

Melissa Jennings

## No One Comes to the Father, except through Me

The humidity was especially thick the day the meth lab exploded on Old Williamston Road. It made the bodies surrounding the house moist. Covered in debris and sweat from the air, they resembled drown victims freshly fished from trash-ridden waters. Each figure clung to the balding summer-brown grass face down, their arms and feet splayed out in numerous directions.

Deputy Jeremiah Gates walked around the scene, his skin dripping under the white suit and dumbbell-shaped breathing mask. He looked at them enraged, thinking of the sin these people had performed: creating basmented chemical concoctions to distribute to the public. It was greed in its purest form. Yet Jeremiah also felt a sense of sorrow. He pursed his lips mournfully, staring at the five forms of lifelessness. The way their bodies solidified to the earth, it looked as if they had died trying to crawl away from the shadows goading them to Hell. These corpses were another reminder of how the simple solution of God's word comes all too late.

"Can you believe this mess?" Officer Daniels said to the deputy while shaking his head. "Once you think you've done a good job cleaning the streets, you forget all the shit lying in the sewers."

Jeremiah remained refined and said, "That all the people of the earth might know the hand of the Lord, that it is mighty: that ye might fear the Lord your God forever."

"Which book is that, Deputy?"

"Joshua, chapter four, verse twenty-four."

"Uh-huh," Daniels replied. "You mind elaborating? I'm not really the church-goin' type."

Jeremiah removed his mask and wiped the sweat off his face. It trickled down, slowly

rolling from the clustered black hair above his ears. “It means that what these people were doing was sinful. It means it was only a matter of time before the Lord’s justice intervened.”

Daniels grinned. It was the same smile he wore whenever the deputy started spouting bible verses. He removed his mask as well and shook his round ebony head. “Then God’s got one hell-of-a mighty hand. This place went up like a fuckn’ mushroom.”

The deputy simply nodded. “There any news on the boy yet?”

Officer Daniels unzipped his suit and went for the beige flipbook in his pocket. He proceeded to go through his notes. “Eh . . . Lazarius Campbell. Neighbors say they haven’t seen him in a couple of days. Mrs. Bridges from next door said she saw what appeared to be some relatives picking him up, but she can’t be sure if they were related.”

Jeremiah lowered his head towards the dead Campbells. “How old is he?”

Back at the book, Daniels put his finger on a particular line and furrowed his eyebrows. “I didn’t get a clear response. The neighbors kept saying how the Campbells mainly kept to themselves. Majority said he looks to be about five or six.”

As Officer Daniels spoke, Jeremiah felt a slight breeze cut through the thick moisture of the day. The coolness invaded his body with placidity. It was as if the breath of God was pushing him. Toward what? The deputy was unsure.

He whispered, “God moves in a mysterious way, His wonders to perform. . . .”

“Deputy?”

“Daniels, I want you to inform me the minute there’s word on the whereabouts of Lazarius Campbell. I’d like to have a talk with him”

Daniels slowly lowered the flipbook. “Yes, sir.” He thought about questioning the deputy, but he saw the Catholicized stoicism of Jeremiah’s face and decided against it.

Before the deputy moved toward his car, he looked at the inky shambles of the house. He thought of how lucky a boy of such innocence escaped the fate of his devilish family. *God moves in a mysterious way, His wonders to perform. . . .*

Four months later, Deputy Gates drove his wife toward the St. Peter's Orphanage on the border of Conville, South Carolina. Katharine Gates held a cluster of potted lavender asters in her lap and pulled the clay base to the petite curve of her belly. Everything she wore was clean and orderly, yet today she held an extra sheen around her. Jeremiah thought her mauve sundress made her pale skin saintly. Not a strand of blond hair was unstraightened as it traveled just below her shoulders in a half ponytail. Katharine wanted to scream out the fidgety excitement in her throat, but instead she kept her lips locked in the shape and color of a crescented watermelon.

Her husband felt the same sort of excitement. However, his joy was reserved and humble. He felt like a prophet as the tires of his Ford Crown Victoria spun the asphalt behind him and his wife.

"Jeremiah, we're making our family whole today," Katharine said while turning to her husband.

The deputy smiled slightly. He turned and focused on Katharine's stomach for a while before looking back to the road. The hint of pleasure in his face faded. "It's never too late to add another."

Katharine pulled the asters closer to her small torso, cradling them like a girl would cradle a doll. Familiar grief touched her before she focused back on the orphanage. "Do you think he'll like the flowers?"

