and she wants to still room together and BE together at Berry, but maybe be with other people too? She told Tommy about us! You know what he said? To see if the three of us could get together. Guess he’s not so jesus-freak after all.”

Lydia gets up from her seat and comes over to Naomi. She sits next to her on the bed and leans her head on Naomi’s shoulder.

“That really sucks. I’m sorry; I totally wouldn’t have shown you all of that if I knew you had other shit to deal with. You wanna blow off church and go do something else?”

“No, I promised mom I’d take Abigail. She really wants to go to her Sunday School class but mom didn’t want to take five of us. Shit, we’re going to be late.”

“Come on, I’ll help you get dressed.”

The two girls get up and leave the room. As they shut the door behind them, we’ll fade out.

Scene Three – L.J.’s sermon

This scene takes place the same morning, at City Upon the Hill. Before we fade in, we’ll show the date on L.J.’s calendar, with the word “PREACH”. Then we’ll fade into the sound room, appearing just behind Joe. We’ll push forward past him, towards the plate glass separating the
sound room from the sanctuary, and look down on the scene below. Everyone is already seated, and the music director is on stage. In the first few aisles, we see Emily Bauer and her seven children: the five younger ones in spring dresses, while Naomi and Lydia sport jeans and shirts. Naomi is wearing ridiculously huge glasses, even inside, and Lydia has what looks to be a leather-bound bible open in her lap. We’ll go in for a close up, though, and notice that at the top of the page, right justified, reads “The Origins of Man.” We’ll settle into an empty seat next to her. The music director introduces L.J., who comes forward from a seat behind him on the stage.

“The music director introduces L.J., who comes forward from a seat behind him on the stage. The music director returns to his seat in the choir.

“Pastor Bauer asked me to talk to you all today, “ L.J. begins, “almost two months ago. And I had no idea what to say. I’ve been with this church for almost four decades, and I’ve never been in front of this podium. I’ve avoided it. In a little bit, I’ll tell you why.

But, some good news, first. A few weeks ago, I witnessed an accident. A young lady hit a deer on Georgia 400. I stopped to help out, but she was okay. Still, she seemed a little shook up, and so I stayed until the ambulance came. We talked a little, about her classes at North Georgia College, her boyfriend, her hard relationship with her mother. I got her name, and followed up a few days later. She came in, and we talked some more. And today, Kristina Davis wants me to tell you that she’s renewed her faith to the Lord, and that her and her mother are coming in to counseling to help repair their relationship. Praise Jesus!”

Camera Two pulls a close up on the young woman from the deer accident. She’s seated in a convenient spot, and waves to the camera. Beside her sits an older lady, presumably her mother, who gives an embarrassed little wave. The congregation applauds, and L.J. has to wait for it to die down before he can continue.

“And I’m so glad that I stopped that morning. I could have kept going; I knew it was making me late for church. But let me tell you another story. A few weeks ago, I was leaving the jail – most of you probably know that I do a great deal of my work at Fulton County Jail here in Atlanta – and my feet just hurt. Us old people, we get achy, especially at ten o’clock at night after twelve hours on our feet. I stopped into the drug store to get some Epsom’s, so I could soak my feet. I came up the aisle to check out and I guess I accidentally stepped in front of this young man, coming up another aisle. He looked like James Dean. He had the leather jacket, but it had
some metal or something coming out of it. And I guess he thought he should have been in front of me, because he just said, “Excuse me!” really loud.

So I turned around. Now, I’m old and thin and on a cane, but I’m tall, and I towered over this boy. And I didn’t really know what was going on, or what he wanted, so I just looked down at him. And he said, “Hey jackass, you cut in front of me!” Sorry about the language, but that’s what he said. And for a moment, just a moment, my pride got the better of me. I thought, here I am, close to eighty years old, buying some salts for my feet after a long day of trying to help out people who don’t look much different than this kid, and here’s this punk cussing at me. A punk, that’s what I thought. But I remembered myself – je me souviens, as the Canadians say – and I apologized and let him go in front of me. Man, did I feel big. Wouldn’t you feel big?”

L.J. laughs. Any fear he once had, or still has, doesn’t seem to show. His style seems reminiscent of Bauer’s, though, as if the stage demands it, or as if he just doesn’t know how else to approach the audience. Still, we feel the same build, and we wait for the thunder.

“And I get home and tell my sister about this. Some of you know my sister, Nettie Walker, and a few of you probably know how she can say just the right thing. So you know what she says to me? ‘Don’t be so smug for failing our Lord.’” Smug. Failing. What? What? I thought. And I asked her, “What? What?”

And she says, ‘You know all the signs, L.J. You know them. That boy needed help. You know it. You let him walk out. You failed. God gave you an opportunity and you let it go.’

Man, oh man. I said, “Are you serious?” and she just told me to enjoy my salts. So I did, but I couldn’t enjoy it. I thought and thought, and I prayed, and I tried to figure out, did I miss something?

Well, last week, I stopped at a gas station near that same drug store. I walked in to pay – us old people, we don’t like the credit cards at the pumps and things, we like to see people – and guess who’s behind the counter? You guessed it. James Dean.

So I said, “Hey, you’re the man from the drugstore.” And he remembered me. I know this because he said, “Yeah, you’re the jackass who doesn’t watch where he’s going. What of it?”
I know. Again. He even remembered what word he called me. So I apologized again, and I told him what I do, and I said, you know, I'm really glad that I found you, because I've been worried ever since. I feel like I am supposed to help you somehow. And he gave me the whole “how can you help me” speech, but I'm prepared for that one. I hear that all the time down at the jail. So I told him again what I do, what we do here, and I asked him, well, what do you need help with? And he told me. A mom with back pain who needs an operation, a brother in jail, a late mortgage payment on his mom's house... he had a lot of needs.

So we made a few phone calls, and I'm here today to tell you that Quinten Landry's mother is getting her operation this week, for free, through a donor who prefers to remain anonymous. We paid her mortgage payment and helped her find resources for the next one. And today, the punk Quinten is here, in his leather jacket, to come and see some jackass preach. Hey, Quinten!” L.J. waves, and Camera Three focuses on a young man in a leather bomber jacket, who waves back. The crowd applauds. L.J. waits again, continuing only when the crowd seems ready to listen.

“But I've been thinking. What else do we miss? How many other times do I see something, a person struggling to change a flat tire, an irritable person in the grocery store, and fail to stop and help? Just how great is our responsibility to each other? Do I have to stop for each and every flat tire that I see? Am I morally obliged to try and be kind to every punk in a drugstore? When is enough?

Then I started thinking about the reasons why I don't help sometimes. Sure, sometimes it's laziness. I'm old, and I don't particularly like changing tires. Sometimes I'm just in a hurry. But most of the time, probably even when I think it's laziness, the truth is that I'm scared. Maybe not scared of the person; I work with the most dangerous people in Atlanta, after all. Maybe I'm scared to be late to church. Or I'm scared that they are going to look at me like, “who's this crazy fool?” Or maybe I'm scared that they are going to ask more of me than I am willing to give. The other day, I saw a lady whose child was just melting down in the supermarket. She looked so frustrated and embarrassed, and her child was really going to; actually lying on the floor and screaming and crying. And I was afraid that it would be out of place for me to step in and offer to help. I just walked around them. Now, I've been a psychologist for over forty years, all at this church. You can imagine how many people have come to me with the statement, “My child is
I counsel children. So I know something about what this lady is going through, but I stepped around her. I wasn’t in a hurry, I wasn’t being lazy, I was just genuinely scared that I would be received badly in the situation. And she hasn’t shown back up in a gas station, so I might have missed an opportunity there.

How often does fear guide our actions? I almost didn’t speak to you today. I’ve avoided this pulpit for forty years, out of fear. Fear that you’d look at me, and my cane, and my glasses, and that I would look stupid for preaching about a healing God when I obviously am not physically whole. I fought and fought to avoid getting up here! And when I had to – well, not had, but once I promised to – I found myself in a near panic. To get on this stage, I had to use strategies that are used for people who have a true phobia. And I wonder, how long as my fear kept me from speaking to you all? I’ve got over a dozen books written and never submitted for publication, simply because I’m afraid of the rejection. Afraid they aren’t any good. Afraid that no one wants to read them. But I wonder, would they help anyone? Am I missing an opportunity that God has given me?

We act out of fear too often. I fight it every time I stand in at a parole hearing. Here’s a person, no serious crime, maybe just a second possession charge. No reason to keep this person in jail a second longer; statistically, he’s likely to get worse in jail. Jail doesn’t reform, it deforms. But the parole panel is afraid. They are afraid that this guy is going to get out, and do something truly dangerous – something he’s shown no proclivity towards thus far – and they will look foolish for releasing him. So he rots in jail. What a horrendously appropriate phrase, “rot in jail.” That’s what happens; that’s what I fight every day, trying to keep these boys from becoming more rotten. Jail isn’t about justice or vengeance nearly as much as it is about fear.

Capital punishment is about fear. I can never understand why a Christian would support capital punishment. Keeping the condemned alive at least gives someone like me a chance to go in and save a soul. If we believe that the unsaved go to hell, then clearly giving them every day of a long life to repent and find the Lord is the only moral choice. But we’re afraid. Afraid they might escape, afraid they might be released and kill again, afraid that not taking a harsh stance against capital crimes would tell other would-be killers and rapists that their actions will go unpunished. Statistically, capital punishment does not decrease violent crime rates. We’ve
known this for years, but our fear causes us to ignore the truth, and we send unsaved men to premature deaths, condemning their souls to punishment for all eternity.

Now, some people will tell me, “Well I agree with capital punishment more than I agree with abortion or gay marriage, which is why I vote the way I vote.” They say this like there are only two sides. Now, I’m not here to tell you how to vote, but this also seems like fear. Why not form our own political party, that rejects both forms of murder? Why embrace the lesser of two evils? Why not rise above, and choose a way that doesn’t force us against our principles?

Typically, pro-life is seen as a Republican ideal. But embracing their philosophy also means electing people who tend to be pro-capital punishment, pro-war, and against welfare spending. More than anything else, the bible commands us to take care of our poor. But if we vote Democrat, we are by default choosing a pro-choice platform.

What keeps us from breaking with both groups? Fear. We’re afraid that a third party’s votes won’t matter. We actually support a strong military response, like the initial support behind the post-9/11 retaliation, because we are afraid of our “enemies.” We keep men trapped in limbo in a prison in Cuba because we’re afraid to let them on our soil, afraid to free them, afraid of what they might do, and afraid of making the wrong decision. We stand against welfare, because we’re afraid we might lose too much of our own money. Our fear keeps us from falling in line with God’s word.

And I am sure that many of us are saved, stay saved, and try to sin as little as possible, more out of fear of hell than faith in God.

Whenever we choose fear, we are making a stand against faith. We say we believe in God, but we don’t trust him to protect us. We don’t trust him to give us the right things to say to a lady in the grocery store. We don’t trust him to give us the right things to say from behind this pulpit. We don’t trust him to keep us safe from those who would attack our nation. To provide for us when we are charitable. We live in a constant state of fear.

And I am afraid. I’ll admit that. Fear is a basic part of our nature. From this moment on, though, I am more afraid of missing opportunities. I am afraid of letting fear, and not God, control my life. I am afraid of what will happen to these people if I don’t become involved. And I truly hope that after today, you are afraid of this too. Let us pray.”
We’ll pull out from the close-up as L.J. begins to pray. We see Naomi slunk in her chair, asleep, and her sister Lydia, wide-awake and focused on L.J.. We’ll continue to pull away as we fade-to-black.
Act Five – Still in Africa

Scene One – Africa, Day 5.

Early morning. We start just outside of the smoldering remains of the broadcast trailer. Nearby, Nathan Edwards, Jerry, Bauer, and another man stand in a huddle apart from the onlookers. A few people seem to be trying to clear the trailer out.

“Day three, all of the satellite dish’s cords were cut. Yesterday, two of our cameras were knocked off their tripods. And today, the whole trailer burns to the ground? We don’t need authorities from several hours away to come tell us that this is intentional,” Jerry says. “I mean, all of the cameras were in there! All of the hard-drives, all of the back-up files, absolutely everything we’ve recorded. Gone! Why would anyone do that? I mean, we’re being told that a bolt of lightning hit it last night. But there was no storm? Just a random bolt of lightning? Come on!”

The unidentified man says, “Well, I still have the audio files. We were running the microphones through my laptop, and using it to play music whenever the singers weren’t performing. and I kept it with me last night to try and clean the sound up. The back-ups were in the trailer, but I have the original files of the first day’s music and all of the sermons from the second day on. Those are what I’ve been trying to talk to you about, Pastor Bauer. The translators, I don’t trust what they are saying.”

“What do you mean, Don?” Bauer asks.

“Well, I’ve been doing this for several years, and I’ve picked up a few words of the local dialect. I mean, every fifth word is allah…”

“But allah means ‘God’ in their language. Not just ‘allah’ like the muslim god, but as in any god. We know that.”
“Yes, and I know the word for yes, and no, and son, and daughter. And I swear that sometimes I think he is saying that Allah didn’t have a son. If it’s okay with you, as soon as we get home we’re going to send the sermons and translations on to France, where a firm there can translate the language back for us and point out the disparities.”

“Well, if you’re worried about it, Don, sure. I mean, we’ve been working with the same locals for fifteen years, and I trust them. But go ahead.”

“Well, someone can’t be trusted, obviously,” Nathan says as he gestures to the trailer. “We had reports of hostiles in the area, but we expected guns, not arson attacks. Someone obviously knew this was our communication base. No one came near the munitions storage, though, and now it’s guarded. If we didn’t still have sat phones up, I’d ask if we should be leaving.”

A thin, dark man in local wear comes running up to the men. “Sirs! Sirs! Lion! Lion! Please come with guns!” he yells.

“Where, Odu?” Nathan asks.

“On the trail in! People saw it in the brush and started running away!”

Nathan turns and begins to run. Bauer asks Jerry and Don to stay at the trailer and salvage what they can, then he and Odu follow Nathan. We’ll go, too, slightly behind the three. Nathan clears the camp in a dead run and comes to a locked portable storage shed. A man in front of the shed has a handgun holstered at his waste. Nathan speaks quickly to him – he’s already too far away for us to hear – and by the time we get close he and the man have entered the shed. They quickly emerge, each holding a very menacing – and likely automatic – rifle. They run past us, and Nathan shouts for Odu to lead them to the animal. We all begin to run across the empty meeting area, and soon see the trail leading in. Many people were already on their way to the main tent, and many of these are standing in a wide arc. Others are still running away from the end of the trail, where something moves in the brush that lines the trail. A child- the same boy from the medic tent the day before – falls as he runs, and the something leaps. Mane-less, more than twelve feet from head to tail, with a head that comes easily up to a man’s elbows, the creature seems like some sort of meta-lion, larger than possible, filling our sight. The boy gets up
just in time for the lion to strike him down with a paw the size of the boy’s midsection. It roars back again, and just in front of us Nathan drops to one knee and fires three times. The creature seems struck, it flinches and turns away. Nathan fires thrice more as the creature flees.

Nathan yells for a doctor, and Odu runs back towards the tents. The other armed man proceeds cautiously towards the brush, separating the stalks with his rifle.

“We have a body over here, mostly eaten,” he says.

Bauer (and we’ll follow) heads for the young boy. The boy’s chest has three long gashes across it, and we can see bone and organ beneath. His eyes are open, his breath is noticeable, and his bleeding is severe.

“Wait for a doctor,” Nathan says. “Moving him will only make it worse.”

