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Title: Give Me That Old Time Religion

Part: Plainsong 1: Prepare The Way

Summary: Set in the late Sixties 'Give Me That Old Time Religion,' or OTR for short, tells the story of how joining the Agapemone Bethel changes young Jake Gledhill's life.

Keywords: msolo mf

To quench any flames before they start raging, this is a work of fiction. The author does not espouse the pseudo-theology contained in this story nor is he an adherent to its practices.

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Please pay attention to the story codes because they may change with each Plainsong.

Finally, remember Celeste's Blow Job Principle which states "If a person expects to get a second blow job, the recipient should make the giver glad to have performed the first." Think of this story, or any story on this site, as the written equivalent of the author giving you head (a handy, gender-neutral phrase encompassing both cunnilingus and fellatio) and be sure to say thank you.

Thank yous for and comments on Gimme That Old Time Religion can be sent to this email address:
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The story codes for OTR: Prepare The Way are(msolo mf)

Give Me That Old Time Religion:
An Oratorio In Several Plainsongs
By Fowler Gray

The First Plainsong: Prepare the Way

I came of age in a "different" sort of family.

A high school dropout, my father Leonard Gledhill worked as a jack-of-all-trades handyman at a local repair shop. Even today I can barely repair burnt toast by scraping the black stuff off; give Dad a hammer, pliers, a screwdriver and some scrap metal and he could fix anything. And it would stay fixed.

My mother Mary Anne quit waiting on tables after she had me and dedicated herself to taking care of her family. Besides the usual housekeeping, this also meant gardening. Not flower gardening, although Mom had a few patches of posies scattered around the house, sustenance gardening designed to put food on the table.

Our small house was the ultimate fixer-upper, patched and repaired until it was as trim and fresh as a birthday cake; the inside full of second-hand furniture and appliances Dad had refurbished. The furnace wheezed like an asthmatic when it kicked on but the place stayed warm. When something did break down, usually late at night, I could always count on learning one or two new and inventive phrases I could use to impress my friends.

Dad's job didn't pay all that much and, even with the odd jobs he picked up along the way, we didn't have many frills. I never had a new bike as a kid, but the discarded bikes Dad overhauled were as good as new. As for a car, well Dad promised once we'd gotten just a little more ahead of the monthly bills, we'd go to the junkyard and pick out an old clunker to work on together; we just never seemed to get far enough ahead to make that visit.

It's not that we were poor. We never lacked for any of

the essentials or even a few nonessentials, but we weren't wealthy either, sort of lower middle-class. Our clothes weren't stylish but they were always clean and in good repair. Our meals were plain but nutritious. The meat Mom bought on sale might be a little off-color but after she added a few spices it tasted just fine and anyway Mom's scrumptious home-baked bread was always the highlight of any meal.

Dad was always trying to earn enough to keep the household accounts in the black but still spend as much time with me as he could. Our entertainments were also inexpensive but no less enjoyable for their low cost. At least one Saturday a month we'd pile into the family car and go for a ride around the countryside. Sometimes we'd pull off the road to picnic in a field or glade or go fishing or swimming in a local creek. A stop for ice cream along the way was always a favorite and, every once in a while, Dad would splurge we'd get a sack of burgers from the White Tower in McCutchen.

Five, maybe six times a year, we'd go "visiting," spending a weekend at someone else's house. The days were when we kids played, moving at warp speed, never still always noisy until all our energy slipped away like sawdust spilling from a cheap stuffed animal, leaving us limp as we slipped into bed only to begin our frantic activities all over again in the morning.

The nights were when the adults played; gathering around the kitchen table bottles and glasses outlining its edge, the ever present deck of cards sitting in the middle waiting for the first shuffle. We'd drift off to sleep with to the muted sounds of "pass, pass, pick it up" drifting our from the endless euchre games punctuated by the clink of a bottle tapping against a glass and the occasional heartfelt "son of a bitch" from one of the fathers as a bid went astray.

The big event was our annual vacation, a week spent at Winslow Lake with two other families. Part of what made it exciting for me was that I could never be sure who the other two families would be. Sometimes it would be friends we'd stayed with before, other times there'd be a new family added to the mix, someone I'd never met before.

The other neat thing was the sleeping arrangements. We always rented the same two cottages at Thistledown Resort. The adults stayed in the Boathouse, which was the larger of the two, sitting perched right on the edge of the water. Kids got to stay in the Bunkhouse about four cottages inland from the Boathouse. It wasn't near the water; instead it was by the playground and ball field, surrounded by a small grove of trees, letting us pretend we were living in Sherwood Forest.

Calling these cottages makes them sound more fancy than they were. Essentially they were old two-room cabins, each with a small bathroom and a large common area. The common area in the Boathouse had a refrigerator, a small gas stove, a sink with cupboards above it, two double beds, a sleeper couch and a kitchen table with chairs. The Bunkhouse had a smaller refrigerator and a sink but no cooking facilities. In place of regular beds there were three bunk beds and the only table in the room had board games built into its top.

