

Altar Ego

By Brandon Abbott

"So you're not going to tell her?" asked Bentley. Vernon was studying himself in the mirror. He pressed the top of his head from different angles, tilting his face from side to side.

"Bentley," he began, "I've thought about it long and hard." He looked away from the mirror and into the eyes of his co-conspirator. A thick index finger emphasized his point. "She's stopped me before. But she won't stop me this time."

Bentley sighed. "What time does she leave?"

"First thing Friday morning," said Vernon. "My appointment's at ten, so I plan on getting her up early and out the door. The sooner she's out of the way, the better."

"How long will she be gone?"

"Till sometime on Tuesday, plenty of time."

“And you’re sure you don’t want her to know?” Bentley pressed. “This is kind of a big step. Do you really think it's necessary?”

Without answering, Reverend Vernon Vanderwalker returned his attention to the mirror. Not bad for 54. A little beefy around the edges. But that wasn't what bothered him. His biggest problem, the proverbial "thorn in his side," was the barren patch of wasteland where his hair used to live. Maybe it was because of age or stress. Maybe it was due to some tragic case of heredity. Either way, Vernon's head was as slick as a baby's butt. He thought of the Old Testament, when the sins of the fathers were visited upon the future generations. "What kind of mess did my Daddy get himself into?" he wondered.

The problem had begun innocently enough above his forehead with a mild receding hairline. But over the years, time revealed its dastardly plan as Vernon's youth eventually eroded to the fuzz on his neck. The process left nothing behind but a badland of desolation that stretched from ear to shining ear, bordered only by a few ghostly threads that simply forgot to die.

"It's necessary," he declared.

For years, he had hidden the problem artificially. But he grew tired of the hair by day, gone by night routine. He longed to wash his hair, not dry clean it. He was convinced this was the answer. This was how it had to be. Maybe it was a big step. But it would be worth it, especially when his wife came home from her sister's to find a fresh-headed hunk of burning love to meet her at the door.

“Sarah hates that wig,” Vernon admitted. “And I simply refuse to stand behind the pulpit while those lights make pretty little shapes on the ceiling from the reflections off my head.”

Bentley studied the brochure Vernon had given him. It was full of the clinic’s most recent “success” stories. Flipping it onto the couch, he pondered how best to address his concerns. Finally, he decided on a delicate, tactful approach.

“Vernon, all those guys look like Chia-Pets.”

“Chia what?” Vernon picked up the brochure searching for his answer.

“Chia-Pets. . . . you know those things you. . . well, you add the water and . . .”

Bentley saw this was going nowhere. Perhaps it was best to just be supportive. “Oh, never mind. Tell you what. If this is important to you, it's important to me. So, who's lined up to preach for you on Sunday?”

Vernon peered over the top of his glasses. Bentley was at least 5 years his senior yet had enough hair to bust a ball cap. As a pastor, Vernon had learned to lean on the counsel of his Deacon Chairman. In the last ten years, the two had seen tremendous growth in the once-dying congregation. With membership at an all-time high, their small country church was now growing at an unprecedented rate. But more than that, Vernon knew Bentley was a straight shooter, a man he could trust.

“What do you mean ‘preach for me’?” Vernon questioned. “What can’t I preach for me?”

Bentley’s worst fears had just been confirmed. He loved his pastor but also felt the need to protect him. For all the wonderful gifts God had given the man, common sense was not among them. It stood to reason in Bentley’s mind that aerating and seeding

one's scalp might require a brief time of recuperation. This thought had clearly not occurred to the man who's head was soon to become a moving sod farm.

"Now Brother Vernon, I know it's been a long time since you've missed a Sunday at this church."

"Going on five years now!" Vernon interrupted. "And that's a streak I don't intend to break! I don't care what you say." Vernon stomped to his desk and sank into the large leather chair. As Bentley stood from the couch, Vernon marveled at how the man could sit for any length of time and not get wrinkles in his pants.

"Preacher," Bentley began. With the utterance of the word, Vernon felt sick. The last time Bentley Bunch began a sentence with "Preacher," it was to announce that Burl Simpson's Billie goat had eaten the blanket right off of a live baby Jesus in the middle of last year's nativity. This was of course very frightening for Jesus' mother, who was refilling a small butane heater near the stable. She screamed loud enough to wake half the church cemetery, which was unfortunate because the poor goat was nervous and instantly fell over dead. It was never clear, however, if this death was due to the shock of the scream or from choking on the blanket.