Bauer takes the boy’s head in his hands and begins to pray. He closes his eyes and mouths words that have no apparent rhyme or reason, no meaning discernable to man. He almost appears to be in shock, blubbering incoherently. His voice raises, until these nonsense words fill the air around us, thundering and reverberating. The boy begins to jerk violently, so Nathan lays down his weapon and tries to help hold the boy in place. We hear Jordan’s approach as she calls out to be let through, but our focus is on the boy.

The wounds close.

“Get him to the medical tent,” Bauer orders. Nathan scoops the boy up and barks for the other soldier to retrieve his weapon. Then he runs.

“Go with them,” Bauer says to Jordan. She turns and runs as well.

Bauer stands up. The strange language pours from his lips, and he surveys the area around him. He looks at the body in the brush, but does nothing. He walks into the crowd and begins touching people. As he does, they fall. No ushers catch them, they fall where they will. The young, the old, the infirm, the firm. We’ll stay stationary as he walks into the crowd, and then fade-to-black.

Scene Two: Lion and Tiger
Later that night, in the medical tent. The boy sleeps on a stretcher. Jordan stands over him, swabbing his face. Bauer enters.

“How’s our boy?” Bauer asks.

“Fine, perfectly fine,” Ann says. “Everything is normal. Look at him! No scars. Yesterday, his knees were scraped and the wounds leaked puss. I was worried about gangrene setting in. Today, his knees don’t even have a scar. Perfectly fine, like it never happened. Look at his chest. Nothing. I... I’m getting off soon. Is there some place we can talk? I just... need to talk about this.”

“Sure, sure. I’ll wait.” Bauer leans over the boy as well, and we’ll fade out.

Scene Three – Jordan’s tent

We’re inside Jordan’s tent, a large eight person tent. She shares it with other medical staff, but none of them seem to be here. Bauer and Jordan sit on the floor. Between them sits a battery powered lamp. They seem to be deep in discussion already.

“That’s what I want to figure out, Ann. Why Africa? Why don’t we see people healed from gunshot wounds at your hospital? It works here. Well, not everyone, every time, but fairly consistently. In five days we’ve seen so many miracles. This boy may be the most shocking, but he’s certainly not the only one. This is what I wanted you to see: a world where miracles happen.”

“But, when I looked at that boy, I knew he would die. And then his wounds closed up in front of me! And when I look at him now, I know he’s going to be fine. Not just tonight, but for a long time. I’ve always been able to trust my instincts. What does this mean, now that I’ve been wrong?”

“It means, your gift cannot predict miracles. The people will die unless God intercedes. Maybe that’s the purpose: to help you identify those who need a miracle.”

“Okay. But in the hospital, this doesn’t happen. Ever! I’ve seen people pull through when everyone else thinks they won’t make it, and they call it a miracle. But those people, I knew they would make it. This is different.”
“That’s my point. Africa is different.”

What happens next is the subject of debate among them for months to come. But from our view, sitting around the light as well, where we can see the sides of both of their faces, is this:

The lamp falls over without anyone touching it. Both of them lean forward to right it, and they bump foreheads. Turning away, their lips brush, and right afterwards, they both stop moving. Then they both move back, and now they are kissing.

If we were to show the sex scene, it would be both awkward and perfect. But the lamp is turned off shortly before, and they try to remain quiet due to the close proximity to other tents. What we get is silence and dark glimpses of flesh. Afterwards, the rustle and buckles of redressing, and then the sense that they are lying next to each other, on the floor, talking in low voices.

“You should go soon,” Ann whispers.

“I know.”

“I don’t want you to.”

“I know.”

“I can’t believe that happened.”

“I know.”

“I’ve thought about it for… weeks?”

We hear Bauer move, and we can barely see that he has turned towards her.

“Me, too.”

“It’s going to be okay.”

“It is?”

“I won’t tell anyone.”
“I know.”

“Just don’t... Don’t avoid me, okay? I totally see this ending with you avoiding me the rest of the trip.”

“I don’t plan on it.”

And he doesn’t. We can montage fast-forward through the rest of the trip, sermon after sermon, Bauer praying for healing and Jordan working away in the hospital, except now Bauer is in the hospital quite often and Jordan comes to every sermon, now Bauer eats with the medical staff and talks about how he can help fund the medical tent next year, with Dr. Jacobs looking both shocked and excited and Jordan trying desperately to act as if this is a surprise, and a few more barely lit moments of silence and flesh. Then the tents are taken down, everything is repacked, and a fleet of trucks pulls away from a large gathering of locals. At the front of the crowd, a young boy, a remarkably healthy boy, stops drawing in the sand with his stick and waves until the trucks disappear from our sight.

Act Six – Fallout

Scene One – Nettie & Theresa

Theresa sits in the driver’s seat of the van. Nettie sits in the passenger seat. We appear to be moving through the poorer parts of South Atlanta. We hear the familiar voices of Powers and Swain coming from the radio.

“What do you make of this controversy surrounding Dr. Lazarus Walker?” Swain asks of his cohost.

“Well, first of all, here’s a man I truly respect. Here’s a man who is part Alabama Indian, part white, and half black. Here’s a man who was in jail in Birmingham at the same time as Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. But he admits he was in jail for trying to rob a store. He hears about Dr. King from the other people in the jail, and he becomes convinced. When he is let out he sets about trying to better himself, trying to be something other than just another black criminal. He spends twenty years earning three PHDs: psychology, social work, and religion. He spends the next forty years trying — fairly successfully — to help reform men in Fulton County Jail. We
talked to him eight, nine, maybe even ten years ago, and were amazed at his success. I’ll tell you, my favorite part of that speech was when he said he had books written that have never seen the light of day; I hope he publishes them now. I would hang on every word. What he could teach the black community about ourselves must truly be amazing. If there’s a controversy here, it’s how such an estimable man has been kept a secret for so long.

The controversy itself, what of it? So he gets up and says that we should be Christian more than Republican or Democrat. That we shouldn’t let fear get in the way of helping others. I thought it was a good – if basic – message. I don’t really get why there’s such an uproar."

“Well, first of all, Neil Bauer himself is staunchly Republican,” Swain responds. “Many of the points Dr. Walker made directly conflict with some of the things Bauer says. This is the same Bauer who stood in that same pulpit and told us that we needed to support our president for invading Iraq because he was bringing God’s divine wrath down on enemies of the faith. The same man who told us that God did not intend for the government to provide “charity”, and that welfare should be left alone by the state. The same man who stood up just weeks ago and told us that we should be afraid of children’s toys. Bauer has been referred to as a fear-monger in many newspapers, and for good reason. Local republican leaders go to Bauer’s church. So I can see some controversy in how different Dr. Walker’s message was from the normal message of City Upon a Hill.”

“I am sure,” Powers says, “is that this will be made a race issue. You know, he stands up against the Republican-Christian alliance, and it will be said that he’s a democrat because he’s black. That capital punishment kills black people, and welfare helps black people, and so his whole concept is dismissed simply for his skin color. The black vote is notoriously a democratic vote. So I’m afraid that all of his wisdom and learning will be boiled down to his race. Boiled down to ‘he thinks that way because he’s black.’”

“I hope not,” Swain replies. “Because I see the questions of why, as Christians, we choose to support war, we choose to support murder in the form of capital punishment, and we choose to support a genuine lack of caring for our poor. I agree with Dr. Walker, these concepts are fundamentally clear in the words of Christ. I mean, Deuteronomy 15:7 reads, ‘If there is a poor man among you, one of your brothers, in any of the towns of the land which the Lord your
God is giving you, you shall not harden your heart, nor close your hand to your poor brother; but you shall freely open your hand to him, and generously lend him sufficient for his need in whatever he lacks.

In Proverbs God commands the kings to ‘defend the rights of the afflicted and needy.’ In Luke, John the Baptist tells us that if we have two tunics, we should ‘share with one who has none.’ I mean, how are these things not clear?

But I thought his main point was even more telling. Dr. Walker said that fear is what keeps us from becoming involved. And I thought about it, I really did. You know, with every important decision I’ve ever made, there was a hesitation caused by the fear of making the wrong choice. Even when we started this broadcast, we were afraid that we were going to pour our money, and our lives, into something that would bear no fruit. And I’m not talking ‘concern’, or ‘critical analysis.’ I’m talking genuine, frightening, up-at-2-am-taking-rolaids fear. So I see where he’s coming from. What we need to do is to start asking ourselves what we can do, how we can identify fear when it strikes and how we can learn to pass it without hesitation.”

Theresa stops the van, and the radio dies. She exits and comes around to Nettie’s door. She helps Nettie out, and we approach a small house. Children of all ages seem to explode from the front door.

“Go on out to the yard,” a woman cries. “Let me alone with your sister for a while.”

Theresa and Nettie wait for the children to exit, and then enter the home. We’ll come in with them.

“Mom, this is Nettie, the lady I told you about. Nettie, this is my mom, Kaneshia.”

The woman in front of us looks to be in her forties, but she is badly kept up. She looks used, faded, and tired. A great deal of this may come from her used, faded, and tired clothing: she wears sweat pants and a Mickey Mouse t-shirt. The shirt is so old that the design has faded nearly completely off, and we can see skin and bra-lines through the many holes in the shirt. She does not extend her hand, or smile, or welcome Nettie in. She simply turns around. We follow them through the house, around worn toys and piles of laundry, and into a kitchen with multiple, full bags of trash on the floor. The woman sits down at the only empty chair at the table, leaving
Theresa to clean toys, drawings, and even a plate off the seats before Nettie and she can sit down.

"Would you like a drink?" Theresa asks Nettie.

"Ain't no glasses clean," Kanesha replies.

"Well, I can clean one."

"I don't need nothin', Reese," Nettie says.

The two women seem to face off across the table. Finally, Kanesha breaks eye contact, and lights a cigarette.

"I came here to tell you to help your daughter," Nettie says. "She needs to stay in her college, and to keep her child. She thought maybe you could help babysit, but you told her no. Seeing this mess, I think we'll have to find another way."

Kanesha blows a long puff of smoke out.

"Reese tells me you're some sort of prophetess. You've got her all excited about Jesus. You come here to tell me that God wants me to raise another baby, when I've got eight outside? People already talk. Even people on our block, who are on social security, welfare, and food stamps, look at me and say I'm 'ridin' the system.' And now they gonna think my daughter is just like me. She should stay home and raise it; help me out like she used to. Half those kids out there ain't mine. They're my nieces and nephews. Nobody knows where their momma is gone. She should abort it if she's too important to stay home and raise it. But don't ask me for the money for that, either. You're a college girl, you figure it out for yourself."

"I'm not telling you what God wants. He isn't telling me anything for you. Reese asked me to come talk to you about this, to see if we could find a way for you to help her out while she's in school. Now, I don't think that's a good idea. Reese, when you're ready, I'd like to go home."
Nettie rises and heads for the door. Theresa seems puzzled and tries to stop her, but Nettie just keeps insisting that they leave. Theresa helps her into the van, and then she slides into the driver's seat. She goes to turn the key, but stops.

"I thought you were going to help me, Nettie."

"Oh, I am, child. What the Lord done told me is that if you left that baby at home with her, something bad would happen."

"What?"

"I don't know. But that's what I heard. So we'll look for another way. It's time we talked to L.J., okay?"

"Yeah. Sure."

She puts the van in reverse, and we'll fade to black.

Scene Two – Naomi and Lydia

This scene takes place in Lydia's room. Naomi has just entered, and sits on Lydia's bed. Lydia, as ever, is in front of her computer screens.

"Did you read this?" Lydia asks.

"What, no. Me read the news? Ha!" Naomi replies.

"It's all about dad's trip to Africa. The agenda, the manpower, the guns, exactly how much was spent and how little of it went to medical aid or building the community. They printed everything! He comes off like a scam artist."

"Wow, how'd they get all of that?"

"It says 'an inside source at City Upon a Hill.' And then they verified some of the info. Isn't that amazing?"

"Why are you happy about it? That's how we eat dinner."
“Naomi, do you know anything about Africa? One year of our military budget during the Iraq war could have paid for twelve years of medication for every HIV infected person in Africa. One in four people has HIV. The annual treatment started out around ten thousand dollars. Then, the African government tried to get around the copyright laws by declaring a national emergency and getting an Indian company to make the same medicine for lose to three hundred dollars.”

“Wow, they can do that?” Naomi asks.

“We did, with the anthrax scare. We declared a national emergency to allow us to produce the vaccine without having to pay the current price. But we didn’t end up needing to do so. Canada did the same thing, and then they actually produced the vaccine for stockpiles at a far cheaper rate than the manufacturer wanted. The thing is, Africa declares this, and then we – the US and Canada - are the same ones who freak out and tell both Africa and India that if the plan goes ahead, we’ll basically make their lives a financial hell. The company backs out, and the regular manufacturer drops the price to $3,000 per year.”

“So it got cheaper? That’s good.”

“But they are still paying ten times what it could cost! There’s no way for them to afford it for everyone. And basically, the 25% that are infected are the middle age, working people. The old didn’t get it, and the young know better. So it’s the entire working population that are affected. And the kicker is, Dad didn’t even take medication for HIV. Just diagnosis kits. They said HIV was better handled by other organizations. Hell, they didn’t even buy medical supplies, everything they had was donated!”

“So what’s the point?”

“We go and drop two million dollars on this crusade, and we didn’t even build a well or anything this time? Most of that money went to American businesses. The rest went to African officials. All of this and Africa gets some expired medicines?”

“And two hundred thousand new Christians.”

“The point is, the article makes it clear just how much of a need there is in Africa, and just how little this Crusade does for Africa. Dad’s net worth tops that of several major industry
exec. He pulls in more money than some NBA players. He could have spent another $2 million out of his own pocket and just bought medical supplies. He didn’t. Don’t you wonder why not? Doesn’t it sound odd that he claims this is all about helping Africa, but then nothing gets done?”

“I don’t usually think about these things. He makes that much? Wow. He’s always talking about how he doesn’t take a salary from preaching.”

“He doesn’t need to. He’s the president of the media company that makes all of the broadcasts and the CDs, he’s got royalties from books, he owns bits of hundreds of companies, he gets paid for speaking engagements, all sorts of things. Really what dad does is get richer.”

“I need to ask for a bigger allowance. Lydia, Beth and I broke up.”

“What? How?”

“She had applied to UGA. She’s going to go there. She told me that she doesn’t want everyone thinking she is a lesbian, and she doesn’t want to be the girl who gets caught in the spotlight when Neil Bauer’s daughter comes out of the closet. Then she told me that she fucked Tommy.”

“Oh wow. What did you do?”

“Punched her in the face.”

“Holy shit! What!”

“I punched her in the face. I’ve never hit anyone, Lydia!”

“You mean slapped her, right?”

“No, I pretty much punched her. Look, my knuckle lost some skin on her teeth.”

Naomi holds her hand out. One knuckle has a band-aid around it. She pulls it back to show Lydia the torn skin beneath it.

“That’s so intense. Is she okay?”
“I don’t know. She had a bloody nose. I told her to go away. Now she won’t answer my calls.”

“I bet! Oh, Naomi, I’m so sorry. How are you?”

“Stoned. In need of a drink. Possibly suicidal. Most likely homicidal. I need to get out of here for a while, Lydia. Come with me.”

“I’m still grounded, you know. Only summer classes, art classes, and church for me.”

“You think they would notice if we took my car?”

“Where did you want to go?”

“I don’t know. Tennessee? California? Europe?”

“Don’t remind me. Brett’s still pissed that I didn’t go to Europe with him.”

“Anywhere. I don’t care. I’m just sick of being here.”

“Okay, let’s break out. Mom’s not even here. Abigail’s not here to tattle. Who IS here?”

