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Words on a Page

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Words on a Page

by Anna Lockhart

The following is an excerpt of a larger story. "Words on a Page" is the final product of a research-based fiction project completed over the course of the 2012 Rhodes Institute for Regional Studies. It is an exploration of the changes in the religious communities of the Mid-South and also focuses upon how the budding Emergent Church movement is manifesting itself in the Memphis metropolitan area. While the story is under consideration for publication, the completed piece cannot be featured online. Anyone interested in reading the entire story can contact the author by email at anna.lockhart@ymail.com.

I

Color is the last to leave. Long after my voice has disappeared, long after my fingertips have stopped twitching against the starched white hospital linens, my memory of color remains. They say scent is the strongest sense. They say the smell of your grandmother's perfume as she hugs you should linger longer than the feeling of her jacket's padded shoulder against your cheek, but all that remains of mine is the pale blue shade of eyeliner I would watch her apply as I sat perched on the edge of her claw-foot tub. The same blue I saw the day I finally reached the quiet bottom of the neighborhood pool and turned to gaze up at the rippling surface before making my ascent. Simple hues that before meant nothing, but now are all I have left. Small flashes of color forcing their way through a blanket of forgotten sensations.

It feels like days have passed since the sounds of the medical machinery stopped reaching me, since darkness bled into my view of the grey grid ceiling above my bed, but I can still picture the crisp green line of the heart monitor leaping and diving.

Such an electric, unnatural green. It rises and falls, bobbing up and down just as the red and white buoy on the fishing line did the day my daughter took me to the lake. It is the last vibrant recollection I have before white walls and sterility. The lake's name has since escaped my mind, but I have memorized the white glints of sunlight in the waves and the way the water grew darker as it drew your gaze further from the shore. My daughter sat beside me with her legs dangling off the dock, bare feet skimming the murky surface of the lake. She turned to me and spoke. I cannot remember her words, but I remember the color of her voice – cerulean, with flecks of amber. It seemed to vibrate through the air after it left her mouth, though I had not seen it then. Her voice was always rich and vivid. I noticed it the first time she sang. It was Christmastime, and she had coiled herself in tinsel while her father and I were draping lights around our tree. Her song started as a hum, quiet and emerald, but then grew to glittering crimson.

Lainey. That is her name. I must hold on to that, right until the end. She is more than just colors. She is Lainey and she is her chestnut ringlets. Lainey and her royal blue high school graduation gown. Lainey and the charcoal smudges on her hands after a day at art camp. She is a little girl with mint green icing smeared across her nose moments after being presented with her first birthday cake. She is a newborn baby with rosy cheeks that contrast against her white baptismal gown. That day I watched the clean, clear water trickle across her forehead as the pastor turned to present her to the congregation. *It is said that a child's earliest memory becomes a metaphor for their relationship with God,* he announced, his voice echoing against the stoic sanctuary walls. These are words I must remember. Just like Lainey's name. *Let us as a church,*

as a congregation, as a community, ensure that it is a beautiful metaphor.

More colors keep trickling in, drop by drop, as if a tiny needle has pricked the roof of my mind. One drop is the warm, golden shade of my husband's skin as I run a finger gently down each bump of his bony spine while he sleeps. Another drop and his skin pales, his veins darken and streak across his crinkling wrists, small tributaries coursing through him slower and slower until they stop altogether. Far too soon. The next drop is the doctor's cold brown eyes, and the next is the black flecks in the alabaster tile floor. I remember the powder blue sheet they threw over his corpse, and how his skin was almost the same color. So different from the day I first felt that bare skin pressed against my own. Strange, I can no longer recall his name or the date of our anniversary, but I can picture the lilacs in my wedding bouquet, how they perfectly matched the bruises I glimpsed on my sister's thigh as she slipped on her stockings before the ceremony. How these things were not mentioned – not by *ladies*. How she wordlessly fastened my veil and squeezed my shoulder on her way out. How she later wrote a note with lilac ink before giving up on colors altogether. And how the beaming yellow of the sunflowers on her coffin seemed to mock the mournful tone of the black polyester blends filling the sanctuary's pews.

That sanctuary – that church – was more constant than any house I'd ever lived in. My family moved many times, always pushing east as neighborhoods darkened. At that time, colors became more important to everyone. My mother painted her nails a bold shade of orange as she bemoaned the tainting of my education. She said white and black could never coexist, though they seemed to do just fine together on the

surface of every picket sign held outside my school. White to offset the black lettering, black to offset the white, and a few precious strokes of ruby red here and there for emphasis.

But we never left that church.