A small laugh came from Jeremiah. As the orphanage came into view and the car went through the opening gates, he said, "The kid's only five, Katharine. I'm not sure what he'll think.

But I imagine he'll be thankful to be in a real home.”

As her husband parked and climbed out of the car, Katharine touched the petals of the asters. Jeremiah opened his wife's door, and she offered the flowers for him to hold as she got out.

The white button-down shirt Jeremiah was wearing showed subtle sweat stains under his armpits. Katharine looked at it as she closed the door and noticed how the shirt was transparent enough to show the lines of Jeremiah's tattoo which arched over his bulky chest. Jeremiah handed the pot back to his wife and gave her a perfunctory kiss on the cheek.

As he had held the door open for Katharine, the September air touched the petals, making them move in rhythm with the wind. Jeremiah was reminded of the breeze at the Campbell's house back in June, how it had led him to where he was. He thought back to the phone call from Officer Daniels that came a few hours after the Campbell's meth lab exploded. Daniels had said Lazarius was found. His mother's boyfriend, Tyrone Little, was watching him for a few days in order to, as Lazarius said, “Watch me as Mommy gets some work done.”

After the call, Jeremiah went immediately to the Conville Police Station. Lazarius was there, sitting in a chair behind Officer Daniels's desk. His five-year-old body was too small for his legs to reach the ground, so instead they hung like two pounds of lean meat freezing in a locker. The sneakers on his feet were splattered with unrecognizable filth, and his brown cargo shorts and orange shirt looked big enough to fit Jeremiah. His skin was the color of lightly creamed coffee and the hair on top of his head was long, thick, and curled like coils.

When Deputy Gates entered the station, Lazarius looked up with a tense expression, as if he had seen police officers' uniforms before, and knew what their presence meant. But above all, Jeremiah saw the naivety in his eyes and thanked God that Lazarius had not been in his home

when it melted in satanic flames.

When Daniels saw the deputy approach his desk, he went over with a file in hand and lowered his voice. “No one was at the house when we found him. Tyrone must have split when he heard the explosion. He lived only a couple blocks down.”

Jeremiah shook his head and asked, “Does he know anything?”

Daniels looked over at Lazarius who had begun swinging his dangling meat-like legs in the air. “How the hell you tell a five-year-old his whole junkie family is dead?”

Deputy Gates kept his eyes on the child. “Of a truth, God will not do wickedly, and the Almighty will not pervert justice.”

The officer shook his head and opened the manila folder. “We’ve contacted child protective services. They should be here soon to pick him up.”

“Thank you, Daniels.”

Officer Daniels closed the folder and looked at Jeremiah. After a moment, he asked, “You want me to tell the kid something?”

Gates stiffened, as if preparing to wear the dense metal of chain mail armor. “Go ahead and take a break, Daniels. I’ll wait here for child services to get him.”

“O.K.” The officer looked at the devout man in front of him. Jeremiah’s face was hauntingly unemotional. “You take it easy, sir.”

As Daniels left, Jeremiah walked over to the desk. He took a knee, coming to Lazarius’s eye level. “Hello, Lazarius. I’m Deputy Gates.”

The boy stopped swinging his legs. He sat quietly and stared at the black sleeves the deputy had on, how they half-way covered the white skin of his thick arms.

“Do you know why you’re here, Lazarius?”

Lazarius thought back to the past three days. He remembered the man his mother kissed, how he shoved Lazarius in the back of a car and drove a few houses down. “Your mother’s got some work to do and she can’t have no lil’ kid fuckn’ it up.” The word “work” made the boy think back to the grey basement, how his mom, his aunt, his two uncles, and his older brother would work down there for hours. The smell would give Lazarius headaches and he remembered how he felt every time he ventured downstairs: like swimming in a pool with no water. Then Lazarius remembered the sound, like thunder in clear skies, and how the man who had kissed his mom and shoved him in the car went outside, saw the flames, ran to his car, and left the boy alone. Later, Lazarius saw the black man in the police uniform come to the door. He had said his name was Officer Daniels, just the same way the deputy had introduced himself.

When it all went through his mind, Lazarius answered Jeremiah’s question with a shake of his head.

“Well,” the deputy said, “the first thing to remember is this: hatred stirs up strife, but love covers all offenses. It’s from a book called the Bible. Do you know about the Bible?”

Lazarius shrugged and Jeremiah’s half-standing knee slipped out from under him. He sat on his calves and sighed, gliding his palms up and down his thighs. Lazarius had a feeling that he had said something wrong even though he hadn’t opened his mouth. The deputy looked oddly disappointed, yet Lazarius took interest in the amusement that quickly came over his face before he half-whispered, “Defend the poor and fatherless: do justice to the afflicted and needy.”

