

A large, black silhouette of a church building with a cross on top. A small red square with a black bell icon is positioned on the church's facade. The background is a gradient from red at the top to orange and then black at the bottom.

# The Church on Church Street

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# **The Church on Church Street**

By James Coman

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<http://churchonchurchstreet.com>

## 1 Commute

Trains never stop in bad neighborhoods, so Adam was speeding past vast stretches of poverty. He sat with his head bouncing against the window watching the mixture of vacant lots, dilapidated bungalows and churches blur by as he listened to The Who. He marveled at all the cheap real estate. Why doesn't someone buy up all this land and build some super-villain compound, or something? Someone should at least buy all the available empty lots until someone inevitably needs to build a big stadium or corporate campus this close to downtown. Online, you can find hundreds of lots for sale. Some of them have been on the market for years, for almost nothing. Some of the sellers literally want no money, just assume the property tax debt, which isn't even that much.

What is stopping him from buying up lots and becoming a land owner? Money, for one, has so far thwarted any such plans. Adam had been saving up to buy something to get out of his dreary suburban apartment and couldn't afford to waste money on quixotic adventures into the hood. He had saved for years. As his house fund slowly grew, so did the prices on the listings that caught his eye. At this rate, Adam worried he would remain an apartment dweller for life.

Adam tried to peek through the streets as they clacked by, looking for some gem just beyond the overgrown brush that lined the railway. He imagined that he could catch a glimpse of some magnificent sturdy building not far from a train stop selling for almost nothing. Instead, everywhere he looked, he saw empty lots and buildings with some part of the roof collapsed in. Whenever he spotted a house that looked like it was in good shape, he would then realize that some or all of the windows were boarded up. Did nobody live in this neighborhood? But then there are cars parked around. There are cars parked on the streets, but also in some of the driveways. There must be some people living there.

What would stop him from living here? How dangerous can it be to live in an empty neighborhood? He didn't even notice, let alone talk to his neighbors in his suburban apartment, so how much different could it be, really? Where could he go shopping around here? He would have to look at a map. Could he still get to work easily? He would check the bus routes. It occurred to Adam that the travel time had to be so much less than his trip from the suburbs that his life would be dramatically changed for the better. He was imagining all his newfound freedom when he heard them announce the first stop.

"Inside Outside, Leave me Alone. Inside Outside, Nowhere is Home," sang Roger Daltrey as the first passengers shuffled out the door. He wondered where all these people lived. The station bordered the desolate south side neighborhoods, and maybe some of these passengers had the same idea of living the ironically conflicted life so close to the city but so isolated. As he did most days, Adam examined the faces and clothing of the departing commuters looking for clues in their demeanor of the lives they led. Everyone looked so ordinary. Adam could see himself in their eyes.

Adam was a white man, nearly 30 years old, who had been born and raised in the suburbs. He had thick black hair, above average height and looked like the kind of person who can probably help fix your electronic devices. In fact, this is exactly what he did at his job. The people getting off the train were almost exclusively African American, and they all looked like people who were also just getting off work.

He changed his music to something a bit less rebellious. Adam still had another half an hour sitting in his hard plastic seat staring out the window until he finally got to his stop. There, he climbed in his old Pontiac, threw his backpack in the passenger's seat, and continued his journey to his apartment complex, with unending rows of buildings distinguishable only by the big numbers on the outsides. As he approached his building, he was struck with how shabby everything really was. From a distance, the apartment buildings looked prim in their uniformity. But up close, the wear of the crowds was unmistakable. He used a key to open the rickety front door, another key to check his empty mailbox, and a third key to open the sturdy but worn door to his own unit. "I really need to clean up," he thought as he always did upon entering his apartment.

He threw his coat on the back of a chair and pulled his company laptop out of his backpack. With the precision of a routine, he unfolded the laptop and assembled its mouse and power cord. He logged in to the computer, the VPN, and the secure site. When he saw that the nightly upload wasn't ready yet, he pulled out his phone to order some food. He paused and thought but went for the website of his favorite pizza place. In fact, he had a stack of boxes still in the kitchen, some of them still with some slices of pizza in them. Like usual, he wished that the website remembered him and his usual order. But like usual, he typed in everything again. He had 30 minutes to wait for his pizza, so he flipped on the TV, and went back to his laptop to see that it still wasn't ready. So, he decided to go pick up his pizza a little early.

The pizza joint staff tried to engage Adam in smiles and conversation, knowing that this was the same pizza they made for him nearly every evening. But Adam just took his pizza, nodded, and drove it home. This time on his way back through the lobby he noticed that the mail was being distributed late to the mailboxes. Optimistically, he stood there with his pizza waiting for the letter carrier to finish distributing the mail.

Hurrying through his task, the postal worker quickly collated the envelopes. But, feeling the heat of being watched, he quipped, "I didn't order no pizza!" It was worth a giggle.

"You should try it. The best pizza around," Adam replied.

"Alright," said the mailman, and punctuated it with the slamming sound of the mailboxes. "Have a night!"

“Thanks,” replied Adam as he fumbled with his mailbox key to open his box. He had two pieces of mail; a flyer for a new pizza place opening up nearby, and an envelope from a law firm with his name and address handwritten. He recognized that he had received mail from that law firm before, and it worried him that this was another letter from them. He thought maybe he shouldn’t ignore this letter like he did the last one, but he didn’t have any business with any law firm, he didn’t have any legal issues, and he really didn’t want to deal with any bullshit.

He stacked the mail on the pizza box with the flyer on top and made his way through the fire doors that led to his apartment. As he walked, he eyed the pizza pictured in the flyer. He noticed that the pictured pizza was topped with quite a large number of pepperoni pieces. He tried to remember the pepperoni density on his preferred pizza and worried that it might not be as high as the one in the picture. They always try to make food look better in pictures. And he wondered if pepperoni density was a good measure of pizza quality or maybe value. But he did really like pizza, he thought as he added his mail to the pile and opened up the box to his dinner.

Adam sat back down at his laptop, saw that the nightly upload was now ready, and went back to work, eating his pizza. He started the download with his mind only on his work and the pizza in hand. There were some problem records as was common, so he fixed those and sent out some emails for people to work on in the morning. He was comfortable, engrossed in his normal routine.

## 2 Church Sunday

Sunday was the only day Adam was completely free of obligations. The title company where he worked needed to be open on Saturday, so if something went wrong, Adam would get a call to save the day. That happened most Saturdays. This made it impossible to make real plans for the day on Saturdays, and complicated any activity that spanned the whole weekend. Consequently, Saturday night Adam indulged himself in time-wasting activities like binging on old TV programs and eating junk food. Sometimes he made it to bed, but usually he slept on the couch, or even slept on the floor. He tried to get the comforter from his bed around him wherever he happened to collapse.

On this particular night, Adam had made it to bed and had even gotten his clothes off before finally succumbing to the inevitable slumber. Sometimes, no unhealthy processed food product could satiate his hunger, and no electronic entertainment could calm his restless spirit. Like every night, he was eventually forced to submit to whatever horrors his own sleeping mind could conjure.

From the bottom of a deep sleep, Adam heard a knock on the door. At first, it didn't register. This might have been the first time someone had ever knocked on the door of his apartment. Sure, people had visited or had come to deliver something. But people ring the bell from the lobby. Had there been a ring of the bell, Adam would have recognized the sound as someone calling. He would have ignored it. But there is no doorbell at the actual door to the apartment. Visitors who have made it past the front security door have no choice but to knock.

Finally, Adam awoke with a startle that there was a loud noise. It was knocking, but where could the noise be coming from? Was he being attacked? Were the neighbors knocking on the wall? Was someone trapped? The...door? Yes, it was someone at the door. Was there a fire? His heart was racing as he jumped up out of bed, standing there nearly naked, trying to figure out what to do.

He resolved that he needed to answer the door. But he needed some clothes. Thinking fast, he grabbed his suit coat hung on the doorknob to his bedroom. Putting it on as he made his way to the door, he hoped nobody could see that he was wearing only underpants under the suit coat. Of course, it was immediately apparent. His balls sagged down in his blue underwear that hung far below the bottom of the suit coat, and didn't even match the color. Vainly, he buttoned the top button. It wasn't stylish to button the bottom button, he had been told; but this meant that his penis was in danger of bulging through. It was morning after all.

He opened the door quickly, expecting to see a towering fireman donning a breathing apparatus and peering through thick smoke. But the actual scene was even more shocking. There was literally a chorus of women, dressed up in their Sunday best beaming enormous smiles at him. Several ladies quickly checked the bottom of his suit coat. Yes, you could see, but he was at least wearing underwear. The large woman in the front fixed her gaze and enthusiastically said, "Have you been to church yet?"

He almost asked, "is the church on fire?"

Instead, he asked, "what church?" While he blinked forcibly.

The large woman was still enthusiastic when she replied, "I'm glad you asked. We're from the Glorious Word of God."

He thought he was now fully awake, but from the back of his head he heard himself exclaiming, "This can't be what angels look like!" And subconsciously he shook his head a little.

The woman continued, "We're your neighbors. If you haven't been to church yet, we wanted to suggest that you join us for the next mass which starts at 10:00."

Adam was still stuck on the image of the building being on fire and the church being on fire, so he imagined that these women had setup a church in their building. It was a pretty large building, but he was wondering how he could have missed the church. Was the church in the building? He asked to confirm, "You all live in this building?" He accidentally sounded somewhat dubious.

"Amie lives here," the large woman replied with some satisfaction as she pointed to a younger and thinner woman behind her left shoulder. Amie, who happened to be briefly looking down at the part in Adam's coat, looked up awkwardly and gave a smile and a little quick little wave back and forth.

"You live in this building?" Adam asked, trying to remember if he had seen her before.

"I live in building 8242. On Elm Street," Amie nodded slightly. Seeing that Adam was confused, she added, "It's a couple streets down."

That must have been in a different part of the complex. It was a huge development with a large number of identical buildings, most of them rentals. But the fact that only Amie even lived in the complex, and in a building far away, meant that these folks must have rung someone's bell to get in the building, and then must be going up and down the halls soliciting. Adam began to wonder if it becomes legal to roam the buildings knocking on doors if one of the people in the pack lives somewhere in the complex. Doubt and annoyance must have cracked on his face, so the spokesperson for the group interjected with the question, "So, are you going to join us for the 10:00 mass? We're in the choir!"

An older, more stern-looking woman wearing white gloves held out her hand with a brochure adorned with fluffy clouds, God rays, and the name of the church prominent on the document. "Here you go. This shows you how to get there!"

Instinctively, he reached out his hand to take the brochure. This had the added effect of widening the gap in his suit, and Adam's now sagging member popped right through the suit. All the women's gaze dropped down in concert to his crotch--even the woman handing him the pamphlet. Adam had to adjust his hand to catch the paper from the top as her hand dropped. He met her gaze again as she looked back up at his face.

"Jesus hopes to see you there at 10am. And we do too! Have a glorious day!", said the big woman.

"Have a glorious day!", echoed the rest of the women waving as the group shuffled down the hallway to the next door. They didn't even look back to see if Adam would reply, so he just shut the door.

With his heart still racing from having been startled awake, he started to feel angry that he was woken up for an advertising stunt. Adam was a lifelong atheist who thought of religious people as mostly harmless kooks. But they were probably really angering a lot of people. Some people work nights and can't wake up early to answer the door on Sundays. Other people have extremely strong feelings about religions that don't involve Jesus. What do Muslims think when they get an early morning knock on the door by some infidels? He guessed that was why they traveled in a pack--so they were safer from retaliation by less open-minded neighbors.



Through the door, he could hear the group waking up his next neighbor with knocks. He huffed and looked at the brochure. The Glorious Word of God Church? He wondered how they got God to come and speak at their church. He thought it might be similar to the way Santa can be at every department store at the same time in the Christian world. Someone there has appointed themselves the representative and spokesperson for God in that building. He suspected that it is considered very poor taste to tell someone that they can't really speak for God, especially when the next church down has a different person speaking for God but saying different things.

He hung his suit coat back up and collapsed into bed again. His head was throbbing with a headache now. He realized he still had the pamphlet in his hand. He should have thrown it in the garbage on the way back into the bedroom, but it was too late. It wouldn't be good to throw the paper on the bedroom floor, so he put it on his nightstand where it stayed until he moved out.

### 3 Check for the Future

Adam wasn't supposed to check his personal email at work. Of course, like everyone else, he checked regularly. Among the junk messages he received on this particular day, a simple email ostensibly from a law firm arrived. "Hello Mr. Adam: This email is in regards to our recent postal correspondence. We trust that you are pleased with the settlement, but should you have any questions, please feel free to contact us here at the above."

The name of the law firm sounded familiar, which is what led him to open the email to begin with. There were no links or attachments at all which would generally be necessary for a phishing or malware email. So he made a mental note to finally open those law firm envelopes when he returned home.