In her haste to save her child, the woman broke the butane pipe's connection, allowing gas to spill into the air. Of course in all the commotion, no one managed to notice the growing stench of gas, nor did they worry what might happen if that gas came in contact with an errant ember from the nearby bond fire. When the smoke finally cleared, the stable was a pile of ash. Two of the wise men were missing eyebrows, and Burl Simpson was out ten bales of hay, three chickens, and one nervous goat. Whatever Bentley had to say now would no doubt ruin Vernon's day.

“Preacher, did the doctor explain to you exactly what you might expect from this procedure?”

“Yes,” Vernon shot back. “More hair.”

“No, I mean in terms of recovery.”

Vernon considered this. He seemed to recall the mention of “some general discomfort” and perhaps the need to “take it easy for a few days.” But that was it. At least, this was all he could remember. Bentley retrieved his glasses from the thick brown pouch wedged in his shirt pocket. He put them on and held the brochure at arm’s length before reading aloud:

“Some patients will experience moderate to severe discomfort in the days immediately following this procedure. Scalp will be extremely tender, as well as red and swollen. Patients should plan on limited to no activity for no less than four days.”

Vernon did the math. Not good. In earlier years, he would have run his fingers through his hair in frustration.

"What am I going to do?" he wondered aloud. "If I can't preach Sunday, my cover is blown." Then after a short pause, "No pun intended." Bentley smiled, but more out of courtesy than amusement. Vernon began to absently flip the onion-skinned corner of a King James with his thumb. Bentley walked to the window and watched a squirrel find a nut.

"Vernon, I just think you're going to have to fess up on this one. It ain't like we've got two of you." Suddenly, the flipping fell silent.

"What did you say?" Vernon demanded.

Thinking that hair might not be the only thing his pastor had lost, Bentley repeated louder, "I said you're gonna have to fess up."

"No, no. Not that. The other thing."

"I said we ain't got two of you." Bentley turned to face Vernon, who leaped to his feet and began rummaging through his top desk drawer.

"That's it! Man alive, Bentley Bunch. You beat all! You know that? There are two of me!" Bentley had the sudden urge to pray for the mental health of his pastor.

He watched in disbelief as Vernon ripped through books and folders searching for something that was apparently as valuable as the holy grail itself - and just as elusive.

"Got it!" Vernon finally thrust a slip of paper above his head in triumph.

"Got what?" Bentley wasn't even sure he wanted to know.

"Bentley, sit back down. There's something I need to tell you." After ten minutes of revelation, Bentley Bunch sat stunned.

"Wait just a minute. You're telling me that you have a twin brother?"

Vernon nodded yes.

"And he lives not three hours from this church?"

Again, yes.

"And you two look just alike?"

"Well, hang on there." Vernon felt compelled to clarify. "I wouldn't say that. Virgil doesn't exactly carry my . . ." He worked to find the appropriate word. "Presence."

"But he looks like you?"

"You could say that. Yes."

"And he sounds like you?"

"When he tries, he can sound more like me than I can."

"And he's a preacher too?"

"Unless he's been excommunicated."

Bentley took a moment to digest this information. It was all so much so fast.

Questions began to spill out of his mouth. "But how come we've never seen him? How come we didn't even know he existed? You've been here ten years, and you've never mentioned a twin brother?"

Vernon knew this wouldn't be easy to explain. There was no great reason why he never mentioned his brother. It just never came up.

"Virgil is . . ." Again, Vernon thought carefully about how best to describe his twin. "Virgil is just different. He and I have never been what you might call close."

Bentley asked the next obvious question. "So what makes you think he'll even come, then?" At this, Vernon seemed to drift back to some distant memory.

"See, when God handed out self confidence, I'm afraid I got the lion's share. Poor Virgil was always kind of like a stow-away on the USS Vernon. It's been like that ever since we were kids. When I played ball, Virgil played ball. When I went to work at Lutrell Hardware, Virgil went to work at Lutrell Hardware. When I became a minister . . ."