As the front door to the police station opened, inviting child services in, the boy cocked his head at Jeremiah’s words, bouncing his curls to the right.

The deputy placed a hand on Lazarius’s shoulder and looked him in the eyes. “I doubt this will be the last time I see you, son.”

The nun Jeremiah and Katharine Gates had worked with during the adoption proceedings was waiting with Lazarius at the door as they walked in. Katharine smiled down at the boy she would now call son.

“How are you, Lazarius?”

The boy’s shyness allowed him a quiet nod of his head.

Katharine kneeled down with the flowers in hand. “These are asters. They’re the birth flower of September.”

Lazarius stared at the lavender petals and noticed how their pretty color clashed with the color of his new mother’s skin, giving her the appearance of a ghost. Yet her face was unblemished from anger, so the boy stepped forward and touched the stems of the flowers.

“When we get home, you and I can plant them in the backyard so that every time we see them, we’ll remember the month we became a family.”

Jeremiah shifted a bit and Lazarius looked at him with the same apprehension as the first time they met. The deputy looked kind enough, yet there was something about him that made Lazarius feel like if he tried to hug him, his new father would break away like crumbled bread.

The deputy laughed as Lazarius held the stems. “Well there you go, Katharine. Looks like he likes them after all. Sister Anne, are all his belongings ready?”

“Yes Mr. Gates,” the nun said. “Everything’s here.” She pointed at a duffel bag sitting next to the wall.

Jeremiah picked it up, slinging it on his left shoulder blade. “You ready to go, Lazarius?”

The boy took his hand off the asters and Katharine stood up, still grinning. Lazarius nodded, and Jeremiah held the door open as his wife and new son walked toward the car. Sister

Anne waved them out. "God bless you all."

"And God bless you, Sister," Jeremiah said back.

Lazarius hesitated at the door to the police car. Katharine stood there and seemed to understand his nervousness. "It's O.K., sweetheart. Just think of it as a regular car."

The boy felt calmer at his mother's words, yet his heart still skipped as he got in the car and thought about the time his older brother Marcel was put in the back of a similar vehicle near the local basketball court.

Half-an-hour later, the police cruiser turned onto White Horse Road. The seventh house on the left was where Jeremiah parked. When Lazarius got out, he marveled at the house he would now be living in. The lawn was green and full and the building was a two-story colonial with white paint and five square columns in front of the paved porch.

Inside past the foyer, the living room came into view. The furniture was clean with a color of snow. The walls and tables held the occasional painting, yet for the most part, the area was uncluttered and spacious, giving the house a feeling of openness. Slowly, Lazarius noticed a floral scent coming from the home. He looked around and saw pots of flowers speckled throughout the living room. Their colors ranged from purple to pale pinks. Katharine noticed the way Lazarius looked at every petal and smiled. "Aren't they pretty? I'll teach you each species of plant and how to care for them."

Jeremiah turned down a hallway to the left with the duffel bag as his wife gently pushed Lazarius with her hands. Walking in further, the boy gazed down at the white coffee table and looked at the only thing it held: a brown Bible. The cover made a U shape, looking as if it had been read several times before. Jeremiah came back from the hall without the bag, just in time to

see Lazarius inspecting the book with his eyes.

“And *that*, son. I will teach you every word of that.” The tone in his father’s voice made Lazarius feel scared. It wasn’t the fact that he would be taught what was in that big crumpled book that terrified him — it was the fact that the deputy would be his instructor. Lazarius sensed that if he said or did anything against the book, he would know what the force of God was through his father’s palm.

Katharine felt the tension in her husband’s voice as well. When he had come to her four months ago and talked about the possibility of adopting a son, she was ecstatic. However, it was a sudden change. Ever since she married Jeremiah ten years ago, around their early twenties, the two had tried to have a child of their own. Yet Katharine’s body was small and holding children was impossible. And though she had endured numerous miscarriages, Jeremiah was an unwavering man.

“We’ll never stop trying,” he’d said the night of the Campbell incident. “We’ll never stop. But Katharine, I feel resolute about raising this boy. I . . . I think it’s God’s will to take this child into our home and give him our love.”

Katharine was on board the minute her husband had mentioned the word adoption. Still, his voice sounded forced. “Why him specifically?”

Jeremiah stopped his sermon-like pacing. “Why not?”

“There’s nothing wrong with him, hun,” Katharine immediately said at the sight of her stagnant husband. “I’m just curious as to why you’re so desperate to adopt *this* boy.”