In the evening, when he finally arrived home, there was no mail in his mailbox, and he almost forgot his resolution to open the letters languishing in his mail pile. Only when he again checked his email did he recall. With some trepidation and excitement, he opened the most recent letter. To his surprise, the envelope contained a check for over \$100,000.

Adam's heart raced, but he quickly decided it must be a promotion or a hoax of some kind. He fumbled for the accompanying letter. It said that the check resolves the matter of Probate for his uncle Travis. He thought to himself, "didn't Uncle Travis die a long time ago?" But governments don't like to give up money without a good long fight.

He checked the email again. He searched the internet for the name of the law firm, and it seemed like a well-known firm. It was even BBB rated. He couldn't think of any way this could be a scam. A scammer wouldn't know that he had an uncle named Travis.

This amount of money could change his life. This didn't make him rich, but it was a significant leg up on his finances. And it was enough by itself for a significant down payment on a house. No more apartment dwelling; no more rent payments; he could finally achieve The American Dream.

The way one's life flashes before one's eyes as they face their death, thoughts of the years of apartment living rushed into his head and filled him with distain. The crazy neighbors, hoarding stacks of quarters for the laundry room, helplessly waiting for weeks for things to be fixed, he never wanted to experience any of those things again.

The check by itself wasn't enough money to buy a house. However, he also had some money saved up, and he was still getting a paycheck. Having a good downpayment, combined with the money he was earning working at the title company, would allow him to get a mortgage to pay for a good house. He started looking online at some tools that calculated how much of a house you could afford given your income and savings. If he was aggressive, he calculated that he could afford a very nice single-family home. But Adam didn't want to tie up all of his money in a house. Houses aren't necessarily the best investment, and if it was his only asset, he could be vulnerable to market swings that could significantly hurt his overall financial health.

## 4 Mice

The whole ride into the office, he looked through listings. He began with houses near where he currently lived and switched to one neighborhood and then another looking for where the houses were good and affordable. He seemed to always be looking in the wrong place. He didn't want a condo. That seemed like just an apartment complex with a homeowner's association rather than a landlord. He wanted a two-story house with stairs that he would personally own. The thought of a lawn was scary. He mowed the grass at his parents' house when they were alive, but that was a long time ago. But he was confident that having his own home would encourage him to do his own lawn maintenance. Maybe he could even have his own garden and grow fresh vegetables. He wondered if fresh vegetables would encourage him to actually eat some vegetables. "Why don't I eat vegetables?" he asked himself under his breath.

It happened to be a very busy workday with many dropped connections and an epidemic of broken mice. He had to run to the computer store for more mice, and he stopped by the downtown branch of his bank.

When it was his turn, he felt lucky to be called up to the window of the prettiest teller.

"What can I do for you today?" she asked.

Adam tried to mirror her professionalism but at the same time act distracted by his paperwork. "I just have a check to deposit," he said as he signed the check and slid it to her with the rest of his documentation. He studied her face looking for surprise. She looked sharp in her blue suit and bright green blouse that was required to match the color scheme of the bank. Her name tag said "Sapphira," perhaps because of her blue eyes.

He expected her to be impressed with a check so large. He rehearsed in his mind saying, "I've been waiting for that one for so long. Those damn lawyers take forever these days," when she said anything that expressed some interest. But no interest seemed to be forthcoming.

"Would you like your balance?" she asked with a professional smile?

"I'm pretty sure it's the amount of the check plus about \$500," he said with desperation just to say anything to the attractive teller. He then cringed when he realized how pathetic that sounded.

“No balance then?” she asked trying to get to his point.

“No thanks,” he replied, trying to think of something more clever to say. He was certain that something witty would come to mind, so he stood there motionless in quiet contemplation.

“Anything else I can help you with?” she asked politely.

He snapped out of his stupor reluctantly. “No. Thank you. Thanks a lot,” he finally returned. And he turned to leave.

“Why am I like this?” he asked himself. Why didn’t he ask her out, or something? Such a huge lost opportunity; when would he have another chance to have such a big-money transaction? Why couldn’t he think of anything meaningful to say? How could depositing a 6-figure check make him feel like such a loser?

He questioned his self-worth all the way to computer store where he purchased the cheapest crappiest computer mice available at the store. He knew these mice too would stutter and break early like the ones he was replacing. But his boss was an accountant, and the idea of spending far less time every day positioning your cursor where you wanted it, didn’t make any sense to him at all. You would think that replacing the mice at least twice as often, and paying him to do it, wouldn’t make economic sense to an accountant, but that’s not how accounting works, apparently.

Back at the office, Adam went around replacing mice. He was able to give people taped-together temporary mice, but he had given Stacy his personal mouse. When he arrived to replace her mouse she said, “No thanks, this one is good!”

“I’m sorry, but that’s my personal mouse. I have a company mouse for you.”

She was somewhat annoyed and asked, “You get a better mouse than everyone else?”

“Well, I brought my personal mouse that I paid for,” he said shyly.

“Can’t you get a new one? You’re the IT guy?”

“I’m only allowed to buy very inexpensive mice,” he said holding up the brand-new mouse like a salesperson on the Home Shopping Network, “and this one is for you!”

“Alright,” she relented with a sigh and left her desk to go talk to someone.

Adam replaced the mouse and retrieved his own, thinking that the people he works with are all professionals with many years of experience handling untold billions of dollars per year, and yet generally behave like children most of the time.

Finally getting back to his desk after putting out all the fires of the morning, he started plugging in numbers to see how much money he could realistically afford for a house. He was disappointed that the figure still wasn’t going to buy him a really nice house in a nice neighborhood. He had to broaden his neighborhood search. But, while typing numbers into the company’s software looked a lot like work, browsing houses was less convincing. For the rest of the day, he had to think about places where he might want to live, do a quick search, and then go back to looking busy. The frustration made him crazy with desire to get home.

Then he got a call from Luis.

“Stacy says you gave her a broken mouse,” he said matter-of-factly as Adam entered the room.

“Her mouse broke, I went to the computer store and bought her a replacement mouse with the company credit card,” he replied with wide-eyed surprise and incredulity.

“She says you got a good mouse, and you gave her a low-quality mouse,” he retorted, and added, “Because she thinks you hate her?”

“Hate her?” he answered with alarm now added to his surprise. “Why would I hate her? I really don’t even know her very well.”

“Well, she thinks you are deliberately harassing her for some reason. I don’t know why. But, she said you insisted that she use an inferior mouse.”

“So, her mouse broke. A few mice happened to break all on the same day. I ran out of temporary mice, so I gave Stacy my personal mouse that I use,” Adam explained. “I bought this mouse with my own money for my own personal use, but I lent it to her so she would be able to continue working while I went to the computer store to get new ones. When I returned with brand new mice for everyone, Stacy didn’t want to give me my mouse back. I did ask politely, and as I said, it is my mouse. I was just trying to keep everyone productive despite an unfortunate coincidence with broken mice.”

Luis looked even more annoyed. “You’re using non-approved hardware in the office?”

Adam was taken aback and stuttered, “Who approves hardware?”

“I do!” barked Luis, now apparently angry.

Now on the defensive, Adam replied, “the way I previously understood the policy, you ‘didn’t care what people used as long as it doesn’t cost the company money.’”

Luis looked genuinely insulted, but responded, “Why do you buy such low-quality mice anyway? Apparently, they don’t even work right.”

“Previously, I understood the policy was that ‘I should buy the cheapest product that services the need,’” Adam defended. “And the cheap mice do work.”

“How cheap are we talking here?”

Adam continued that, “The mice I buy for the office have no real names on them, and they’re only \$15 before tax. My personal mouse was \$89 on sale. I don’t know how much they currently sell for downtown, but I’m more than happy to head back to the store and get everyone new mice. I’m sure everyone will be happy—especially Stacy—and their productivity will noticeably improve. I bet Stacy would accept my apologies if I came bearing a nice new high-precision gaming mouse!”

“We’re not going to pay hundreds of dollars so everyone can be gaming at work. And we don’t allow unapproved hardware at the office. That’s the policy.” Luis said sternly.

“So, you want me to go buy myself a new cheap mouse?” Adam asked. “I gave my old one away.”

It wasn’t clear exactly what the answer was when Luis replied, “No gaming at work!”

Adam decided that that was a no, and just went with it. “No gaming at work,” Adam repeated. And with that he headed back to his desk to pretend like he was working.



## 5 The Real Estate App

Adam was sitting at home alone browsing the real estate sites. His mind wandered with his browsing. He found himself looking at giant mansions on multi-acre estates, realizing that he probably couldn't afford any of the cars parked in front of the house, let alone any house in the neighborhood. He also checked out the cheapest properties on the site. He found a house, if you can call it that, with a dirt floor. He noticed that listings of trailer homes rarely included pictures of the inside. And pictures of the outside of a trailer home were carefully cropped to only show that one trailer by itself. If he looked up the location of the trailer homes, he found that they were parked in lots cram packed with sketchy looking homes. Pink Flamingos were common.

In fact, he noticed that everything about the listings for expensive houses was better. There were far more pictures from inside expensive houses, and those pictures were super high-quality with great lighting. Listings for cheap houses frequently completely omitted interior pictures entirely, but when they had them, the pictures were regularly blurry. He actively wondered how he could take a picture that blurry if he was trying. If he went into a trailer home with his cracked old camera phone and took some pictures of the kitchens and bathrooms and such, those pictures would be far better quality than what are included in a sales listing. The pictures look like they were taken at a crime scene. Maybe the realtors are taking pictures while being chased by weasels. Real estate weasels.

The text also differs starkly. Although they use the exact same vacuous words like graciously appointed and strategically located, the good house descriptions just have more words. Clearly, realtors selling expensive houses can afford to take more time spewing extra bullshit.

When he did searches, the same houses seemed to come up every time. Images of the houses would appear in his mind before they were rendered on his screen. He had memorized the search results. He now felt that he was an expert at house searching. Maybe he should become a realtor himself. How hard can the classes be to get a license? When a house started to become familiar to him, he would check to see how long the house had been on the market. He found some that had been listed for more than a year. There must be something wrong with that house, or with the price.

It seemed to Adam that the housing app bore some resemblance to dating apps that he had previously attempted to use with little success. In the game of dating, presumably there are perfectly good men and women who join the site, find a perfectly good mate, and then exit the site having achieved their goal. But, not everyone is perfectly good. In fact, most people have significant flaws that blemish their desirability. One would guess that people would line-up according to their desirability quotient. The 10s should get the 10s, sure; but the 3's should naturally settle for another 3. Of course, every 3 would love to have a 10, but

they have to be realistic. Instead, dating sites are full of people looking for a perfect partner that doesn't exist and could never exist.

Dating isn't that simple. For one, a participant's level of attractiveness cannot be represented by a single-factor model. Looks are important, sure. But height, weight, race, income, ability to write a bio, and countless idiosyncratic qualities determine each dater's power level. Worse, daters don't agree on who the good candidates are. Most people have specific minimums they look for. Nobody wants to date someone who believes in the wrong religion. Women would never communicate with a man who wasn't significantly taller than they were. People have preferred races which may correspond to their own but may not. You never can tell.

With dating as with real estate, there are preferences. There are some daters that might have to wait a long time to be noticed by just the right person. Some people are just more attractive than others. There are people who sit on dating sites for year upon end waiting for just the right partner who seems to never arrive. Maybe many people have dated the person behind that profile, and nobody has made a commitment, leading them back to the dating site. It may be obvious by looking at the bio, but for some people you have to meet up with them to find out why they're never getting off the dating site.

On a real estate app, there are definitely some 3's priced like a 10 that are never going to sell anywhere close to the price at which they are listed. For others, maybe whenever someone goes out to actually view a house in person, they quickly change their mind about the property. Houses just sit out there for a long time, and others get snapped up right away. At least real estate doesn't have latent psychological problems, and sales are final.

It had been weeks now, and no houses had popped out at Adam. He had checked his bank account multiple times, and the big chunk of money was still present. If he talked to a teller, they invariably informed him of the great new rates that the bank had on certificates of deposit. He hadn't moved the money into his savings account yet, because he was going to buy a house. New "pre-approved" credit card offers were arriving in the mail almost every day.

The real estate app on his phone knew him well. It emailed him offers to get pre-qualified for mortgages. It notified him of new homes for sale nearby.

A few of the new homes looked very interesting. He bookmarked them and contemplated them. However, he noticed that houses were disappearing off his list. He wondered if there was a bug, and he finally set out to investigate. First thing, he realized that the houses were disappearing because they were being sold. Some of the houses were sold after only a day or two. After some additional contemplation, he decided that the houses that were disappearing were materially better than the ones that were wasting space in his

brain. The good ones were being snapped up quickly, and the bad ones were rotting in his search lists. Real experts were noticing the good houses right away and jumping on the opportunity. And, chumps like him were staring at otherwise unwanted real estate.

