

THE WEIGHT OF THE HUMAN SOUL

Z.Z. Boone

The first time I heard the voice, I was halfway through my senior year in high school. I was in bed, just coming off a four-day fast my mother had imposed, when words began to form in my head. At first it was gibberish, like chatter you might hear through a wall. That last bit of semi-consciousness just before sleep settled. But with time, words became clearer, sentences more complete. Nothing profound, more like bits and pieces from some old gym teacher.

“Protect yourself at all times,” it might say. “Keep your feet in line with your shoulders.”

My mother was convinced that this was the voice of God, that he had a mission in mind. The possibility delighted her. She began feeding me better—more protein meant more strength—French toast and sausage replacing the coffee and buttered toast she usually made for breakfast.

I'm not sure if my father left because my mother found religion, or if it was the other way around. According to Mom's account—which was the only version I had to go on—Dad was lured away by another man—a “sodomite”—who led him to the Northeast where they found work as smokejumpers.

What I do know is this. I was nine, and Mom clutched God like a drowning woman grabs at the faraway shoreline. Catholicism, which she'd abandoned, was recalled. Mass six days a week, the rosary every night. I was enlisted, dragged along some might say.

My mother changed her first name—Madeline—and began referring to herself as “Mary.” She claimed it was a tribute to the Blessed Virgin. She started to “spread the Good Word” at AutoMotion Car Parts where she worked, telling customers things like this:

If you want a starter that'll last a lifetime, try Jesus.

She was moved to an office in the back where she worked in front of a computer and kept an eye on inventory. She let her fingernails grow to a point where they started to curl like bird claws, and I don't know how she typed on a keyboard but apparently she did.

Once, in seventh grade, Father Augustus pulled me from the lunchroom and took me into the chapel rectory for a talk. I said I hadn't finished my sandwich, and he told me we wouldn't be long and to leave it. We ended up in his tiny office with a desk and a couple of chairs and a tall wooden closet that looked like a giant's coffin turned on end.

We sat.

"How are things at home?" he wanted to know.

"Good."

"Your mother's good?"

I nodded.

"She wrote me a letter," he said, and opened his desk drawer. What he took out was typed, a couple of pages long. He put it in front of me and I tried not to look at it.

"She says she doesn't feel you're getting an adequate education here at St. Mark's. That religion is being mistaught. She suggests coming in during her lunch hour and lecturing in the auditorium two or three times a week."

There was a small window on the wall behind Father Augustus. Outside, was a tree and I tried to imagine myself hiding behind it.

“Would you like to know some of the topics she’s interested in talking about?”

I didn’t answer. Father Augustus pushed back in his chair and touched the tips of his fingers together.

“She wants to talk about lust and impurity. She wants to inform every boy here that it’s his Christian duty to remain chaste until he finds the wife the Lord intends. That homosexuality will result in spiritual death, that the sin of Onan will rot his soul. She seems to see herself as Christ’s chosen representative as opposed to those of us who’ve been ordained.”

“She’s very serious about being Catholic,” I said.

“So am I,” Father Augustus said. He tapped the pages of the letter like he was trying to get someone’s attention. “But she’s stepping into territory where she doesn’t belong. She’s...”

He never finished the sentence. We both just sat there. I thought about mentioning the voice, but I was afraid. *Demonic possession*, he might say. *Cursed for all eternity*. Finally, he stood up and left the room. I counted to one hundred in my head. I thought about taking the letter and tearing it into pieces, but I left it where it was. I went back to the lunchroom to finish my sandwich, but it was gone along with my apple slices and my chocolate milk.

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By the time I entered high school, my mother decided she'd had it with Catholicism. Said it lacked spiritual backbone. That the Pope had gone wobbly on too many key issues. She stopped attending Mass and instead studied The Bible and read a magazine called *Consecration and Revelation* which came in the mail. I'd been the product of eight years of all-boys, parochial school, but at Samuel Gottlieb all genders, all beliefs were equally accepted. It was my first real exposure to girls, and my mother constantly quizzed me. Were couples forming? Did I know anybody who was "doing it"? Was I ever tempted to touch myself in an inappropriate way, and if so, what were my thoughts when I did.

I told her the truth. I was chaste. A loner. That pleased her.

But it wasn't what I wished for. I wanted some self-confident female to approach, to be attracted by my shyness. I convinced myself that she was out there, that when our lives intersected a relationship would develop as quickly as one of those old-time photographs that you shake and watch what comes into focus.

"Twenty-one grams," Mom told me. "That's the weight of the human soul as determined by the scientific experimentation of Duncan MacDougal."

I knew better than to question this.

“Three-quarters of an ounce,” she said. “Yours to keep, yours to surrender.”

