

Emmy

Herman senses the dark underbelly of Wesley Chapel, the flick of evil that lives just below the congregation's shining, well-mannered veneer. It's as subtle as breath, and will drag you down if you aren't careful. The seeming tranquility of Wesley Chapel might throw a person off, but Herman is certain of the particular darkness in the hearts of church members, including his wife, Lois.

The others don't feel the evil like Herman does. It breaks his heart they can't, or won't, see the nearly palpable, touchable static in the air as the two forces, good and evil, rub close together. But then, they never had a childhood friend like Emmy.

Wesley Chapel sits on a low hill in East Tennessee, between Knoxville and Sevierville, elegant and pristine like the jewel of goodness she is supposed to be: the sacred bride of Christ. A wide creek runs behind, for baptizing, with picnic tables on its bank.

Fenced pastures of grazing cattle surrounds the church. Down the road sits a dairy farm, a coop and a country store, all closed on Sundays.

The blood red brick of the church contrasts with the pure white columns and double front doors, which are flung open on Sunday mornings like welcoming arms. *Come to me, all who are weary and heavy-laden and I will give you rest.* God said "all," Herman thinks. "Plain as day in Matthew.

Inside, stained glass windows tell the Gospel stories – Mary and an angel, children surrounding the savior, Jesus healing the blind. These are stories congregates know by heart, pictures they grew up with, pulling at their Mama's skirts and asking "but why did God blind him

in the first place?” When Herman and Lois’s own children, Will and Emily Ann, were small, they begged to hear the “window stories” again and again.

A hand-carved wooden cross adorns the alter. On Sunday mornings the hardwood floors gleam. Lighted candles send a smoky, vanilla aroma heavenward. It’s an old church. The members are elderly. They grew up together as children, attended each other’s baptisms and weddings, and funerals for some.

The women arrive in self-sewn, knee-length cotton dresses. They are country women who have raised their babies. They smell of hair spray and bacon left over from breakfasts they cooked for their husbands.

The men wear fedoras, suits and ties, shabby from use but still their Sunday best. They linger outside on the gravel parking lot before church, smoking Camel cigarettes and talking about the going prices for corn and tobacco.

Sometimes, under Herman’s urging, they veer into politics. Wallace or Nixon? Most of the men tread lightly on this topic. Each knows his own conviction but isn’t sure how his neighbors feel about blacks and whites eating at the same lunch counter, or their children attending school together. Best to leave that to Washington. These men have farms to run. This isn’t Alabama. Racism isn’t their problem to solve.

Herman will push it, though, and the men know it.

“We can’t let Wallace in,” he says. “It’s un-Christian, what he’s doing.” The men hear insistence and urgency in his voice and skirt away. They know Herman relishes a good argument on the subject, will get red in the face about equal rights.

But the men don't want to discuss it. No need to bring on that uneasy feeling. Why disrupt a nice morning? Better to get through the service without debate, go home and read the paper, fill their bellies with Sunday dinner and take a nap.

The men enter the church in a clump at the last minute and search out their wives. Herman is the last to slip inside. He walks to the pew where he and Lois always sit, third row from the front. Lois bristles as he scoots in. Herman feels her fuming because he spent too much time in the parking lot.

"Out there stirring up trouble?" she whispers.

Herman chuckles. "Now why would you think that?"

Lois is a petite woman with tight white curls close to her head and blue-grey eyes, a kind and loving soul who doesn't like to call attention to herself or bring on controversy. What Herman labels "evil," she says is "just life, the way things are." Herman usually lets her have the last say in arguments. Lois says evil is too strong a word to throw around.

Herman loves his wife. He understands her viewpoint to some degree, or at least why she has it. She has never known a black friend, much less fallen in love with one, like he did. Emmy is his secret, though. A secret from his youth that has shaped his politics and his Christianity, put him in direct conflict with the likes of their new preacher, Brother Allen.

"You aren't going to like the sermon," Lois whispers. "Don't walk out and make a fool of yourself like last time."

The last time Herman heard racial hatred from the pulpit he had stood up and held his bible in the air, interrupted the preacher.

“Sitting in a church with a closed heart does not make you God’s person, does not make you a Christian. Just like sitting in a garage doesn’t make you a car.”

There had been a smattering of nervous laughter. He walked out and waited in the car for Lois. After the service, everyone avoided them. Lois was furious.

This morning, Herman opens the church bulletin and glances at the topic: “Race Mixing and the Bible. Det. 7:1.” Herman lets out a heavy sigh that turns the heads of those around him.

“I’m of a mind to walk out right now,” he whispers.

“You’ll do no such thing,” Lois says, her eyes wide and jaw firm.

Evil is a live ember at Wesley Chapel this morning, Herman thinks. He’s not surprised, but disappointed. Brother Allan had placed a Wallace campaign sign in the front yard of the parsonage. What kind of preaching would you expect from a Wallace man?

And, when Herman and his hired help, Bobby and Billy Watson, ran into Brother Allan at the coop, the preacher, with his beefy fingers and booming voice, made a show of shaking Herman’s bony hand, patting him on the back, asking about the weather and the up-coming revival. He had ignored Bobby and Billy as though they were not there. Herman felt it was wrong of the preacher not to shake their hands, too. A man of God should not see color, should welcome every child of God, not just his churches white tithers.

Herman and Lois stand for the first song, open their hymnals and sing. *“Blessed assurance, Jesus is mine. Oh what a foretaste of glory divine.”*

Certainly, Herman thinks as he sings, ministers before Brother Allen had been racist, and likely half the congregation agrees with him. But preaching segregation from the pulpit lends authority to a viewpoint that Herman knows, in his heart, defies the word of God.

The preacher walks to the pulpit and motions for the congregation to be seated. He is a heavy man with basset hound jowls and a round, protruding belly. The word “gluttonous” comes to mind whenever Herman sees Brother Allen.

“Don’t start anything,” Lois whispers. She straightens her back and gives the preacher her full attention.

Brother Allan begins with scripture about light not abiding darkness. But Herman doesn’t listen. His mind drifts to Emmy, his childhood friend and first love. Beautiful, dark-skinned Emmy, daughter of the sharecropper farmer who tended Daddy’s land.

Herman and Emmy, working alongside their fathers, planting corn. Emmy, chasing feral cats at the barn, or insisting they could dig a hole to China. Emmy, who could make a rock skip five times across the pond. She wore her stiff, shiny hair in tight pigtails.