To be a real house hunter, you needed to be smart and moreover, you needed to be decisive. He figured that he wasn't that dumb. It was the decisive part he needed to work on. But to be decisive, he needed to be smart. He needed to understand perfectly what his criteria were. When that magic house hit the market, he needed to recognize right away that this was the one. It wouldn't just be the right house for him. It would be a good house. He would find himself immediately in competition with skilled house hunters, and he would have to act fast.

What kind of house did he really want? That was a good question. He had already established that he wanted an actual house, and not a condo or townhouse. In fact, he thought that anything with a home owner's association was out. He also wanted an upstairs and a downstairs. For him, it wasn't really a house unless it had multiple floors. He realized that he had started to make a list. Most lists could go on his computer or his phone, but this was an important list. He wanted to be able to walk around with it and refer to it. He grabbed some paper and a pen.

"No HOA," he wrote. And "Multiple floors." He scratched off multiple floors and wrote, "Two stories." He didn't remember seeing any three-story houses, and if he found one, he thought it would be either way too expensive, or would involve someone else on the other floors. He wanted a house all to himself.

He had been looking pretty far away from downtown, so he also wrote down, "Convenient for work." It was an executive decision. He wanted to live in a nice home, but if he spent all his time commuting, he knew he would hate it. He gave it a second thought, but no. The nicest places he had considered so far were actually out.

He thought for a minute and wrote what he thought was probably the most important thing for the list, "Within budget." Obviously, he needed to be able to afford the house. He didn't want to blow his whole inheritance just to find himself struggling to make payments.

He remembered a conversation he had heard at work about realtors. He heard that if you tell a realtor the maximum you want to spend on a house is X, they will take that as a minimum, and will immediately start suggesting houses that were above X. The thinking seems to be that everyone wants to be a little conservative on their pricing goal, so you need to give your clients a little nudge to be more realistic about their budget. The thinking goes that if a realtor only shows houses that they think they can afford, inevitably the customer will find a nicer house that is above what they told you, and you'll lose the customer. Realtors hate losing customers. But at the same time, nobody wants to be stuck with a mortgage they can't afford.

The reality is that house prices almost always appreciate in value, making a house more affordable over time. Plus, if you have been looking at houses that list for less than X, houses that are more than X are going to look nicer. Realtors want to show people more desirable houses. And, if it turns out that the buyer really can't afford the house, that's not actually the realtor's problem. They get paid up front. And they get paid a percentage of the house price.

So, Adam added to his list, "With extra to spare." If possible, he wanted to leave some of the inheritance money for other things like emergencies and retirement. He hoped that was not an unreasonable requirement. After all, he had a job. If he put down a lower down payment, it would just mean that he had slightly higher payments going forward.

## 6 Listing

Adam arrived at home from his long commute, and took out his phone to plug it in. Upon unlocking it, he found the screen showing a picture of a church. The picture was on his real estate app, on the “Homes Near You” page. It seemed that his phone had been on while tucked in his pocket on the train. Random pressing had brought up the “Homes Near You” page and selected a random property.

The church was listed as a home for sale for 50,000 dollars. Moreover, it had been on the market for only one day, according to the description. The asking price was much less money than the houses he had been looking at locally, and it was big. He concluded that the search must have happened while the train was travelling through the poor part of town on the outskirts of the city. He decided to look up the property on his computer, so he noted the address on the property. Ironically, the church was on Church Street.

At the price it was listed, the church was less than half of his inheritance money. That made it seem low risk. It was much closer to work. And it looked really cool. The fact that it had been on the market for just a day fit his criterion that he should be looking for houses that were recently listed, so he wasn't wasting his time picking over junk that savvy buyers had turned down.

While searching on the computer, he saw many houses for sale near it, and at first was going to conclude that the church wasn't actually for sale and that the app had glitched somehow, but he eventually found it, not too far from the railroad tracks.

The quality of the pictures was uncommonly good. Looking at street view pictures, he could see that the houses around it were mostly dilapidated with many empty lots. The trash in the streets were not present in the pictures of the church listing. He concluded that the realtor had probably cleaned the place up before taking the pictures.

Frustratingly, there were no pictures from the inside of the church. There were vitals that seemed very strange. The church was more than 2000 square feet, but there was only one bedroom, and three bathrooms. Was the bedroom really a bedroom? The included appliances looked typical for a normal house. According to the website, there was a refrigerator, stove, even a dishwasher and microwave, so there must be a kitchen. There was even a washer and dryer. Adam wondered if these items, which appeared on basically every listing, were just clicked on by default. Maybe there wasn't really a kitchen in there. Or maybe someone had converted the church into a house and built a kitchen for themselves. It was hard to guess.

Adam decided that probably the appliances must be real, and he imagined having his own laundry facilities. Laundry is painful in a large multi-unit apartment building. Residents have to share the facility with many strangers who may not have the same hygiene standards. The aspect that most bothered Adam was getting home late from work and having to remember that he had started laundry. Too many times, Adam had forgotten his laundry and returned hours or days later to find his clothes still wet in a heap on the floor. At that point, the only reasonable course of action is to start over and re-wash the clothes, putting him right back to the beginning of the laundry process.

He didn't dare hope for a kitchen that was stylish, or a washing machine that was state-of-the-art, but at this point any working model would dramatically improve his lifestyle. He didn't know what any of the options on the washing machine did anyway. What is Permanent Press anyway?

Adam looked at the houses around the area and found many houses for sale. Some of them were boarded up, and most looked very frumpy. It wasn't a great neighborhood. It seemed like there were some good deals there. The problem was the neighborhood.

But the church was listed only yesterday. Could it be that this was an amazing deal that would be snapped up quickly if he didn't act? There wasn't much information about the church, but there was a phone number and an email address for Langston Williams, who seemed to be the realtor for the property. He decided he should immediately contact Langston and try to schedule a showing.

The earliest possible time he could go to the property was Saturday. He might get called into work on Saturday, but if he did, he would already be most of the way downtown anyway. He figured that, if he did get called, he wouldn't be too far from his office, and it would be a good test of commuting from the area.

Pressing the email button, it prepopulated a message starting "I'm interested in property #84221." Adam just had to add, "How is Saturday Morning?" And sent it off.

It was very exciting. This was the first time he had actually contacted someone about actually buying a place to live. He wondered how long it would take to get a response back, and worried as he always did about saying something stupid when he ultimately met the realtor in person. And then he thought about how crazy it was to consider living in a church.

Who lives in a church? Well, Elvis did, right? He bought Graceland. Although granted, he was a bit crazy and had enough money to do anything he wanted to the buildings. And, while Elvis probably wanted to live in Graceland because he was religious, Adam wanted a really good deal and churches were just buildings for him.

This was literally the first place he had even asked about, so it wasn't worth getting very excited about, Adam told himself.

## 7      **Unavailable**

Adam was excited to get an email from Langston the next day after his inquiry. At first, it seemed like it was going to be very difficult to meet up and see the church. Langston seemed to be busy all the time, and took a while to respond each time. Adam thought he would need to go visit the church by himself, which was possible, but he wanted to see what it looked like inside. Finally, Langston relented and agreed to meet at the church at 8am on Saturday.

The whole week, Adam thought about the church, imagined living in a church, tried to guess what the church looked like on the inside, and thought up questions for Langston. He habitually studied the listing and watched the number of days on the market creep up. Through it all though, he managed to restrain himself from sending any of the long lists of questions he had prepared and even printed out to bring on Saturday. As he commuted into and out of the city, he watched his map, and tried to see if he could catch a glimpse of the church as the train whooshed by through the neighborhood. He felt that he should be able to spot the modest steeple on the church as it whipped by, but he could never identify it among the clutter of trees and other rooftops. In the end, he just had to use his imagination.

Adam was used to getting to work early. Morning was when most of the problems happened at his office. Consequently, he made it a habit to take an early train in to get a head start on any disasters before the rest of the company started pestering him for answers. So, planning to meet Langston at 8am was no problem. In fact, he planned to get there early to get a good look at the neighborhood and check out the church building without Langston's inevitable sales pitch.

The Friday evening before meeting Langston at the church, he set his alarm, and went to bed early, only to find that he had some difficulty nodding off. And then, early in the morning, he found himself awake again. The time was about when he would get up to get ready to catch the train on a weekday, so he convinced himself that that was interfering with his sleep schedule. Rather than just shower and get ready early, he decided he should get a little extra sleep, and he dozed off again. When his alarm finally went off, he awoke with a start, and prepared to head into the city. He kept forgetting things, including his multiple lists of questions for Langston. When he finally got in the car and plugged the address into the GPS, the travel time was longer than he had anticipated, but he would get there with plenty of time. So, he set about immediately on his journey.

As he drove, he found himself repeatedly getting stuck in traffic, which he hadn't expected on a Saturday morning. And it felt like he was always stopped for a traffic light that seemed to be poorly timed. Each time he checked his estimated time of arrival, it got pushed a little later. He eventually resigned himself to being late. "With all this planning," he thought to himself, "he was still going to manage to be late." It was very frustrating and made him uncomfortable.



When he finally arrived, he almost missed the church. It didn't look quite like it had in the pictures or in his mind. The building seemed to more naturally blend in with the rest of the surrounding neighborhood. It was a fairly run-down old church in a bad neighborhood. This shouldn't have been much of a surprise.

Looking around, he didn't see anyone or any car that was obviously the realtor's. Adam parked in a small empty parking lot right next to the church. This gave him a new perspective on the building. He could see that the building had a unit for central air conditioning. He didn't see any broken or boarded-up windows like many of the surrounding buildings. The church was entirely clad in dark red bricks, and those all seemed to be in pretty good shape. He was trying to see if he could catch a glimpse into the windows, when an older model Mercedes Benz pulled into the parking lot along side him.

"You must be Adam," he said.

"Langston?" replied Adam.

"The one and only," confirmed Langston with a flourish. "Look, my friend, I am so sorry I'm late. I'm supposed to be getting into work, my other work I mean, and I got distracted. But here we are, right? Isn't this the most beautiful church you have ever seen? Should I call you Reverend?"

Langston's presence was that of contradiction. He was a tall man wearing a suit coat over a crisp white dress shirt that was opened to reveal a large gold chain. He wore blue jeans and large white Gucci flipflops. Everything was a little scuffed and wrinkled. He noticed that the car had some scrapes and rust was forming along the bottom. But he had a firm handshake, and a twinkle in his eye.

"Just Adam," Adam reiterated. Then he asked, "Is it okay to park here?"

Langston turned as if in surprise and enthusiastically said, "Oh, this is the parking lot for the church! It is part of the lot. The congregation has to have a place to park, of course." Then he added, "This is a full-service church!"

Adam was trying to process what that meant when Langston walked up to the side of the building, put his hands on the wall and effused, "Look at these bricks? Have you ever seen bricks this beautiful before? They definitely don't make bricks like this anymore!"

“That might actually be true,” thought Adam. Looking up at the building from street level, the church seemed enormous. “The ceilings must be pretty high.”

“You want to take a look?” Asked Langston as he tentatively looked around the back of the building.

The logical thing would have been to head towards the front where the main entrance was. But Langston was a professional, and Adam didn’t feel qualified to question him. The back of the building was overgrown with weeds, but Langston braved the tall brush with enthusiasm. Adam had on jeans and sneakers so didn’t have too much trouble making progress following the path that Langston was creating. But, Langston’s feet must have been getting cut up with those flip-flops on. Occasionally Langston would shuffle his feet or lift them up to pull out sticks. Neither of them were getting a very good look at the building because they had to concentrate on not stepping on anything dangerous.

In general, the building looked like it was in pretty good shape. It was just neglected. When they came to the back, they found a substantial slab porch with some cooking hardware. There was a smoker, a gas grill, and some neglected tables that could be used to prepare food. A double door opened up onto the porch, but the entrance was closed and presumably locked. They looked like heavy wooden doors.

“So, what do you think so far?” Asked Langston enthusiastically.

Adam responded hopefully, “We’ll go in back here?” And he motioned to the entrance.

“Nah,” he said. “I don’t have a key. I was just thinking that this is an awesome old church. I mean, look at these amazing old bricks!” He pushed somewhat weakly on the door and said, “Look at these amazing old doors! It’s like a castle! You have to go to Paris or something to find a crazy old church like this, am I right?”

“I guess,” Adam said tentatively. “Could we see more?”

“Oh yea!” Langston responded, staying enthusiastic. “I was just stopping in case you were getting tired or something.” And then Langston looked all the more tired heading back into the brush.

They passed a third entrance on the side of the building, also with a heavy wooden door. Langston didn’t even stop for this one. They trudged all the way around to the big front entrance of the church, which was

impressive. It definitely needed to be painted, and maybe repaired. Adam was now very excited to get a look inside.