The deputy took his wife’s hands into his and smiled. “For we walk by faith, not by sight.”

Katharine had nodded, knowing her husband expected this was all the answer she needed.

Now, as she looked at Lazarius and Jeremiah, Katharine saw the competitive determination on her husband's face. She understood her husband viewed Lazarius as a challenge, making Jeremiah's affection toward the boy surface as a hollow love. The realization sent an itch of sharpness through Katharine's body, as if her spine was an unbending flagpole.

"Come on, Lazarius," Katharine said. "I'll take you outside and show you the garden."

The boy followed his mother through the glass sliding door on the opposite end of the living room. Outside, the large yard was gated with a white-painted wooden fence. In the middle was a in-ground swimming pool.

Katharine walked around it. "We might not be able to swim in it since it's getting close to fall, but next summer will be here before you know it."

Near the back, directly parallel to the one-leveled porch was the garden. Katharine moved toward it with the pot of asters in her hand. Lazarius, however, stayed put and looked at a small pot in the corner of the patio where the sun shone. Inside the clay bowl was a set of three white flowers that resembled pointed tongues. The inner part of each tongued petal held yellow cones that looked fuzzy to the touch.

When Katharine turned around and saw Lazarius was not following her, she traced his gaze. "Those are called calla lilies. They're my favorite."

Lazarius walked over and touched the petals, letting the velvety texture glide over the lines of his fingerprints. He thought of the plastic funnels in the grey basement from his previous home and how they had almost the same shape as the flowers. He remembered their hardness, and sometimes they were watered with liquid that would burn his skin. He remembered a day when the Jeremiah and Katharine came to visit him at the orphanage and how the deputy told Lazarius that what he'd experienced was close to what Limbo is like.

“Some believe it’s a grey, desolate place on the outskirts of Hell where unbaptized children go to wait for eternity.” The deputy had touched the backside of Lazarius’s hands after that and said, “You’ve escaped Limbo, son. We’re gonna make sure you never have to go there again.”

As Katharine walked over and sat next to Lazarius while he touched the calla lilies, he knew this was different. And even though his new father made him nervous, he knew this was better.

His mother’s words about summer were true.

By next July, Lazarius was a whole year older, but not big enough to swim in the deep end of the pool. Jeremiah watched — his feet swaying over the edge of the pool in the water and a walkie-talkie by his side — as Lazarius played with a toy tugboat in the shallow end.

“Who was the man with the big boat from the Bible, Lazarius? You remember?”

Lazarius looked up at his father, lingering a moment on the tattooed words of Jeremiah’s chest:

For God gave us a spirit not of fear but of power and love and self-control.  
2 Timothy 1:7

“Was it Noah?”

The smile on his father’s face made Lazarius know he’d said the right thing. “That’s right. And what book is that from?”

“Uh . . .” Lazarius put his hand to his watered-down curls. “Is it Gena something?”

“Genesis.”

“Yeah! That one. Noah put all the animals in the boat and all the water came. Sho, sho, shoooo.” Lazarius made the tugboat bounce along the pool like a skipping rock.

As Jeremiah smiled with pride, the walkie-talkie abruptly crackled, sending him to his feet like a released bungee cord. Katharine's voice came from the small black square. "I'm awake, sweetie."

"Son, out of the pool. *Now.*"

Lazarius knew tugboat time was over. He quickly climbed the hard submerged steps, ran to his towel, and went inside. He followed his father to his parent's room where Katharine was sitting upright on the off-white quilt that covered her bed. Lazarius thought her belly was even bigger than the last time he saw it, even though it had only been hours ago.

"What do you need?" Jeremiah asked. "Water? Something to eat?"

Katharine shifted her weight. "Maybe just a damp towel. I'm a little warm."

Jeremiah took long strides out of the room toward the kitchen. Lazarius stayed and stared at his mother. She smiled and patted the side of the bed to her left. Her son walked over. Katharine took the towel he held and placed it on the bed. Lazarius sat on it.

Up close, he noticed small beads of sweat encompassing his mother's face and neck. Her blond hair stuck to the moisture on her skin, giving it the appearance of soggy spaghetti.

"Are you excited about having a sister?" Katharine asked.

The memory of Marcel came to Lazarius, but the face was smeared. In his mind, the vision of his sixteen-year-old deceased brother seemed to meld with the grey cinderblocks of their chemical basement.

"Yes," he said. "When will she get here?"

Katharine placed a hand on her swollen abdomen. "Very, very soon."