Except for breakfast, almost all of our meals were cooked on the grill outside the Boathouse, each family taking a different day to roast hot dogs and hamburgers for everyone. Meals were eaten on an old warped picnic table on the lakeshore. You had to be very careful where you sat if you didn't want to wind up with a butt full of splinters.

The fact the cottages were separated from each other gave us youngsters the chance to stay up far later into the night than we were usually allowed. Sure, lights were to be out at 10 but it didn't take us long to figure out we could hang blankets over the windows and keep the lamps glowing without anyone in the Boathouse being able to see them. Of course, in the morning we were just as tired as the adults were from their late night activities and, while we didn't have the magic of coffee to perk us up again, we did have the resiliency of innocent youth.

Working together was another way Dad found to spend time with me, despite the fact I was downright clumsy. Of course, it was also his way of educating me and making sure I pulled my own weight in the family. I

always worked for my allowance and, when I turned 11, Dad arranged for me to start putting in a couple of hours a week at the hardware store in town, sweeping the place out and doing other small chores, a role that grew as I grew older. Half my dollar an hour pay went into the money jar at home, the other fifty cents I got to keep.

"No free rides for my son by god. I'm not raising any pampered sissy, a little hard work will help make a man out of you Jake, get you ready for the real world," he would tell me whenever I groused about having to kickback half my earnings.

Getting ready for the real world was a big thing for my Dad. So was being a real man. So was "doing better than your old man did."

At the mercy of too many forces he couldn't control, Dad wanted things be done his way at his house. Dinner would be what he wanted when he wanted it. He worked and brought home a paycheck. Mom was to clean, cook and do whatever else Dad told her to do. It's not that Dad was a tyrant, far from it. But he was the boss and expected to be treated that way.

My mother was a deferential and dutiful wife, following my dad's orders to a "T." I don't think it ever occurred to her to do otherwise. In fact, once I entered my teenage years she had even begun to well, not follow my orders exactly, but something close to that.

"Mary Anne, the boy's 13, he's on his way to being a man, it's time you started listening to him a little better," Dad instructed her one day. That's when I got to start telling Mom what I wanted for lunch, what I wanted to wear, that sort of thing. The older I got the more deferential Mom got to me.

My mom's social life was a limited one. What didn't revolve around her family involved her church, the Agapemone Bethel.

Every Sunday Mom would go to services at the bethel. Since he was a practicing agnostic who scoffed at any

organized religion, Dad didn't go with her. That didn't stop Mom from dragging me along a few times.

I didn't go that often, maybe once every six weeks just to make Mom happy. When I did go I always found it a strange experience. For one thing, women weren't permitted to talk during the service. Timothy's admonition "During instruction a woman should be quiet and respectful," was the order of the day. The only time you could hear their voices was during the plainsongs, which were chanted, not sung, because music wasn't allowed in the bethel. Stranger still, it always seemed that tucked away somewhere in every sermon was a little lecture on the need of a wife to "hold fast to her husband and cheerfully obey him in all ways," or on "the virtues of submission, because when a wife rebels against her husband she rebels against God," sentiments that had most of the women in the congregation nodding along in agreement as though they came directly from Stepford.

The older I got the more this bothered me. With woman's lib all the rage, this just seemed so sexist and dismissive of women that I couldn't believe my mother was buying all this stuff. It finally got to the point that, when we stopped for ice cream at Couf's Dairy on the way home from services I decided to ask Mom about the sermons.

Hermann and Magda Couf were part of a large German farming family that had branched out into a number of businesses. Herman bought his milk and cream from his brother Heinz's farm. Magda, their two daughters and an indeterminate number of nieces and nephews transformed it into the best ice cream I've ever had.

There were never any more than five flavors available at Couf's at any one time and the only one that was always available was vanilla. One that was never available was chocolate. Magda hated chocolate and, being a stubborn German, refused to make it.

"Those what want chocolate ice cream can go down to the Tastee-Freeze. I won't have that scheisse in my parlor."

The other four varieties changed with the harvest seasons as Magda took advantage of the locally available fruits and berries to produce her confections. Even today, I'd kill for another taste of her Wild Blackberry Roly-Poly, all the joys of summer distilled into a single bite.

While the flavor board at Couf's was eclectic, the decor was standard ice cream shop with an emphasis on red, white and pink. The walls were lined with high-back booths, the center with twisted metal tables painted white; the back of the dairy had a single long formica-topped counter with red topped swiveling stools. Even during the winter Couf's was a local gathering place, a location to have a bite to eat, catch up on town gossip and, on that day, receive religious instruction.