“That’s some church, isn’t it?” Langston said grandiosely, spreading out his hands. “Everyone knows about this church. This is a pillar of the community. You’re going to be a famous preacher here! And, the best part is that the owner only wants fifty thousand dollars for this amazing historical monument. Are you ready for such a challenge, my friend?”

Adam was impressed by the strange sermon Langston had given, but he said expectedly, “Can we see the inside now?”

“Yea! I’m not going to lie, though. I do not have keys. The owner hasn’t given me the key yet. But the outside is a treasure, isn’t it?”

Dumbfounded and dejected, Adam asked, “You don’t have ANY keys?”

“No. You’ve got to give me a little time for that. But I just wanted to show you the outside first. I wanted to show you what a spectacular piece of architecture you were dealing with here.”

Now Adam was angry. This confirmed his worry that Langston didn’t really know what the heck he was doing. Was there something really terrible inside the church? Or was Langston completely a fraud, not even a realtor at all? It probably wasn’t a good idea go around the back of an abandoned building with a psychopath pretending to be a realtor. But, if Langston was going to pretend to be a realtor, Adam had to continue to be a customer.

“When exactly can I see the inside?” Adam said with enough brow to indicate his annoyance. “How can I buy the church if I can’t see the inside?”

Langston acted like he was somewhat surprised and said, “You want to see inside. Yea, that makes perfect sense. Right. I want to show you the inside right away. I will get the keys, and we’ll go in, and we’ll take a look. That will be great. At the moment, though. Right now, I need to get to work. I mean, I need to go to my other job, and right after, I’ll give you a call. I’ve got your number. And we’ll take a look. But, you’re going to love it. It’s amazing!”

“Today?” Adam asked skeptically.

“Give me a few days to work it out, and you’re going to be thrilled with what it looks like inside. I mean, if you like the outside, wow, you’re going to love the inside of this church.”

Adam wondered if that meant he had actually seen the inside of the church, but he instead asked to confirm, “You’ll give me a call as soon as you get the key? I’m probably not going to be able to come back here until next Saturday. Can you send me pictures of the inside?”

“Yea, let me see what I can do. I’ll get back to you as soon as I can. Maybe tomorrow, Adam. I’m really glad you like the church. You know, we haven’t seen this last corner of the building. This is literally the best corner, here. On the way back to our cars,” Langston said, seeming to hurry a little now.

Back at the cars, Langston pulled out a business card from his suit pocket and said, “Here’s my card. You call me if you have any questions.”

“You mean about the outside of the church?” Adam asked with subtle sarcasm.

“Just let me get the key. We’ll take a look and then you can decide if you want to make an offer. The owner will be really glad to hear from us. It’s going to be great. We’ll be in touch, okay?”

And with that, Langston was off in his beat-up Mercedes, and Adam was left in the parking lot of an abandoned church in a bad neighborhood. He thought that, pragmatically, he should take some more time to check the exterior of the place out. He thought he might be able to see something in the windows if he looked more closely. But, his disappointment, frustration, and anger got the best of him, and he hopped into his car for the longer-than-expected drive home.

## 8 Disappointment

Disappointed with his strike-out with the church, Adam decided to drive to some of the houses for sale in the area where he was currently living. The ball was now moving, and he felt a renewed motivation to find a place to really live.

Like his experience with the church, he found that no place quite looked like the pictures. The pictures weren't necessarily doctored or even misrepresentative, but 2-D still images cannot capture the impression one gets when looking at something in person. There is a visceral feeling being in the presence of something like a home.

Looking at a picture, your mind works hard to create a mental world where the picture exists. It does a pretty good job, but the world in your mind is generated without seeing anything other than that seen in the pictures, and without the full sensation of being there. The discrepancy between what you expected and what you experience can be jarring.

Since he was driving around after work, he didn't have a lot of time, so he didn't go far, and he didn't see many houses. With each property, he would know what the cost was before arriving, and he was consistently surprised that you don't really get that much for your housing dollar.

He had adjusted his expectations about how much he would budget for the house. He expected to spend all of his inheritance, the money he had saved up for a house, plus he would get a mortgage loan. It would be a significant commitment.

The idea of living in a church in a bad part of town seemed even crazier after having visited it with its odd and questionable realtor. On the other hand, it solved most of the problems he faced, and the idea still fascinated him. He thought he should look at some other churches in the area, but he couldn't bring himself to do it. He was afraid he would find many such churches, and the insides would all be disasters that could be fixed only with a bulldozer.

Nonetheless, late in the week, Adam decided to send an email to Langston, whom he had not heard from. His email was quick and to the point. "Any news on a key?"

Minutes after sending the email, he received a call from Langston. “Adam my friend! How are you doing? I was just about to call you and I got this email from you. You’re still interested in the Church on Church street?”

“That depends,” replied Adam. “Can I see it?”

“That’s exactly what I was going to call you about. The seller hasn’t gotten back to me yet, so I just sent him another message. I really thought he would have responded by now. I told him how interested you were in the church. I really expected him to be excited that a young man, such as you, was ready to continue the church’s long history of preaching the gospel to a new generation. But, like I said, I haven’t heard back yet, and I’ll let you know as soon as I can get a key, okay?”

Adam was actually speechless. Eventually, he just said, “okay.”

Langston continued rambling, “Right. I know you’re disappointed. Hey, you know I’m disappointed too. But I’ll keep on him. As soon as I hear back, I’ll give you a call right away. Does that sound good?”

Again, Adam could only say, “okay.”

At the end of this conversation, Adam was left somewhat angry but still wanting to know about the church. He thought that the idea of buying a church to live in was crazy, the neighborhood would be a crazy place to live in and buying something from a realtor who didn’t show up on time and couldn’t even get the key to the place he was selling were all crazy. But he still wanted to know more. In part, the inability to see the inside made him want to see inside even more. Over the subsequent days, he sent Langston additional messages, and he got nothing back. He was being ghosted. The reasonable conclusion was that the church was no longer for sale, or even if it were for sale it couldn’t be purchased through Langston.

Nonetheless, Adam started a little communication campaign, either sending an email or a text message each day at a different time of the day. A week went by with no response.

## 9 Warranty

Sitting at home with Langston's data sheet in his hand, Adam found a phone number that he hadn't seen before. He put the number in his phone and gave it a call.

"Hello?" came Langston's distinctive voice hesitantly. Clearly, Adam had caught his realtor friend off guard since he clearly hadn't been set up as a contact on this phone. Adam would later discover that he was calling Langston at work.

"Hello my friend," Adam announced with some cheer since he finally felt he had a bit of an advantage in the relationship. "It's Adam--your church buyer!"

"Heh, that's...great...Adam." Langston stammered a bit. "So, you've decided to buy the church. That's very exciting! Hey, how did you..."

"You've got the key, then? I like to check out churches before I buy them," Adam said with unwarranted bravado. Adam had never purchased anything more expensive than a used car before.

Langston replied, "Yea, I think I mentioned that I'm working on getting the key."

"So, Langston," Adam began a pre-rehearsed question, "you're a realtor representing the seller of a church, right? And, the seller didn't provide you with any key to the building? That seems suspicious. Does it seem suspicious to you?"

"I see where you're coming from. I do have a key," Langston started.

"Finally!" Adam exclaimed.

"The key I have doesn't work, Adam. There's a disagreement with the seller who tells me he personally used that key, and it works. But the thing is, the key just doesn't work. I've tried squirting oil in there, and everything. It's the craziest thing!"

“So, that’s the end of the church then? Everyone is just locked out of the church and we’re going to wait until church falls down before anyone will see the inside of it?” Adam asked with disgust.

“No, of course not. It’s an old church, and the lock is probably just frozen with disuse. We need a locksmith. I have a locksmith who is great. He’s a genius locksmith. He’ll just replace the doorknob, and that’ll be it. We’ll go inside. You’ll say, ‘wow what an awesome church!’ you’ll buy the church, and you’ll be the greatest pastor in the world.”

“So,” interrupted Adam.

“But, the crazy old man won’t let me change the lock. I’m being honest with you, Sir. He’s a great guy, but he’s a little stubborn,” chuckled Langston. “He wants me to sell the church, but he won’t sign the agreement to have the lock changed. So, I’m at a standstill with him. I keep calling him, and he usually doesn’t even answer.”

“That sounds familiar,” quipped Adam.

“I know. I’m sorry about all this, really. I’m doing what I can. I completely understand that until I get this resolved, nobody wants to buy the church. Which is a shame. The seller tells me it’s in great shape. He says it is just the way God left it, whatever that means. He says a true man of God will know that this is the church for them.”

This all sounded very creepy, but this was far more information than he had ever gotten out of Langston. The story was making Adam curious, and he asked, “so you’re saying the church is good on the inside? There’s not shit and corpses piled up in there?”

“Here’s the thing, I’ve been inside the church. The key used to work. It’s a nice church. Your followers will be happy. You’ll love it there. There are pews. There are stairs. But, that was a while ago and now the key doesn’t work.”

“That really doesn’t make any sense. If it’s just a maintenance issue, the seller should just let you change the lock. Doesn’t he want to sell the church?” asked Adam.



“He’s a stubborn old man,” replied Langston. “He is blaming me. He thinks I changed the lock so I could have the church for myself. But nobody lives there. I’m not living there. I’ve been there many times and it is empty. It’s just locked.”

“What if someone has snuck in there and trashed the place?”

“It can’t be, Adam. We’re selling the church with warrantee. That means that if the place is destroyed, the seller has to pay to get it cleaned up. The seller says he will pay for a new lock after someone buys it. I know that is messed up. I keep trying to convince him that people need to be able to see the church if they’re going to buy it. But anyway if you bought the church, you would get a key, and you wouldn’t even have to pay for it.”

“That’s crazy,” Adam said.

“I’m telling you,” replied Langston. “And also, let me tell you. I shouldn’t tell you. Do not tell anyone I told you this, Adam. The seller will take 30 thousand dollars for the church. That’s his walk-away price. Okay? Don’t tell anyone I said that. You can’t hardly buy a new car for that.”

Adam was getting somewhat excited at this point. He asked, “So, you’re saying it’s a nice church and if I don’t like it, I can take it back?”

Langston’s voice lowered almost as if he wanted to whisper and said, “Look, I don’t have time to go into detail right now. I need to get back. But the inside has to be the inside of a church. It can’t be structurally unsound, things can’t be all broken more than ‘normal wear’, and it has to be ‘broom clean.’ If you don’t like the color, you can’t take it back, but it’s definitely a church. I can explain the legal ramifications later. Can I call you later today?”

“Absolutely,” said Adam a little sarcastically. “You can just respond to one of my messages.”

“I got you, Sir. Thanks. I’ll talk to you later, okay?”

Adam was in disbelief that it wasn’t possible to just open a door to allow people to look at a building that is for sale. It seems childish and financially irresponsible to not just do what needed to be done for the sale.

Clearly this was at least part of why the church couldn't get sold. Besides the fact that it is church in an undesirable neighborhood, one couldn't go see it if they wanted to.

This conversation really changed Adam's perspective on the church. With a price of only 30k, he could definitely afford to do some remodeling. Maybe he could even convert it into a real house—a house that happened to have a steeple. Rather than having a fund to finance his eventual house purchase, he would have an actual place to live where he could gradually make updates to convert it to a regular house. This all sounded like a great idea.

At the same time, when he tried to put the idea into perspective, it was clearly a crazy idea. No rational person would ever buy this church. First of all, it is a church. As far as he knew, normal people didn't live in churches. Churches are primarily designed for large groups of people to pray to some god or gods. Houses, condos, townhouses, and apartments are explicitly optimized for living. Here, Adam had a bit of an advantage. Whereas anyone who felt some connection to religion would think it was possibly heretical, sacrilegious, or at least creepy to live in an abandoned church, to Adam it was just a building. Could it be haunted? That's just silly. To Adam, there are no ghosts, because there are no souls because there is no God.

If he were to try to sell the church, others would see it as a church. But in this, there was a counterpoint also. If he converts it into a house, then it is just a house. If he fails to convert it to a house, then he just has to sell it as a church. People do buy churches. They are a good business.

Then there is the issue of the neighborhood. Everything around the house is run down, destroyed, or dangerous. There was no telling if he would even be safe in this neighborhood. Maybe he would be a little safer in a church? Since the outside walls were covered with bricks, maybe he was even a little safer from stray bullets from drive-by shootings that are always in the news for this neighborhood.

But then on the plus side, his transportation to and from the office should be much easier. There were busses day and night that drove right by the church. Since they are a city service, they drive through no matter how dangerous even if there are no passengers. It should take about half the time to get to the office, and he wouldn't need to use his old car.

Adam couldn't stop thinking about having his own place to live for so little money. He didn't think he'd be able to stop himself from making a crazy decision.

## 10 Who is Langston?

Sitting at work in between crises, Adam checked that the church was still available for sale online. He noticed that he had Langston's business card in his pocket, so he decided to do a little research to see what Langston was all about. He did find a few websites that had him listed. His face, beaming with his signature smile, appeared on some of them. Clearly, he had put himself out there as a realtor. But he wondered what else could be discovered about this man.