“Actually, no one. They’re all at vacation bible school.”

“Oh, yeah. Fuck this then. Let me change.”

Lydia walks behind us, towards the closet. We’ll close-up on Naomi’s face. Her pain – and her medicinally induced haze – are obvious.

“You know the shitty thing, Lydia?”

“There’s a shittier part?”

“I never thought about kissing Jake. When we were talking that night at the party, I was just saying things to keep myself from staring at Quinn.”

“Staring at Quinn?”

“Yep. Or, her tits at least.”
“Really? What does that mean?”

“I think I really am, you know.”

“Are you staring at my tits right now, while I’m changing?”

“No. Like you can talk, little miss voyeur. At least I don’t watch my parents fuck.”

“Well, I think it’s cool.”

“I think it’s gross as hell. Joe’s a scab.”

“I meant about you. Maybe you can ditch this religious crap once and for all.”

“But, maybe I don’t want to? I still believe in God, unlike you.”

“Look, all I am saying is, we believe what we’re told. We were raised Christian. If we’d been born halfway across the world, we’d be Muslim or Buddhist or something. That makes faith pretty circumstantial. So don’t fall for this shit about gay being a sin. Any good lesbian will tell you that gay women aren’t even in the bible, because we were so unimportant that God clearly just didn’t give a fuck what we did.”

“You know, it’s not even that. I just... Jesus. I don’t want to be Neil Bauer’s gay daughter.”

“Well, you could ditch the pot and booze and be respectable, and be Neil Bauer’s decent gay daughter. It would do a lot more for your cause if you didn’t look like you were just party-time rebellious girl. Shit, trust me. It’s bad enough being the black sheep because I want to go to Berkley or Yale.”

“That’s it, too, though. I don’t want a cause. I just want to be, without having to worry about what it means or who it offends. I like girls. That doesn’t mean I want to start going to rallies.”

“God forbid you should become an activist or anything,” Lydia says.

“Don’t mock me. I’m serious. Am I going to be a bad Christian and a bad gay person? Like, do I have to sign up for every freaking pride parade just because I’m different? What if I
truly, seriously, desperately just want to be left alone, to love whom I love, without having to listen to anyone’s shit?"

“I don’t know. Move to Europe? Or Canada. Lots of gays move to Canada. Look, though, seriously. So what if you are dad’s kid? People will fuss, and then they’ll come to you, and you’ll just say, “I’m not my father.” Just make damn well sure you’re set before that day comes, because you know he won’t help you out. He’ll put so much distance between you and him that you won’t even hear the name Bauer again in your life. And honestly, call Grandma and Grandpa... you’d be surprised at how cool they are.”

“Yeah, maybe. You really think he won’t talk to me?”

“I’m sure of it. But, not like it really changes the relationship much, right?”

“I guess you’re right.”

“Okay, I’m ready to go.”

The girls leave the bedroom, leaving us to fade-to-black.
Act 7- Montage

We need now to skip from June to November; we need, as Lydia says, time with things as they are, to get everything in order. The movie, versus the novel or the play, allows us to progress time, and our actors, logically and expediently. Instead of clumsy prose or hand-held signs carried across the stage by extras, we can visually show the passing of time. We'll montage scenes of our actors, showing the crucial moments during these months, with outdoors scenes and choices of clothing as cues to the passing months. Several shots of Theresa's obvious progression in her pregnancy surely help.

Perhaps the greatest difference in the mediums, though, is the use of music. In life, ambient music is often irrelevant to and distracting from the reality around us. But the right song in a movie adds to the mood; it informs the feelings of the actors in ways that words simply cannot. It adds another layer, an undercurrent to the narrative. The music makes the movie more emotional, more powerful, and more complete. To understand the importance of music, we need only look at the Lucifer myth: music held such import in Heaven that one of the highest ranking angels - the Archangel Lucifer - was given charge of music. It's telling that this position was so important that he was allegedly able to gather the support of a third of the angels, and make a claim for the throne. Of course, there really isn't biblical justification for the Satan/Lucifer connection, but that's neither here nor there.

So we must choose a song that fits our mood; a song that expresses the longing and loneliness that flows under our story. Every actor here needs something, is looking for something, is trying to fill some void. We'll need something soulful, almost mournful, but ultimately reassuring, to play through our montage. I think we should stick with Nettie's favorite song.

We open up to Nettie's room. We see her take a pill, and then lay her enormous bulk down on her bed. Nearby, a radio plays the same gospel station that we've heard Powers and Swain on, only now music pours forth. A woman - distinctly African American, with a voice that seems to come from us from ages past- sings a slow rendition of an old slave song.

Swing, low, sweet chariot, comin' for to carry me home...
We'll switch to Lydia and Brett, at the airport. We see her hand him back his class ring. She turns and walks away. He calls after her – we can hear him through the music – but she waves an arm and keeps walking.

*Swing low, sweet chariot, comin' for to carry me home...*

We see Bauer, on stage, preaching for all he is worth, saying, “The devil places this fear in us, to keep us from doing God’s work. We must constantly be aware of our enemy’s influence, his subtle machinations, where one day we are content to not stop to help someone change a tire, and the next we are content to let marriage be redefined and ruined, to embrace homosexuality in our laws...”

*I looked over Jordan, and what did I see...*

We see Theresa, maybe five or six months pregnant, and an older couple are opening the door to their home for her. The man says, “and downstairs are your bedroom and the nursery. We'll work out schedules in the next few weeks, don’t worry about that right now.”

*Comin’ for to carry me home...*

We see Emily Bauer, herding her children from the front aisle of the sanctuary, turning to look up at the dark glass of the sound room.

*A band of angels coming after me...*

Naomi, dialing on her cell phone, and then we cut to Beth, who looks at her phone and presses the ignore key.

*Coming for to carry me home.*

Lydia, in a dojo alone, working out furiously on a punching bag. Tears stream down her face, until she finally collapses on the ground, giving herself over to her tears.

*If you get there before I do...*

Naomi, entering her dorm room, looking at the other bed. Lydia enters carrying a box, with Grace at her side. Lydia puts the box down and goes back out, Grace stays. “Why do you have to stay here,” she asks Naomi. “Who’s going to chase off the demons?”

*Coming for to carry me home,*

Bauer, looking at his appointment times on his laptop, with Jordan’s name written in twice a week at eleven A.M. In the corner of his screen, we see the time is almost eleven. We hear a knock at his office door, and he opens it. Jordan comes in, closes the door, and they begin to kiss.
Tell all my friends I am coming too,
L.J. opening up one of his filing cabinets, and pulling out a manuscript. He flips through it, and then returns it to its resting place.

Coming for to carry me home.

As the song ends, we come back to Theresa, lying on her bed. She opens her eyes.

“Today’s not the day,” she says, and begins struggling to get up. “Soon, though. Lord. Soon, come carry me home.”
Act 8 – November

Scene One – Theresa gives birth

A hospital. Theresa lies on the hospital bed, holding a smiling infant. The door opens, and Nettie walks through. She comes to stand by the bed.

“I can’t believe you made the flight,” Theresa says. “Sam told me you hate to fly.”

“Samuel knows that I wouldn’t miss this. I’ve seen all of my grandchildren before they came home from the hospital. You’re no different. Now, what’s this big secret you’ve been keeping from me?”

Theresa holds up her child.

“It’s a boy! We’ve known for months. I wanted it to be a surprise.”

“Well I am surprised. How you gonna name a boy after me?”

“His name is Walker.”

“Walker, that’s a good name. How are Sam and my daughter? They treating you alright?”

“Yeah, everything is great. I’ve got almost my own little apartment down in the finished basement. They made it for you, you know. In case you needed help. They worry about you.”

“I told them I’d never live up here in this cold. Besides, L.J. needs me just as much as I need him. And we’ve got that boy Quinten, now. He comes over like you did, mostly just to drive me where I need to go. That boy, he put all this music on the computer for me. He found all the old spirituals that I love and put them in the computer somehow, and even showed me how to use it. Me, using a computer. But I don’t have to listen to those two men argue on the talk show no more. We had to get a real nurse, too, she comes regular twice a week. How’s your school?”

“I took some summer classes, but I took this semester off. We’ll get through the holidays and I’ll start back in January. I like it so much more than Georgia State. I wish you’d stay through Thanksgiving, though. So do Ella and Sam.”
"My daughter is a bully. She called and found out how to change my ticket. I guess she can do that; she paid for it. I’m here for three weeks. I’ll leave just a couple days after Thanksgiving."

"I’m so glad! Here, do you want to hold him?"

"I’ll have plenty of chances to do that. Why don’t you just keep holding that boy, and I’ll sit down over here. How about your momma? She didn’t make it?"

"She won’t even speak to me. Dad has to call me from one of his jobs or she’ll yell at him. When Sam called and offered to buy her ticket, she cussed him out and hung up on him. I was so embarrassed! But he just said, ‘Now I see why Net wanted you to come up here’. I am truly grateful; there’s no way I could ever repay them for doing all that they are doing."

"Since she retired and her youngest moved out, Ella’s been a mess. It’s another reason I didn’t move here, I don’t need my own daughter mothering me. She’s positively joyful about having you and your child to go on about."

"Oh, I know it! She keeps buying stuff for Walker. I try to stop her, but Sam told me it was impossible. They won’t even let me pay rent or buy groceries. They said as long as I go to church on Sundays and I keep up with my classes, then they will help me any way they can."

"Best you believe it. When I called Ella and asked her about you, she started crying. We were so poor when she was your age. So was Sam, he tells me. What you’re trying to do... Lord, child. Do you know how many of us have struggled for a better life? Ella had to make sure she didn’t ruin her shoes, just so she could hand them down to her sister when she out-grew them. Now look in her shoe closet. And her daughter’s, and her grandchildren’s. You’d think they were shoemakers. She told me she’s already bought shoes for your baby. What’s a baby need shoes for? It can’t even walk! But that’s my Ella.

I watched two husbands work themselves into the grave. L.J.’s doing it, too, even though he has money. We have all fought to make something better. So that’s how you can repay them. Give your baby a better life. Sometimes, when we do things for other people, we’re really doing it for ourselves. We are children, and then we spend the rest of our lives trying to make up for everything that happened to us as children. If we can do well, and give our children a good life,
then it helps make up for all the mess we’ve been through, all the hardships in our own
colorhood. Helping you and Walker just lets her make up for all the people she couldn’t help as
she tried to take care of her own. You’ll understand one day. The best thing you can do for Ella
is just love her and let her love you.”

Someone knocks on the door. We see the couple who opened their home to Theresa come
in. Ella carries a grocery bag and is already pulling out plastic containers of food. Sam brings in
a small suitcase.

“Mom made Sam drop her off here right from the airport,” Ella says, “so I brought us
some food. I can’t believe you have to stay in this place another night!”

“Ella,” Sam says, “the doctors know best. But Reese, we sure don’t mind sneaking you in
some real food. No reason for hospital Jell-o when you already gave birth! We also brought you
some more clothes.”

As they begin to unpack the food, we’ll fade out.

Scene Two – Ann’s Apartment

Ann’s apartment. Heavy drapes cover every window, so the room relies on electric
lighting. The apartment is small – from our vantage point in the living room, we can clearly see
into the dinette, the kitchen, the bathroom, and the one bedroom. The entire place is clean and
well-ordered; perhaps excessively so. In the dinette, flowers and candles adorn the table, and
two place-settings have been laid out. Ann wears a black evening dress. She paces up and down
the living room. We hear a knock on the door, and she opens it to find Bauer, very wet, and very
winded.

“Oh, no! I didn’t even realize it was raining!” she says.

He comes in and takes off his overcoat. Beneath it, he wears a black suit.

“I’m just going to hang this in the bathroom. If I take off my shoes, does that ruin our
attire?” he asks.

Ann kisses him on the cheek and turns back towards the kitchen.
“That’s fine,” she says. “I was worried that you were going to stand me up again. I tried to keep everything warm. Now, don’t make fun, I don’t usually cook.”

“No, it just took me forever to climb the stairs. When are they fixing your elevator?”

Bauer comes from the bathroom and walks up behind her. From his pocket he pulls a rectangular box, wrapped in shiny red paper with a white bow. He slips it in front of her.

“So you did remember,” she says.

“Six months ago today,” he replies. “Our first kiss. How could I forget? But if I had forgotten, then calling me up and asking me to dress up for dinner at your apartment certainly would have tipped me off.”

“Well I’m not opening it until after dinner. I got you a present, too, but I’m wearing part of it?”

“The dress?”

“No, silly.”

“I suppose I have to wait until after dinner for that, too?”

“Yes, now dim the lights and sit down. I’ll bring everything to you.”

Bauer sits down at the table, and Ann begins bringing out a lavish meal. Once she has put food for them both on the table, she sits and waits for Bauer to try the food. She doesn’t eat hers yet, and she wrings her hands in her lap under the table. He takes a few bites.

“It’s really good, honey. I thought you didn’t cook often?”

“Are you mocking me, Neil? I worked really hard on this!”

“No, not at all. This lamb is just right. Our chef couldn’t do better.”

“Seriously?”

Bauer’s cell-phone begins to ring. He quickly pulls it out and silences it.

“There, I forgot to turn it on vibrate.”
“It’s not her, is it?” Ann asks.

“I didn’t check. But she knows I had a ton of errands to run, and that I wouldn’t be home until late. If she even notices my arrival; I told you that I’ve been sleeping in the carriage house.”

“Who says that? Who has a carriage house?”

“Well, office-over-the-detached-garage is a mouthful.”

“Do you think she suspects anything? I mean, why does she think you are sleeping there?”

“Because she told me to. We had a huge fight about Lydia going to stay with her grandparents over Christmas break. I’m pretty sure she’s just going to get away from us. We had another fight because I couldn’t be home when Naomi got home from college, and when I missed Faith’s recital because I was in Washington. I can go to ten of these things, but if I miss one, she spends the next several days reminding me of what a terrible father I am.”

“How could you make every event for seven kids?” Ann asks.

“I can’t even make half of them. We’re very fortunate to have enough money to give our children all of these things... art classes for Lydia, music lessons for Faith, dance lessons for Joy, on and on. Lydia alone does art, soccer, honors club, French club, I mean she’s at a different organization every day of the week, and she’s one of seven? How could anyone keep up with it all? I’m sorry, do we really want to spend dinner talking about this?”

“It’s okay. I’m interested in your life, Neil. I mean, as much as I want you for myself, I don’t want to not talk about things just because they aren’t related to... us.”

“Well there is something you might be interested in. In one of the fights, she told me that I must have married the wrong person, because I wanted a boy and she can’t have boys. We have seven children, but she also miscarried three times. After the second miscarriage, the doctors did many tests on her, that she had told me where all negative. But it turns out that she has a disorder—a sex-linked recessive disease, she called it, I wrote the name down but forgot to bring it—that causes severe deformation in males. Most of them die in the womb. And she never told me, but
all three of the miscarriages were likely males. So lately she’s been saying that we never should have gotten married, which sounds like a step in the right direction.”

“I’m not asking you to leave her, Neil. I told you that…”

Bauer’s phone vibrates in his pocket. He silences it again. Ann gives him a look, indiscernible but most definitely a look, and then continues.

“…and I mean it. I’ve been through this before, you know. You aren’t the first married man I’ve fallen in love with. You aren’t the first who’s told me he is leaving. They never leave. I get it, I know it, the last one didn’t, the one before him didn’t. I know it sounds weird, but I am okay with this. I work so much that it doesn’t really matter. I mean, sure, I’d love to sleep next to you every night, but I’ve accepted things as they are. I mean, if you got divorced, what would the congregation think of you dating so soon? How long would the divorce take? How long could we last after that?”