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I also knew better than to ask about my dad. It was a topic that could send her into a tailspin, a subject that reddened her face and made her hands ball up.

On my birthdays he'd send a card that Mom made sure to get to before I did. Usually, she'd burn it in the wood stove, but one unseasonably warm January, she tore it up in front of me. The next day, while she was still at work, I went into the trash and tried to patch together the shreds. There were a few random scraps of a twenty-dollar check, and the card itself had some kind of underwater theme. “Take a deep breath,” was printed across the front. Dad had written a long note inside, but too many of the pieces were missing and nothing other than “Hey Boy,” in the beginning and “Love ya,” at the end, really added up.

What I was really after was the corner of the envelope with his return address. But there wasn't a trace, even after the eggshells were gathered, the coffee grounds wiped away, and the grease blotted with paper towels the best I could.

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I didn't tell my mom that at the start of junior year, a transfer student arrived. She was blond and big-eyed and constantly smiling. Jennifer Milne was her name and she was assigned to be my lab partner in Chemistry 1. I had no idea how to talk to her, which made little difference to Jennifer. A quarter through the course, I knew she had two parents and an older brother and a German Shepard named Frankie. She wanted to be a dancer and her favorite color was cerulean. The food she loved best was barbecued ribs and her pet peeve was people who went to the beach but never stepped into the water.

One day in mid-November, she asked me if I was going to this dance called "Turkey Trot," and I told her I didn't know.

"If you decide 'yes,'" she said, "maybe we want to go together."

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At this point, my mother was cooking pot pies pretty much every night. Mostly chicken, but sometimes beef or straight veggie. I was poking at mine when she asked what was wrong.

"There's this girl," I said. "She wants me to go to a dance."

My mother nodded, wiped her mouth with the paper napkin, smeared her lipstick almost to one cheek.

“What’s her name?”

“Jennifer Milne.”

“Is she pretty?”

“I guess.”

“You guess?”

I shrugged. “I never really looked that hard.”

Mom nodded and then took a sip of ginger ale.

“You know who else was pretty?” she asked. “The Whore of Babylon. The Collector of Souls.”

I could feel my stomach juices beginning to churn.

“Your father once found me pretty,” she said. “But after I lied down with him, I turned into a hag. The Bible teaches that charm is deceitful and beauty is vain. Remove her from your life like you would a thorn,” she said. “Do not let her lead to your ruin.”

My mom got up from the table, walked around, and lifted my dish.

“I’ll warm this for you,” she said.

The next morning, in front of her locker, I told Jennifer that I was having two wisdom teeth taken out the day of the dance and that I’d be unavailable.

Once, during Christmas break, a bunch of us decided to ignore the weather and go over to Delis Pond. We were anxious to show off the presents we'd gotten—the skates, the safety helmets, the carrying bags, the hockey sticks. I didn't expect to see Jennifer there, but she was. Puffy pink overcoat, light blue ski cap, hiking boots. A pair of white figure skates, laces tied together, on the ground. This guy Colin Heffernan had her practically pressed against a tree, and she was smiling as he leaned in and said whatever it was he had to say. I put on my skates and got on the ice. I tried to ignore them, but how could I? They were nibbling at one another.

I was reluctantly drawn into a game of Red Rover.

And then they were gone.

That night the voice spoke, but the message was kind of garbled. *Bear the weight*, it might have said. *Close the gate. Discount fate.*

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After that, I seldom saw Jennifer without seeing Colin. Our chemistry class had ended before Christmas break, but by April I noticed Colin was with a different girl. I'd sometimes see Jennifer walking in the hall, head down. If she was still smiling, I couldn't tell.

Despite my mother's warning, I decided to do something that would draw us together by summer. We rode different busses, but maybe I could accidentally-on-purpose get on hers and then walk her home. If that didn't work, I'd pass a note and ask if we could meet at the library and cram for finals. Once my confidence amped up, I'd take her to a movie, or maybe we'd go hiking.

But I could never quite pull the strings together. Today was never the day, now was never the time. June went by, and then July, and then August. By the time school started, Jennifer was the thing everyone talked about. She'd moved away, some said to New Jersey, others swore it was California.

Also around this time, AutoMotion gave my mother her two-week notice. The layoff troubled me more than it did her, and without saying anything, I went into the office, found the owner, and asked if he'd please reconsider.

"Here's what I will do," he said. "I'll let you work ten or fifteen hours during the week and all-day Saturday. Get done with high school and we'll see about putting you on full-time."

I took it. Between the little I made, my mother's unemployment check, and the money she'd sandbagged, we survived.

Just barely, but we did.