"Jake," my mom told me in repose to my questioning, her lips shiny with whipped cream from the banana split she was eating, "I certainly do believe in the teachings of the Bible. God made Eve from the rib of Adam to be his partner, equal in all things. But Eve listened to the serpent and betrayed Adam, made him fall from grace. It was woman who was responsible for the expulsion from the Garden. Every woman has to seek redemption for that original sin. We do it through obedience to our men as Eve should have."

"But Mom, what if Dad wanted you to do something that was wrong? If he asked you to rob a bank would you?"

"Now you're being silly. Your father would never ask me to rob a bank."

"Alright but suppose he asks you to tell a lie. Telling a lie is a sin isn't it?"

"Some lies are."

"OK, so would you sin if Dad asked you to?"

Mom put the spoon down next to her dish. Reaching across the table she took both my hands in hers capturing my eyes with hers.

"I know you're growing up Jacob but even at 17 I don't know if you're old enough to understand what I'm going to tell you."

"Mom, please quit treating me like a little kid."

"As you wish Jacob, just remember I'm speaking to you as a man now, a young man but a man all the same. Yes, I would sin if your father commanded it."

My mother's admission stunned me. My face must have shown it because she gave my hands a tender reassuring squeeze.

"Understand me Jake. Your father is my Lord and Master. As such God expects me to follow your father's commands. That's God's will. There is no sin in doing God's will. If you'd go to Bethel more with me you'd understand."

Fat chance of that, I thought, hoping that no one was overhearing this conversation. I'd die if my friends knew my Mom was saying these things. Thank goodness we were sitting in a booth against the wall. The high back gave us some privacy unlike the tables in the center of the dairy.

"Your great grandmother Massie grew up in West Virginia, Jake. She was a 'sin eater.' People then believed that you couldn't go to heaven until all of your sins were forgiven. If you died unshriven, you went to hell.

"Gramma Massie would be paid to 'eat' the dead person's sins. She'd go to the house where the body was laid out, usually on a table, a plate of food resting on their chest. Your great grandmother would eat that food and the sins of the deceased along with it. That's what sin eaters did. As they ate the food they took that person's sins on to themselves so the person could go to heaven.

"For any woman, being a submissive spouse is just like being a sin eater. By our subservience to our men, we redeem Eve's sin in Eden when she disobeyed the Heavenly Father. Our willingness to make this sacrifice

preserves our souls and our place in the kingdom. I feel sorry for those women who talk about woman's liberation, independence, equality but I feel sorrier for those young girls they're misleading. They're perpetuating Eve's error and bringing great unhappiness on themselves."

Until then I'd never thought of Mom as a religious fanatic but even to my 17-year old mind, there was no question she had serious issues. Being old-fashioned was one thing; this, this was another. I looked for flecks of spittle on her face; in all the books I read crazy people always foamed at the mouth. All I could see were stray smears of cream the split had left behind at the corners of her mouth.

Oblivious to my growing unease and embarrassment, the words gushed out of Mom like water rushing over a cataract of a river. How woman was created to follow, not lead. That only through fulfilling her role as God had intended could a woman realize true inner peace and salvation. The joy she felt when she obeyed Dad's commands. I wasn't so much listening to her talk as I was watching her mouth move. Then she said something that brought me to attention like a recruit at reveille.

"... and I can only hope and pray Jake that when you start getting involved with a girl it'll be some one from the bethel who will be as respectful of you as I am of your father. You know," she said with a calculating look in her eye, "Mrs. Brewster told me her daughter Alice thinks you're cute, maybe you should pay a little attention to her the next time you go to bethel with me."

Alice Brewster looked like a constipated hamster. No way was I going out with her, no matter how cute she thought I was. But the idea of having a girlfriend who would listen to me and treat a nerd like me as if I was something special took root pretty quickly. Maybe there really was something to the song about wanting a girl just like the girl that married dear old dad.

After that, I went to bethel with Mom more often, not to listen to the preacher or to get religion but to

check out the girls. As one of only six bethels in the state, Mom's drew people from all over, just not a lot of them. The flock was small and there weren't very many girls to check out. The ones that weren't spazes or sweat hogs pretty much all had boyfriends, except for Eleanor Hunter.

Elle was just on the pleasant side of skinny with a narrow triangular face and long silky chestnut hair she wore in a classic pullback with a French twist. Set above a pointy, almost beaky nose, her hazel eyes were hypnotic, twinkling with some inner amusement as though Elle knew a joke too good to share with the rest of the world. She was one of those girls who were "handsome" rather than pretty.

Her attire for worship was plain and simple, all one color, usually black or midnight blue with only a modest portion of her long legs revealed to public view beneath the hem of her dress. More sack-like than clinging, even the least form fitting of her Sunday outfits couldn't hide the protruding mounds of her breasts, so out of proportion to the leanness of the rest of her body.

