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REDEMPTION

JOANNE SIMPSON sat on the edge of the pew in her beloved church, knowing exactly what made her jumpy. Never before had she experienced the least bit of distress inside the house of worship that influenced most of the people living in her tiny town – spiritually as well as socially. A nervous buzzing, like a hive of bees trapped inside a wall echoed off the wooden walls. Some parishioners whispered to each other and a few stared intently straight ahead.

Until today, entering the church had always given her the sensation of just having been baptized in cool, sparkling water. That feeling started when she was only eleven and never went away. That's why Joanne insisted that her eleven-year old daughter, Tina, attend services with her. She wanted her to have the same experience, but according to Tina it hadn't happened as yet. Joanne had faith.

Every Sunday the minister's simple and direct sermon brimmed with love and caring. They always touched Joanne deeply, a reminder that her fellow parishioners were like family. Her religion provided sustenance for the struggles of a single parent facing everyday life. She barely kept her head above water.

The minister, Reverend Henry Lukuns, cleared his throat. "I beg each and every one of you to welcome our new member, James Anderson, when he comes to church next Sunday. We are all about forgiveness and love. Jesus welcomed sinners and good people alike, bringing those on the wrong path into his fold. We must do the same. James Anderson has paid the price to society by serving a long jail term, and is declared reformed by the system." The minister bowed his head. Then he looked up.

"This man is known to you through the pamphlets circulated to every nearby neighborhood in accordance with Megan's law. They reveal Mr. Anderson's past, that is if you haven't already seen the police blotter," the minister declared in a low resonant voice and stretched his arms out. "This man begs for acceptance. God is love. God is forgiveness. We believe in mercy and kindness. We must turn the other cheek." The minister inhaled sharply.

"Sadly, Mr. Anderson's windows have been broken, his car damaged and eggs thrown at his front door. The man begs you to allow him a chance to show that he has served his sentence and is reformed." He stopped, stared at the audience and raised his hands upward. "And now I beg you, as you all believe in God, let forgiveness flow through your hearts. Open yourselves up. Let goodness flow in. We can help this person within these humble walls," the minister gestured around the room, "God will guide him. Your acceptance will take him along the right path. He desires Jesus to take his hand. Forgiveness is holy."

Joanne noted that this sermon was a first. The words she heard distanced her from religious thoughts, and she stared at the church décor as though an answer might be written on the unadorned, white plaster walls

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or high, beamed ceiling. Nothing resolved in her mind, not even when her eyes alighted on the five-foot wooden cross that sat behind the alter. Attending this church had been healing for Joanne, but the sermon today brought her back to horrors of the world she sought to escape.

Now the stuffy air thrummed with murmuring. It felt like listening to a monotonous note pitched so high that only certain people heard it while others strained to catch the sound. The minister, waiting patiently for quiet, looked around at the one hundred or so congregants.

Joanne glanced at Tina who wore a green and yellow flowered sundress with the sleeves drifting off of her thin shoulders. Her usual summer clothing consisted of blue shorts and a T-shirt, and she knew Tina could not wait to get out of the cumbersome outfit. The child's fragrance reminded Joanne of a sweet, brown-flecked banana. Tina had combed her long dark hair into a ponytail and deftly snapped it into a band.

Aware of Tina's beginning maturation, Joanne had an urge to cover her daughter in layers of clothing. This pedophile, James Anderson, had moved into her block a month ago, three doors down and across the street. Now she was being asked to forgive him and to ask God's mercy for the evil he had done. She refused to waste her prayer time on him.

As people exited the church, about a third of the congregation bypassed the minister rather than shake hands. Some were red-faced and held tightly to their children's hands. Others were openly hostile and muttered invectives about the minister as they got into their cars. Several spoke out, saying that they would never return to the church if the child rapist showed up. Joanne didn't know what she would do. How could she shun the place that gave her so much hope?

As she passed the minister, she nodded and shook his hand.

"May I expect to see you next Sunday, Joanne?" the minister asked, looking her in the eyes.

Joanne hesitated, smiled and said, "I'd be very unhappy if I no longer came here."

"That doesn't answer the question, my child."

"I hope to be here, Reverend Lukens." It was the best she could do. Joanne pulled her hand away and left.

She had seen Anderson coming and going from his house and often saw a camera dangling from his neck. He was small and frail looking, too delicate to hurt anyone. He had a pleasant face with rough skin and, although she hated to admit it, his smile was open – nothing sly in his appearance. Joanne never responded to his greetings.