“But I want things to be different. And with her talking like this… I mean, if *she* leaves me, Ann, everything is so much easier. We can settle out of court and be done in a month. The girls are already provided for, and we have a prenuptial – thanks to her father’s insistence- that never expires and is pretty clear. I mean, he thought she would be the one making the money as a lawyer, but it still provides clear – and fair – direction. We talked about this almost three years ago. She and I agreed that if it came to divorce, we’d simply follow the prenuptial and settle quickly. But then we found out that she was pregnant again, and…”

Bauer’s phone rings for the third time.

“Just answer it, I’ll be quiet,” Ann says.

Bauer answers the phone. He talks for a minute, then he says, “Of course. I’m on my way.”

“The queen demands an audience?” Ann asks. But Bauer’s face is full of concern.

“No, that was Nancy. Pastor Walker… he has been shot.”
“What? How? That’s the old man that the Republican National Committee jumped down your throat about, right?”

“Yes. The same, he’s worked with us for close to forty years. For all of that time, he has held a bible study and prayer meeting at Fulton County Jail. He was shot somehow. They are life-flying him to Grady. Can you tell me how to get there? I’d navigate it, but I figure you drive it every day…”

“You can follow me. Oh, let me change real quick… I don’t want to have to explain the dress.”

Jordan ducks into the bedroom while Bauer blows out the candles and starts clearing the table. She doesn’t bother to close the door, so we see her changing – and she is indeed wearing some sort of frilly, sexy underwear, although it’s hard to make out. She throws on some jeans and a sweater and meets Bauer at the door. He stops to kiss her.

“I do love you, you know,” he says.

“I love you too. But we’ll deal with that later.”

“Deal with? Is love something to be dealt with?”

“In our case, it is. Honestly, I know this is horrible to say, but does it tell you anything that our special date was interrupted by something so awful? You don’t believe me when I tell you everything will be ruined.”

They exit, and we fade to black.
Swing Low, Sweet Chariot 89

Act 8 – L.J. gets shot.

Scene One – The Prison

Some say God exists outside of time. Some even claim that time is one of man’s inventions, but clearly mankind was brought forth into a universe where chronology and causality reign. Of course, the famed “Alpha and Omega” scripture used to so commonly to support God’s temporal superiority can be – and I will argue should be – interpreted not through the Greek scripture, but through the Hebrew concept that it likely derived from: Emeth; or God is truth, encompassing all. That debate aside, we see a clear favoring of time throughout the bible, with significance given to number of days, years, or even generations of events. Clearly, a linear story was meant to be told.

We’ll interrupt the linear continuity of our story just this once, as we jump back a few minutes in time, and over to the prison. We see L.J. in the same classroom, leaning casually against a folding table. Prisoners and guards file out of the room; service has evidently just ended. Randal, the guard, waits by the door. Buster stands up last, after waiting for others to leave. He comes up to L.J. Something in his walk seems aggressive; enough so that L.J. straightens up and Randal steps closer to the pair.

“Reese isn’t planning on coming back from Chicago. She called me today.” Buster says. He waits for a response from L.J.

“Buster, you knew she wasn’t coming back right away. She’s in school. She has a couple of years before she graduates. With any luck, you’ll be out of here about the same time she finishes up,” L.J. says.

“She told me she didn’t put my name on the birth certificate. She told them she didn’t know who the daddy was. She doesn’t want me to see my son,” Buster says. His voice gets lower, his back tenses. Randal steps even closer, and his hand moves towards his taser-gun.
“Now, Buster, that’s not how she told it to me. She had to move away to be able to keep her child and still go to school. She’s working to make a way for you all,” L.J. says.

“No, she isn’t!” Buster yells. “She broke up with me. She told me that even when I get out of here, she has to see proof that I’m living right before I am welcome in their lives. That’s my son! My blood! And she cut me off because of you. Because you convinced her of Jesus, and now she’s all religious. She said I need to get right with God before she can allow me back in her life. Why would you do that to me?”

“Buster, you know that’s not what I tried to do. And if she refuses to let you see your son, we can find you a lawyer. You have rights. You won’t get custody, but you can try for visitation. But they’ll want to see the same thing, Buster. You’re going to need steady employment and a record of clean drug tests, at the very least. You’re going to have to stay clean.”

“That’s how you play it? You take my child away from me, and hold him over me to make me behave? What kind of fucked up shit is that, Preacher?” Buster thumps his chest with both hands, rattling his chains.

“That’s not my decision, Buster, and you know that. Theresa had to make a choice – a difficult choice, a moral choice – to keep her baby and still find a way to make her life better. She hasn’t talked to me about her decision since she moved. I’m not working against you, Buster. I gave her a job because you talked so highly about her. I trusted her to care for my sister. And when she needed help, we found her a better place to live. My niece will make sure your child lacks for nothing while Theresa makes it through school. They’re going to have a good life. And she didn’t write you off, did she? She just said you needed to get your life together. You can have a good life, too. So, tell me, Buster, how are you going to do that?”

Buster stands still for a minute, huffing. Then he turns and walks towards the door. Randal steps close, and suddenly, despite the handcuffs and chains, Buster shoulders into Randal and grabs the guard’s handgun. He taps the safety off and fires even as he draws the weapon. Randal falls to the floor. We see no blood, but he appears lifeless.

Buster turns and points the gun at L.J.

“Buster, come on...”
Buster fires. L.J. falls back onto the table, and blood begins to flow from his chest.

“She was everything to me,” Buster says. He takes aim. “What’s left?”

We hear a click! Buster begins to convulse. The gun fires once—we can tell that it goes wide of his target—and then the weapon seems to jump from his hands. As Buster falls, we see Randal holding the taser, and cords between the weapon and Buster jump with vibrant electricity.

“Shit. Shit. Shit.” Randal struggles to his feet, clutching his side. We see other guards racing towards the room. We’ll fade quickly to black, and then jump-cut through a series of small scenes; a guard at L.J.’s side, inspecting his wounds. EMT workers loading him onto a gurney. The gurney going into a helicopter. The helicopter landing. L.J. being lifted from the helicopter. We do this rapid-fire, cutting into blackness, and then into each scene, conveying the hurried nature of the response. Then we zoom in on L.J.’s face, barely conscious, and fade-to-black.

Scene 2 - The hospital

I’ve always found these shots kind of cheesy, but there’s just no other way to pull it off. We open up looking down on L.J., as he lies on an operating table. Instead of directly above, we are slightly above and off to one side, as if we are one of the several doctors gathered around him. A four-inch incision extends the wound in his abdomen, and hands seem to dip in and out of him. We’ll angle in just a bit, focusing more on L.J.’s face, until we can no longer see the surgeons, the ER nurses, or even the hands. We hear beeping machines, then the flatline, someone calling clear!, and then L.J.’s body jumps. His eyes pop open, and he looks us in they

eyes.

“I’m gone this time,” he says.

We hear a voice. The voice is clear, but echoes, and the echoes have a different pitch than the voice. The voice seems neither male or female, but is surprisingly deep.

“Your work is not finished” the voice says,

“What work is that?” L.J. asks.
“No longer can you hide behind the lies of disability and inferiority,” the voice says.

“I’m very confused,” L.J. says.

“Now you are made whole. Take your work to all mankind. You have little time left.”

“But I…”

But the voice is gone. The room seems to dim, and L.J. falls unconscious. We’ll back out of the shot, until we see the hands stitching the wound closed, we see the nurses and surgeons turning away, returning instruments to trays, and removing gloves. We fade to black.

Scene 3 – Recovery

Just outside the Emergency Operating Room. Jordan approaches a surgeon.

“How is he,” she asks.

“It’s the weirdest thing, Ann. The way he was bleeding, I was sure he was gone. But we got in there, and couldn’t even find the damn bullet. No major arteries, no organs, nothing vital, no exit wound. He flat-lined on the table, and we brought him back, but I’ll be damned if I even know why he flat-lined. His injuries simply aren’t consistent with a normal gunshot wound.”

“But, he’s stable?”

“Well, we have to consider his age in his prognosis, but he seems to be... fine. Wait, do you know this guy, Ann? Why are you asking me? Just go look once he’s in a recovery room. You’ll know if he’s going to make it, won’t you?”

“I don’t know if I trust that anymore.”

Ann looks pensively at the EOR door, and we’ll fade to black.

Scene Four – A Fast Recovery

L.J. is sitting up in a hospital bed. An unknown doctor and nurse attend to him.

“Well, we’d like to keep you for 48 hours for observation, and re-run the x-rays to make sure we didn’t miss anything,” the doctor says. “We’re still concerned that we may have missed
the bullet, but sometimes they really do just bounce out. However, with you telling us that you have titanium pins in your leg, and those not showing up on x-ray, either, we’d like to just re-do the scan."

“That will be fine, doctor,” L.J. says.

“Other than that, you look remarkably well for a man who has just took a nine-millimeter round to the abdomen. You’ll still want to limit your movement. Call a nurse if you’d prefer to get up to use the restroom, and plan on taking it easy for a few weeks. You said your house is already wheel-chair accessible?”

“Yes, I remodeled it over a decade ago, when I fell and broke my leg again.”

“Good. I don’t think you’ll need it, but it might be easier on you. You know, I just have to say, Mr. Walker, you may just be the healthiest seventy-seven year old man I’ve ever examined. Perhaps you’ll share with us the secret of your immortality?”

“Well, doctor, it seems the Lord just isn’t done with me yet,” L.J. says.

“Indeed. I’ll be checking in on you, but page the nurse’s station if you need anything in the meantime.”

“Thank you again, Doctor.”

The doctor and the nurse both exit. Jordan enters, wearing her scrubs.

“Hey, Pastor Walker. I just came down to check on you.”

“Hello, Miss [name]. I’m doing just fine.”

“I heard. Some people are a little put off by that. You were a mess when you were brought in last night. You lost a lot of blood; you should at least need a blood transfusion. You died on the table last night. Then I hear that you’re down here, chatting away, asking the nurses to let you cook in the kitchen. I never knew you cooked.”
“Are you kidding? I’ve been cooking since I was twelve years old. My mother was a cook. My wife was a cook. We never had any children, but if we did, I’m sure they would have been cooks, too. Miss [~], there’s something else you need to know.”

L.J. slips his legs off the bed and stands up. He walks around a bit, then shimmies a little, and does a toned-down version of a Charlie Chaplin dance.

Jordan startles, and waves him back towards the bed.

“You really, really, don’t need to do that. Lie down and let me check your sutures.”

L.J. drops his hands and lies back down. Jordan moves to his side and uncovers his bandages.

“You missed the point, Miss [~]. At age 31, I was shot by the Birmingham police while trying to steal a car. I had made it through high school, but couldn’t afford college. I was unable to find a decent job in the city, even with my degree. I was dirt poor, as they say, and I had thought to steal a car and head up North, or out West, anywhere that I might be treated better. Anyways, I was shot and then given very rudimentary care. My leg never healed right, and I have walked with a cane ever since.

I don’t regret the experience; it turned my life around. I heard about Martin Luther King, Jr., who was in solitary in the same prison. Well, the prison swelled with the Blacks they arrested during civil protests, and I was let out with them. I claimed that I was a peaceful protestor, and somehow I got out. A man in jail – part of King’s regular retinue – invited me to Atlanta. They funded my college, my first bachelor’s and masters, and they set me up with Philip Bauer. Can you imagine my surprise, after being funded by a Black movement, and attending a primarily Black school, reading all of the Black empowerment and civil rights materials, when I drove up from Atlanta almost to Gainesville and met my new, my very White, boss?

But he told me, Walker – he always called me that, not by first name, or title, just Walker, like he was still in the Army – ‘Walker, I heard you were shot for trying to steal a car.’

Now, I’d never told anyone of my crime, and I just didn’t know how to respond. I don’t even remember what I said, but he just said, ‘Nevermind. You’ve turned your life around, how
about you give back by helping others do the same?’ And he told me about this prison ministry he wanted to start, but had found some resistance to because the inmates were demanding a black spiritual leader.

So I went. For over forty years, I have gone down into Fulton County Jail, and I have walked in with my cane, and I have told my story. And I tried my best. I had graduated with a degree in social work, and I got my PHD. I got two more degrees, and I just kept reading and reading, trying everything to help these boys. It ruined my marriage; I don’t think I paid her enough attention. I’ve spent my life trying to make atonement, but I’ve always carried the scars — emotionally, and physically — of my past.

Now, tell me, Miss [], why, today, after being shot again, can I suddenly walk with no cane? No pain, no limitation on my movement. I don’t even need my glasses to see.”

Jordan has long finished re-dressing his wound, and she says, “Pastor Walker, this looks like you were operated on days ago, not last night. I think this wound is healing quicker than it should.”

“I can’t believe it. Can you believe it?”

“Oh, I believe it. I’ve been to Africa.”

“So you have. Listen, Miss [], I’m going to tell you something that I’ve ever told anyone. All this time, I’ve kind of felt like a fraud. I’m preaching about Jesus Christ, saving us and getting us out of the mess we’re in, and logically, I’m thinking that it’s all just hard work, and people helping people. I’ve prayed and prayed, and I’ve never been healed. Yet I work at a church where we preach healing. The counseling I do? Well I put it in a Christian context, but it’s the same principles that I would use in a secular setting. I’ve never seen a demon, or a possession, or a healing. I’ve never heard the voice of God. But last night, I thought I did.”

“Many of our patients report some sort of out-of-body experience, or a white light, after a near-death experience. In fact, the white-light sensation can be electrically stimulated in the brain.”
“This wasn’t a light. I just heard a voice. It told me that I must take my message to everyone. And that’s what I am still confused about. All this time, I’ve thought my “message” was a hoax. All I’ve ever done is preached common sense and taught people how to get back on their feet, stay out of jail, make up with their children, or husband, or wife... I’ve never preached some deep, spiritual lesson. I feel like I am barely a pastor.”

“Well, maybe that’s just it. I remember Neil... Pastor Bauer, preaching about the different roles of church members. He, as the Apostle, oversees the ministry, and provides it direction. Evangelists try to save souls, prophets provide insight, and pastors... well they are pastors. They tend to the flock. And that sounds like what you do.”

“You know, I never believed all of that. I’ve held my peace about many things Pastor Bauer said, and many things his father said. I’ve always just thought they were more with God than I was, and that maybe in time I’d come to understand their truths.

I was worried about you, when you first came in for counseling. I was surprised – even furious – about his recommendation that you go to Africa. I thought you might have a serious disorder. But maybe I was wrong about that, too. You’re still coming in for regular counseling with him, and you seem to be doing just fine. I guess... I guess I’m just not sure what to make of all of this.”

Jordan looks away. “I’m not... I just... I need to go.” She stands up and heads for the door.

“I’m sorry, I must have said something wrong, Miss [~]?”

She doesn’t turn around. As she exits, she calls out, “No, I’m sorry, I just need to go work.”

We hear her walk off. We’ll cut to a close-up of L.J.’s face, confused and concerned. He shakes his head, not understanding, and then he holds up his cell-phone. We hear it dial.

“Quinten. Yes. I’m fine, but they want to keep me here for a couple of days. I know it’s not part of our usual arrangement, but could you call Nettie and help her change her flight? She’ll need someone to pick her up at the airport; I’m concerned about her trying to ride
Marta by herself. The last time she tried she got confused and ended up on a bus out in Chamblee.”

L.J. listens for a moment, and then continues.

“I don’t know. I’m not as bad off as they thought.”

L.J. laughs.

“No, no. No ‘bible blocked the bullet’ stuff here. They’re just telling me that the damage was far less than they originally thought.”