He thought that what he really needed was to talk to a different realtor about him. Looking down a few cubes, he saw Jakob; a friendly and outgoing older black man with broad shoulders and an easy outgoing manner. Adam remembered hearing that he had a realtor's license. Adam decided to see if Jakob could do a quick search for the professional qualifications of Langston.

He walked over, card in hand, and softly asked, "Hey Jakob, how are things?"

Jakob responded quickly and loudly, "Yo, Adam. You know, it's funny, I was just about to start my IT security training."

"That's good. You're way overdue for that." Adam said tentatively.

"Yes, I know how important that is," said Jakob. "Everything else going great?"

"I do have a little favor I wanted to ask you," Adam said handing Langston's business card over. "Is it possible for you to look this dude up and tell me if he's a real realtor?"

"Is this guy bothering you?" Jakob said jokingly.

"You know what?" Jakob said while standing up with card in hand. "Stacy is our resident expert on realtors and real estate. Do you know Stacy? She's amazing."

Adam found himself being involuntarily lead to Stacy's desk, thinking, "yea, but Stacy is a bitch." But only actually saying, "Uh, yea. I thought you were a realtor."

“Yes. But I’m mainly a lawyer,” Jakob said out of the side of his mouth as he walked into Stacy’s office. Adam could find no way to stop Jakob and avoid another encounter with Stacy.

Adam hadn’t been in Stacy’s office since the incident with the mouse. He noticed that Stacy now had a giant flashing gaming mouse on her desk. He wondered if she had purchased it herself.

“Yo, Stace!” exclaimed Jakob enthusiastically. “Adam here is working with a realtor, and he wanted to check to see if he’s legit. You know Adam, right.”

Stacy beamed at the two of them and said, “of course! Hey Adam!” Then she took the card from Jakob and quickly typed Langston William’s name into a website she already had open.

“Handsome young man,” Stacy said. “He has been a realtor for only two years. Looks like he sold one property to a one Philistine Williams. A relative maybe?”

Stacy looked on the back of the card, found the address of the church, and typed that in just as quickly as she had typed in Langston’s name. “You’re looking to invest in some speculative property?” She asked with a raised eyebrow.

“Yea, I was just looking at it. It just came on the market about a week ago.”

Stacy hit a few more buttons and said, “it looks like this property has been listed on and off for at least three years. By Mr. Williams.”

“Oh, it showed as being on the market for 8 days,” Adam said with some bewilderment.

Stacy turned to Adam and said, “Yea, that’s the point. There are some really pervasive superstitions in real estate. People think stupid buyers will not know a property isn’t selling if they just relist it. But, your realtor would have told you if he hasn’t already.”

“It’s a pretty building,” she said facing back at the screen and browsing through some pictures Adam hadn’t seen. However, none of the pictures seemed to be of the inside.

Adam strained to peek over Stacy's shoulder at the pictures. "Are there pictures of the inside?" he asked almost involuntarily.

Stacy flipped through the pictures quickly again and said, "no, I don't see any. That's not too weird. When the outside looks better than the inside, you only show the outside."

"Is it cheap?" Adam asked. "It seems like it is inexpensively priced"

"Well, the price keeps going down with each listing, I see. 50k sure isn't a lot of money for a building this size. But, in a neighborhood like this, things are often priced on their tear-down cost."

"Tear-down?" Adam asked with some confusion.

"In these neighborhoods, very few people want to live there. People who didn't grow up there typically buy them mostly as a speculative investment. Without maintenance, which is expensive, you're going to eventually have to tear the building down. My guess is that the listing price is close to what it would cost to level the building and haul away all those bricks and garbage. That's the tear-down price."

"The building is garbage?" asked Adam, a little worried.

"I don't know. You'd have to take a look at it. Maybe. Have you talked to your realtor about it?"

"I've only talked to Langston so far."

"Ooh, I could be your realtor, Adam!" said Stacy with enthusiasm.

"Do I need a realtor?"

"Everyone needs a realtor, Adam. But, if you just need someone to look things up for you for now, I'm happy to be of service." Stacy seemed very sincere.

“I appreciate it,” Adam said sincerely. “But I currently can’t even get Langston to call me back.”

“Here,” said Stacy curtly. And she printed out the information on Langston including phone numbers and an address that wasn’t on his card.

“That’s awesome. Thanks a lot, Stacy!

“It was my pleasure.” And Stacy gave a friendly wave to Adam as they turned to leave.

He and Jakob walked back to the cubes.

“Stacy’s like that,” said Jakob with admiration. “She’s so friendly and helpful. And she knows everything about real estate.”

“I thought you were a realtor too, aren’t you?”

“Oh sure, I have my license. But, you can see that she has skills that a simple guy like me can only be jealous of. You let me know if you want me to rough up this Langston fellow!” Jakob said with a grin.

## 11 Acceptance

Adam gave himself two days to try to talk himself out of his plan. After that, he called Langston and said he wanted to offer \$28k for the church, and demanded a guarantee that the transaction would be cancelled under some certain conditions including a lack of structural integrity of the building, deviation from the facts in the listing, squalor, serious pest infestation, or inhabitation by any other party. As expected, the seller came back with a counter offer of \$30k plus the cost of new locks. A formal offer was drawn up and both parties signed it. A closing date was selected at Adam's employer, and nobody objected.

Stacy agreed to act as Adam's representative. He thought of asking Jakob first, but he didn't know how serious Jakob was about either hostility with Langston or his own competence as a realtor.

Upon hearing that everything was all in agreement, panic set in and Adam became convinced that he was making a big mistake. Only the modesty of the selling price gave him solace that he could recover from any catastrophe that could come of this crazy plan.

For the first time, Adam received the name of the seller when it was revealed in the preliminary closing documents: Reverend Ezekiel Brown.

This seemed to confirm that the building was recently used as a church. This struck Adam as a good thing. Maybe a person planning to move into a church should have wished for a building more adapted for habitation. He could have hoped for a home that was more livable. But instead, he hoped that a church would have been better taken care of.

To keep costs down, it was agreed that Adam could make out checks directly to the parties in the closing. Thus, the biggest check was to Reverend Brown. The day before, Adam headed to the bank to have cashier's checks made.

Standing in line at the bank, he could see that the pretty teller Sapphira was working again. Working out the speed of the transactions and the pattern of the customers, Adam let a customer go in front of him, feigning some confusion with his paperwork so he would end up conducting business with the young woman. His plans don't always work out, but this time he managed to get called to her window.

"I need the following cashier's checks from this account, please," Adam managed to say somewhat professionally.

She took the paperwork, looked up his account, and asked, “Making a contribution to the church?”

“I’m buying the church,” Adam said confidently with a bit more pride than he had intended to display.

“Really?” she said sounding almost genuinely impressed. “So, you’re a man of the cloth?”

“Actually, I’m an atheist,” he said.

The confusion looked like it slapped her in the face. “So, what do you need a church for?”

Adam concluded that she was a religious person and felt guilty that he was disrespecting a church. “I’m just going to live in it,” he replied sheepishly.

“Too bad,” she said with a bit of disappointment. But then she added, “If you do decide to preach in the church, let me know. I can help you write your sermons.”

Adam was a little confused. An atheist isn’t going to be writing sermons. Maybe she didn’t understand, or maybe she just wanted to brag about her sermon-writing abilities. However, Adam definitely wanted more contact with Sapphira. “Oh yea?” he said trying to sound impressed and interested.

“My daddy was a preacher and I helped him all the time. I’m a walking librarian of bible verses,” she said boastfully.

Adam’s suspicions were correct. She was a religious enthusiast, and he was buying a church. He thought maybe he could turn this to his advantage. “That’s amazing,” he said trying to look impressed. How do I contact you if I need biblical references for a sermon?” Adam was very proud of the clever way he was able to smoothly ask for her number.

Sapphira took a business card out of the holder that had been sitting inches from his right hand on the counter and put it in front of him. “Just give me a call,” she said with enthusiasm.



Adam felt embarrassed that he hadn't thought of just taking a card that was right in front of him. And, he was disappointed that the card contained only her work number but not her personal number. It indicated that Sapphira thought of the relationship strictly in the context of work. But maybe it was better that she actually handed the card to him rather than him reaching for it. Maybe she really wanted him to call her. "I will," he said resolutely.

He tried to direct her attention to the part of the paper she was holding with the payee name and amounts for each check. She understood well and proceeded to cut the checks.

Adam watched while she worked to create the checks, but he tried not to stare. She worked very diligently. Occasionally she looked up and caught him staring. He tried to fidget with his paperwork, but there was no hiding the fact that he was attracted to her and enjoyed just looking at her.

Finally, she handed him the stack of checks and said, "there you go!" with a smile.

Adam checked over the accuracy of the documents and confirmed, "looks good!"

As he started to pack up all the documents into a folder, Sapphira said, "good luck with your new church."

Again, he was surprised that he wasn't clear about not treating the church as a church. But this time he was happy that she mentioned the church. It was better to be misunderstood than ignored, he thought. "Thanks a lot! See you soon!"

## 12 The Closing

The closing happened on a Saturday at Langston's request. He didn't want to miss any work over the real estate transaction. Adam probably had to be in the office anyway, but it meant he didn't have to miss any of his core work hours that way either.

Sitting around the table were Langston, representing the seller, Stacy representing the buyer, Alejandro representing the mortgage company, and Adam. Stacy questioned the \$270 for a locksmith. "The buyer shouldn't be paying for maintenance on the property. This is entirely the responsibility of the seller. Is this work already done?"

"The work is done today, but the locksmith has not yet been paid. That's the locksmith's fee right there," replied Langston.

"That's not the way it is done, Mr. Williams. The seller is responsible for the state of the property up until the point of sale. We need to take this fee off."

"Absolutely," replied Langston. "Ordinarily yes. However, the seller actually doesn't have the money to pay the locksmith. So, this was agreed in advance by your client to allow the deal to go through."

"The seller doesn't have \$270? So, we're paying to get the door opened at the closing?" Stacy looked at Langston and then Adam. Adam nodded.

"That was the agreement," affirmed Langston.

"This transaction gets weirder and weirder," commented Stacy, looking back at Langston and touching his shoulder.

Langston gave Stacy a smile. From the moment Langston saw Stacy in the lobby she was eyeing him, and at this point Langston seemed distracted by Stacy too.

At the end of the closing, Adam was trying to figure out where to get the key to his new place, but Langston and Stacy were literally comparing the shine on each other's shoes.

“How do you get those shoes so shiny? You’ve got a secret that you’re not sharing with me,” teased Langston.

“Okay, looks like that’s it for today,” Stacy said noticing that Adam wanted Langston’s attention. “Let me know if there’s anything else you need from me.” Adam thought the comment was directed at him, but she was looking at Langston when she said it.

“So, you’ve got the key,” asked Adam?

“There are four keys, two each for the front and the back which also didn’t work. The locksmith said the keys are in a bag next to the front door.” Langston nodded, watching Stacy walk away.

“So, the keys are just in a bag outside the church?” Adam asked with some alarm.

“That’s what he messaged me.” Langston replied. “So, you work with Stacy? You know her pretty well?”

“Yes, we both work here,” replied Adam. “The locksmith didn’t mention anything about the inside of the church, did he?”

Langston replied, “There was nothing to say. It was just the inside of the church. You’ll be home inside the church before I can even get the man his check. You’re going to love it, Adam.”

Adam wanted to leave right away to go retrieve the keys and check out the church, but there were some problems that needed to be looked into at the office. He worked diligently to resolve some reported network problems when Stacy found him.

Stacy mostly wanted to talk about Langston, but she intimated that she believed that there were going to be serious problems with the church, and she provided some names of several real estate lawyers with experience in this area. Adam had to be very agreeable and thankful for her advice since she had represented him in the closing without charging him. It was in fact a very generous gift, even though realtors are always paid in percentages, and the low cost of the sale made it almost not worth the effort.

Between several conversations about his new adventures as a church owner and some particularly weird connection issues that finance was having with one of the bank's service providers, it was not possible to get home on the train after visiting the church, so he decided to see if he could find his way directly to the church by bus that night.

## 13 The First Night

Adam had previously mapped out the best bus route to the church, and he pulled a cheat sheet out of his pocket. The trip involved just one bus transfer from his downtown office. Within the downtown area, bus stops are close and the progress was slow. He got on with only one other person. He had guessed that since he was leaving the office so late, the bus wouldn't be crowded, but that turned out to be a bad guess. Adam didn't mind standing because he was filled with nervous excitement, and he knew he would be getting off to connect with a southbound bus soon. He had to adjust his standing location at each stop as well-dressed passengers embarked and disembarked.