We always sat in the same pew, in the same beam of sunlight. I don't recall the warmth of the sun through the stained glass panels, but only the reflection of the colors off the polished hardwood pews. During worship, the room was teeming with unspoken tension. Everyone had chosen a cause. Some fought to replace the faded garnet carpet that lined the aisles; others fought to keep it. Some thought the music was too dull; others thought it too lively. *Everyone* had an opinion on the pastor, either for him or against him. But for an hour every Sunday morning, people kept their opinions to themselves. They would sing worship songs while casting toxic glances. Grudges grew stronger with each Hallelujah, and gossip blended into fact with each Amen.

Yet the church was always most beautiful when empty, when silence filled the sanctuary like smoke circling upwards through the tarnished brass chandeliers. It felt pure, holy. Even when I slipped in alone, my single and imperfect presence detracted from the blue-grey glow of vacancy that seemed to vanish under the cracks in the doors as I entered. I used to visit the sanctuary when I was upset, using it as a means of solace. After my sister's death. After my husband's. I would weave through the empty pews, dragging my delicate fingers across the tops of the worn blue hymnals. Every once in a while, I would pause to check for dogeared pages, hymns marked as favorites by long time members who felt the unofficial seating chart would remain uncontested.

Which, of course, it did. To their dying day. I would walk by my own pew, peeking into the hymnal that my mother and father shared, he holding it steady and she gingerly turning the pages.

The colors from that church are much crisper than the others in my mind. Or perhaps they are all growing crisper. There are the pastels of childhood Easter dresses, all the cheery shades of fruit sherbet. There is also the pale yellow of my catechism booklet. My sister and I were given a nickel for every answer we memorized. I do not remember any of the questions, much less the answers, but only the shade of the cover and the way those nickels glittered in the small bowl on my bedside table. We received the books in Sunday School, the same morning that the instructor taught us to fingerprint.

The third time we moved houses, I put that skill to use. I swirled red and blue together with my fingertips and left a trail of purple dots along the hallway wall to my room so I would never get lost. I was Hansel and Gretel together, at once afraid of the unknown and forming a plan to conquer it. Mother was furious and restored the wall to its original color, that of a coffee stained napkin. She insisted the color was “Whispering Wheat,” waving the paint sample in front of me teasingly. Each of her brushstrokes buried my trail of breadcrumbs. Yet now, even that paint's name is like its own crumble of bread guiding me back from a journey. Even farther back into my memories than I could travel when I was well, when I had sight and sound and touch. Every layer of whispering wheat on that daunting hallway wall leads me further from the heart of the woods, pulling me closer to home. Right back to that golden wheat field behind my

grandfather's house in Mississippi. He used to sit on a tree stump and pluck grasshoppers right from the air as they flitted past his face. *Good source of protein*, he would joke. I must have been no more than four. He rose from his makeshift seat, glanced at the sky, and scooped me into his arms. *Looks like we're about to get that rain we've been needing*. And suddenly, there it is. The fresh scent of an oncoming storm. I can feel drops of rain on my forehead, on my legs. A soft, cool prickling as the sensations descend like dew, like soft rain on freshly mown grass, like showers on delicate plants.

II

Walter Harmon was afraid. He was afraid of the rattling air conditioning vent in his childhood bedroom. He was afraid when he awoke to find his feet peeking out from his blanket, exposed and vulnerable. He was afraid of tornadoes and hurricanes and things beyond his control. He was afraid of car wrecks, and he was afraid when one claimed the life of two of his closest friends. He was afraid of vague questions, and he was afraid of hazy answers. He was afraid of flying, afraid of outliving his children, and he was afraid when he received a phone call from Lainey at 2:21 AM.

He drove noiselessly through the streets of Memphis, with only the occasional ticking of his blinker to slice the quiet night into quantifiable moments. A few clicks more, and he arrived at the hospital. In his pre-dawn daze, he focused on moving from one checkpoint to another: to the sliding glass doors, to the ding of the elevator, to the flicker

of the fluorescent lights, to the nurse's desk, to the hallway, and to room three hundred and four. He gently pressed through the doorway to find Lainey curled in a metal chair and clutching a yellowed envelope. In the seat next to her sat an African American woman who appeared to be the same age, and she was resting her forehead on her palm. There was an eerie hum in the room, like when an entire orchestra stops playing all at once. Lainey's mother was laying motionless on the hospital bed. The machinery stood silent, unplugged.

"Pastor Harmon," Lainey breathed, standing up when she noticed his entrance. The woman next to her stood as well.

"Lainey." He crossed the room and embraced her. "I'm so sorry." Walter stepped back a bit to study her face.

"It was another stroke," she explained. "Only four hours after the first one. They said it's not uncommon for a woman of her age." She sighed, then suddenly straightened. "Oh, introductions! I'm sorry, not really firing on all stops here. Walter, this is my friend Caroline. She works with me at the Commercial Appeal. Caroline, this is Walter, my pastor."