To a young boy, noticeable tits of any size attract our attention like toys in a shop front; major leaguers like Eleanor Hunter had made you want to press your face against the shop window. Even before Mom had started me thinking about the girls in the bethel, I'd checked Elle out on more than one occasion. So, with the most impure of intentions, I began to try to figure out how to get close to Elle.

Her being a year older wasn't a concern at least to me; I didn't know how Elle would feel. Being five years older than Dad, Mom was always being teased about being a "cradle robber." I figured I was just carrying on the family tradition of being the "younger man."

The dilemma was that Elle didn't go to my school; she went to school two counties away. At 17, even though I could drive, I had no car, and little chance of using the family chariot for dating. It was one thing for her to be seen with someone a year younger than her even though we were both in the same grade, one of the nicer

effects of my starting kindergarten early. It'd be another thing for us to be chauffeured around by our parents or so I thought.

Still that was a complication that could be solved later. Of more immediate importance was getting Elle to notice me, a difficult task since the only time we spent together was a few minutes before and after each service.

Whenever possible I maneuvered Mom into sitting either directly in front of or behind Mr. and Mrs. Hunter and their daughter, a position that allowed me to take advantage of the blessing of peace and understanding at the end of each service. I preferred sitting behind and a little to the side of Elle since then I got to look at her throughout the entire proceedings. Sometimes, as she moved, I could see her breasts sway from side-to-side, offering a nice distraction from the preacher's droning.

After a couple of weeks, Elle and I began to talk with each other in the parking lot outside of the bethel. Nothing heavy, just the inconsequential exchanges you get between any two teens. Our discussions were polite and perfunctory, tinged with an awkward formality by the knowledge our every move was being monitored and evaluated by the maternal pair hovering just at the far range of earshot, ready to step in and thwart the slight hint of any improper activities.

Even with the constant surveillance, it didn't take long for me to reach the point where I was becoming infatuated with Elle. Just the sight of the corners of her mouth rising toward her ears in response to something I'd said made me feel like I'd won first place at a track meet.

I liked making Elle smile, her grin as wide as a pumpkin's, the flat of her pink tongue visible between even rows of sparkling white teeth. I liked Elle's laugh, a bright chirpy sound and the way she tilted her head back when it escaped from her vocal cords. I think I even liked Elle.

What made it hard to say for sure was that I really

didn't know Elle and Elle really didn't know me. We were strangers to each other despite the surface courtesies we engaged in every Sunday. The after-bethel ritual may have satisfied the proprieties but it really only allowed us to become familiar with each other on the basest of levels, our physical appearances.

When I talked with her, I was careful to follow Dad's advice to keep my eyes focused on hers and "... never, never eyeball her tits even when you think you can get away with it. She'll know what you're after but you don't have to advertise it. Deep down inside she wants to give it to you, it's just you have to play the game to get it from 'respectable' girls."

"Eyeballing her tits" may have been forbidden when we talked but they were front and center in my fantasies. There Elle would be nude, stretched out on her back in my bed, her eyes closed tight, her hands cupping her bold round breasts and pushing them up to my waiting mouth, uplifted nipples erect and cherry red against her French vanilla skin with its sprinkling of freckles.

That creamy skin would be shiny from sweat, sweat that would be covering her body, dripping down her ribcage; moistening the sheet underneath and making it wrinkle as she began to writhe. I'd lick my way from her tits down her squirming stomach, savoring the salty tang of her young flesh. When I arrived between her legs, I'd toy with her, blowing lightly against her pussy, bestowing just the softest glancing caresses with my tongue. And then, only after I had reduced Eleanor to a quivering suppliant begging for my cock, would I thrust into her wet, warm cunt and listen to her cries of ecstasy as I brought her to orgasm after thundering orgasm.

So I was a sex-crazed teenager. So sue me.

My favorite fantasy came out of one the skin magazines Dad gave me. That's right, that my dad gave me. Mom was big on providing "hands on" help with my schoolwork. Dad liked to offer what he called "special rewards" for good scholastic performance, "but don't let your mom know." He felt it met two of his three goals, since

it helped me not only to do better than he did in school, it also moved me further down the road to being a real man.

There was a definite hierarchy to Dad's bribes. Gradewise C's got me old Adams and Playboys. B's were good for softcore porn. My rare A's got me the real thing, hardcore action, some of it pretty kinky.

The other side of this was that poor grades got things taken away at double the rate they were awarded. He always knew just the ones to take away, the ones that were the most worn or had the most spots on them.

In my number one scenario Elle is again nude. But this time she is kneeling in the middle of my room waiting for me. I enter the room fully clothed and walk up to her. She begins to massage my dick through my jeans with one hand while raising the gray T-shirt I'm wearing with the other. Before my cock gets too hard to move easily she undoes my pants spreading them open into a "V" and pulling them down along with my boxers until the bottom of the zipper rests just below my balls, my dick now flat against my stomach.