“Oh, you don’t have to do that. If you do though, could you bring my laptop? It’s on the desk at home. I don’t take it with me to prison. Yeah? I guess so.; I might look odd trying to walk out of here with a hospital robe on. Just grab whatever; jeans and a t-shirt would be fine. You don’t have to do all of this. Okay. Okay. I’ll see you soon. Oh, I don’t even really know! I’ll find out what room I’m in and I’ll call you back, okay? Alright, see you then.”

L.J. hangs up. For a moment he continues to smile, and then a quizzical look crosses his face. We’ll zoom out a little so that we can see him try to lift the edges of his bandage and look under it. Then, he holds his leg up off the bed, and wiggles it a little. As we fade out, he continues to give his leg little experimental movements.

Act 10 – Inevitability

Scene One – Revelations

Several months later. All things given a beginning must also come to an end. We’ll start the end in Lydia’s bedroom, where she sits at her computer desk. She’s wearing boy-shorts and a tank top, which look very much like she wore them to bed. She dials her cell-phone on speakerphone. She waits through the rings, then hangs up and dials again. Finally, a voice picks up.

“Hello?” Naomi says.

“Get to your computer,” Lydia says.
“Lydia? What the hell? It’s right here. Hold on. It’s up.”

“I sent you a link. Check your email.”

“Why are waking me up? It’s like 6 AM?”

“Just pull up the site.”

“I’m there.”

Silence.

“Oh, shit. ‘Neil Bauer, pastor of the famed mega-church City Upon a Hill, near Atlanta, Georgia, has been conducting an affair with a member of his congregation. Jordan [~], 32 years old, a nurse at an Atlanta area hospital... newspaper was sent photographic evidence... oh, holy fuck, Lydia, what is this?”

“Dad’s having an affair. I thought that was obvious.”

“But you released it to the press? Are you fucking insane? What about letting things be as they are until you graduate? That’s only a couple of months.”

“This wasn’t me. But I know who it was.”

“Who? How do you know?”

“Joe Svrenis. He came over here a few nights ago while dad was away. He told mom about the affair and asked her to leave Dad for him. She said no. Then this comes out in the paper this morning, and is on every major news channel. Look, Naomi... you might not want to go to class. I’m about to go talk to the family; we’re probably going to have all stay home for a bit.”

“What? I have tests! I have a party to go to!”

“Naomi, do you really want to deal with reporters? I mean, they’re making this...huge. But you know how these things are, in a few weeks we won’t be worth the front page.”

“Front page?”
“Of every major newspaper.”

“Holy shit.”

“No kidding. Naomi – please come home. Gracie is going to need you. Hell, I need you. And you might want to hurry if you want to beat the reporters.”

“Alright. See you in a bit.”

Lydia hangs up without saying goodbye.

Scene Two - Jordan

Interior, Hospital, Emergency Ward. Jordan is scrubbing out- washing her hands after an operation. The same surgeon that we saw work on L.J. stands by her side.

“So, what are you going to do,” the surgeon asks.

“I don’t know, Steve. Sleep in the on-call room?”

“Well, I wouldn’t leave. News crews are covering the exits, even though Harold told them you are on an extended leave of absence. Maybe they saw your car in the garage.”

“Am I?”

“Are you what?”

“On an extended leave of absence?”

“Not according to Harold. Says we need you in the EOR. He’s threatening to have the media arrested for threatening the livelihood of our patients. They know the regulations regarding news and hospitals. He’s being really defensive about you, Ann.”

“He should be.”

“Why, because you’re such a great nurse? Don’t kind yourself. You’re good, but you know Harold hates any negative press about this place.”

“No. Because I fucked him.”
“Jesus, Ann. Don’t tell me that!”

“Sorry, just trying to offer you some insight.”

“Anyone else?”

“Do you really want to know?”

“I suppose not. Why? Is it just the thrill of it, Ann? Because this time, it doesn’t look so fun to be you.”

“No, Steve. Why do we sleep with anyone? Love, need, not wanting to be alone at night, to feel some warmth? Maybe it’s just that every nice guy I meet is already married.”

“I mean, I get their attraction to you. You’re young, fit, gorgeous, smart, talented. But what’s your attraction to them?”

“You know, I’ve never figured it out. I guess I just feel safer when I know it’s all going to go to shit. Better than finding someone that I think is perfect, then being dumped on my wedding day.”

“Ouch, did that happen?”

“No. I never got the chance. Hey, Steve, do you think you can find someone to go buy me some clothes? I’m afraid to send anyone to my apartment.”

“You can just wear scrubs.”

“Underwear.”

“Ah. Sure. I’ll help you find someone.”

“You know the shittier thing in all of this?”

“There’s a shittier part?”

“Yeah. He hasn’t called.”

“Did you expect him to?”
“No. But it still hurts, just the same. I mean, he’s been talking about leaving her for months, but you know he’ll never call now.”

Scene Three – L.J.

Exterior, City Upon the Hill. L.J. is pushing Nettie’s wheelchair from the van. Suddenly, a news crew seems to ambush them.

“Pastor Walker, Pastor Walker! I’m Mike Jones, with the morning news. You’ve taken over for Neil Bauer, can you tell me about that? Any news on Bauer’s whereabouts? How is the congregation reacting to this scandal?” the reporter asks.

“Well, taking over is a vast overstatement. I’m just preaching while Pastor Bauer is on sabbatical. You’re welcome to come in and hear me, but the cameras stay outside. Come on in and take a seat. Just be warned, our security team has orders to remove anyone who is clearly bothering our parishioners.”

“Where is Bauer now?”

L.J. turns away and begins pushing Nettie towards the door.

“Pastor Walker, where is Bauer staying now,” Mike Jones calls out.

L.J. doesn’t turn around, but he calls out, “So, are you coming in, Mr. Jones?”

We’ll close-up on Mike Jones as he shrugs and begins to follow L.J. into the building. We fade to black.

Scene Two – L.J. ’s second sermon

Interior, City Upon a Hill Sanctuary. L.J. prays in the small hallway, just beside the stage and out of view of the sanctuary. We’ll pull an extreme close up of his face. He prays aloud, but quietly.

“Lord, you told me to take my message to the masses. But I still don’t know what that message is. I need some help, Lord. Tell me what to say, what to do. Even better, show me what
you want me to see.” He nods, walks to the stage, and mounts the stairs in an easy stride. He comes to rest in front of the podium, and he pulls out a few pages of loose-leaf paper that he has stuck in the front of his bible.

“Every Sunday, this church draws 25 thousand people. That’s a good turn out for an NFL game, or a major concert. This Sunday, we’re counting less than fifteen thousand people. That means that already, half of our congregation has been so hurt, so confused, and so angry, that they have already chosen not to come back.

This church provides the funding for over two-thousand meals to the poor each week. That means that, just this week, from the missing tithes, one thousand meals may not be served. If your support for this church goes to the wayside, so do the other one thousand meals. So do our addiction recovery groups, our mission trips, our underwriting of loans to help other, smaller churches get off the ground, and, needless to say, the twenty-odd counseling appointments I keep each week, and the sixty-plus inmates at the Fulton County Jail that I minister to as the leader of our outreach there.

I understand your pain, your confusion, and your anger. My relationship with Pastor Bauer is as complicated as they can get. I’m over thirty years his senior, and yet he is my pastor. I served here under his father, and I’ve known him since he was a teenager. I stood at his wedding, while his father conducted his marriage to his wife. I stood at the graveside, where he buried his father and swore to continue this ministry. I fought with him over the cost of constructing this sanctuary so that he could preach to a far larger crowd from behind the same pulpit that his father stood behind for over forty years. That’s right. I wasn’t there the day his father brought this pulpit in to what used to be a one room farmhouse, sank it down in the front of the room, and started to preach, nearly seventy years ago. Over forty years ago, I walked into another room here – the sanctuary that replaced that small pulpit could hold an amazing four hundred people, and it was full every Sunday. A teenage Neal Bauer sat right up front, doodling during the sermons. He asked me what I was going to do for the church, and I told him, ‘I’m going to go preach in the Jail.’ And he said, ‘Won’t you get shot?’ And I laughed, and said, ‘I’ve already been shot.’ So he said, ‘then I guess you’ll be okay.’”
When he came in, just a few months ago, to the hospital room where I was recuperating after being shot by a prisoner, he told me, 'I told you that you would get shot.' And I said, 'I've already been shot.' And he said, 'then I guess you'll be okay.'

And when he called me and asked me to preach behind this pulpit while he was on sabbatical, that we could provide consistent support for the congregation instead of running special guest after special guest across this pulpit that his daddy built, he asked me if I was too afraid to stand up here again. And I said, 'I've already been shot.' And he said, 'then I guess you'll be okay.'

So when I tell you that I understand your pain, your confusion, and your anger, believe me. This is a personal matter. And before I accepted the offer to preach, I had to decide if I was coming back here.

And then I remembered the two thousand meals, and my twenty appointments, and all the faces I see in this sanctuary who once battled through addiction, or depression, or abuse. And I realized that my work – God’s work, really, I can’t claim it – isn’t done. I’ve got to work through my feelings, sure. And we’re going to talk about those, and get through them. But I’ve also got to show up, and continue to do what God has asked me to do. I come here still, because this is my home. And some of you here, you probably feel the same.

But some of you today, you didn’t come because you feel that this is your home. Journalists and other news media swell our ranks. You’ve come to hear the response to this scandal. You’ve come to witness and report the pain, the confusion, and the anger. You’ve come for the human story, to get eye-witness testimonies of our congregation. And you will, I am sure. And you’ll print them, and you’ll earn your wages off of them, and people will read the papers or watch your news channel and really tune in to the human drama.

But you won’t print one thing to help these people, will you? You’ll print many things that hurt them, but not one thing to help them. You won’t talk about the good things this church does. You won’t mention the two thousand, well, one thousand, meals, or the addiction groups, or the twenty-odd appointments. Neutral, unbiased. You’ll watch these things slip away, maybe doing a little piece of the drama, a quick read on Sunday morning. But you won’t use your position to try and better the situation.
And it’s this treatment of misery as entertainment that demonizes us. We’ve become comfortable with facing misery on our televisions, in two-hour movies and mini-series, on the nightly news. We let ourselves go on an emotional roller-coaster, and at the end, we can just click off the TV and go to bed. We’ve become complacent with misery.

Go downtown. You’re sure to find a homeless man. Perhaps his misery bothers you, and you give him a coin and hurry away. Or, perhaps you give him a few coins and go on your way, feeling better about yourself. Then you go and vote against welfare. Against social security. Against universal healthcare. And you wonder why we’re called “hypocrites”. No, I’m not talking about the journalists. We are not consistent in our actions. “Be you hot or be you cold,” am I right? We have become a nation of Luke-Warm Christians. Tomorrow, 9AM sharp, I will walk into Fulton County Jail and explain to them why I refuse to press charges against the man who shot me. Why they will need to subpoena me to get testimony against him. And I’ll do it knowing that next Sunday, I will come in here to you – probably to far, far, less of you, and try to convince you that you should give up capital punishment so that I can have the rest of his life, and the rest of my life, trying to reach him.

I will not fill your Sundays with esoteric hierarchies or letter-by-letter translations of Hebrew and Greek words. I will not coddle you. Comfort, yes, but coddle, no. I will step up here, every chance I get, and talk to you about real issues. Life-changing issues. World-changing issues. And we will heal our pain, we will clear our confusion, and we will eliminate our anger, together, even as we continue to do our work. God’s work.

If you have any questions, give me a call. Drop by and see me. If you need anything, let us know. But stay with us. Stay with me. We’ve spent seventy long years building this ministry up to let it go over a stupid alleged affair. We’re better Christians than to let 1,000 meals go unserved over the love life of one man. Now, I’d like us to come forth.

He walks down the steps and to the ground. No one has come forth. He shrugs, then laughs.

“No one? Okay. Mike, Mike Jones. The reporter Mike Jones. I dare you, to come down here and pray with me. We’ll pray about what you should write. We’ll pray that God opens your heart, and your eyes. Come on.”
Mike Jones gets up, shrugs to his co-worker, and walks down to the front. L.J. reaches out to grab his hands and pray for him, but the instant they contact each other, the reporter falls to the floor. L.J. looks surprised, and ushers spring forth into position.

“Okay, who else?”

People begin to come forward. As L.J. reaches for them, they fall to the ground. We’ll zoom out and tilt down, looking at the crowd from above. As we fade out, we hear L.J. asking, “Who else? Who else?”

---

**Act II — the call of redemption**

**Scene One — Bauer and Lydia**

*We start in a small hotel room. Bauer lies on the bed, with the lights off; the room is illuminated by light from the open bathroom door. He is alone, and in pajamas. The clock on the beside table reads 5pm. Someone knocks on the door. He ignores it. The knock comes again. He rolls over. Someone knocks a third time.*

“Dad, I know you’re in there. Open up,” Lydia calls.

Bauer gets up slowly and comes to the door. He cracks it open.

“Lydia, is that you?” he asks.

“Let me in, Dad.”

He opens the door and lets her in. She carries with her a fed-ex envelope. She hands it to him.
"What's this? It's addressed to you, Lydia."

"Just open it, Dad. Put the disk in your lap-top. I'm going to run to the bathroom. Did you know that it stinks in here?"

She goes to the bathroom and closes the door. The room goes dark, and then Bauer turns on a lamp. He puts the disk in his computer, and a list of files comes up.

"What now," he calls out.

"Just play the first one!"

He does so. The video that starts playing shows Emily Bauer wearing a bathrobe in the kitchen of their home. The angle is high, from the vents. Joe Svrenis enters, wearing nothing. He approaches her, opens the robe, and lifts her onto the marble-topped island.

"What is this, Lydia?" he calls out. We hear the toilet flush, and we'll angle towards Lydia, and away from the screen. She opens the door and leans on the frame.

"It's mom, fucking Joe Svrenis."

"Watch your language."

"Fuck you. Deal with it. It's your wife, fucking your producer, about three years ago."

"How did you get this?"

"I bugged the whole house. How did no one notice this? I can see the wires hanging out, sometimes."

Bauer looks back at the screen, where the couple has started to gasp and moan. He mutes it, but leaves it running.

"Lydia. why? I mean, what am I supposed to make of this? Do you just won't me to suffer more?"

"Don't act like a fucking martyr. You fucked someone else; I don't give a damn if you're suffering. Before you ask, she dated him for almost three years, through her pregnancy with
Hope, who is not his, by the way. I just... Dad. Mom says she’s going to try and fight the prenup. It won’t be easy, but she thinks she can do it. She says it’s because your income is likely to plummet if people stop buying your books and CDs, so she can fight for more of your current assets. Some clause about ‘anticipated income’ in the prenup. Anyways, I just thought it was unfair. She let this guy dick her for three years, and then she’s going to leave you over an affair of what, four months?”

“More like nine. But can I even use this in court?”

“You shouldn’t have to. I’ve got easily over 200 hours of her just fucking the guy, all in fed-exed envelopes that have dates on them. These could be opened in court, sure. Or you could just take her this one, and negotiate a fair settlement.”

“Why are you doing this? Oh, Lydia, did you record Ann and me?”

“That’s part of it. Dad, every time something has been leaked to the press – like about your Africa budget – it has been me. But not this time. I only have the house bugged, I mean I’m not entirely sure how legal it is to run around and put hidden cameras in public places. This was Joe, and I can prove that, too, through a recorded conversation that he had with mom this week.”

“Why did you tell the media these things? And why are you doing this for me? You hate me, don’t you?”

Lydia softens. She comes into the room and sits on the floor next to Bauer. He closes the laptop.