Caroline stood to shake Walter's hand. "Yes, of course! Pastor Harmon. I've heard a great deal about you." She smiled politely. Her handshake was firm and confident, though the dark circles beneath her eyes betrayed her weariness.

"Caroline, you should go home and get some sleep," Lainey reasoned, perhaps glimpsing the same fatigue that Walter had. "You've been in here all day with me."

"Are you sure?" Caroline glanced at Lainey apprehensively.

"I'll be here with her," Walter interjected. "Please, go and rest." Caroline nodded, gathered her things, said her goodbyes, and left. Lainey sank dejectedly into her chair, and Walter claimed the seat next to her.

"We're just waiting on the mortuary technician to come and..." Lainey's voice trailed off as she gestured toward the body, but she did not move her gaze from the floor tiles. A few moments later, the nurse peeked in to say it wouldn't be much longer. She left the door open, and Walter listened to her rubber soled shoes plod down the hallway, around the corner, and onward to the still-living, the not-quite-deceased, and the soon-to-be-wells, all those that could still be helped. But he stayed put. He sat with Lainey, heavy silence seeping from the ceiling tiles as he shared the early morning with the church choir director and the shell of her mother, a woman he hardly knew.

She was more than a shell, of course. He knew how much she had meant – how much she still means – to so many people. But it was nearly 3 AM, which was prime time for unwanted cynicism. It was his third day on call, meaning that, given the size of his church and the cruel nature of statistics, it was also his third day in a row sitting in a sterilized room with a fresh corpse. It's a wonder they don't mention this in seminary, he mused. Normally lead pastors of such large congregations aren't required to be on call, but he had volunteered. He knew about grief and frustration; he knew how to claw his way out of the pit the two create. And he consequently felt called to pull others out of that same pit.

"I guess I'd always just assumed she was going to live forever," Lainey muttered to herself, pulling Walter from his thoughts. "She was a part of my *routine*."

“Routine?” he prodded, gently.

“Wake up, brush my teeth, make coffee, call Mom. My routine. Who am I going to call in the morning now that I’m, oh what would you say... An orphan?” Her voice broke a little, but she covered it with a half-hearted laugh.

“You can always call me,” Walter added hastily, though Lainey's expression informed him that this was a poor suggestion. There was a time when that offer would've been comforting, but that was several months prior to this hospital room.

Lainey attempted to hide the tension. “What, with that strict phone policy of yours? My morning routine doesn't fall into your office hours,” she joked.

“You have your small group for support. Or you could use that time for prayer.” Lainey nodded, but her gaze was distant. Her thoughts had already moved elsewhere.

“It's strange, the things you remember,” she sighed. “Small things. Inconsequential things. Like her picking up the shards of glass when I dropped our pitcher. Or watching as she hung wind chimes on the front porch. I remember the movement of her hands so clearly. *Why* is that important?” Her brow furrowed. “It must mean something. Sometimes I think that it's some giant puzzle. That the things we remember, those tiny little moments, are like dots we're supposed to connect. And that it spells out some big message, gives our lives direction and meaning.”

“Your life has direction and meaning already. You know that.”

“Maybe,” she said, her grip tightening around the envelope still in her hand.

“Are you the family?” a voice asked from the doorway.

Walter jolted, then he and Lainey rose to their feet. He hadn't even noticed the

technician come in.

“I am,” Lainey replied, and her eyes moved to Walter.

“I'm the pastor. Of the family.” He paused. “Pastor of the daughter, really,” he concluded rather gracelessly.

“You sure are dedicated,” the mortician joked, then turned to Lainey. “Hope you're paying him overtime for this.” He wheeled the stretcher next to the hospital bed and began to move Lainey's mother. He was young, perhaps in his late twenties, and seemed oddly light-hearted considering the time of morning and the task he had before him.

“It's a full-time gig,” Walter replied, though immediately regretting his choice for that final word.

The man scoffed quietly as he began to cover the corpse in a sheet. “What church do you spend your *regular* office hours in?” he asked.

“East Ridge Baptist.”

“Oh, Fort God?” After the technician glimpsed the puzzled expressions Walter and Lainey wore, he continued. “Right, sorry. That's just something my friends and I call it when we drive out that way. You know, if someone dropped a nuclear bomb on Memphis, the only two things left would be a bunch of roaches and that church building. Though I doubt the roaches will use it to worship God.”

Walter and Lainey stood quietly for a moment as the man finished covering the body and prepared to wheel it out. “It's more than just a fort, you know,” Walter said, feeling the need to defend its honor.

“Of course,” the young technician conceded unconvincingly, and he gently maneuvered the corpse through the doorway. Walter again listened to the plodding of rubber soled shoes, this time with rolling wheels as accompaniment, as they made their way down the hall, around the corner, and into a basement filled with the not-living, the newly-deceased, and the never-to-be-wells.