Bentley finished the statement. "Virgil became a minister."

"Exactly." Vernon snapped his fingers.

"OK. So let's say he'll do it. Do you honestly believe he could pretend to be you on Sunday morning and just go back home without anyone knowing?"

"Beautiful, isn't it? Think about it, Bentley. Sarah's gone to her sister's. The only time I have to be anywhere between Friday and Tuesday is at that pulpit Sunday morning, a good 20 feet from the first pew. If Virgil can still do 'me' like he used to, most folks will never suspect a thing."

"I don't know, Vernon. This all just sounds like a bad idea to me." In reality, it was undoubtedly the dumbest idea Bentley had ever heard.

"Oh, hogwash, Bentley! It'll work. I'll write the sermon. Virgil will preach it. It's fool proof."

The phrase "famous last words" came to Bentley's mind. But in the end, he agreed to be a part of the "fool proof" plan, if for no other reason than out of morbid curiosity.

Tolerance was not a significant part of Vernon's skill set. He had little tolerance for gambling. He had even less tolerance for foul language. He had almost no tolerance for crying babies in the church service, and – above all else – he had absolutely zero tolerance for pain. Needless to say the ride home from the Horton County Hair and Hip Replacement Center was not a pleasant one for Vernon Vanderwalker. His scalp throbbed with the pulse of every blurry yellow dash that bounced across his window. It was almost as if someone had cut holes in his head and stuffed them with . . . well, no wonder it hurt so much. He swallowed one of the large white pills the nurse had given him. Then he thought of having to see his brother the next day, so he swallowed another. He silently swore to himself that if Bentley hit one more bump, he would find

himself on parking lot duty every rainy Sunday from now until Jesus came back. Oh, Jesus. Right now would be a great time to come back. Bump.

Bentley couldn't help but feel sorry for his friend. No one should feel that badly, even if it did serve him right. Was it normal to do the entire head all at once? He was reminded of the picture on the front of a horror movie his son had brought home once. The villain had a slick white head with pins sticking out at every angle. He guessed Vernon had never seen this movie. Bentley thought that was a good thing. The best course of action would be to get Vernon home and in bed as quickly as possible. Once the pain medicine kicked in, sleep would take over from there. But for now, a little discomfort might build some character. With a smirk, Bentley aimed for just one more pothole.

As they turned into the Vanderwalker driveway, Bentley's heart sank at what he saw. "Uh, Vernon?"

"HMMMMMM?" Vernon mumbled. The medicine was working. It would have been a good time to ask him for that new coffee machine in the Fellowship Hall. But there were more pressing issues at the moment.

"Vernon, doesn't Sarah drive a green Lincoln?"

"Mmmm Hmmm." Vernon answered from some level of his subconscious.

Bentley's mind began to race. She wasn't supposed to be home for four more days? How would he explain why her husband was bandaged like a confederate soldier after the battle of Gettysburg? There was no hiding it. Vernon was half-looped on pain killers and, as Bentley now observed, was drooling onto his plaid button down.

Before their car came to a complete stop, the Lincoln door opened. To Bentley's surprise and relief, the passenger was not Sarah Vanderwalker, who was apparently still enjoying her sister's company in blissful oblivion. Instead, it was another Vernon, identical in nearly every way, leaning against his car and smiling like a duck with new dentures. He was a day early, and apparently very proud of this fact. Only later did Bentley notice the Lincoln's license plate, which read "REVITUP."

As the Vernon clone drew closer and his teeth grew larger, Bentley could see the principle difference between the two brothers. The real Vernon, who's breath was now making nostril prints on the window, consistently exhibited remarkable poise, at least when conscious. His gate was measured and controlled, his gestures calculated and concise. The other Vernon, who was now waving erratically, was more like a bad Japanese knock off of the original. He moved as if his joints had too much play in them. Every step came with a wave of motion that flowed from head to toe, leaving nothing out in between. Bentley prepared himself for the conversation ahead then opened the door.

"You must be Deacon Bunch," said the knock off in a voice much higher and far less refined than his brother's. A slightly thinner hand extended in a clammy gesture. As he shook it, Bentley was already regretting his decision to be a part of this charade. He was reminded of the goat that ate Christmas on that not-so-silent night last December. This plan was certain to produce similar results.