Jeremiah walked in as his wife was talking to his son and handed her a damp washcloth. "And your sister's going to be baptized, just like you. Do you remember why we baptize our

children?”

“To wash them of original sin so they can go to Heaven.”

Katharine kissed Lazarius’s wet ringlets. “That’s right, sweetheart.”

Jeremiah straightened. “For by one spirit are we all baptized into one body.”

Quickly after his father, Lazarius said, “So they won’t go to Limbo.”

“Yes son, so they won’t go to Limbo.”

Lazarius looked at his future sister resting in his mother’s stomach and frowned. “But what if she dies before she’s baptized?”

His father grew stern. “That’s not going to happen. The Lord let your mom hold your sister. He’s not going to call her home right after she’s born.”

He was still uncertain, yet he wanted his father to take the sour look of annoyance off his face, so Lazarius said, “O.K. Good.”

Three nights after his sister was born, Lazarius crept into his parent’s room where the crib was. His parents lay asleep and at the foot of the bed, his baby sister Sarah rested on her tiny back. Lazarius noticed her skin was pale like their mother’s, making Sarah look even more fragile than a baby should. Her brother thought she resembled a porcelain doll—small and easy to crack. And even though his father had said there was no way the Lord would call her, Lazarius was conflicted. He thought back to his Limbo: the prison-like aged cinderblocks, the foggy taste of chemicals in his throat, and the harsh headaches. He imagined Sarah in a place like this and he panicked. Lazarius didn’t know what to do. His sister’s baptism was only a few days away, but what if the Lord decided it was her time? What if?

It didn’t seem hard when the priest had baptized him. Lazarius remembered he was

dunked in what appeared to be a huge swimming pool and Father John had said some words about being in the name of the Lord.

As quietly as he could, Lazarius lowered the side of Sarah's crib, just as he'd seen his mother do before. He carefully cradled his baby sister in his arms and carried her out of his parent's room, down the hallway, through the living room, and toward the sliding door. Once he opened it, Lazarius walked toward the swimming pool.

There was a full moon out, making the walk from the porch to the pool visible. The water reflected the silver beams gracefully back and forth, like a conductor's arms guiding his musicians.

Lazarius walked down the steps of the shallow end of the pool. His sister stirred but refused to wake. Gently, he lowered Sarah below the surface of the water and held her there a few seconds, letting the hands of God wash her clean. When he lifted her up, a shriek came from her tiny lips. Lazarius felt sorry for his sister, but was also happy — he'd saved Sarah from the fate of living in a place like his biological mother's meth lab.

Quickly, Lazarius remembered he forgot to say what the priest who had baptized him said while he dunked him in the water. Again, he lowered Sarah in the pool and said, "In the name of the Lord."

Before Lazarius had a chance to raise his sister from the water, he felt the strong arms of his father grab his shoulders and wrestle him for the baby. When Jeremiah eventually got ahold of Sarah, he rose from the pool and gave her to Katharine. Lazarius noticed his mother was staring at him, her hands covering her mouth.

"Take her inside," Jeremiah said, patting his crying daughter on the back.

"Jeremiah, please don't do anything foolish. He doesn't understand what he was do—"

“Go . . . in . . . side.”

Lazarius watched as his mother took Sarah beyond the glass door. It was the last thing he saw before the full force of God came running across his face. The boy did not have time to hit the surface of the water before his father grabbed him by the neck and laid him on the grassed area between the pool and the porch.

Jeremiah sat on top of his son, the one who had almost killed his daughter. He hit every ounce of skin on the boy’s face, leaving nothing untouched.

For Lazarius, every slap came so quickly, making him unable to feel each sting. But he knew the beating was taking its toll for he felt like he was sucking on a penny, and his ears rang so loudly that the words from his father were inaudible.

What Jeremiah was saying was not directed at Lazarius. Instead, he was yelling at God. “Why, Lord, why! Why did you send me a wolf in sheep’s clothing?”

The air of the full moon was stagnant, as if wind were an imagined thing. Jeremiah felt abandoned and isolated and questioned the day he had sensed the breeze near Lazarius’s shattered home. Had it really been God’s breath or the wicked air of Satan’s mouth? He wasn’t sure. At that moment, all Jeremiah knew was his hands would only stop once they got tired.

Lazarius seemed to realize the same thing, so he let unconsciousness block out his father’s wrath. The six-year-old was unsure of where he would be when he woke up, or if he would wake up at all. The only thing he was certain of was that it would not be Limbo. And if, after Jeremiah was through, the Lord decided to call Lazarius, at least he left his sister on firm ground.