East Ridge was more than just a fort. Walter was sure of it.

* * *

“Thank you so much for being here,” Lainey whispered as Walter entered the sanctuary of Colonial Presbyterian. The funeral service was being held at the church Lainey's mother Rebecca had attended.

“I'm always here to support you,” he reassured, then followed his wife and their two daughters to an empty pew near the front. The room was filling up quickly. A few minutes later Reverend Paul Yates, the current pastor of Colonial, greeted the guests, opened with a brief prayer, and began the eulogy.

“Rebecca Wilson Phillips was on the nominating committee fifteen years ago when I was called to this church.” The reverend's powerful voice made Walter instantly forget the thin, pale frame from which it came. “When I arrived at my first interview, she looked me up and down, turned to the rest of the group, and said 'This is the one.'”

Gentle laughter echoed from the pews.

“She was intuitive like that, though. Brilliant and intuitive. She always seemed to know when church politics were weighing me down. A few years back, when the issue of the carpet change came up – ” The couple behind Walter chuckled. “ – it was oddly

polarizing for the congregation. As I was leaving the sixth or seventh heated meeting on the subject, Rebecca grabbed my arm and whispered, 'You know, we could cover all the windows with Star of David curtains and no one would notice. They'd be too busy looking at their feet.'" Yates laughed at his own memory, then continued.

"That woman was a mother, a wife, a librarian, a reader, a writer, a giver, and a lover of God. I remember how devastated I was when she decided to resign from session. 'Church is a lot like sausage, Paul,' she'd reasoned. 'I don't really enjoy seeing how it's made.' She was right, of course. Church is a lot of imperfect people trying to work together within an imperfect system to praise a perfect God. It gets a little tricky at times. Yet she stayed involved right until the end. And stayed light-hearted, which is no easy feat. The last Sunday before her stroke, she walked past me, grinned wryly, and said that we should talk to some people about changing this awful carpet." More laughter from the guests.

"But we can all take comfort in the fact that Rebecca Phillips is with God now. Death is simply a part of life, some even say the *completion* of life. And, as we all know, there is a time to be born and a time to perish, a time to plant and a time to uproot, a time to change awful carpets and a time to let them go untouched, a time to bring the joy of God to others and a time to let it wash over us, carrying us on to the Kingdom of Heaven. Which I truly hope has carpeting that everyone can agree upon." And with that, Reverend Paul Yates sat down. Walter was surprised by the applause that followed the speech. It was a brief round, however, and Lainey was next to step behind the pulpit.

"My mother had this theory," she began, "that everyone should carry their final

words around with them. She used to say that half of suicide's appeal is the prospect of leaving a note, of choosing your last phrases very carefully and putting them into writing. That way, you can't be misquoted. I used to find her looking at her sister's note a lot. It just said 'I hope my next horizons are broader.' 'She always had to be so damn cryptic!' Mom would joke, but the accompanying smile wasn't quite sincere. Then one morning she called me at the crack of dawn and declared that it simply wasn't fair, that *she* should get to choose her last words, too. 'What if I die in a car crash, Lainey? What if I just have a brain aneurism and die instantly? Then I won't ever get my shot at some reasonable final words.' That's when she set about writing this." Lainey paused and pulled a yellow envelope from her pocket. Walter recognized it from his hospital visit a few days earlier.

"She spent months on it. She said that choosing your own last words was not a task to be taken lightly. 'Rest assured I won't leave you people with a flimsy, flowery metaphor,' she said. After she finished it, she carried it with her everywhere. She even left a copy with her lawyer in case she should die in 'some tower of flames and hell-fire.' Her words, not mine. I know she would have wanted me to read this at her funeral, to all those who cared for her and came to send her off. So here it is, Mom's non-suicide note. Her official final words:

"Greater people than myself have lived and died before me, and greater people will live and die after I am gone. But that does not change the importance of my life, of any single life. To all who read this, never believe that your thoughts are not important because they are not broadcast on television. Never think that your words do not matter

because they have not sold ten thousand copies. Never feel that your pain means less because it does not send ripples across the oceans and to the other side of the world. Not every thought can be a political movement. Not every word can be a poem. Not every ache can be an earthquake. But that does not change the importance of a life. Go live, go think and speak and hurt and tell all those you know about it. Take some leaps. Brace yourself for some rough landings. Ask questions, and don't be distraught when they are not answered. Fight battles, and don't be disheartened when you lose. Seek truths, and don't be discouraged when lines get blurry. It's all relative anyway, this whole messy picture of reality. So go step out into the sunlight and draw your own blurry boundaries in the sand. Craft your own storyline. Make your own truths."