"Bentley Bunch," the deacon offered. "And you must be . . ."

"Virgil. Virgil Wilson Vanderwalker. But you can call me 'Rev.' Everybody does." Bentley broke the hand shake, which was apparently never going to end without help.

"How about I just stick with Virgil. That OK with you?"

"Sure. Sure," he agreed. "Fine by me. Call me whatever you want, just don't call me late for supper." As he laughed at his own corny joke, Bentley made mental note of yet another tragic family similarity. This would be a long weekend. The two men worked with no small effort to move Vernon Vanderwalker from the car to his bed.

Virgil hovered over his brother the entire time, tucking him in, checking his temperature, adjusting his pillows. Vernon smiled once, which delighted his brother, at least until Vernon whispered, "Thanks, honey."

Later than evening, after the two men had dined on chicken casserole Sarah had left in the fridge, an exhausted Bentley found solitude in a wicker rocking chair facing a western sky. Vernon's porch, he remembered, had been designed for just this sort of thing. Here in the stillness of the sunset, he could understand why Vernon and Sarah spoke so often of their time together on the front porch after dinner. He missed his own wife and their quiet moments together. He looked over to the empty rocker next to him and pictured her there. She was so beautiful, so delicate, yet tough as nails to the very end. She was his iron Rose.

The creak of the screen door drifted into Bentley's thoughts as Virgil came to join him. Careful not to let the door slam, the dutiful brother eased it closed and then sank into the other rocker, squashing Rose's memory in an instant. With a deep sigh, Virgil settled into a slow rhythm back and forth. The only sound was of creaking wood as the two rockers shifted to adjust to the weight of the two men. It was Bentley who broke the silence.

"Virgil, I'm not sure why you showed up a whole day early." He allowed a long pause, the kind of pause older men employ when they need to think or when they want

others to do the same. Virgil's eyes met his, patient but curious. He continued, "But I sure am glad you did." With this, the two men smiled. Both were now looking not at one another, but into the sunset.

"I didn't mean to be a bother," explained Virgil. "But I told Martha – that's my wife, Martha – I said, 'Martha, I reckon I better head on early. If Sarah's gone, then it'll be up to me look after my baby brother.' Ain't nobody like family for that kind of thing." Bentley stopped rocking and looked quizzically at Virgil. Sensing the questioning eyes, Virgil continued. "Don't get me wrong. I'm sure you'd have done just fine. But I didn't know you from Adam's house cat, so I figured I'd come on just in case."

Bentley smiled at the innocence and the transparency of this Vanderwalker. He might have been quick to follow in his brother's steps, but Bentley got the feeling that Virgil Wilson Vanderwalker was in many ways his own man.

"No," Bentley reassured him. "I'm proud you showed up when you did. That brother of yours is one heavy preacher." They laughed. "But Virgil, did you say 'baby brother?'"

"Only by about six minutes. Not much to brag about really, but I did kind of pave the way for that little guy. Been doing it ever since."

Bentley was confused. He had been led to think of Virgil as nothing more than a passenger on the good ship Vernon Vanderwalker. Curious, he decided to follow where the conversation might lead. "How do you mean?"

"Well, turns out that when two babies share the same space before they're born, it's real easy for one to soak up all the good stuff, which ain't so good for the other. When we were born, I was fit as a fiddle. But it took Vernon a long time to catch up. He

was always kind of sickly.” Bentley listened in amazement. “Even when he got better, Mama was always worried about Vernon. So whatever it was he decided to do, Mama made me go along and look out for him.”

“So, you tagged along in case he got in trouble?”

“Trouble, or hurt, or sick, or whatever. He didn’t really need me. Most of the time I just got in the way. I never was too good at any of the things Vernon wanted to do. But I couldn’t tell him the truth. He had too much pride for that, and I didn’t want to hurt his feelings.”

“Did you ever try to convince your mom that Vernon didn’t need supervision?”

“Oh sure, plenty. But she wouldn’t have it. If Vernon played ball, I played ball. If Vernon worked at Lutrell Hardware, I worked at Lutrell Hardware.” Bentley could guess the rest of the story. But Virgil stopped short of the ending Bentley was anticipating. Cautiously, he pressed for more.