His records showed a man of hideous cruelty. He'd beaten and raped a ten year-old child, burned her body with a cigarette and left her for dead. In another attack he'd bitten and raped an eleven-year-old child and thrown her out of a moving car. Now, at age forty-five, he'd been released on parole after being incarcerated for sixteen years.

Anderson had been a model prisoner, used his college skills to teach other prisoners and responded well to medication. He'd become born

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again, something she thought had become a ritual for convicts to aid in their getting paroled.

Still, the mental images of the rapes bled into every conversation about him that she'd had with friends and neighbors. She knew for certain that she didn't want to see that man anywhere near her daughter or any child for that matter despite his *finding* God.

At home, Tina put on shorts and a lavender T-shirt with a picture of a duck. Then Joanne combed her daughter's full head of thick hair. She wanted to caution her daughter that she ought to wear more clothing even though a searing July sun melted the asphalt in the streets and shimmered the air rising from the pavements. She didn't want to tell her daughter for the millionth time she ought to be wary of strange men because their lives had become overly filled with *oughts*. Besides, this man wasn't really a stranger after living on her block for eight months and was now a member of her church.

"Stay away from his house," Joanne said despite admonishing herself

"Here we go again," Tina snorted. "I ignore him," Exasperation wrapped every word. "Besides he wouldn't do anything bad knowing he can go to jail again."

"People like that are out of control. They're sick." Joanne knew pedophiles had an extremely high rate of recidivism.

"I'm not a kid anymore. You have to trust me." Tina gave her mother a tolerant look. "I can take care of myself."

Then Tina called her friend, Janet, who lived next door to the unwelcome neighbor.

"Janet's baking cookies with her mom. Can I go over?"

"Sure." Joanne checked the urge to fold Tina in her arms, knowing it would annoy her. "Bring Janet back and we'll have dinner here. I'll pick up your favorite, Marvin's barbeque ribs and hot dogs. Call me when you're ready to come home. I'll walk you back."

Tina scowled. "I can come back myself. You're so high-test neurotic. The police know where this guy lives."

That thought didn't calm her nerves. Although she'd informed the police that the man carried a camera around with him, they told her that he wasn't doing anything illegal.

Admittedly, she never saw him snapping pictures. A cop told her the man had his constitutional rights to be carrying anything that didn't indicate danger. They promised to caution him about infringing on privacy of the neighbors with picture taking though. That was all they could do until he did something wrong.

"What about a decent, law-abiding citizen's rights," Joanne had said tersely. After she hung up she swore she'd never sit around, waiting for the worst to happen. How could she allow her child to be a guinea pig for the justice system?

As Tina waved goodbye, Joanne stared at her child's sweet, round face

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and felt weary of her own nagging. In the last two years, she and Tina had expended lots of energy adapting to the divorce. Just when they found a smooth rhythm to their lives this guy moves in.

Working two jobs to cover their basics and a few extras like ballet lessons for Tina, Joanne sometimes put in sixty hour weeks. Moving wasn't an option. Even if she could afford it, there had been enough changes in her daughter's life. Tina loved her school and friends. Besides, Joanne had a big emotional investment in the town where three generations of her family had lived. The townspeople were an important part of her life where everyone pitched in when someone ran into difficulties. Her mother lived in a nursing home on the outskirts of town and was visited daily by either friends, the minister and his wife or Marvin, the town butcher who helped anyone in need. Janet's parents often had Tina sleep over when Joanne worked late.

Peering out the window, Joanne stomach wrenched as she watched Tina skip past the loathsome house.

Later that afternoon Joanne decided to walk the two miles into town to shop for dinner rather than drive. As she passed Anderson's house she noticed his white muslin curtains parted and the man's bald head outlined like a bright spot against the dark interior of his house. She stopped. Her skin crawled as she stared at his boxy, blue painted house, indistinguishable from the other innocent looking houses surrounding him, including Janet's home. Her parents were hard-working and concerned. Joanne looked from one house, pleasant and peaceful with the sweet odor of baking cookies wafting from the open window, back to Anderson's with imaginary smells of a toxic dump.

Joanne commanded her sluggish legs to move and resolved to confront this Anderson at some point. She reasoned that if he knew people watched him he'd have more incentive to keep himself under control. Suddenly, he appeared on his front porch. This time he had no camera slung over his thin chest.

"Hello," he called out in a tight baritone voice, much deeper than would be assumed in someone so slight. "I'd like to talk to you." He hurried over to her.