Elle leans into me and begins to lick up and down my prick; her saliva tickling my balls as it flows across their wrinkled container. At the top of a stroke, she opens her mouth and engulfs my dick, welcoming it into her warm, wet oral cavity as an alcoholic would a drink. Her chestnut hair becomes tossed and tangled as she rotates around my shaft, bobbing up and down and sucking until I feel I'm being pulled inside out.

As I near my climax, I reach down and still the motions of her head with my hands, a loud, sloppy slurp marking the exit of my cock from between her lips. As I begin to shoot, Elle leans back and rises up offering her tits as the target for my outpouring. Thick gobs of sperm puddle on their upper reaches while the thinner less energetic spurts ooze slowly down her mammary slopes until they drip from her nipples like melting snow from a roof.

While I watch, Elle bends her head down as far as it will go, her protruding tongue transporting my

spendings into her hungry mouth. What her tongue can't reach her fingers can; fingers that act as tiny pseudo-cocks complete with a serving of warm, fresh cum. It's an erotic vision that never failed to stimulate me.

It sure didn't on the night my mother walked into my bedroom just as her son was shooting his wad all over his stomach.

There I was, fist racing up and down on my stiff dick, Rosy Palm and her five sisters doing the line dance when the door shot open and the light snapped on. No time to roll over, pull up the covers, do anything to hide my onanistic fervor. I was trapped by the sudden illumination of my self-abuse. All I could do was stare in horror at my mother as the tip of my prick erupted, a geyser of white jetting into the air only to fall back in accordance with the Newton's law of universal gravitation, drenching me with sperm and shame at the same time.

For a moment, it was as though Mom and I were posed subjects in an old-fashioned daguerreotype, unable to stir even a fraction of an inch without ruining the plate. I don't know how I looked to her but Mom's mouth was hanging open like a bright red ribbon; her startled eyes focused on my crotch until she broke our gridlock by taking a half step toward the bed.

Her halting movement freed me from my captivity, allowing me to turn away from the door and conceal myself and my humiliation beneath the bedspread. For almost a minute, the only sounds reaching my ears were those of Mom's labored breathing and the creaking of the floor beneath her as she rocked back and forth. Then, expelling a large sigh, Mom left the room softly closing the door behind her.

I'm not sure how long I laid alone in the dark berating myself for exposing my own mother to my moral deficiencies. It could have been ten minutes; it could have been an hour. The only thing keeping me company besides my own misery was the faint intonations of a conversation taking place down the hall. The fact that I could hear it at all, even if I couldn't make out what was being said, told me that the discussion was a

heated one.

When footsteps came my way, I began to shiver, knowing that Dad had his belt in his hand ready to administer the punishment I deserved for my actions. Well, I had earned my chastisement and I was going to take it like a man. I just hoped he would leave some skin on my buttocks. At least it was Friday night and I'd have the weekend to recover before I had to spend the day sitting down in school - unless I had to do extra penance at the bethel.

The gentle knock on the door brought me up short.
"Jacob, it's your mother. May I please come in and talk with you?" I didn't know what to say.

"Son, I really would like to talk with you if you'll let me." I must have made some sound Mom took for consent because she opened the door and came in.

"Jacob, may I turn the light?" From under the covers, I issued a muffled "Yes."

"Please come out from under there Jacob. There's no reason for you to be ashamed and you need to see me while we talk."

No reason to be ashamed? My mom walks into my room while I'm spanking the monkey; I spray jizz all over myself while she's watching and I don't have any reason to be ashamed? The sheer novelty of Mom's approach was enough to make me leave my cotton cocoon.

As my head cleared the covers I saw my mother on her knees in the middle of the floor, her head bowed, her long silver-blond hair hanging forward over her shoulders.

"Jacob, it was wrong of me to enter your room when your door was closed without your permission. I apologize for my failure to respect your privacy and I beg for your forgiveness."

Unsure of why she was asking for my forgiveness when it should have been the other way around, I simply stared at her.

"May I have your pardon, Jacob," she asked again.

"Mom, you didn't do anything to apologize for. I'm the one who's sorry."

Acting as though I hadn't spoken my mother formally asked for absolution a third time. "Son, please gift me with your forgiveness." Not knowing what else to do I told her she was forgiven.

After the last words of dispensation exited my mouth my mother lifted her head and, for the first time since she reentered the room, looked me in the eye. "Thank you Jacob for your pardon. May I rise now?" I nodded yes, still stunned by my mother's behavior.

Apparently, my little wag of the head did the trick because the woman who uncoiled herself from my floor was again my mother, not the sorrowful penitent of earlier.

"Jake, I didn't think you were ever going to accept my apology," she said moving a chair away from my desk to sit on. "I'm glad you finally did because that floor is hard and my knees were really starting to ache. At least when your father's angry with me he usually lets me kneel on a pillow."