“Dad, I don’t hate you. You just frustrate me. You are – or were – in this position of great influence, and you use it to do so little. I mean, you make all of this money, so much that you could personally double the amount that the church gives to mission work each year, and you do absolutely fuck-all with it. I want – I’ve always wanted – you to just pay more attention to the real world, and give a shit. You’re up there preaching about some goddamn toy corrupting our youth, while people die in Africa. 95% of Africa lacks proper sanitation, but you’ve never even mentioned that. You know nothing about CAMPFIRE, or how hard it is just to get decent medicine in, how much of each dollar of government aid goes towards administration, and how
little goes towards actual supplies. I just want — shit. I just want you to be real, Dad. I don’t care if it’s Africa or Atlanta or Jerry’s kids, I just want to see you step up and do something real.”

“Saving their souls isn’t real?” Bauer asks.

“Not in my book. I bet they’d say anything to get you to come in, put a well in, and run a medical tent. Why ask them to say anything at all? Why not just... do it?”

“Well, then you’ll love this. We just got the copy of transcripts back from France. Our interpreters have been preaching about Allah. As in, the muslim Allah. Everything we did last year, and probably every year before that, was done in the name of Allah.”

“Wow. How did you not know that?”

“None of us could speak the local language. I mean, we do these trips, and we’re in a different part of the continent each year, with a different language or dialect... so we use local interpreters. The same ones, about twenty of them. And they all are apparently in on it. We called them to ask about it, and they aren’t answering or returning calls.”

“That is funny. I mean, sad, but funny. Still, my point is, that doesn’t mean that it’s right for mom to violate a prenup and try to get more when you had an affair. She did, too. All the things she says when she’s on the phone with you — I hear them. ‘How could you risk our family, how could you be so foolish, after all the times I stood by you?’ I just want you to know that she’s guilty, too. I don’t want you moping around thinking this destroyed your family. We were fucked long ago. I think she’s just doing it because she feels like you won’t fight back.”

“Why should I? I’ve lost my career, my family, my calling from God himself. I don’t care about the money.”

“Yes you do. And you should. Mom — shit, Dad. You know we don’t need money. The prenup is more than enough to cover all seven of us, through college, to pay for our weddings, and buy us our first home, too. It’s enough for mom to buy a nice house — smaller than the current one, I’m sure, but nice enough— anywhere in the country and hire cooks, babysitters, maids, even a driver or two, all the way until Hope is in college. What else will mom use the money for? New clothes?
You can still make a difference. Take your money and do something with it. Your ministry seems over, Dad? You’ve been talking about Africa for fifteen years. Go fucking do something about it. I don’t know. Go build wells with your bare hands.”

“I don’t know, Lydia. I’m old. I can retire, be done. I don’t know what to think anymore. Why would God even allow me to heal people in Africa if it was done in Allah’s name?”

“Maybe God doesn’t give a shit who gets credit, as long as the people are better? Or maybe it’s the same damn God, given the direct connection between the two religions. Or maybe their belief is what matters. Too old? Dad, you’re in your fifties! Some people buy a red Porsche for a midlife crisis, you have a national sex scandal. You certainly aren’t unique in that. Look at it this way, you can start over. No church to run, no kids you didn’t want…”

“I always wanted to be a father.”

“To a boy. You’ve not been my father in a long time.”

“That’s unfair! You know that isn’t true.”

“Really, what school do I go to next year?”

“Yale?”

“Wrong! Mom wanted me to go to Yale, so I could be close to grandma and grandpa, and to her, too, it turns out. She wants to move the whole family back to Connecticut. I, though, wanted to go to Berkley. And I got in, with a full scholarship. But I’m not going there. Do you know why?”

“Of course I don’t. You don’t have to make me feel like a bad father, Lydia, your mother does plenty of that.”

“Shut up, this is about me. I’m not going to Berkley because I’m going to University of Michigan to be near my stupid boyfriend. Nothing in the world is close to Ann Arbor; Yale’s an 11 hour drive, U. Penn is a 10 hour drive, and I want to be able to see him every day and go to every football game he plays in, so I can sit in the stands and pray to a God that I don’t believe in that he doesn’t get his fool neck snapped in fucking half. Besides, they have a good law school.”
"You have a boyfriend?"

"Two years, going on three. You can see him any time the Wolverines take to the field; he's one of the only freshman starters."

"What's he play?"

"Running back. Why do you think I run three miles every morning?"

"Wow, anything else I should know?"

"Naomi's gay. She told me to tell you."

"Don't make fun of your sister."

"She really is. That guy I got in a fight with? He took a picture of her kissing Beth."

"Chuck Baker?"

"That's the one."

"Well, I guess it doesn't matter now."

"What the fuck do you mean 'it doesn't matter now'? It matters a hell of a lot to Naomi. You mean, it doesn't matter, having a gay daughter can't ruin your reputation anymore than dicking your churchgoers?"

"No... I mean, I guess it's too late to apologize for putting you on restriction for so long."

"Why? All restriction meant was I had to sneak Brett in while you were asleep, instead of fucking him in the back of my SUV."

"Brett?"

"My boyfriend. Michigan? No? I thought we just had this conversation."

Bauer sighs. "Brett. Boyfriend. Michigan. Running back. Got it. Do you think we can ever do this right? I'm such a...a..."
"Total tool? I know. But at least you know, too. But if you sit here and wallow in piss and misery, you’ll also be a loser and a complete waste of life. So what’s your move, Dad?"

"I don’t know."

"Well, I’ll leave you to figure it out." Lydia heads for the door. At the last moment, she turns back.

"Dad, how is she?"

"The girl. What’s her name, Jordan [~]."

"I don’t know. I haven’t talked to her."

"Why not? You love her, right? Or was it just about sex?"

"No. No. I love her. It’s just, complicated. She came to me for counseling. My lawyer thinks she could use that against me, file a suit, even though I’m not a professional psychologist or social worker. He says its better to let the lawyers talk it out."

"You love her, but you’re letting your lawyer handle your break-up? God, you really are a tool. Bye, Dad. I love you."

"I love you, too." Bauer gets up to go to her, but Lydia walks out and closes the door.
Act 12—As it was in the beginning

Scene One—Nettie’s Voyage

Interior, L.J.’s house. Nettie sits in the recliner, as L.J. prepares to go out.

“What about the Jordan’s last name girl? She called here yesterday. Her number’s by the phone. Did you ever call her back?” Nettie asks.

“I’ve tried. She isn’t picking up. I called the hospital, but they said she is on personal leave. I know I gave her my cell phone number, but I have so many calls now that half of them don’t get through. If she calls, can you ask her what time I can call her back?”

“You tried going over there?”

“Where?”

“Her apartment. I got her address, too.”

“No, I haven’t, Net. I’m so busy now. You think I need to send someone by there?”

“Well, I sure can’t go.”

“But you think someone should go over there? Net, do you know something?”

“She’s pregnant.”

“How do you know?”

“How do I always know?”

“Alright, Net. I’ll try to get in touch with her today, and if I can’t, I’ll go by there tomorrow.”

“I’m just worried, is all.”
“Alright. I’ll be at the church if you need anything. Quinten will be by tonight after he gets off work. He’s going to run to the grocery store for us; I haven’t had time.

So call him if you think of anything else that you want, okay?”

L.J. leaves. Nettie sits in her chair for a moment longer, and then she struggles to her feet. She walks over and takes the paper with Jordan’s information on it. Then she goes to the phone and dials. We hear the ringing, and then indistinct words from the receiver.

“Yes, I’ll need a taxi. I’m not sure how far it is. At my home. My address?”

We’ll fade to black as Nettie dictates L.J.’s address to the cab service.

Scene Two: Deus ex Machina

*Interior, Jordan’s apartment. Jordan wears sweat pants and her striped track jacket. She stands in the bathroom with a bottle of pills in her hand, cap off. We hear a knock at the front door, and Jordan puts the cap back on, puts the bottle in the medicine cabinet, and then goes to answer the door. She opens it to Lydia.*


“I’m Ann. Only the newspapers call me Jordan. You’re one of Neil’s daughters. Lydia?”

“You’re good. Yes, that’s me. Can I come in? I just came up like five thousand steps and this isn’t exactly the best neighborhood.”

Jordan lets Lydia in. They stand in the entryway, awkwardly, for a moment.

“Well, can we sit down or something? It’s really dark in here, are you one of those vampire-wanna-bes?”

Jordan turns on more lights as they walk to the living room. Lydia sits; Jordan begins to pace.

“It’s an ER trick. Go to any ER nurse or doctor’s home and you’ll probably find curtains that block out the sun. Sometimes we work nights and sleep during the day. Or we work night
and day and sleep whenever we can. Which can be... wait. Why are you in my living room, Lydia? Is everything okay?"

"Deus ex machina."

"What?"

"Latin for ‘God in the machine’. In Greek plays, when everything got completely fucked, they’d lower an actor onto the stage who played a god or goddess. This god would suddenly fix everything."

"I know what it means. How does it relate to you coming here tonight?"

"Well, Ann, I don’t think any god is going to drop down and fix this. And it’s pretty fucked, isn’t it?"

"What’s... fucked?"

"This." Lydia gestures around. “Your name in all of the papers, some guy at your hospital being quoted as saying that you slept with half of his department, the church hiring lawyers to get in contact with you, you referring them to your own lawyer... I mean, that’s all pretty crazy, isn’t it?"

"Did they send you here? I’m not trying to sue anyone. I just want to be left alone; can you tell these lawyers to stop calling me? Nevermind. I guess it doesn’t matter."

"No one sent me. Actually, everyone will probably be pissed when they find out, but that’s the benefit of being me: they’ll be pissed no matter what I do. Look, Ann, I don’t think you should give up on my father."

"Give up? He hasn’t called me in a month. I’m not exactly the one who gave up. But it’s fine; I never expected any of this to last."

“It’s funny. I had all of this planned out in my head days ago, but now I forget... I’m surprised that I missed it, really. I’m usually very observant, Ann. But Dad, well, he’s gone all the time anyways. He gets phone calls from people at odd hours, he gets up and leaves unexpectedly, he sleeps at church some nights... I mean, who would know that he was having an
affair? I’m not shocked; I mean, no one who knows my parents can really be shocked. You’re actually pacing. Who paces? In that jacket, you remind me of a tiger.”

“Funny you should say that. I went to eat Chinese with your father one day, and they had the placemats with the zodiac and birth years on them. We looked them up; I’m a tiger, he’s a dragon. He totally lost it. Now he won’t eat Chinese.”

“You know that there was supposedly a prophecy that he should watch out for tigers? He thought it was about the lion in Africa. Which is silly; there are no tigers in Africa.”

“I know. I was there. That’s how we started…” Jordan trails off, and shrugs. “Anyways, what’s your point?”

“For fifteen years, my father has spoken with passion about one thing, and one thing only: Africa. I mean, he sounds passionate any time he preaches, but I can tell. Africa is where his heart is. However, for fifteen years, he’s made a mockery of it. A real crock of shit. He’s so determined to get proof of some sort of miracle on tape, and to convert as many people as he can, that he’s become blind to the real troubles there. I mean, at first, there wasn’t a lot to do, and we did a lot. We put in more wells, helped build more roads, you can look this stuff up. But somewhere, he got off track. Now he spends two million plus a year and barely does anything. They tear up more land that they improve, the medical tent is a joke…”

“I know,” Jordan interupts. “Again, I was there.”

“But that’s just it. What I missed. This year, as he began planning for Africa, things were different. Not massively so, but this year, he was talking about a budget for the medical tent. And I realized, this is because of you. You’re the only thing different. He found a mistress who is a nurse, who has been to Africa, and slowly, slowly, he’s starting to come around. And I think you did it.”

“Well, yeah, I mean, a little We’ve talked about Africa a bit…”

“I bet.”

“…and some of that stuff has come up. I mean, I didn’t accuse him of not doing enough. I just told him about what we could be doing. If we’re willing to ship the supplies in ourselves,
and distribute them ourselves, using the existing contacts... we can bypass a ton of monetary
drain that usually goes into paying local governments, or our own government officials.”

“I know! And I think it’s great. But now, he’s not planning on even going to Africa this
year. They found out that the interpreters were actually preaching Islam, and the church isn’t
willing to back him, and honestly, a lot of the people who were involved have left the church.
And if you leave him, too, it will probably never happen.”

“I know. I was on the planning committee for this year. Now, no one from that church
even calls me. Just the lawyers they’ve hired. So you’re saying that I should go back to your
father because otherwise, he won’t go to Africa. You know, the thing about those Greek plays is
that even their contemporaries declared that the Deus ex Machina device was faulty, and that it
often suggested improbable solutions to insoluble situations. I love – loved – your father, very
much, but I never expected a happy ending. Sometimes things get fucked, and they just stay
fucked, Lydia. And knowing that is part of growing up.”

“You know, Aristotle also said that sometimes the irrational isn’t so irrational, given that
it’s probable that improbable things will occur. And if nothing ever ends happily for you, then
maybe it’s because you refuse to let it be so. I’m not suggesting that you don’t give up on my
father simply for Africa. I’m saying it because, after fifteen years, the only thing I’ve ever seen
him be passionate about is you, Ann. He’s not lying up there in a motel room wearing four-day-
old pajamas and smothering under the aroma of week-old pizza boxes because his wife is finally
leaving him, or because he might be losing his ministry, or because of a nation-wide – well,
world-wide, really, as it’s in the London and Paris papers, as well – media campaign into his sex
life. Under any other conditions, he’d just check himself into a nice hotel in Vancouver or
something, get the hell out of dodge, just like he’s done every time the media flares up. Instead
he’s wallowing away in a cheap motel room because he can’t stand the thought of leaving town.
He’s up there pulling some Siddartha at the river shit, waiting for a tiger to come eat him, or a
river to swallow him up. He’s suffering – and gloriously, intentionally so – with a broken heart,
that he knows damn well he deserves. But he loves you. I could see it on his face, from the
moment he opened the door and it wasn’t you, to the moment I left after calling him an ass for
not calling you. He’s a rock, Ann. Stone. Every emotion he displays every Sunday is intentional,
has been practiced in front of a mirror. But now, he doesn’t bother to hide his grief.”
"You think he still loves me? I mean, come on, we had a lot of sex. You don’t sleep with someone in your office twice a week, penciled into your agenda, with someone you love. That’s a whore, not a girlfriend. The media isn’t far off. I should have asked for money. If I take any money from him, that’s what I will be. Just a whore. Fucked is right. I can’t possibly explain how fucked things are to you. I’m not even sure of why I’m discussing this with his daughter.”

“Listen to yourself. You love him, he loves you, but you can’t just let that be? You’re an ER nurse, or so the paper says, and that’s not bad money, but you still live over here in shit-town, several stories up with no elevator? You’re as bad as he is. You want to suffer. So I came here, like a dumbass, to tell you that not only is my father just waiting for you to reach out to him, but that you’re probably good for each other. And all the mess that I’m sure got in the way of a meaningful relationship is quickly going to disappear. They’re going to push through a quick divorce, because they are both so ready for this to be over and because there’s just too much dirt on both sides for them to get nasty over this. I mean, it sounds cynical, but she is cynical – and a very large, public legal battle would just make dad look worse, and less people would still buy his books, and mom would get less money from him. So she’s agreeing now to end this quickly and smoothly. The family is moving to Connecticut, with dad paying travel expenses if he wants us to visit. He may not go back to the Church, but he could walk away from it – it could belly-up – and he’s still going to be immensely wealthy. And yet, you’re totally going to let it all go? What the fuck, Ann?”

“I don’t really have to explain myself to you. Maybe I just don’t want all of that.”