Joanne jammed her hands into her jeans pockets. "What did you say?" Joanne thought her voice sharp enough to cut through thick tree trunks. Up close his presence revolted her even though he was quite presentable. He wore an immaculate blue oxford shirt, neatly pressed jeans and tan sandals. He faced her, a sad look on his face. She thought this a perfect opportunity to get out her pent-up anger.

"I got a warning from the police." He looked apologetic. "I don't know if you called, but I'd understand if you did. I need to explain something."

His scent of flowery soap hung suspended in the hot summer air between them, nearly choking her. While his expression beseeched her, she thought him fraudulent, covering his horrific deeds with an aura of Mr. Super Clean. She'd bet his nails were neatly trimmed and flawless.

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She stared him down until he finally looked away. "I did make that call. What of it?"

"I want to apologize if I offended you. Let me assure you that I am completely rehabilitated. I'd never hurt anyone again let alone a child." He spoke well, his English a bit clipped.

A friend in the D.A.'s office had supplied Joanne with background information. This man came from an upper middle-class family, had grown up a child of privilege, attending the best boarding schools and universities. What, she wondered, happens to create such monsters? It shocked Joanne that he had the nerve to face her and force her fears out in the open like a body blow.

"In my prison rehab I took up photography. I'm trying to exploit that skill and get into the business." His face flushed. "It isn't easy to get a regular job because of my record so I've gone free-lance."

"I don't care about your personal life. Just know I'm watching your every move," Joanne said with steely coldness.

"That doesn't bother me at all. I'm a changed man. I paid for my crime which I deserved. Believe me." He tented his hands under his chin and continued, "I suffer every day for what I did. My family disowned me which is pretty funny because I was abused by my parents as a child. My father raped me."

He seemed to choke on his words and for the first time, Joanne listened carefully.

"I'm sorry to dump that on you." He caught his breath. "It's because people treat me like a pariah. I wish they knew that God leads me now."

His eyes begged for the forgiveness that she was still reluctant to give. The God she knew didn't want children hurt. Maybe some people in society do have to pay the price for the rest of their lives. Joanne figured this man was one of them.

"I love this neighborhood, and I want to stay." He waved his hand in a big circle to take in the tidy, neighborhood of single homes with the postage stamp lawns. "I'd die before going back to prison, and I'm begging for forgiveness. I have found Jesus."

Scrutinizing his misted eyes, she vacillated between believing and wanting to slap his face. "Don't expect invitations to neighborhood events." She heard a dollop of softness creep into her voice.

He smiled wanly with thin, bloodless lips. "I don't. I'm just trying to make a living doing commercial photography now. I can do parties, portraits or even your pet." He wiped his brow with a clean tissue. "My prices are reasonable."

The idea of his entering her home and being in the same contained environment with her daughter made her itch all over. Still, he seemed so sad. Forgiveness beat at the back of her head. Was it possible to set her rage aside? It would be the right thing to do. The minister's words rang in her head.

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"I'm trying to feel good about myself. I even tried to contact my parents despite the past. I have to take responsibility for myself."

Joanne held on to her anger like clinging to a life raft in a storm. She felt herself slipping. She didn't want to reveal that she had an ounce of pity for him. "Don't let me catch you talking to any of the children around here or I'll report you to the police instantly."

His head snapped back as though she'd struck him. "I learned patience in prison. God will help you learn to trust me." He held out his hand.

Her arms lay limply at her sides. "God has better things to do."

He looked like a puppy being yelled out for wetting the carpet.

On impulse she shook his hand and was immediately sorry. She didn't want to give the impression she'd been convinced of his story and dropped his hand quickly.

By the time Joanne entered the business district, her heart still banged in her chest from the face-to-face confrontation. She passed rows of small brick-front businesses, untouched by the mega-stores. Mom and pop hardware, bakery, grocery and clothing shops lined up in friendly groups as though shielding the town from an outside hostile world.

The town residents showed their loyalty by patronizing the four block commercial section rather than driving to the big shopping mall on the outskirts of town. This is where she wanted Tina raised. There could be no better place.

She felt comforted passing by the stores owned by friends and acquaintances. Not that Bolton Heights had an ideal record of kindness and humanity. They had their share of mean gossip, petty crimes and occasional domestic violence, but never had she heard of what she'd seen in Anderson's records – acts of inhumanity.

Inside Marvin's butcher store, she purchased two pounds of his homemade hot dogs and four pounds of special barbeque ribs already cooked. Marvin looked like he'd been drawn from an old-fashioned magazine cover – robust, totally bald with blue twinkly-eyes. He played Santa Claus every year and was perfect.