"Mom, I wasn't angry, honest."

"Honey, it's fine if you were. It's a hard thing watching your son grow up into a man, harder yet to judge what stage he's reached. I knew you were interested in sex and I knew you've been masturbating. I've seen the stains on your sheets for months now. What I should have known was to not open your door without knocking and being told it's alright."

Take the ruddiest red you've ever seen and multiply it tenfold. I was blushing so hard my face felt hotter than molten steel at a rolling mill.

Mom actually laughed as she tussled my hair. "It's nothing to be embarrassed about Jake. Masturbation is a normal outlet for sexual urges. Everyone does it, you,

your father, even me sometimes."

It was freaky lying in bed, sticky cum crusting on my chest, listening to my mother talk about how she masturbated too. I didn't know what to make of it.

"But Jake, I really was wrong to barge into your room the way I did and I am sorry. I hope your forgiveness is real and not just something you said because you thought you had to. From now on whenever your door is shut, I'll knock and wait for you to tell me I can come in. That's a promise, hon."

"Thanks," I said the flush on my face lowering its intensity to a mere fire engine red. "I'm really not mad Mom. It was just so embarrassing. I didn't know what to do."

"Well, maybe a good place to start right now is cleaning yourself up. Wait a minute," Mom said as she walked out of the room only to return in a few moments with a warm washcloth in her hand.

"Go ahead Jacob, wash off before it gets dry and itchy," she said handing me the cloth. "I'll turn around," she said matching her actions to her statement.

Mollified, I threw the covers off and began to scrub the remains of my orgasm from my body. It was only as I sat up to wipe my thighs that I looked into the mirror over my dresser. There, reflected fully in the looking glass, was my mother, a mysterious half-smile on her face like a cat dreaming of a fat, slow mouse.

The next day my mother rearranged my bedroom furniture. A small pine chest had replaced the battered nightstand next to my bed, a round, short metal wastebasket wedged in between the bed and the chest. The drawers of the chest contained my collection of pornography, the same magazines and photos I kept in a box on the shelf in the back of my closet. On the top of the chest sat a new box of facial tissues with a note attached.

"Jake," the note read in my mother's swooping handwriting, "please use these to save on my having to

wash your sheets twice a week. Love Mom."

From that point on, Mom treated me differently. Not only was she even more deferential to me, she was also more open and outgoing showing me facets of her personality she had kept hidden before.

For one thing, Mom had a wicked sense of humor and a sharp tongue. One night when I mentioned Elle at the Sunday dinner table Dad told me "Jake, never forget, men are fire and women are the wood put on earth for us to consume," only to have Mom shoot right back "Yeah and Smokey The Bear's never around when you need him."

For another, she wasn't as uncritical and accepting of Dad as she seemed. Disagreements, they were too mild to be called arguments, which had taken place behind closed doors now were conducted in the open. But once Dad gave a command, she obeyed.

It seemed the bethel didn't demand meekness from a woman in all things, only that they honor their man's commands fully and faithfully. According to Mom, she had the weight of scriptural authority behind her in any "disputations" she had with my father provided she was obedient to his decision once it was made.

The biggest change in my mother was her willingness to talk about some personal matters that had been off-limits before. Like why she and dad married when they did.

Their wedding photo is a study in contrasts. It depicts a barrel-chested, bantam of a young man whose light brown buzzcut is trimmed close to his scalp. A stunned smile bisects his flat face as though he had just won the big lottery on a ticket he found in someone else's clothes. Not all that impossible since his tuxedo seems to be made out of mismatched parts, the arms a smidgen too long while the truncated pants legs stop shy of his ankles, revealing a pair of white gym socks inside his loafers. He stands as poised and taunt, a diver on the high board ready to plunge into unknown waters, his eyes looking straight ahead at the photographer. For once the omnipresent wooden match is absent from the corner of his mouth.

Standing across from him is a well-formed woman for whom the word "resplendent" seemed to have been coined. Taller than her new spouse, and full-bodied, her blonde hair is arranged in a towering beehive hairdo, its artificial height adding to the image of the couple as Mutt and Jeff. She holds a bouquet of daffodils and tulips in her arms, cradling them like a newborn. Her face glows with contentment, her smile with jubilation. Her plain cream wedding dress is tight on her, its constriction dividing her buxom breasts into two firm hemispheres.

"That's your Dad, that's me and that," she said, a crimson-tipped nail tapping against a small bulge at her midriff, "is you,"

I knew the story about how Dad met Mom while she was waitressing; it was one of Dad's favorites and I must have heard it a hundred times growing up but he never mentioned he had to marry Mom.

"I was just starting to show when we got married. I could have worn a girdle and not have shown at all but your Dad and I figured it was nothing to be ashamed of. We weren't exactly the first couple in these parts to jump offside before the snap; doubtless we won't be the last," she told me her voice even and collected as she filled me in on the family history.