On the southbound bus, the situation was different. There were plenty of places to sit down. Rather than smartly dressed office workers, the second bus took riders with shopping bags, and some that seemed to be just enjoying a leisurely ride through the city. The bus also moved faster through the less-crowded streets, and few people got on. By the time he got close to his planned stop, he was the only person on the bus, and Adam sensed that the driver was looking back regularly to check on him. Although he could exit through the rear door of the bus as most passengers did, Adam felt he should go to the front and point out his stop, so the driver wouldn't have to do quick stop and go's at each stop.

As he got up to the front, he said "Church Street" when the driver was looking back. She gave an exaggerated nod. He noticed that the middle-aged African American woman was wearing a bullet-proof vest under her bus uniform.

She pulled up to the requested stop and said, "Church Street." She watched him get out and said "Have a good night!"

Adam had to cross the street, and the bus driver let him go in front of the bus while she watched him step out of the street lamp illuminating the bus stop. Adam got the idea that she thought he was lost somehow. If there were no keys next to the church door, he was hoping he could get back to the stop in time to get on the bus going back into the city. As he walked briskly down Church Street, he tried to think of a good excuse for his trip into this neighborhood that was convincing enough that she wouldn't think he was doing a drug pickup.

In the dark, the neighborhood looked different than it did on his previous visits. The lights selectively highlighted some nicer buildings. But at the same time, the neighborhood was blanketed with a profound darkness. Like being a child in the dark, it was impossible to get comfortable that something sinister wasn't lurking in the dark places. There were a few blocks left to walk, and Adam maintained a brisk pace without running. Adam wondered if maybe he shouldn't invest in his own bullet-proof vest.

Adam nearly walked right past his new church home as it stood unlit on a dark street. Approaching the front door from the sidewalk for the first time, he found he needed to use the flashlight feature on his phone. Instinctively, he tried the door, but then looked around the stoop for the promised bag. With significant disappointment, Adam decided to check a crinkled-up sheet of paper just to be sure. He was supremely relieved to find that the paper actually was a cheap paper bag containing four unlabeled keys.

Balancing the paper bag, the key, and his cellphone, he tried a key at random in the front door and was pleased when the bolt turned, and the door opened. Without the benefit of sight, Adam took a big whiff of the air that escaped the old church. It smelled musty and a bit oily, but at least it didn't smell like the rot of garbage or worse.

He hadn't yet contacted any of the utility companies about the house, so he didn't expect the power to be on, but he groped around for light switches anyway without success. Looking down, he saw that cheap vinyl adhesive squares made up the entryway floor. They were somewhat scuffed, but seemed surprisingly clean. To his left, he saw a large closet with enough rod and hanger space for a church full of people. Looking up, he was surprised to see a speaker pointing right at the door. Adam couldn't immediately deduce the value of the device, but he concluded that if the place had been ransacked, intruders wouldn't have failed to abscond with a nice speaker.

Moving through the foyer, he came to a set of large double doors. Stepping through those doors, he raised his dim cellphone flashlight to reveal a chapel. There were rows of pews and an altar. The room was two stories high, which seemed like a waste of space, but looked impressive. The far wall was painted to look like stained glass.

It was at this point that it finally hit Adam that he had actually purchased a church. While the wisdom of owning a church could be questioned, he felt that he had gotten a good deal. His expectations for a cheap church in a bad neighborhood were low, but he now felt that his misgivings had been for nothing. He had gotten lucky.

Briefly considering the prospect of converting the big room into a crazy home theater, Adam turned back. He thought he had seen some stairs. In a narrow hallway off from the entrance he found a narrow stairway leading up. He followed the stairs into a modest room with a hardwood floor, a small bed, a wooden desk, and a large wooden cross built into the room. The cross was so large, that it seemed that the vertical beam might actually be a structural support for the building. However, the cross beam seemed to be made of wood with matching dimensions. It was heavily lacquered to form a decorative centerpiece for the little room.

Since he still had some work to do including the nightly download, he decided that this desk, in what must be a bedroom, would be the ideal location. He pulled his laptop out of his backpack and started his usual routine. There was a certain dissonance doing his usual routine in the dark in a church. In the download, he saw his own transaction scroll by. The transaction on the screen reminded him that in fact this building really was his property now.

While performing his evening duties, Adam noticed a small closet with white shelves which contained a set of sheets for the bed, a blanket and a pillow. Adam decided that, rather than go back to his apartment, he would stay in the church for the night and start moving his belongings in the morning. He made the bed in the glow of his laptop.

With everything done for work, Adam hung up his work clothes on the desk chair and laid himself down to sleep. Before turning off his phone's flashlight, he noticed that a crucifix was hanging over his head. He thought he should probably get rid of that first thing in the morning. It was creepy.

## 14 First Morning

What first woke Adam up was the sun streaming through a window. In the darkness, Adam hadn't even noticed the tall window with the characteristic square bottom and a pointy top emblematic of churches. The low angle of the morning sun filled the room with a brilliant light.

The music Adam had been listening to in his pre-woken state wasn't what he usually enjoyed. But, as he slowly shifted to consciousness, he decided he was rather enjoying the catchy gospel song. The lyrics were easy enough to follow along with, mostly consisting of "amen, amen, amen."

It was a magical moment, with the beautiful light and the inspiring music that was performed with passion and enthusiasm. Adam found that his feet were tapping against the foot of the bed, and he was filled with joy. Adam noticed that the sound quality was incredible. The dynamic range, frequency response, and spatial separation was commonly present only in a live music presentation. It sounded like he was right there inside the music.

Finally it hit him. The music, and clapping, was coming from within the church. There were people in his house. From the sound of it, many people were singing and clapping in the house he just bought. His heart sank and he felt the blood run from his face. How could this possibly be? He was terrified. Was he in the wrong building? Were the churchgoers in the wrong church?

Adam's groggy mind scanned through the possibilities. He had just been through the closing, so he knew he bought something. He trusted his coworkers that, as poor as their judgement with computers was, they knew real estate. The title had been checked and modified. The address was verified against records. Langston may have been eccentric, but he couldn't have messed this up if he tried. His office wouldn't let him.

Booting up his laptop again to check the closing information, he also checked the map feature on his phone to verify what building he was currently residing in. As the phone software booted up, he felt very naked, standing in a strange room in a church wearing only his underwear while a church service boomed downstairs. Frustratingly, the map bounced around a little as it always does, but it was unmistakable where he was. He was in the church that matched the address that matched closing documents.

Then he remembered the keys. If he was in the wrong building, what are the chances that keys for the house would be in a paper bag next to the front door, like he had been told during the closing? Adam also



checked the buildings around the one he was currently in. Just as he had obsessively scanned time and time again, there were other churches in the area, but no other buildings were similar.

The more he concluded that he was in the right place, the more he concluded that the church service was in the wrong place. His fear turned to a nervous anger. He resolved that he needed to get these people out of his house. He hastily put his work clothes back on with the intention of confronting the crowd. He even put his suit coat on so he would look like he had some authority. Authority is the only reason for wearing a suitcoat anyway.

He was still putting his coat on as he moved faster and faster down the narrow stairway in a rage. He didn't have a great plan for what he was going to say, but his gut told him he should shout, "get out of here!"

At the bottom of the stairs he encountered some people, mostly well-dressed men, smiling and clapping to the music that, admittedly, was engaging. They paid no notice to Adam as he brushed by them. Walking past the front door, he noticed that the speaker was blasting. Apparently, the speaker was for the members congregating at the front door.

When he turned the corner into the main church area, it too was beautiful with the light shining into it. The pews weren't nearly full, with nearly as many singers standing on the risers as there were seated. The crowd seemed mostly older, except for the singers who were shaking their hips back and forth in unison with the music they were belting out.

Adam spotted a podium with a microphone, so he made a bee-line towards it. A sharply suited man standing next to the singers had been beaming a huge smile, clapping his hands and swinging with the singers. Upon seeing Adam, his demeanor completely changed. His jaw dropped, and he seemed to freeze with fear. He watched Adam heading to the podium. Adam concluded that this must be the pastor.

As joyous as the whole scene was, Adam was thinking how stupid it was to be singing and dancing about a fake god. Adam was thinking that there's no God, so the whole gathering existed for nothing.

Adam stepped behind the podium, looking for the microphone, but realized it was in the hand of the pastor. Only a gooseneck microphone holder remained. Adam decided he needed to shout.

The song was nearly over anyway, and most of the singing had stopped in anticipation of Adam saying something at the podium. Misjudging how loud it was necessary to yell, Adam shouted what was on his mind.

“There is no God!” Adam boomed.

Some people were still talking, clapping, or saying “Amen,” when Adam started but all eyes now turned to him. Adam repeated himself, trying to be even louder than the last time. “There is no God!”

The way he had imagined it, everyone should have run out of his church as if a cat had just arrived at a gathering of mice. The crowd must surely have been aware they were trespassing. They were attending an illegal mass in a church that was supposed to have been locked up and inaccessible. From the looks on the congregation’s face, he was not on the same page with anyone else in the room. In fact, everyone looked at Adam like an insane man who had just run into their church.

By this time, the pastor had come over and put the microphone into the holder and moved the microphone closer to Adam’s face. It seemed that the pastor had decided to provide all the rope necessary for Adam to hang himself. He then felt the pastor disappear behind him and bow his head either in prayer or disbelief.

Feeling that he needed to be clearer he leaned into the microphone and emphasized that, “God isn’t real!”

Unexpectedly, an older man seated in a wheelchair, not perfectly facing the podium said “Amen” with enthusiasm. Adam noticed the man wasn’t even looking at him.

Adam was, in fact, in a church, standing behind a podium talking about God. Presumably, this wasn’t terribly unlike what happens here every Sunday. It occurred to him that the existence or non-existence of God was actually immaterial, and the whole topic had been introduced exclusively for the shock value. Nobody was shocked, so he felt some urgency to get to the point.

“This is my church!” he bellowed.

Adam realized he was trying to convince people that he owned a church, but that he doesn’t believe that there is a God. Isn’t a church specifically a place where people come to communicate with God? If he didn’t believe in God, why would he buy a church? He felt he needed to clarify. “A church is just a building!”

Frustrated by the fact that his sermon was getting increasingly abstract, he added, “And, there is no God here!”

The minister, who had been waiting patiently behind him, could see that Adam was struggling. He saw an opportunity to help Adam get on track with his sermon. “Where is God, Brother?”

Adam snapped back, “God is in your mind!”

A few people in the audience, perhaps inspired by the fact that there was now an interplay between the known minister and the insane man exclaimed, “Amen!”

Scanning the crowd, Adam met eyes with a middle-aged man with a bushy moustache who was glaring disapprovingly. The man had wide shoulders and bulging muscles barely contained by his nicely pressed dress shirt. He was holding the handles of a wheelchair with a little old woman with a broad pink hat with white flowers. In contrast to her son, she was softly nodding with a slight smile.

Adam needed to change the mood quickly, so he said, “Jesus in inside everyone,” into the microphone, trying not to look at the burly man.

This elicited a somewhat tepid response of “Amen,” from a few female voices. This was reassuring, but the muscular man had tilted his head with suspicion. Adam decided that this could be a life-or-death sermon. Now he needed to inspire the congregation to not lynch atheists.

“And, Jesus wants you to be good!” Adam continued with some fake enthusiasm. He hoped to get a few more “Amen’s” but they hadn’t yet come.

“Listen, you have to be good!” he continued. “Because God isn’t going to do it for you. God isn’t going to save you today. You need to do it for yourself.”

At this point, the room seemed a little more relaxed, and it struck Adam that he hadn’t combed his hair, or checked that his suit was straight. He hadn’t even brushed his teeth, which made him feel very dirty and embarrassed to be talking to a room full of people.

“God isn’t going to brush your teeth for you!” he continued. “God leaves that up to you. God will save you from damnation if you show him that you’re a truly good person. Remember, God is inside you watching. God will remember the things you do. You may forget the good things or the bad things you have done, but God will remember. But, he leaves the teeth brushing up to you.”

A significant percentage of the parishioners were now checking their phone. The men standing out in the doorway had stepped outside and were horsing around. Critically, Adam observed that the big angry man was now accepting some Tic Tacs from his mother. This seemed like an ideal time to wrap things up and get out of the hall.

“So as you leave here today, remember that Jesus is inside you, right now, watching, and he wants you to do the right thing, definitely not beating anyone up.”

Adam looked behind him and saw the pastor. In a loud whisper, Adam said, “We need to talk. I’ll be upstairs.”

The pastor wore a concerned face and nodded in agreement. He stepped up to the podium as Adam left for the safety of the upstairs.

“We’ll all think about those inspiring words from our guest preacher. We may be hearing more from him in the future. Now, if we could get the choir back in their places, they have another song they want to sing for you.”

This time, Adam wove his way behind everyone including the choir, and he avoided eye contact. Running up the stairs full speed, he shut the door behind him and figured out how the lock worked. He was panting rapidly at least as much from the embarrassment of his ordeal as his run up the stairs.