Marvin lived around the block from her and when he walked his dog by her house he often dropped off a piece of beef without charge. He always claimed the cut hadn't sold and so needed to be cooked immediately. She knew he did her a favor because the meat smelled fresh and tasted great.

But the peace and tranquility she had worked so hard to achieve was dissipating like a plume of smoke in the air. Before, when anger gripped her, she felt sure of her hatred of Anderson. Now a bit of compassion had crawled into her heart like a worm inching into an apple. A part of her wanted to believe him, but she had to hold tight to the fact he behaved like the lowest form of animal.

"How's my girl, Tina doing?" Melvin asked. "Saw her and Janet over at Jensen's Dollar Store. Those are terrific kids. They are always polite and sweet."

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"Until now they were both doing great." Joanne had never been bothered by the girls walking around town by themselves. Now her knees went weak at the thought.

"I get your meaning. It's that neighbor of ours." Marvin waved a gleaming cleaver in the air. "I'd cut his you-know-what off for what he did if I could get away with it. I worry about my girls, too."

"It's awful that he moved here," Joanne said. "He stopped me in the street before I got here, claiming to be totally reformed. He sounded convincing." The sliver of belief in the man's rehabilitation opened a tad wider as, once again, she heard the minister's plea in her head.

"I heard those reform stories before. Yeah, they become born again. Born again to do their evil," Marvin said, slamming his cleaver on the butcher block with a loud thud. "Everyone is jittery, afraid to let the kids go out. Keep your eyes open."

"It's a worry not being around to watch them all the time," Joanne said. "Maybe he has come to his senses."

"Don't lose sight that he's the scum of the earth."

The bell on the door tinkled and a customer walked in.

Joanne paid for her purchase. "Thanks, Marvin."

"I'll keep an eye on the girls when they're in town best I can. We're all looking out for each other."

"I appreciate that. See you around."

On the walk back home, she avoided looking at Anderson's house. She had to admit it took courage for him to approach her like that. He put himself right out there, allowing her scathing words to claw his soul. And he took it well.

Out of the corner of her eye she noticed Anderson's SUV sitting in the open garage with the motor running. She agonized about whether to knock on his door as a common courtesy. After setting her grocery bag on her porch she crossed the street. He opened the door quickly. The smell of mints coming from his breath intending to cover the underlying scent of alcohol didn't work. She fisted her hands. A man with his proclivities shouldn't be drinking.

"Your motor is running," she said, and turned to leave.

He craned his neck to look into his garage. "I was about to leave, but I forgot something in the house. I'm having trouble starting the motor so I let it run. Thanks." He walked to the driveway without staggering. As he pulled away he waved. He seemed sober. Did he just have one beer? No harm in that.

Inside her house, she found the girls watching T.V. Joanne got dinner on the table and they ate together while the girls told silly jokes. For dessert they inhaled the cookies baked at Janet's home. These were happy well-adjusted children despite some hardships in their lives. Joanne was determined to keep it that way.

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Perhaps Anderson realized that any infractions on his part would end his chance at a new life. At least she'd answered the question of whether to continue attending church. She would. How could she blame the minister? Religion told him forgiveness was divine, and he gave that message to his flock loud and clear.

The girls helped with the clean-up and then Janet had to leave. Tina plopped on the living room floor and began to leaf through a magazine.

Joanne sat in a chair nearby, staring at her daughter. She couldn't help wondering, what if...? "Did that Anderson man talk to you or your friends?" Joanne blurted out.

"No," Tina answered, rolling her eyes, "I'd have told you if he had what with all the warnings you gave me."

Joanne fell upon Tina, hugging tightly. Her daughter gave her a look of alarm, but she didn't care. Tina was safe, and if Anderson was going to do anything bad, if he was out of control, it probably would have happened already.

"What's with you?" Tina asked, wiggling out of her mother's clutches. Joanne settled in her armchair.

After half an hour, Joanne stepped outside. The night air hadn't cooled the heat of the day. Hot breezes brushed past her. It surprised her to see Jim's garage door open again and the SUV inside with the motor running. She waited ten minutes. He didn't come out.

"Damn it," she muttered, crossing the street.

Cautiously, she approached his house. Inside the garage she passed the truck as heat from the motor hit her in waves. She wondered what to do; shut the engine or knock again? The door leading into the house from the garage was ajar. Standing at the threshold she called out his name. No answer. If he was sincere about his clean-cut life he wouldn't mind her walking in.

She found herself in a living room that contained nothing but a ragged chair and a small T.V. with empty food cartons strewn on the floor. The room smelled rank, so unlike his appearance. It made her think no human had ever breathed clean air inside this house. It reeked of despair, and enforced solitude. In an instant, she saw how tough life was for him.