I went through my last year of high school like a ghost. Few friendships, none long-lasting. I continued hearing the voice at night, but like I said, the messages were as illogical and inconclusive as a one-sided phone conversation.

After dinner, I would read to my mother from a book by somebody named L. Laurence Totten in which he interpreted The Old Testament—that fertile land where Mom’s mind now resided—using what he referred to as “the present-day lexicon.”

We learn, for example, through a close study of Deuteronomy, that if a woman, even to protect herself or her loved ones, grabs the genitals of a male attacker, she should have her hand severed from her body and be an object of scorn from that day on.

“Don’t you think that’s a little severe?” I asked.

“It doesn’t matter what I think,” my mother said. “It’s not my game. I don’t make the rules.”

We were sitting at the kitchen table. Mom was drinking countless mugs of coffee all through the day. She said it helped keep her awake so that she could spend more time contemplating “the divine mysteries.”

“At St. Mark’s, they told us that God was forgiving.”

This made her chuckle, but not in a comforting way.

“Suppose,” she said, “some men were to drive up and snatch me off the street. Take me someplace and tie me to a filthy mattress and force me to do the most unimaginably dreadful things. When I could no longer appease their pleasure, they’d murder me. Slowly. In the most gruesome and torturous way they could.”

She moved to the counter and topped off her coffee.

“And then they’re caught. They’re put on trial. Who do you want judging them? Someone who is fair, or someone who is forgiving?”

“I’d want whoever did that to suffer like you suffered.”

“Ah,” she said. “Now you’re thinking like God.”

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Weeks later, she began to shake. She started to have trouble staying on her feet.

“If I’d have never met your father,” she said one morning, “I’d have never produced you. Not that I regret it; you’re the love of my life. It’s just that things would have been a lot less painful.”

She slept in. I’d bring dinner to her, read from L. Laurence Totten, tell her about my day. She was making less and less sense. Once she said to me, “Don’t

you find it strange that when a baby is born everyone wants to know what it weighed. Yet they never ask the same question about people who die.”

The weird thing was, the less sense my mother made, the clearer the voice became. I'd be fully awake, sitting up in bed, when I might hear, “I'm good”, or “be well,” or “miss you.” Maybe it was just me still trying to patch together some old, ripped up birthday card.

I don't know.

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Mom got even more distant toward the end of my senior year, and then—two weeks before graduation—she died. I have no idea what she weighed, whether she willingly relinquished that twenty-one gram soul or held tight.

I was eighteen and I got everything, which wasn't much. We'd lived in a two-bedroom rental, but the landlord was kind enough to allow me to move to a cheaper studio apartment one floor down. Perhaps it was the relocation; I stopped hearing the voice.

§

Summer and fall came and went. I immersed myself in work, convinced that there was nothing wrong with a life devoted to flywheels, pistons, and cams. I'd just opened the store, turned on the **Genuine Chevrolet Parts** sign in the

window, and walked behind the counter when, not ten minutes later, the bells above the front door jingled.

It wasn't her face, but that puffy pink coat and light blue ski cap that caught my attention and made me look up from the parts catalogue. She was carrying a baby in one of those pouches like a mother kangaroo.

"Oh my Lord," she said once she recognized me.

"Jennifer?"

"Say hello to Anthony," she said, and turned sideways so I could see the kid's face peering out from under one of those fur-lined aviator hats. When he spotted me, he smiled the way she used to.

Jennifer explained she was back in town for her brother's wedding, but not sticking around. "In and out," was the way she put it. She needed to get back to New Hampshire where she was working as a house-sitter-slash-dog walker and working toward her GED.

"Thus the plight of the single mom," she said.

She'd come in for a set of wiper blades for her 2011 Nissan Sentra and I found them easily enough on the rack by the door.

"I don't suppose you install them."

"I'd like to," I said, "but I'm chained to the counter."

“That’s okay,” she said. “I’ll struggle through.”

I told her it was good to see her. She said I looked exactly the same. I ran her credit card and bagged the wiper blades. She waved at the front door and then raised the baby’s tiny arm as if he were waving himself. The door closed behind them.

“Go,” I heard a voice say clear as filtered water.

I thought it was Pascal from the stockroom, but I remembered he told me he’d be a few minutes late. I wondered if it might be God, or maybe my mother with knowledge she’d never had in life.

But in those last seconds, as I grabbed my coat and headed out, as I passed a confused Pascal on his way in, as I was momentarily blinded by the glare of sunshine reflected from plowed banks of snow, I had a vision. It was my dad, dressed as I remembered, in jeans and brown loafers and a red polo shirt. He was standing in some massive forest smelling for smoke, checking for smoldering campfires, and watching the sky for lightning.

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