“I call bullshit. What you consider an insoluble situation simply requires a fucking phone call.”

“Lydia... I’m pregnant, okay?”

“Oh. Shit. Well, it’s dumb of you not to take any money, then. There’s certainly enough to care for every whim your child ever has. Still, I think he’d be okay with it. I don’t think Dad has been distant from us because he didn’t want to be a father, or even because of that dumb ‘prophecy’ over him having a son to carry on his work. I think he was just afraid of Mom leaving him, and didn’t want to become attached. He’s always been bracing himself for the loss.”
“I’m not going to have the baby.”

“What? Why?”

“Because it’s my choice, you’re dad’s a lousy father, and I don’t think I’d be a good mother. And you’re right, if I called your dad, he might take me back. But could we really make a family out of this? I don’t think so.”

“More like a daughter. I mean, I know the man determines the gender, and that it should be fifty-fifty, but come on. Seven girls? The odds of that are what, three in fifty thousand? I don’t think he can make boys.”

“Actually, it’s your mom. She has a sex-linked genetic condition that drastically reduces the likelihood of a male fetus surviving. Trust me, in this case I think dying is more lucky than being born so maimed and disabled.”

“Shit, I thought I was good at finding out secrets. What else do you know about us?”

“Well, from what your dad says about you, I thought you’d understand that this is my choice.”

“Oh, I’m totally pro-choice. Liberal. Separation of church and state. Practically everything exactly opposite of my family. Which, of course, they just view as some weird sort of childhood rebellion, instead of considering the possibility that I’ve read countless political theory books, ethics books, law books, history books, and that I’m going to major in political science. I mean, it couldn’t possibly be that I’ve just educated myself, and made my own decisions about what I think is right and wrong, instead of just believing what I’m told.

Anyways, yes, it’s your choice. But it’s also my sister. Half-sister? I mean, you’re not even going to consider adoption or anything? Do you know how many people would kill to adopt a perfectly healthy white baby? I totally respect your choice, but you could choose to give that baby a perfectly happy life. And dad might not do so bad with one baby, and a woman who loved him. Mom likes to go on about how she gave up law school to support dad’s ministry and raise children, but she forgets to mention that she hated law school, only went there because her dad told her to, and she was failing out of it. Seriously, I’m not sure she ever really loved him,
and I’ve heard her say the same. So maybe he’s a bad father because of the conditions? And besides, it’s not like any of us have turned out to be criminals.”

“I know, I just... I mean, is this the right time? Do I really want to show up at work for the next six months, with every camera in town trying to click a picture of “Bauer’s Pregnant Mistress?” My life... my life is shit already. I can barely do this on my own. I can’t do this with a child. And I’m not sure if I could live with giving the child away, and honestly, I’m not sure I can live with having an abortion. You know, it’s funny, you showing up here tonight. I have asked God to come tell me what to do. Just tell me. Instead, you show up and remind me that there really isn’t any God to do so. So this really is insoluble, isn’t it?”

“I’m sure there’s a way, Ann...”

A knock at the door interrupts Lydia. A knock, followed by a dull thump. Jordan goes to the peephole. She looks confused. Then she stands on her tiptoes. She gasps, and throws the door open.

“Call 911! Call 911,” she yells. Nettie lies just outside the door, covered in sweat, breathing heavily, and barely conscious. Jordan bends down to check Nettie’s vitals, and Nettie drops an open bottle of pills.

“M’am, can you hear me? Did you take one of these? Have you taken it yet,” Jordan asks. Over her shoulder, she yells, “she’s having [medical term for a heart attack], tell them we need an ambulance to Grady right now!”

Jordan continues to evaluate Nettie, and Lydia comes to the door with her cell-phone up to her ear.

“Oh my god. Mrs. Walker? What are you doing here,” Lydia asks. “They’re sending an ambulance, I don’t really know where it’s from. They’re still online, in case you need to give them more information.”

“I’m fine...” Nettie mutters.
“Don’t try to get up. Lydia, could you go grab one of my pillows or something? Mrs. Walker, just relax. Were you having chest pains? Have you taken one of your nitroglycerin tablets?”

“Two of them. I had to rest on the stairs coming up,” Nettie says.

“Okay. Well, we’re just going to stay here for a few moments, and then we’ll try to get up and go inside.”

“No ambulance driver is going to be able to carry me down all those steps. We should go downstairs.”

“We’re going to stay right here for a few moments, then we’ll figure it out.”

Lydia returns with a pillow and they place it under Nettie’s head.

“Jordan. It’s funny,” Nettie says. “Funny how He sees to the little things. You know, my favorite song is about the river Jordan. And I guess an ambulance is my chariot.”

“Don’t try to talk too much,” Jordan says.

“It don’t matter…. Tomorrow’s my birthday. I came here to tell you that you can’t kill yourself, Miss [Jordan’s last name]. You’re pregnant.”

“I know I’m pregnant.”

“Wait, you were going to kill yourself,” Lydia asks.

“Yes. No. I mean, I had thought about it. It’s not important right now.”

“Listen, you can’t. He said you would be killing your little boy,” Nettie says.

“No one’s dying. Not me, not you,” Jordan says. But tears fill her eyes, and her voice shakes.

“It’s alright. He done told me I could be done this year. Time for me to be carried on up.”

An ambulance siren fades in. Lydia walks to the end of the walkway and looks down.
“I want you to promise me that you’ll take care of this child, Jordan,” Nettie sat. “I don’t want to die for nothin’. I don’t pretend to understand it, but there’s a reason that you are having this child.”

“Don’t talk now.”

We pull back, up into the sky, until we can see the ambulance pulling into the parking lot. We’ll keep going up. Up. Up, until we are carried home.
Act 13 – Epilogue

Author’s note: The original first draft stopped above, at Nettie’s death. An epilogue may be needed, however, to explain what happens to Bauer, who finds “redemption” by moving to Africa. Similarly, the fates of Ann, Lydia, LJ, and so on would be decided, instead of left without closure. These concerns are left for a second draft or re-write.
Swing Low, Sweet Chariot

Appendix A: An Interview with Myself

The Writing of Swing Low, Sweet Chariot

The following interview took place in my head, as I wrote Swing Low, Sweet Chariot. These are the questions I answered during the creative process, the things I struggled with, and the questions I hoped Larry King would ask me one day.

Q: Why this novel?

A: I actually had several ideas for novels, but I chose to finish this one for my college thesis. I chose this for several reasons, but primarily because the story was the most complete – in my head – of all the possibilities. It’s also the most true to my life. Bauer is a synthesis of over a dozen pastors that I grew up under. L.J. is based several people. The damaged person who only wants to heal other damaged people, the intellectual black man who, despite everything, still submits to a white authority figure that he doesn’t agree with, the Black and Native-American heritages fighting it out in one body – these are all people that I have known and loved, who helped shape my own thoughts on religion, morality, and ethics.

Another reason for this novel is that I feel a real need to communicate the damage some of these churches do in their beliefs, and the damage done when one of these super-star pastors gets caught in a hotel room with a prostitute. These are people who could affect millions, and they aren’t thinking about that. They don’t seem to respect the burden place on them. Or perhaps they do, and that’s why they crack. But when they fall – and it seems almost impossible for them not to fall into some sort of scandal – the members of their church are often severely emotionally and spiritually hurt, yet nothing is done to prevent or mitigate this damage.

I saw Jim Baker years after the PTL scandal, and he was contrite as can be. He refused to accept any offerings for his sermon, and he talked about how prison brought him closer to the Lord. I just remember thinking, “He’s so charismatic, he could have convinced people of
And that really answered a lot of the questions I had about how someone could get into a national pulpit while preaching things that don’t necessarily jive with the Bible. Rhetoric and stage performance accounts for far more than truth. I thought that this was important to show, this aspect of a larger-than-life person being able to lead us astray.

Q: And yet, many of his beliefs are held by Christians across America.

A: True. I really wanted to accurately portray some of the beliefs that I grew up hearing. The woman submitting to the man, the father as a “spiritual head of household,” homosexuality as the reason for all the ills in this country; I heard all of these things straight from pulpits across the South. No part of Bauer’s belief system was made up for this novel; I took it all from my childhood. I believe that the majority of Christians aren’t so extremist, but I’m alarmed that the mega-churches often are so extreme. When we have someone like Jerry Falwell, who makes these controversial statements that end up on CNN, like about Katrina being God’s wrath for our acceptance of homosexuality, I think that even when he apologizes he still moves his congregation more towards hatred. Part of the reason for this book was to make people who aren’t aware of these beliefs more aware, and to ask people with those beliefs, are they really sure about them? Or are they just buying into it because some guy who claims divine authority tells them it is so? Clearly, there is a case for homosexuality as a sin in the bible. I don’t agree with the view, but I acknowledge that this is in the bible. But I don’t think that justifies the intense disgust and hatred that I feel from Christians towards the gay community. There’s none of God’s love in a hatred like that.

Q: You placed Naomi, the oldest Bauer child, in a same-sex relationship. Why?

A: Naomi is a true story. Many details were changed, but the main story-line is straight from my youth… one of my girlfriends had a same-sex relationship before me, and there was a rumor at school that she was gay. Yet, her own family was completely oblivious. Ultimately, it turned out to be adolescent exploration. Last I heard she was married.
I really felt that it was necessary to convey just how out-of-touch the Bauers are from their children, as well as how the faith can create such a struggle with identity. It isn’t meant to be a bad thing – like Naomi’s drinking is. It’s just as exploratory, and perhaps part of the reason she drinks is her shame and confusion over her sexuality. In Naomi’s case, the question goes unanswered – will she marry a man because she wants to, or because she feels like she should? Will she become openly homosexual?

Q: Who is your target audience for this novel? What genre would it fall under?

A: I think it lacks a genre other than “fiction.” The Nobel Prize committee recently stated that they had no intention of awarding the Nobel Prize in Literature to an American author, because we don’t consider a global audience. That is, Americans write for Americans. I’m certainly guilty of this; I’m not sure someone in, say, Guam, could pick up this novel and “get” most of it. The narrator presupposes – and relies on – an audience that has watched countless movies, that is informed about our political system, and that has some knowledge of the mega-church phenomenon and the resulting scandals. Moreover, I don’t think that the political views of LJ would seem counter to European Christianity. He’s speaking directly against ideas in place in our society.

Still, as much as I would love for most Christians to read this novel, and seriously consider and discuss the ideas in it, I really think most of them will put the book down early on. If they make it until Lydia, I’ll be mildly surprised. If they survive Lydia’s “Fuck Patois”, as Tom Wolf calls it, then I’ll be shockingly impressed.

Q: Parts of the story are completely over-the-top. Maulings by a lion prophecies come true. What are we to make of this?

A: I really wanted the “true” religion in this book to have elements of magical realism. I wanted to leave the possibility of a divine being, of the mystical, out there, but unexplained. I’ve known people who will say, “God gave me cancer so that he could cure it and I would learn about faith.” I think they are nuts, but it raises interesting questions. Did God sent a lion in to maul a
boy, just so he could be saved? Did God put Jordan and Bauer together, because he wanted to end Bauer’s misguided reign, did Satan, the tempter, put them together, or was it just two people acting as they would? These questions are intentionally unanswered. We have a sense of God watching, not intervening for most of the novel, until of course the end. And even that we take as subject to interpretation. I really wanted that, it played in heavily to the choice for the point-of-view.

Q: And what an interesting point-of-view, I don’t think I’ve read another like it. Talk to me about that.

A: Point of view was perhaps the hardest thing in this novel. I struggled with it until February, and the thesis was due in April. So large parts of the novel were written in different POVs. The first fifteen or so pages went through at least five major rewrites, the opening line had at least a dozen versions. Bauer’s first meeting with Jordan was written from Bauer’s perspective, from Jordan’s perspective, from omniscient-third, and finally to the royal-we that the novel uses.

I stated in my prospectus that I wanted God to be in the narrative, in the POV. So partially this meant really nailing down God’s role in the work. I knew that I wanted the whole novel in present tense, to follow the belief that there is no past or future for God. Biblically, he is present in all times, and all times are the present for him. I also liked this because it makes the work feel more alive; I knew this wouldn’t contain excessive action, and I thought present-tense would make a better read than past-tense.

At first I toyed with the whole story being told in prayers by the characters, but this was very clumsy. I tried first-person narratives, but that meant that in every scene, I had to choose who would “see” the scene for us, which meant that their personal beliefs had to color that section. While I wanted to explore those beliefs, I didn’t need them clouding everything. It also would mean that each section would have a different sound, and I was having enough trouble making the characters sound different.
Finally I settled on third-person, present, omniscient. I did the first chapter over in this form. I really hated it. It was boring, staid, and ineffective. I simply write better in first person. I think everyone does; it’s a more convincing form.

By this time I was really in a bind for time, and I wanted to shorten the novel up. I originally was going to do a lot more research — things like what the inside of Fulton County Jail in Atlanta looks like, what it really would have been like to be in Birmingham Jail at the same time as Martin Luther King Jr., exactly how much a mission trip costs. But getting those details would cost me time, and I needed to be able to finish the first draft without them. I started thinking of doing the work as a screen-play instead of a novel, just to get an idea of how much I really needed to describe — how brief I could be — and still get the point across. Also, one of my thesis committee members had told me to put more of the plot into dialogue, so that seemed like a good idea. I thought I’d write the first chapter as a screenplay, instead, just to see.

Instead I ended up with the point of view used in the novel. It echoes a screenplay, with the “royal-we” narrator dictating the shots. But it also makes the “we” a character, able to call attention to specific things that might otherwise go unnoticed — like the emphasis on the sweat on Jordan’s clothing during the first meeting. It’s mentioned in the description, but we fade into it in a kind of crass manner, to re-emphasize that, despite his attempts to ignore it, Bauer is focusing on Jordan’s physical appeal. It colors his decision to not send her to counseling but instead invite her to Africa. It questions his intentions.

This point of view also lets me be funny. I’m naturally humorous, and “a pro-wrestler for the CIA” is very much the way I would describe someone. But none of the characters are overly funny — besides maybe Lydia, who sees most people as a joke — and so there’s no other place for it in the novel. This doesn’t crop up much, but it does occasionally. We get that the narrator is sharp, witty, insightful, and amused. The narration is almost playful.

Another thing it let me do is skip the pointless stuff. Early on, when L.J., Theresa, and Nettie witness a wreck, L.J. gets out to help the girl. I wrote this from his perspective, and from third-person following L.J.. Honestly, the typical “are you okay” conversation was just pointless to write, pointless to read. Our narrator stays in the van — why would he get out, L.J.’s got it covered? And we witness instead the conversation with Nettie that convinces Theresa to get
Swing Low, Sweet Chariot 129

tinned. This decision is critical to her, and to the novel. Later, in his sermon, L.J. references the
girl in the accident. The whole accident was designed just so he could use it in his sermon, but by
saying in the car, we move a different plot along. The POV lets me dictate why we stay in the
car...we’re stuck with the camera, who blatantly tells us “that’s boring, let’s stay in here.”

Perhaps my best reason for the POV though is to emphasize the change in L.J. during his
final sermon, when he asks to see through God’s eyes. I wanted this to be powerful; I’m not even
sure how you’d do it in a movie. Here, the movie-schtick is dropped for more potent narration. I
wanted the print to reflect this change, when suddenly L.J. can feel and see as God can. I wanted
to use this to explain why, maybe, we don’t see or hear or even feel God on a regular basis – we
simply can’t handle it. Or God, having given us free-will, can’t justify constant interference. The
POV plays with the idea of God as a voyeur, getting some sort of enjoyment or fascination from
watching us without aiding us, that completely falls apart during this scene. We sense –
hopefully, if my writing is good enough- the true love, the sorrow, the desire to pick up all the
brokeness and fix it, fix us all, the frustration with why the church is ignoring the needs of the
people, the righteous anger at the fear instilled in these people from the pulpit.