“So, is that how you both ended up as ministers?” Bentley asked. Virgil gave a knowing smile.

“You catch on quick, Deacon Bunch.” Virgil reached over and patted Bentley’s arm in sincere congratulations. “It was a tent revival. A big one. And that preacher, man alive! He was something else. He had that crowd so wound up I thought Jesus himself was gonna come back early just to see it.

“When it came decision time, Vernon tugged Mama on the arm. Said he wanted to go down. Mama said ‘What for? You’ve already been baptized.’ But Vernon said he’d done felt the call. You know, to preach?” Bentley patiently signaled his understanding.

“Well, so Mama looks at me and says ‘Virgil, you go with him.’ So here I was walking the aisle with my brother to meet his call.” He paused for a moment and stared into the last sliver of burnt orange as it flirted with the horizon. “You know, I still don’t remember exactly how it happened. All I know is before I could say ‘hellfire and damnation’ that preacher had me and Vernon both by the back of the head shoutin’ and praisin’ the Lord for these two young men, God’s holy twins, ready to proclaim his Word to the nations.”

“Why didn’t you just say something?” Bentley wondered aloud.

“It was too late. I looked back there and saw Mama dancing around. Daddy had his hands in the air. Pretty much the whole community was under that one tent. I was as good as ordained right there on the spot.”

Bentley sat back in his rocker, captivated by the truth as it slowly revealed itself. He listened to the rest of the story.

“After a while, it just felt natural. We’d go and preach together sometimes. People loved it.”

“So what happened?”

“Well, over time, me and Vernon sort of veered apart in our preaching styles. You see, I’m a Church of God minister.” Bentley understood what that meant. Virgil was no doubt an incredibly charismatic preacher who was most comfortable before an incredibly charismatic congregation. This would not be at all what he would find at his brother’s First Baptist Church. These were exciting times of course, but church was still church. There was an order to these things.

After a few moments, Virgil climbed out of his rocker and rubbed at his joints. “Well, Deacon Bunch, I reckon you better be gettin’ home to your family. I can take it from here.”

“Oh, it’s just me.” Bentley corrected. He wasn’t sure why he felt the need to share this with Virgil, but he didn’t stop there. “We lost Martha just a few years ago to cancer. The kids are grown and live not too far from here. So, it’s no problem to stay. I brought a bag. It’s in the trunk.”

Virgil stared at Bentley for a moment and then eased back into his rocker. The tree frogs were singing loudly now as if in competition with the crickets and in rhythm with the fireflies. “You’re a good friend to my brother.”

“Your brother is a good man.”

“His heart’s in the right spot. Sometimes I wonder about the rest of him, but his heart . . .” He beat his chest with a closed fist. “It’s different now than when we were kids. Sure, I was usually in the way more than anything else, but at least I was always there, you know?”

“I know.”

“It’s just nice to know that my brother has someone like you looking out for him since I’m not there to do it anymore.” Virgil looked at Bentley with a thankful smile. Not so much teeth, just gratitude. Bentley was touched. It wasn’t easy being Vernon Vanderwalker’s closest friend. It was often difficult in fact. It felt good to have someone to reassure him, to encourage him, and to thank him. This was a nice moment.

Then, without warning, the Church of God preacher turned back to the horizon, opened his mouth, and burst into song.

“Beyooooooooond the sunset!”

The moment was over. His voice had a tone that reminded Bentley in some strange way of a police scanner. As Virgil kept singing, Bentley walked to the car to retrieve his bag, wondering along the way if Virgil Vanderwalker came with batteries.

Saturday passed without incident. Vernon managed to pull himself from his drug-induced slumber for a brief visit with his brother. The two spent time going over the sermon Vernon had prepared. Virgil’s abilities to impersonate his brother also proved to be uncanny. Bentley was amazed at how remarkably alike these two could pretend to be, especially after understanding just how different they truly were.

The two also arranged (as only sibling preachers could) a unique system of code for relaying messages to one another in the course of their clandestine operation. It was a type of game they had clearly played before. The first brother would provide a scripture reference, whereby the second brother would promptly quote the associated passage. Both brothers were impressive in their abilities to quickly recall even the most obscure of references. After a few volleys, Vernon announced that the Sunday signal for “all clear” would be Luke 1:23. A smile of recognition crossed Virgil’s face. Bentley flipped in his Bible, curious to see why this verse had been chosen. However, before he could reach the third gospel, Virgil quoted the passage for him.