Calling his name again, she got no response. Had he gone for a walk unaware he'd left the motor on? Was he going out again soon? Light trickled into the living room from a cubbyhole of an office with a chipped and scarred desk. Piles of pictures sat on top of the uneven desktop. She knew she should leave, but she felt compelled to pry. Rifling through the photos she saw shots of sunsets, sunrises, mountain tops enshrouded with clouds and a family portrait. The shots were high quality. A stack of business cards sat on the edge of the desk. The minister was right. She hadn't given him a fair chance.

On the way out, she accidentally kicked a bottle on the floor. It was a lone, empty bottle of beer. At least there weren't dozen of empties. She righted it, left the house but found it odd he wasn't nearby. Opening the door to the SUV she shut the motor, but an overpowering stench of gaso-

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line booze encapsulated her. Her eyes burned and she blinked hard. She was startled to find Anderson lying across the front seat, fully dressed in jeans and a white shirt. A dozen or so empty beer bottles lay on the floor mat on the passenger side. Was he unconscious from the fumes or the booze or both? She turned the key to off, reasoning that it was lucky for him that the overhead garage door was open.

She pulled out her cell to call 911 when she saw an open package sticking from under the driver's seat. Pictures were falling out. She picked them up. Something familiar in the first photo struck her as she squinted in the half light. The shot concentrated on the chest of a young girl's body wearing a lavender T-shirt with a picture of a duck. The shirt clung to the child's budding breasts. Tina was the only one she knew who had a T-shirt like that.

Looking further, Joanne saw images that appeared so foreign she had trouble focusing at first. They were pornographic pictures of adult men having sex with very young girls came into sharp image.

Barely able to breathe, she wondered if this clinched the proof that she needed for the police to put the man away. The pictures of Tina weren't outright sexual and there was no real proof it was her daughter, but surely he'd broken probation by having these other obscene pictures in his possession. She threw the pictures on to the dashboard. Some fell on Anderson's reclining body.

Clutching her cell, it occurred to her he might possibly receive just a reprimand. If they sent him back to jail he might only serve a couple of years for parole violation. He hadn't acted on his perverted impulses as far as she knew – at least not yet. Maybe he'd avoid jail on who knows what technicality. Anderson definitely wasn't repentant or rehabilitated. Like hell he found Jesus. She put her cell back in her pocket. She wanted to pound Anderson with her trembling fists, pulverize him.

The words love, peace, redemption – life and death is in God's hands ran through her head. In contrast, she recalled the reports of the terrible violent acts against children Anderson had committed.

Retrieving tissues from her pocket she removed her prints wherever she'd left them – the photos, the door handle the steering wheel, even wiping down the cubby area inside the house. She stuffed some of the photos back under the seat, and put the rest in her pocket. Then she turned the motor on, checked to make sure the SUV's windows were closed and stepped outside on to the pavement. Should she shut the overhead door?

She became frozen with indecision, agonizing about the seriousness of what she considered doing. How could she be responsible for someone's death when she had the opportunity, no, the moral commandment to stop it? "Thou shall not kill." This was against everything she'd been taught to believe in.

Within a few seconds she decided to turn the key off and report the incident to the police. She had to stand by the law as well as her religious teachings. Shaking her head, she couldn't believe she'd almost walked away to let him die.

Bile seeped into the back of her throat. Rage returned, nearly blinding

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her. She gathered the photos and looked up and down the empty street. Leaving the motor running, she stepped to the pavement and yanked on the overhead door.

Just then Marvin came around the corner, his dog trailing behind. He stopped and stared at Joanne and then looked through the half-open door. She ripped the pictures out and Marvin leafed through them. He narrowed his eyes, and his body shook. When he seemed to regain his composure, he put his hand over hers and, together, they closed the door. Once again, she wiped fingerprints away.

She ran back to her house with the pictures under her arm, a silent scream filling her head. In the living room, Joanne looked at Tina, scrutinizing her innocent face and still child-like body, trying to see her in the same way Anderson did. She shivered fiercely, ran to the bathroom and splashed cold water on her feverish face. Running out to the back yard, she burned the photos in an aluminum trashcan.

She waited for guilt to seize her, but it didn't because she knew her daughter and other children were safe. What hit her with the force of a hammer smashing into her head was the realization she would never set foot inside a house of worship again – not ever. She bent over in pain, grieving not for the man who was about to die but for the self-inflicted exile that created an enormous empty place in her heart.