Q: Talk about the actual process of writing. Where, when, how often?

A: With a deadline on this project, and a really busy life (I have two jobs, full-time enrollment in
college, a wife, a toddler, and one on the way), I had to write whenever, however, and wherever I
could. Notes were scribbled on legal pads during other classes, or on lunch-breaks, memos on
receipt paper from work, on my laptop whenever possible. I found it hard to write at home – my
daughter couldn’t understand why I couldn’t play with her right now – so I would go to campus
and type in the computer room of Bayboro Hall. On days we planned to go to the beach, we
would choose a beach 90 minutes away, and my wife would drive us so that I could type while
she drove – my daughter loves car rides. The best-case scenarios were Saturday mornings when I
paid to proctor exams for my tutoring job – because I merely had to time the students on
sections and answer any questions, I essentially got paid to use the time for writing! (And yes,
my bosses knew and were okay with this. They didn’t want to come in and sit around for four
hours on a Saturday morning.)
Most of the big decisions — which scenes to include, how to combine them — came during times when I wasn’t writing. If I was washing dishes, doing laundry, driving, or even playing video games to relax, I would relegate these to the back of my mind and focus instead on how to order the novel. For the first draft, it was essential only to get the scenes written and provide overall flow. This-then-that-then-that. I’m used to much shorter works, that often need little revision. I found writing a novel much harder, because sometimes I knew I was writing shit. I’d write a line that I hated, that I knew I would replace later, and I would have to leave it and move on, because I needed it as a narrative place-holder. I’d have to tell myself, “The first draft of anything is shit.” I’d thank Hemingway, who obviously knew enough about shitty first drafts to just let them be shit, and I’d try to learn from that. I would only go back and revise if it was necessary for the narrative — like adding foreshadowing, or revising to include a section. For the party scene, I realized that I’d explained that Lydia is closely watched by her parents, and then here she is, 17, at a frat party with her sister. How’d she get there? So I went back and included that in the conversation they have in Grace and Abigail’s bedroom. Which worked, because it gave me a reason for Abigail to tell on them later — she’s pissed because they focus on Grace. She’s jealous of the attention. In that scene, she’s mentioned as just a form under the blanket — but she’s not sleeping. She’s nine, and she’s listening, and she remembers. It includes another dynamic of this large family... how to you pay adequate attention to them all? Who feels left out, and why?

Q: The Bauers are a large family. Is this part of the television phenomenon with large families?

A: This story also has its base in a true one; one of the pastors I grew up under had a large family of all girls, and the rumor was that he had wanted a boy to carry on his spiritual work. His father was also a pastor, if I remember. So some of those details came from that story. But Bauer is significantly different from that pastor; the size of the family and the rumors behind it are all I borrowed from him. Oh, except perhaps his wife being ethereally beautiful. If I remember, that came from the same pastor. His wife’s character, however, is actually based on the mother of one of my first girlfriends.
The size of the family is important for a few reasons. One, Bauer starts out the novel by telling people to really scrutinize their children, to go through their rooms, to take their toys. Having seven children just emphasizes the impossibility of this task: how do you control the media that seven children are subjected to? Lydia has this mega-computing set-up in her room, do you think she can’t hack whatever out-of-the-box parental controls Bauer had installed? Here’s Naomi, the perfect daughter that they always look to for help with the younger children, and she’s out there trying everything that a teenager could try, then coming in on Sundays and trying to reconcile her behavior to her beliefs. I’m not even saying her exploration is bad; just typical of a high-school senior. Praise Jesus and should I have sex at prom?

It’s also important to explain the nature of Emily Bauer. She gave up a lot to be this perfect mom, and she wants to fill that role. She never mentions why she allowed seven children to happen, but we sense that she was trying to fill some sort of emptiness.

Q: How is this work different from your previous work?

A: Swing Low, Sweet Chariot is my first attempt at a full-length novel. It’s a different beast; previously I’ve only written short stories or academic essays. These works were easily polished, requiring just one or two revision. I would have the basic premise for a short story, and then just write it out in a rough draft. After that, I would do one revision to clear up the language and make any necessary rearrangements. A second revision usually indicated that I was writing substantial portions of the work over in a new style or direction.

Weaving together a novel proved to be a completely different task, and required a completely different approach. I used an outline more often, drafted character sketches, and used a timeline. It’s important, for instance, to remember that Nettie has seen eighty years of life, and that her mentality has its root in poor rural Alabama in the 1930’s and 1940’s. Here’s someone whose family didn’t move on when the Native Americans were pushed out of the area, but instead incorporated itself into the black community. Then they didn’t move on when the blacks fled from Alabama after the Civil Rights movement. All of that informs her; it explains her
distrust of Bauer and her discomfort in a mostly white church. And she’s just one character. Now we have to switch over to Bauer himself: a product of the seventies and eighties, when the Evangelical churches really took off, and who has steeped himself in the next thirty-some years of Charismatic, Apostolic, and Non-denominational movements. Each character has a full life that influences their speech and decisions. Just tracking all of that proved to be a challenge.

Usually when I write, I thrust myself into one role. Even in a third person short-story, the angle is singular; I am one narrator with a very clear, consistent look at the circumstances and characters involved. In this case, I wanted to deal with the ambiguity and Unknowable aspects of God, which meant inferring rather than stating. I never call Emily Bauer a gold-digger, but we see plenty of details that could enable us to infer this. Or, she’s a person who just happened to end up wealthy, when she didn’t expect it, and she’s still trying to figure out what that means. She rejected her parent’s money for ideals like love and changing the world, and she ends up without those things but still with money. I never say that she “married her father”, but we see undeniable similarities between Neil and Emily's father. Our narrator is holding back, giving us camera shots and scenes of dialogue, as if he wants us to make up our own minds about this. He’s asking us to judge. I found this difficult to do, because I am so often didactic.

Time constraints on the thesis dictated that I needed to produce a rough draft of the complete novel. I really felt that this was the first critical task in the actual writing, just getting the dialogue down and the scenes in the right order. During the writing, I knew I would have to rewrite. For instance, all of the characters tend to sound alike, and they sound suspiciously like the narrator! Which, of course, isn’t accurate. Lydia, the 17 year old full of spunk, sounds much different than Jordan, the 30-something paranoid nurse. But their dialogue reads the same in the rough draft.

Partially this is because I didn’t do dialogue very often or very well before this work. I’m cerebral, my friends are cerebral, and my writing tends to be cerebral. Heavy, dense, and internal. Dialogue is so vastly different than this. If I gained anything from this work, it’s an appreciation of writers who can make many different dialects and ways of speaking flow together in a work without seeming cliché, overdone, or false.
Multiple themes also proved challenging. When people ask me what is this novel about, I tend to answer “the fall and redemption of a televangelist.” But so much more is present here: personal contradictions, glimmers of the race issue in Atlanta, parent/child interactions, teenagers and sex, abuse of religious power, and the fear as tool for those in religious power all come into play. And yet, for the most part, our narrator merely wants to show us these, to make us aware, without passing judgment and sometimes without even obviously stating the themes. And so it became a challenge to create scenes with realistic dialogue geared specifically towards a primary goal – character/conflict/resolution – while pinging off these secondary goals. Naomi is a devout Christian who is in a same-sex relationship, and also is trying to establish her identity as an adult as she moves into college-phase. Many of the things she does conflict with her religion, and with her true self. Every time she is in front of the camera, we are confronting these contradictions.

But we also have this really distinct impression that in Atlanta, a place where the percentage of African Americans in the population is more than double the national average, we get the impression that Naomi has no Black friends. This isn’t a stated thing; Black students are just conspicuously absent. So the theme of a racial divide in Atlanta – where all these cultures come together but never really mesh – is present in the background, but not directly addressed. Closely related but very distinct is the class issue. When we compare her life to that of Theresa – our college journalism major who is afraid that keeping her child means losing her scholarship, and thus any hope of a better life for herself and her child – only then do we get a glimmer of these divides.

Because of all these issues, this work – or at least the rough draft of this novel – is substantially different in that it lacks the unique twist of phrase that most of my writing has. People don’t talk like I write, so that’s missing in the dialogue. These details are in the small narratives that serve as scene descriptions, but they are intentionally left short. So the rough draft feels inferior to my previous writing. Part of the revision and clean-up process will be to bring this work up to my normal standard. While I struggled to find a voice for this novel, I know my own voice. But, evidently, I need to alter it to fit the needs of a longer work.
Q: Africa is featured prominently in this work. There, as opposed to here, miracles happen on a regular basis, and people like Jordan—who experience nothing but panic and fear here—are able to find fulfillment. What is Africa’s role in the novel? Why is it important?

A: When I started this novel, I had recently taken a class on ethics and the environment, and we studied Africa quite a bit. So Lydia’s knowledge of things like conservation practices and the sort of political screw-ups came from this. The part about the medical companies came from this, as did the expired medicines. A few years ago, I read an article in the Shambala Sun (a Buddhist magazine) that said the money we spent on one year in Iraq would have paid for HIV/AIDS medication for every sick person in Africa for something like twelve years. So I already had this image of Africa as a country that few try to help, and when they do, they try to help in all the wrong ways. And I needed that in the novel as an example of where, as Christians, our attention should be. We sit focus on these minute differences in interpretation of the Bible as some critical element in our salvation, while a whole continent struggles to get clean drinking water. It’s ridiculous. I seriously doubt that a modern day Christ would be found in the aisle of a grocery store, complaining about the injustice of exorbitant pricing on cage-free chicken eggs. Instead he’d be either in Africa, or here trying to get more resources moved to Africa.

I also had experienced several churches who fund and run these Africa Campaigns. These really are massive projects where hundreds of thousands of Africans are saved, but when the tents pull up, they are left with a few hundred people who received treatment for a current illness and possibly a new town well, community center, or mill. And I really wanted to stress how off this focus is, where we are concerned first about their “souls” and secondly—and distantly—about their day-to-day. I think the proper route for evangelism is to care for the day to day, and when—and only then—when we are asked why we do so much, or how it is that we have our own lives together, then we mention our religion. We show people tangible compassion, and they see us walking our path. Then, we not only create new converts, but we create converts who are self-supporting and even able to go and begin this process of charity in their own community. In this way, we have taught virtue, compassion, and right action and helped establish these as principles for those new to faith.

I always remember how the Buddha refused to discuss the existence of a deity, life after death, or the existence of a soul. He likened these things to a man who has been shot with an
Swing Low, Sweet Chariot 135

and looks at the fletchings to try and deduce the arrow's origins, instead of focusing on the more salient problem of the hole in his chest and the arrow shaft still present in the wound. Buddha thought that first, maybe we should focus on this life-threatening problem, and then maybe later we'll get to the other issues.

It makes good sense, and I think it's an approach that is appropriate, ethical, and necessary in a place like Africa. I see the argument of "but the souls are more important, as we are more concerned with the next life than this one." But I completely disagree, and I think Christ would disagree. By working on the physical problems in Africa, we could help create a culture that would enable Compassion to spread. Instead, we help create the attitude of the translators in the novel: "How do we get all we can out of these ignorant Americans?" We promote greed, and trickery, and selfishness. And frankly, if I'm starving, I don't give a damn what God you want me to worship, I'll sign up for some food. And I'll sign up for the next guy's God, too. So I think the "souls saved" numbers are false; it's "people who said so because we promised or gave them something." So let's meet those needs first, and then talk about religion.

There is also this kind of urban myth in Christianity that healing happens on these trips. I've heard the stories about the dead being raised in Africa, followed by stories of "but our luggage, and all the relevant photographic evidence, fell from the plane over the ocean." And you always assume these people are just full of it. But what if they weren't? And what explains the discrepancy between how God acts in Africa and how he acts here? I didn't really have answers to these questions, but I wanted to raise the questions. In the novel, miracles occur in both places. Why are they viewed differently?

Ultimately, this novel is about whole-sale redemption. Even the title is meant to suggest that we are far from home, waiting to be brought back. We are wondering in this foreign land, and we see something, the massive Red River, or a moment of insight, that reminds us of something Unknowable. We pray for redemption, we ask for the chariot to come and carry us back to the place that our souls belong. We cry out for righteousness, even as we try to define it and even as we flee from it. For some, like Lydia, this means letting go of hatred and hurt to come and make peace with her father, and tell him what she really wants from him. For Bauer, this is getting back to his original attraction to religion – the ability to make a real difference through missionary work. He's funded this mission trip for fifteen years, and we see its
importance to him. But he’s let aspects of it slip, he’s not fully committed, and he’s not making the kind of difference he once thought to make. So he hypes it up: Look at us! Look at the number of souls saved! But he misses the benefit of tangible improvement. He makes a very visible spectacle for a week, and then goes home without even photos to remind him.

We get the impression that missionary work is what he should have been doing all along, but for some reason he got bogged down leading a church. Now he ends up with a wife, children, and a massive ministry - but he’s still not doing what he feels he should. And so I chose Africa to be this work, for the above reasons. A well-funded ministry there that focused on meeting the needs of the people - bypassing large committees and employees that simply suck up the funds through salaries - could make an enormous impact. In the end, he moves there, and redeems himself.

I actually anticipate catching flak for his decision to abandon his family, but I think it’s pretty clear that he abandoned them long ago, and at the end we get that he cares more - and perhaps has a better relationship with them - from Africa than he ever did while living with them. Just as I expect flak about Naomi’s choice, I think it’s important to remember that the narrator isn’t passing judgment, and he isn’t stating that these people have done the right thing. He’s simply showing us the story, and letting us decide for ourselves. Ultimately, that is the main religious premise of this novel - the truth is Unknowable in this life, and we must find our own path to redemption.

Q: Any final thoughts for honors students wishing to write a novel as a thesis?

A: Don’t do it! Lol. Seriously, unless you already have a ton of material for your novel - I’m talking plot outline, character sketches, beginning-middle-end - you simply won’t have time to produce quality work in the time given. The average thesis is, what, eighty pages? And the average novel is more like four hundred. So you’re really cranking out written material. The logic that you won’t need as much time to research simply won’t hold up: you’ll spend that time making decisions about the novel, and possibly researching details to fill the novel out.

If you are determined to do so, lessen your course load. I ended up dropping several non-essential classes in order to have time to complete this. Oh, and if you’re planning on, say,
having a child, taking care of your existing child, and holding down two jobs, like I did, you can pretty much kiss the concept of sleep goodbye.

Other than that, I'd have to stay that a good analysis of great literature is better than a thousand books on how to write a novel. Grab your favorite book and tear apart the writing… look at why the language catches your attention. Diagram tension in the novel on a time vs tension scale. Look at the complexities in the relationships. See how over the top or out-of-the ordinary the characters are. Then grab the next novel and do it all over.

At one point, my wife and I tore through my library of “classic literature”, all seven bookcases of it, and divided it into two piles: third person versus first person. Then I spent several days comparing the viewpoints, especially those of writers who had used both. In the end, I realized that I wanted a voice that sounded somewhere in the middle of the two, and the narration in this novel flowed naturally from that. Despite the religious nature of the book, I don't think I quite would have hit on having an omniscient “royal we” narrate if I had not spent the time comparing both styles. If you’ve done all of that in the past, great! If not, then expect the novel to take longer than you anticipate. Again, if you don’t have a clear idea of where you’d like a novel to go, and a substantial amount of work already completed, reconsider using a novel as your thesis.