“And it came to pass, that, as soon as the days
of his ministration were accomplished, he departed to his own house.”

The two brothers laughed heartily, both reveling in what Bentley thought might very well be the one thing in life they truly enjoyed together. It was agreed that this was the perfect “all clear” signal. The scripture was to be written on an offering envelop, folded, and hand delivered to Vernon once Virgil was in his car and homeward bound. Bentley would of course serve as messenger. Though he found the cloak and dagger routine a little silly, Bentley resigned to accept his role in silence for fear of raining on one of the nicest parades he had seen in a long time.

The day’s activities proved to be too much too early for Vernon Vanderwalker. He slept soundly all night and was still asleep when Bentley and Virgil left for church the next morning. It was a short, ten minute drive from porch to steeple. But the constant chatter from a nervous Virgil made each mile stretch on longer than normal. Though he had insisted on driving, he continued to rehearse the sermon, now from memory. He started, stopped, then started again. He phrased and rephrased, frowned and sighed.

“Aw, shoot.” He worried out loud.

“Virgil, is something wrong?”

“No. Well, yes. Deacon Bunch, I don’t know if I can do this?”

This sudden lack of confidence unnerved Bentley. Virgil had seemed so calm until now. There had been no hint of uncertainty in the man during the last 48 hours. Now, however, he was undone with panic.

“This sermon, it’s just . . .” The words seemed to escape him. “Well, did you read it?”

Bentley had read it. It was some of Vernon’s best work, he thought. It was thoughtful, insightful, with a real personal touch. It was Mother’s Day, so Vernon had written of the women in Jesus’ life, from his mother to his friends Mary and Martha. It was a truly inspired look at how each of these women contributed to Jesus’ ministry much like the women of today. Bentley wasn’t sure he understood Virgil’s problem with the sermon.

“Sure, I’ve read it. Don’t you like it?”

“Aw, it ain’t that. It’s a fine sermon. Fine. It just don’t have that . . .” He pressed his lips together. “It ain’t got no ‘amen’ holes. Those people are just gonna sit there lookin’ at me like a mule lookin’ at a new gate.”

Bentley understood. The Church of God preacher was finding it difficult to conform to the more reserved style of his Baptist brother.

“Virgil, you’re going to do just fine. Just think ‘Vernon.’ These folks like his preaching. You’ll see.” But he could tell Virgil wasn’t convinced. Having waited until shortly before 11:00 a.m. to exit the study, Bentley helped Virgil avoid any unnecessary contact with the congregation. The pre-service absence was a break from protocol, but such a thing could easily be forgiven if one assumed the preacher might not be feeling like himself. If they only knew, Bentley thought to himself.

It was a full house. Mother’s Day always brought with it a variety of family activities and special events, which in turn meant more people in the pews as well. Looking out across the congregation, Bentley noticed even a few unfamiliar faces. They

were most likely distant relatives in town for the special occasion. He also noted a few “wayward” souls who only seemed to darken the door of the church when absolutely necessary to keep peace in the family.

Scanning the crowd, however, Bentley’s face lost its color as he spotted the most unlikely of attendees on this Sunday morning. Dressed in her Sunday finest, Sarah Vanderwalker made her way toward him, claiming her usual seat in the second pew, piano side, just in front of Bentley.

“Miss Sarah.” Bentley nodded with the usual courtesy. “Didn’t expect to see you hear this morning.”

“Well, Bentley, I have to say, I didn’t either. But this morning I woke up and thought, ‘I told Margaret Cleghorn I’d bake a cobbler.’ Can you believe I flat forgot? Anyway, I told Claudine that I was sorry, but I had to get on back. So here I am!”

“Here you are.” Bentley smiled a tense smile. “So, you haven’t been home?”

“Nope. Drove straight here. Thought I’d surprise Vernon.”

As Virgil walked to the pulpit, Mary Mavis ended the organ prelude, bringing the congregational chatter to a halt with it. Typically, the service would have begun with singing. However, for reasons not really explained to anyone, the order of worship had been altered for this Sunday to allow the preacher to speak first with an extended time of singing to follow.