He tried to think who he could call to try to get this resolved. At first, he thought he should call Langston. Did he know that the church was actively having services? If he did, he was the world’s very best actor. And, why wouldn’t he just get the key from the pastor? None of this made any sense. Adam sent a message “Call Me!” but didn’t hear anything back.

He thought maybe he should call Stacy, but he couldn’t stand the embarrassment. And, he didn’t have her personal phone number anyway. This was Sunday.

This was all just a big mixup and he had to talk to that Pastor. What did he know?

For the first time, Adam tried to plug in his phone and laptop and found that the electrical plugs were working just fine. The light switch also turned on a dim but serviceable florescent light on the ceiling. Besides feeling dumb for buying an active church, Adam felt dumb for not having tried the electricity. He tried browsing the web for something that could help him out while he waited for the service to be done. Information on squatters was horrifying but seemed not to apply. His panic gradually gave way to a nervous boredom. He had things he needed to do. He needed to change his clothes and brush his teeth. Assuming he would get church services stopped, he wanted to move personal belongings into his new residence. He needed to get to his apartment.

He waited and waited but eventually decided that the church service would last forever. Adam wrote on a piece of scrap paper, "Call Me. I own this church," and his name and phone number. He went down the stairs and wove his way back to the pastor who was now talking about the local news and how people should interpret it in a spiritual way. Adam handed him the piece of paper. With some trepidation, the pastor hesitantly nodded and Adam headed back out trailing some stares from the parishioners.

Exiting through the front door, he passed by the men standing outside. One said to him, "you're alright, Reverand. I hope we get to hear more from you." Another man patted him on the back. A third just said, "Hello Reverand."

Adam didn't know how to feel about being called "Reverand." If they only knew he was an atheist, they might call him something else.

He just smiled, nodded and said, "Thank you."

Adam had no way of getting home rather than taking the bus back into the city, and then taking a train back to his apartment. Rather than waiting at the nearest bus stop, he walked along its route, hoping to put more space between the church and himself. On the walk, he got to see a little more of his new neighborhood. The streets were mostly empty, and the few people he did encounter seemed to look right through him like he wasn't even there.

He finally caught a bus, made it to the train, and got all the way back to his apartment, feeling like he had left a very strange world. The whole trip, he felt that he first needed to talk to the pastor. He didn't want to use his phone too much for fear of missing a call.

## 15 Reverend Nathaniel

With his essentials packed into the car and no additional room, Adam started driving back to the church. As he made a little progress on his trip, his phone rang, and Adam answered.

“Hey, this is Reverend Nathaniel. You gave an impromptu sermon at our little service today. You asked me to call.”

“That’s my church,” said Adam almost in desperation. “I bought the church. You shouldn’t be in there.”

There was a pause, and Nathaniel said, “I see what you’re saying. Congratulations for your purchase. That’s very exciting. Welcome to the neighborhood. Adam, right?”

“Thanks,” replied Adam. “Yes, my name is Adam.”

“Yea, of course I was completely unaware that the church had been sold. I apologize sincerely that my congregation held our service in your church today. I can hear from your voice that you were quite surprised and upset by our presence. And for that, I am truly sorry,” continued Nathaniel with great empathy and sincerity.

Adam didn’t know what to say, so of course he replied, “it’s okay.”

Nathaniel continued, “That’s very kind of you. Of course, it isn’t really okay that we caused you all this trouble and consternation. Again, I do apologize. May we discuss this in person? Will you be back soon? I’m currently cleaning up after today’s activities.”

“I’m driving back right now, actually.”

“That’s wonderful. Would you have time for a conversation today? In fact, there is quite a bit of food left over from today’s potluck.”

It occurred to Adam that he hadn't eaten since lunch yesterday, but he had no intention of eating with Nathaniel. Still, he wanted to talk to Nathaniel. He had many questions. "I'll be there in just a few minutes," he said.

"Excellent, Adam. I'll be here cleaning up. I look forward to seeing you again, Friend," said Nathaniel warmly.

"Now we're friends?" thought Adam. But, he said, "Okay, see you in a few minutes."

Mostly, Adam was thinking about how crazy this all was the rest of his way to the church. He was at a disadvantage in Nathaniel's neighborhood, in the church that Nathaniel thought was his, and up against Nathaniel's skillset. While Adam's strengths were with machines, hardware, and software, Nathaniel was clearly an expert on dealing with people, and negotiating about morality. Adam told himself that he needed to be firm. This was his building now, and Nathaniel was just going to have to find somewhere else for his church services.

There were still a few cars parked in the church parking lot, which irked Adam a bit. After all, it was his parking lot and nobody else was supposed to be there. He briefly wondered which car was Nathaniel's.

Inside the church, there were a few people helping Nathaniel cleaning up some folding tables.

"Adam!" shouted Nathaniel from across the hall as he motioned for Adam to come. When he arrived, Nathaniel greeted him with a hearty handshake. "Sir, I was afraid that I had scared you off."

"Hello Nathaniel," Adam smiled back.

"Adam," said Nathaniel waving his hand over the remaining food. "We have all this food left. You need to at least try some."

Adam recognized none of the dishes on the table, but he didn't want to be impolite. After all, he was going to ask Nathaniel to leave and take all of his followers with him. He saw something deep fried on the table and thought that not only does everything deep fried taste about the same, but anything that has been browned in hot oil must be fully cooked and definitely safe to eat. He popped one in his mouth and found that despite the crispy outside, the inside was soft and creamy.

Possibly owing in part to the fact that he hadn't eaten in almost 24 hours at this point, the food tasted delicious to Adam. This was despite the fact that he was completely unable to identify what he had just eaten.

"That's pretty good," Adam said with some surprise in his voice. "What is it?"

"That's just some fried okra. It might not be as good since it has been sitting around a bit. Here, you should try the cornbread casserole. I think this one has chicken in it. It's delicious."

Adam didn't want to have a conversation about food, so he tried to steer the conversation towards his questions. "No thank you, really," he said. And then, "Can I ask you some questions?" as he popped another fried okra into his mouth.

"Of course, what can I help you with, Adam," Nathaniel said in his warm friendly voice.

"First of all, how did everybody get in here?" Adam asked, trying not to sound accusatory.

"Oh, well the door was open," replied Nathaniel as if he was surprised that such a question would be asked.

"Really?" Adam asked with genuine confusion. He put another okra in his mouth, and then took another one as he moved towards the front door. Once there, he closed the door and turned the latch. But surprisingly, he was able to open it again anyway.

"Oh here, I see what happened. If you turn it a bit, it clicks, but it isn't really locked. You have to keep turning it." Nathaniel continued to turn the latch and it made an additional clacking sound.

Adam tried the door but it wouldn't open now. Adam crinkled up his face with frustration. He was going to ask about how he had gotten people in all previous days, but he first asked, "and how do you turn on the lights?"



“Oh, the light switches are in the coat closet.” Nathaniel reached in through the coatroom door and turned the lights off and back on without being able to see the switches. He knew exactly where they were without looking. He added, “we don’t want the kids coming in and messing with the lights. They think everything is funny.”

Adam felt silly for not having looked a little harder for the light switches. But then, he hadn’t expected that the power would be on at all.

Nathaniel asked with some seriousness, “What is your flock like? Are they near here?”

Adam was looking over at the okra, and didn’t understand Nathaniel’s question. “Hm?” he grunted.

“Your parishioners. Will they have far to travel to your new church?”

“Oh,” Adam said finally understanding what Nathaniel was getting at. “I’m not a priest.”

Nathaniel was a calm and ingratiating man who regulated his emotions artfully. In this case however, it was impossible for him to suppress his relief and excitement. A weight had been lifted and an opportunity had presented itself. “I see,” he said. “So, it wasn’t your intent to use the church as a place of worship?”

“Nah,” replied Adam. “I just need a place to live. Close to my work. I work downtown.”

“Ah yes,” Nathaniel nodded in agreement. “Were you thinking about registering as a church anyway? To save money on taxes?”

Adam felt some embarrassment that tax implications of owning a church hadn’t entered his mind at any point. He gave a nervous giggle and said, “I hadn’t even thought about that.”

Nathaniel puffed up his chest a little and said, “Well, even though I do give guidance to people regularly, I’m not a tax attorney, of course. But, from my own experience, there are quite a few financial advantages to being a member of the clergy. An example that is very relevant to you, if this building was to remain a house of worship, it would be exempt from property taxes.”

Adam said, “I think I knew that, but hadn’t thought of it.”

“Yes, and of course, any income you derive from the practice of spiritual services would likewise be tax free.”

“Yes. But I’m not even religious,” Adam protested.

Adam had made his way back to the fried okra and had started eating again.

“Well, let me present an offer to you. A sort of business venture. Rather than giving up the obvious financial benefit of owning a church and declaring it as a church, why don’t you and I enter into a business relationship. We could be partners.” Nathaniel seemed to be proud to be able to make such an offer.

Being completely unprepared for such an offer, Adam didn’t know what to say. He had been hoping to simply chase away some intruders from his new house, and now he was being offered a business deal. It seemed more like a scam than an honest proposal. He only replied, “Partners?”

“Yes. I bring an entire existing congregation who know each other, they know me, and want to continue to come here every Sunday to glorify the word of God,” Nathaniel said, almost pleading.

Adam latched on to the one word. “Only on Sundays?” Adam asked.

“It would only be Sundays,” affirmed Nathaniel. “The rest of the week, the church would be all yours. I mean, it is your church every day, of course.”

“I see. I would have to think about it,” replied Adam sincerely.

There was a pause as Adam helped himself to some more okra.

Nathaniel had to add, “Would you like to try it for a few weeks?”

Adam really did want to spend some time thinking about it, but he started to get the message that Nathaniel was impatient for an answer. If Adam wasn't going to let Nathaniel hold services in the church, he was going to have to quickly find another location. Nathaniel also worried that Adam would take this opportunity to steal his congregation. This made Nathaniel desperate to make a deal.

Feeling the urgency in Nathaniel's voice, Adam decided to relent. He said, "You can have services here next Sunday, okay?"

"Okay," confirmed Nathaniel with a nod and clear relief.

"Let's talk during the week, okay?" continued Adam. "I have more questions for you. And, I need your help with the some of the tax issues."

Nathaniel nodded with a smile this time.

"Today, I have a bunch of work to do. I need to get things moved out of my apartment."

Nathaniel responded that he needed to finish cleaning up. But, he also showed Adam around the church letting Adam know where he could safely keep his personal belongings. Adam was thrilled to finally get a tour of the place he had purchased, and Nathaniel was massively relieved that he would be able to continue using the church, at least for a while. The two exchanged contact information and were like new best friends giddy with excitement for the future.

"One more thing," Nathaniel added. "How did you want to split this week's offerings?"

Again, Adam hadn't thought about that at all, but concluded that it couldn't have been too much money. It was a poor neighborhood. Adam further felt that he hadn't earned any of it, only bursting in to disrupt it in the middle.

"We can talk about that later too," he said somewhat dismissively.

Nathaniel was also relieved to hear that because it was an important source of income for him. But he also believed that the church itself was a critical part of the service and pastor merely guides the flock. He was

concerned about what he would ultimately be required to give up, and wanted to know if there would be enough left for him. Nonetheless, he graciously accepted the money and hoped for the best.

## 16 The Bus

Adam had brought all his belongings, less some furniture he would have to begrudgingly pay someone to transport. Most items were spread around a meeting room downstairs, but he had taken some personal belongings to the room upstairs which he now called his bedroom. Before going to bed, he practiced locking the front door and making sure it was really locked.

As he laid in his bed, he thought about registering as a church and decided that it was a prudent decision. He probably didn't even have to necessarily do much of anything. There was no way to test that someone really believed in a god. As long as he was going to live in a church, he might as well get the full benefit of the situation. He resolved to start looking into it tomorrow. Since Nathaniel was anxious to use the church for his congregation, he would probably be convinced to help with the process. He fell asleep imagining what it would be like to have people paying reverent attention to his words, looking for a way to get into heaven. It was an awkwardly appealing idea.

In the morning, he didn't have to get up quite as early as his usual routine to get to his office on time. He put on a suit for work headed out for the bus with his usual backpack, checked the front door several times to make sure it was really really locked, and headed for the bus stop. The neighborhood was eerily quiet. Only some cats could be seen lurking between the houses and empty lots. The streets were almost empty, and upon arriving at the bus stop, he could look far down the street to see that a bus was coming.

The bus, when it arrived, was occupied only by the driver who looked at Adam suspiciously. "You're a cop?" asked the middle-aged African American woman as Adam walked in and paid the fare.

"Uh, no. Just on my way to work." Adam replied.

He sat at the front of the bus since every seat was available, and it made Adam feel a bit safer. Unfortunately, that seemed to make the driver both uncomfortable and chatty.