Mom was scared when she found out she was pregnant; afraid that Dad would think she'd tried to trap him, fearful that he'd deny her "... after all even Peter denied Jesus..." terrified that she'd be left alone to deal with everything by herself. "When I wasn't throwing up because of morning sickness, I was puking my guts out worrying about what was going to happen."

It took a month for her to work up the courage to tell Dad, a month in which every bad scenario she could dream up played itself out in her head.

When she finally told my Dad his reaction was to yank her up off her feet and swing her around in the air, yelling like a fool. Then he returned her to the ground, got down on one knee and asked her to marry

him.

"Remember that one winter when the blizzard hit and our power went out? How cold and dark it was and the temperature kept dropping until it was below zero outside," my mother asked me. "How we waited for hours for it to come back on but it didn't. How worried we were we might have to pack up and leave for some place else. We didn't know where, just some place that had heat and lights and we could be warm and safe. Remember that Jake?"

I nodded yes, while I wondered what Mom was getting at. Nobody had predicted the storm that hit us. We were only supposed to get a couple of inches of snow. We got over two feet along with winds that snapped massive limbs off 100-year old trees. The snowdrifts were so deep the hood of the car was buried; we were going to have to use the tractor and the wagon to get out of there.

"You remember what happened next? How you and I were outside putting our suitcases on the wagon bed when every lamp and bulb in the house went on at the same time and the furnace made that 'kerummph' noise as it started up again. What it felt like when you knew everything was going to work out OK, that we wouldn't have to leave and go somewhere else?"

Sure I remembered. I was worried about a Siamese Fighting Fish I was taking care of for my friend Ben. Ben's grandfather had given it to him that summer, the same grandfather whose funeral he was at in Mississippi when the storm hit. Ben made me swear on a stack of Marvel comics, as good as swearing on a bible for nine year-olds, that I'd take good care of it while he was gone.

Dad had set up the Coleman camping stove and I was using that to warm water for Ben's fish. I knew even as the water heated we couldn't take the fish with us. It was going to freeze in the bowl after we left. Ben's fish would be dead just like his grandfather and it would be my fault. Then dad got the old generator running.

"Well, multiply what you felt about a hundred times and you'll know how I felt. When your Dad asked me to marry him it was like every lamp in the world started to glow and every furnace in the universe kicked in. I didn't have to huddle alone in the dark and the cold worrying about what was going to happen any longer. Your dad loved me and he was going to take care of me and I'd do anything he wanted to return his love and make him happy."

Having set the stage with her story, Mom made me an offer. "If you'd like me to son, I'll talk with Mrs. Hunter on your behalf. It's time Elle got started on a covenant courtship anyhow and, at the rate you're going through tissues, I think you're ready too."

Now I knew what she was getting at. Mom was matchmaking.

I wanted to find out more about Elle and this "covenant courtship" thing. But, even though I'd taken nightly advantage of the tissue box Mom had put there for me, the embarrassment from my involuntary masturbatory exhibition still lingered. She might find it natural and easy to talk and joke about, I didn't. I still felt like a puppy caught rolling in its own piss.

Trying to creep up on the subject, I used the magician's ploy of misdirection to hide my real intent. I shouldn't have bothered. Before the second question was out of my mouth, my mother's face was bright with amusement.

"Honey, you're just circling around what you want to talk about. I know you like Elle. But a covenant courtship is a lot more than just dating; it's a very complex and regulated set of courtship rituals intended end in marriage. Not right way," she explained at the sight of panic washing across my face. "You and Elle are still too young for that but, if a match is made, it will be expected for the two of you to get married in the bethel and sooner rather than later."

Which brought Mom to the start of her explanation. The bethel encouraged relationships to start at a young age, "because it's better for everyone involved when

you bond with another person who believes within the bethel as you do." Mom had broken the rules with Dad and, even though she loved him, "I probably would have wed inside the bethel if I hadn't gotten pregnant."

Because of her marriage to my Dad, before Mom could even approach the Hunters on my behalf, I would have to become a true member of the bethel, not just a visitor. It wouldn't be enough to be anointed and attend regularly, I'd have to be examined and sanctioned by the Oblate Council before the courtship could begin.

At first, Elle and I would be closely chaperoned by one of our parents, never out of their sight or hearing. Then, when the parents judged it was time, those duties would be taken over by a bethel volunteer called a shadow protector who'd give Elle and I a little more privacy and freedom, "but not a lot, not as much as you'd expect on a regular date."

Mom was pretty vague about how long we'd be shadowed, said it depended on many things. "Eventually the Oblate Council will decide if you and Elle are ready to receive the blessing of the bethel and can enjoy theopathy."