After a few too many sips of water, Virgil was ready to begin. He had not looked at Bentley. In fact, he was avoiding eye contact with anyone. He kept thinking of the sermon. It needed something. These people needed something. They were so starched and proper. Just like the sermon. Suddenly, it hit him. That was it! The sermon was

too proper. It needed to start with a bang, something to get people's attention. Finally, he looked out over the congregation, although still not at Bentley for fear of losing his nerve.

As he saw the corsaged matriarchs scattered about the sanctuary with their husbands and children and grand children seated around them, he knew how he would begin. He would speak of his own mother, of Vernon's mother. But the introduction would be unlike anything this crowd had heard before.

"Friends," he began. He was putting forth his best Vernon impression now. "Before we get started this morning, I would like to share something with you." He hung his head with manufactured humility. "I want to confess to you something that, were my wife here today, might be hard for her to hear."

Those in the congregation who had already spoken with Sarah smiled at the realization that their preacher was unaware of her presence.

He continued. "The best years of my life . . ." Again, he paused for dramatic effect. "The best years of my life were spent . . . not in the arms of my wife . . . but in the arms of another woman." If Burl Simpson's goat were to have survived the screams of Jesus' mother that night at the manger, if it were it to have overcome the synthetic choking hazard as it swallowed the holy baby blanket, it most certainly would not have survived the shock that Virgil experienced at seeing his sister-in-law gasp for air and faint across the front pew of the church. It would not have survived the scattered screams that reverberated off the room's stained glass windows. And it most certainly would have given up its Billie goat ghost when six foot, five inch, two hundred and seventy-two

pound Doyle Trotter stood to point at his wife Maybelline from pew six and shout, “You Jezebel! I knew it!”

Bentley worked desperately to right Sarah back in her seat before trying to intervene on Virgil’s behalf. But even as he struggled against the weight of his circumstance, he knew this would get worse, much worse.

“Doyle, you big igmo!” Maybelline promptly retorted. “I’m not in love with the preacher! I’m in love with Carl!” There was a collective gasp from the congregation, the second of the day. More screams filled the air as Carl Strickland shouted in protest. “Hey now, wait a minute.” But it was too late. Doyle had already launched into a full assault. Fearing for his life, Carl leapt flat-footed from pew to pew, clearing a Sunday School teacher, three deacons, and a WMU director before landing solidly onto the organ and exiting by way of the baptistry. To everyone’s amazement, Doyle followed Carl’s path, although with the agility of a jersey cow.

Just as Sarah was beginning to come to, someone shouted from the back of the room.

“If the other woman’s not Maybelline Trotter, then who is it?” A chorus of shouts and accusations erupted at once. Then Virgil, shaking and nauseous, spoke.

“It . . . It all seemed so clear just a moment ago.” He propped his elbows on the pulpit to support his weak knees. “But now, well . . . for the life of me I can’t remember who it was.” With this, the congregation exploded and Sarah fainted once more. Seeing the mob approach the stage, Bentley abandoned Sarah Vanderwalker and rushed to rescue Virgil. As they fled from the room, Virgil managed to scribble a note. He thrust it into Bentley’s hand.

“You give this to Vernon.” He was breathless. “You tell him, I’m so sorry. I am sooooo sorry.” With that, Virgil “Rev” Vanderwalker threw back the door and sprinted to his car. In less than five seconds, the green Lincoln with the license plate that read “REVITUP” was but a blur in the distance. Only then did it occur to Bentley to look at the paper Virgil had given him. It was not the “all clear” scripture they had agreed upon. Instead, in almost imperceptible scribble was a new reference, Genesis 19:17. Looking around, Bentley spotted a Bible on a nearby pew. Grabbing at its edges, he fumbled clumsily until he found the chapter. Using his finger to trace the columns, he neared the bottom of the page. Fifteen, Sixteen, there! Despite the drama that surrounded him, Bentley laughed out loud when he read the verse. Even now, Virgil was looking out for his brother.

. . .Escape for thy life; look not behind thee, neither stay
thou in all the plain; escape to the mountain, lest thou be
consumed.

The End