None of this was sounding like a very good deal. I'd have to become a serious bethelgoer, pass some sort of religious examination and then I'd be allowed to date Elle with a chaperon on every date. I'd be lucky to get her to hold my hand in the movies, let alone act out even the mildest of my fantasies.

"If you and Elle aren't right for each other, well, we can look at the covenant directory from other bethels. Setting up a fostering arrangement isn't unheard of. But before we go to those extremes, we'll see how you and Eleanor do together."

Bitting the bullet, I voiced my concern.

"Mom, I like Elle and everything but I'm not sure about this."

"About going out with Elle?"

"No, I want to go out with Elle. It's all the other stuff, being a bethel member and getting the OK from the Council and being watched everywhere we go. I just don't know."

Mom gave me a careful look. "Jake, if you want to go out with Elle, this is the only way. Mr. and Mrs. Hunter will never allow her to go out with someone who isn't a member of the bethel. Believe me, I've talked with Mrs. Hunter about this."

"Mom." I whined in protest, "you didn't?"

"Jacob Devin Gledhill, I most certainly did," she said her jade eyes regarding me with open fondness and exasperation. "Neither Mrs. Hunter or I are blind you know. We've seen the way you two look at each other after bethel. You've certainly caught Eleanor's interest. If it makes you feel better, Irene approached me first. Elle has asked her a lot of questions about you and her parents don't want this to go any farther without the sanction of the bethel. I agree with them. So, you have a choice, either get on-board the train or watch it pull out without you. There's no halfway here son. Say no and we won't even be sitting by the Hunters anymore. It's not fair to Elle to let her waste her time and affection on you when she has to marry within the bethel."

Stunned by my mother's bluntness, I sat back at the kitchen table, my thoughts circling like a gerbil on an exercise wheel. Sure I liked Elle, but there'd be other girls. I was only 17 after all. It sounded like I'd be signing my life away and all for a few dates where I couldn't even get a handjob from my girlfriend. Nope, this wasn't for me.

My decision must have shown on my face because my mother got up from the table and began massaging my shoulders, her strong hands kneading the tenseness from my muscles. It felt good.

"Honey, I know this is a big decision for you. Why don't you sleep on it before you make up your mind? You can tell me in the morning what you want to do. OK?"

"OK Mom. Can I ask you a question?"

"You just did but I'll let you ask another one, maybe even another two if you're good."

"I don't want to sound dumb but what's theopathy and what's it got to do with me and Elle?"

Her silvery laugh filled my ears. "Ah Jake, that's why you need to learn more about the bethel. I'll bet you don't even know that Agapemone means "Abode of Love." I shook my head no. "Well, theopathy is the stage in a covenant courtship where the young couple are allowed to experience religious ecstasy."

"Huh?"

Mom's hands didn't stop working as she gave me an explanation.

"Have you ever heard of 'bundling'?"

Again I shook my head no, marveling at the feeling of my mother's fingers digging deep into my flesh.

"In colonial days, a couple that were courting were allowed to sleep together. The woman's legs were bound tight against each other in a bundling stocking, which fit like a glove. That's all she would wear. So while they couldn't have normal sex, the couple could do other things to their hearts content."

"You mean," I started to say my voice husky as I thought about what Mom was telling me.

"Yep, theopathy is my bethel's version of bundling except there's no bundling stocking involved. Once the Oblate Council has approved a covenant courtship we believe the couple is mature enough to avoid reproductive sex. The girl has to stay a virgin until they are married. Other than that the bethel encourages the couple to enjoy each other's bodies as long as they offer their ecstasy up to the Lord."

As she bent over to whisper in my ear I could feel my mother's breasts pressing against my back. I imagined I

could even feel the rock hard nubs of her nipples through our clothes.

"Elle and I don't belong to a typical religion. Our bethel believes sex in all its forms is a sacrament given to us by the Lord, one meant to be shared and enjoyed with others. If you enter into a covenant courtship with Elle and if the two of you get the bethel's approval, well let's just say I won't need to buy as many boxes of tissues as I have been.

"But Jake," my mother told me, her lips now brushing against the side of my neck, her breath hot against my skin, "the pleasure of theopathy is reserved for members of the bethel. And, unless you join, honestly, sincerely and without reservation, Elle will be practicing theopathy with someone else who is a bethel member."

My dick was as hard as the cast-off rebar my dad stores in the shed. It was all laid out clearly in my mind. Elle would have sex with me, not just in my fantasies but for real, and all I had to do was join the bethel.

With a final lingering kiss of my cheek, my mother made her way from the room, pausing just before leaving to throw another comment over her shoulder.

"Pleasant dreams son, there's extra tissues in the hall closet if you need them."

My fantasies that night featured Elle in the starring role but, as weird as it seems, once or twice, Mary Anne Gledhill slipped in as a shadow in the background.

I started my religious education classes the very next week.