"You live around here?" she asked making eye contact through the oversized rear-view mirror.

There were few cars on the road which was wide and straight, so it didn't seem too difficult for an experienced driver to keep the bus on the road. But still it made Adam uncomfortable that she wasn't watching the road constantly.

“Yes, Ma’am,” He replied, trying to be polite. “I just bought a place right up there on Church street.”

She apparently didn’t completely understand, and she questioned him with incredulity, “You just bought a church?”

“In fact, yes. I just bought a church on Church Street,” he explained trying to speak more clearly.

“Oh, you’re a preacher?” she said wondering if she was starting to understand the crazy white guy.

“Nah, just needed a place to live that was close to downtown,” he said, smiling and nodding his head a bit since she was looking at him again through the mirror.

“Oh,” she replied with an exaggerated reaction as if she was startled by the stupidity of the answer. “That was an interesting decision.” She looked back at the road getting serious about her job again.

Adam wasn’t pleased with the implication that he wasn’t making good life decisions, so he simply nodded in agreement and looked out of the wide front window of the city bus with her.

“You know, there are three bullet holes in this bus?” said the driver again looking back at Adam.

When Adam looked at the driver, she was looking back again, wide eyed with her painted-on eyebrows raised even higher. “Back by the back door. There are three holes where some gang member started shooting. You can see them back there. They go clear through the other side. They haven’t fixed the holes yet. It has been months now.”

The story seemed plausible and somewhat unremarkable, but Adam wanted to sound as if he appreciated the clear warning by the bus driver. He took a quick look back and said, “Oh really? I’ll take a look on my way out.”

The bus driver shook her head with a combination of surprise and disgust.

When he reached his stop, Adam moved to the back of the bus and looked around for the alleged bullet holes. He found that, indeed, there were some holes. Since he had been asked to check on them, he tried to work out the angle at which the bullets penetrated the bus, and he discovered that there seemed to be at least four holes.

Since the bus driver had pointed them out, he felt he should let her know. "There's actually four holes," he shouted.

The bus had arrived at the stop, and the driver either hadn't heard over the noise of the bus and the traffic, or she wasn't listening. She just waved goodbye and said, "Bye," so Adam hopped off without the satisfaction of correcting her.

The next bus was more crowded but uneventful. It slowed down into the usual morning rush, but made slow predictable progress. When he arrived at work, he found that he was far earlier even than he had predicted.

At work, everyone in the office seemed to know that he had purchased a church in the bad neighborhood. He received congratulations from people whom he didn't know well, and got some "Hello Father's" from people he knew a little better.

His boss told him that he wanted to make a confession. It seemed that he hadn't thought of a second part of the joke, because when Adam asked what it was, his boss just laughed awkwardly.

He was worried he would get a visit from Stacy, but she only stopped by briefly to ask if everything was okay with the church.

He replied cheerily, "It's a church! No problems. It's going to be a great place for me to live."

She nodded and said, "that's good!"

Jakob also stopped by and said, "Hey buddy. I heard you bought a church. Congratulations!"

Adam was hopeful that Jakob might have some information about how to register the church as an official church. He thought that he might also have some additional advice for him regarding black churches, Adam reached out his hand and said, “Yea, you know about churches, Jakob?”

Jakob kept walking and shook his head. “Not a thing. Nope.”

It seemed like Adam was on his own finding information about becoming a cleric. For the rest of the day, in between work requirements, he tried to decode the frustratingly disorganized online resources available. As was typical of government websites, the pages copiously employed undefined terms, never guided the user to referenced forms or information, and was arranged according to departments that provide the information, rather than how a citizen might use it. In short, it was impossible to decipher without external guidance.

He was really hopeful that Nathaniel would be able to help him, so he sent a text. Nathaniel was working, presumably at his real job, so they agreed to call after work.



## 17 Being a Minister

Nathaniel and Adam decided to meet at the church. As usual, Nathaniel greeted Adam with a cheerful smile and a hearty handshake. This time, Nathaniel was wearing shiny grey dress pants and a pressed black polo shirt. He was dressed casually, but very professionally. Adam wondered if this was what he wore all the time, or if he dressed this way for work.

The first thing Adam wanted to know about was what he needed to do to designate the building as a place of worship and claim an exemption. Nathaniel explained that Adam must first register himself as a minister, create his own religion, and then assign the church as a place of worship for the religion he created.

“Can’t I be a Baptist or something?” asked Adam with confusion.

Nathaniel explained that, “You can’t just pick somebody else’s religion. If you want to be a Baptist, you have to ask permission from the Baptists. And, you have to pay them money. That’s why, in reality, most people just create their own religion. It’s easier that way. You can say you’re a Christian. Nobody owns the rights to Christianity. But, you want to join a particular denomination of Christianity like the Baptists, there’s a group that owns that. They operate like a business. In fact, they are a non-profit business, and they’ve got accountants and lawyers and everything. But, there’s nothing stopping you from creating your own personal denomination.”

“I see. But, who is going to believe my personal religion?” replied Adam.

“Do you want your own followers? I thought you just wanted to be my partner?” asked Nathaniel with a raised eyebrow. “They just need to believe in my religion.”

“So, I should join your religion, then?” asked Adam.

“You could,” explained Nathaniel. “My church is the Inner City Holy Rollers.”

“Seriously?”

Nathaniel just looked at him. But, eventually said, “Why don’t you just create your own religion. It’s easier that way. You just come up with your own religion with your own name, and you will have the flexibility to do whatever you want with your religion.”

“I thought we were going to be partners?” asked Adam unironically.

“Absolutely. Partners. Do you want to be a member of the Inner City Holy Rollers?” asked Nathaniel.

“How about the Christian Athiests?” retorted Adam.

“You can be whatever you want,” said Nathaniel. “Shall we fill out the forms?”

Together, Adam and Nathaniel filed to create a new religious organization called the Theist Christians, requested a new tax ID number for the religion, registered Adam as a member of the clergy, associated Adam with the newly formed religion, and submitted a statement that the church on Church Street is the official place of worship for his new religion. It took more than two hours of hard slog finding the documents and filling them out with the correct information. Without Nathaniel’s help, he would have had to seek help from one of the many consulting companies that specialize in helping people wade through the inordinate obtuse red tape.

Responding to the additional mailings and resubmitting documents lost by the various agencies would take further months. Nathaniel informed Adam that he would have to create a bank account in the name and tax ID of the religious organization when that information was received.

“I really appreciate all your help, Nathaniel. I had no idea there was so much involved in becoming a member of the church,” said Adam with genuine appreciation.

“My friend,” said the minister in his usual fatherly way, “I’m very glad that we can be partners. It means a lot to me. I hope we will have a long and prosperous relationship.”

This made Adam comfortable enough to ask some tough questions. “So, it seems like you were getting into the church when the realtor couldn’t. Was there some trick to opening the door that he didn’t know?”

Nathaniel responded sheepishly that, “The trick was that the realtor didn’t know that I changed the lock.”

“Oh,” replied Adam, surprised by his candidness. “Why did you change the lock?”

“Because it was broken. It was a stupid lock, and I ended up breaking it to get in,” said Nathaniel with a shrug.

“Why?”

“Because there was a mass that was going to start, and I couldn’t get in,” continued Nathaniel with another shrug. “The show must go on!”

Adam nodded in understanding, “I see. But the realtor didn’t know. And, the owner didn’t know?”

“The owner would have wanted me to continue preaching,” explained Nathaniel. “At least he would have when he was fully rational.”

“So, you knew the owner?”

“Ezekiel? He was a crazy old preacher who taught me everything there is to know about God and about preaching,” Nathaniel explained as he smiled and seemed to relive a happier time with his mentor.

“You took over from him?” Adam asked.

“Ezekiel just stopped showing up,” Nathaniel explained. “At first, it was just, ‘The show must go on.’ But then I was doing all the sermons, and it was my church.”

“Now, technically, it’s my church,” Adam added.

“Yes, but to the congregation, the church is the church,” explained Nathaniel with a wave of his hand to indicate the church they were currently in.

“So, you think they’ll accept me as,” Adam paused, “a member of the church?”

“Well first of all, they have to, right?” Then Nathaniel added, “But they’re going to love you. I know they will. You’re...super interesting!”

“Is interesting a good thing at a church?” asked Adam, dubiously.

“Are you kidding me? Church is incredibly boring! That’s part of the reason I wanted to lead it—just to make it interesting. If it weren’t for the threat of eternal damnation, people wouldn’t even go.” Nathaniel let out a genuine laugh that Adam hadn’t heard yet.

“Am I a good kind of interesting?” asked Adam with some concern.

Nathaniel thought for a few seconds and said, “To be honest, that remains to be seen. But, most likely, it will be a big hit.”

“But you’re going to need a better sermon than your first one,” he added.

“That wasn’t a sermon,” insisted Adam. “I was panicked, and I thought I was going to shoo everyone out of the building.”

“That didn’t happen,” Nathaniel chuckled. “That wouldn’t have happened. And, I’m really glad it didn’t.”

“My life would have been less complicated that way,” said Adam.

“Boring!” concluded Nathaniel.

Adam gave Nathaniel one of the copies of the front door key to the church and said, “I’ll see you on Sunday, Partner.”

## 18 The Next Sermon

Adam was busy with work and he got into a routine of playing on his laptop when he got home, not exploring the rest of the church. He owned the church and felt that it was his at least as a steward of the building, but he felt that the religious congregation held an interest in the building as well. The church always carried the sensibility and will of the congregation. Whenever he was home, he felt a constant presence in the church that made him a little uncomfortable. He never felt alone, but it was never creepy. He wasn't afraid of ghosts or anything. He also never felt he was being watched.

Sometimes at work and on the train, he would daydream about giving his next sermon. He hoped that he could say interesting things. He wanted to make people think and felt that he probably brought a perspective that was fresh. As an atheist, Adam thought about the world differently than they did. He couldn't tell people how to actually find God without lying to them. But from his perspective and understanding, a sermon is about more than God. From his perspective, it could never actually be about God because God doesn't actually exist.

A preacher may tell a parishioner how to get things from God, but the parishioner never actually gets anything from God. According to Adam, God doesn't exist, so nobody can ever get anything from God. This doesn't mean that people don't believe they have gotten something from God. People pray all the time, and when good things happen, especially things that they had hoped for, they may ascribe the benefit to an act of God. People draw the wrong conclusion all the time.

Adam was very familiar with incorrect conclusions. At work for example, people have reported that their computers were angry at them, when really they just needed to reboot. Similarly, some computer users swore that Adam had magical powers because when they tried to show him a problem, it inexplicably resolved itself. The comparison possibly wasn't perfect, but it was enough to convince Adam that people can't connect cause and effect.

The only reasonable conclusion Adam could come to was that sermons don't need to contain any advice about God, since no advice about God could ever be valid. In a way, Adam's first sermon gave people good information. People shouldn't be looking for answers from God because God won't help you. Nobody in the church would believe that God won't help you because there are no gods. But this isn't important to the message.

The job of an atheist preacher should be to give a sermon that is thought provoking and meaningful with advice that doesn't rely on the existence of any deity. Adam was confident that he was up to the task. He just needed to do it.

On his way home to the church every day, he would pick up some takeout food in the downtown area before getting on the final bus. There weren't good options in his new neighborhood, but there were plenty near his office. On the bus, carrying his dinner, he would think of ideas for a sermon, fully intending to write everything down right when he finished eating. Unfortunately, this never happened. Day after day he got distracted and never managed to get anything written.

By Saturday, he was concerned, and vowed to dedicate the day to writing a good sermon and re-introduction of himself to the congregation. As luck would have it, there was a company-wide computer outage that he needed to work on. This left him very little time in the evening to work on a sermon. He only managed to complete an outline.

He went to bed worried about being embarrassed about his poor performance. But, he concluded that a sermon isn't about the words you say, but rather than the attitude of the preacher. The audience feels the energy of the speaker, and that is what the listeners take away. He was confident that the genuine anger and yelling of his first sermon were what made it work. He didn't really know what God wants, but fell asleep confident that he could yell louder than Nathaniel.

He woke up refreshed and optimistic that the day's church service would be a good one. Nathaniel actually knocked on the door and Adam let him in. They discussed the plan for the Sunday service. Adam felt ready.

As the faithful came in, Nathaniel and Adam stood side-by-side to greet them. To his surprise, many of the churchgoers stepped up to Adam directly to shake his hand. A wave of pride and joy came over him with each person he met. They seemed genuinely happy to meet him, and Adam was fascinated by each greeting.

Eventually it was time to begin the services, and Reverend Nathaniel called everyone to take their seats. The service went on with statements, prayers, readings from the bible, and songs from the choir. Adam sat in awe of the energy and enthusiasm of the room. He previously believed that his first sermon had accidentally been over-the-top. Now he worried that he hadn't projected enough energy. He vowed to be even louder with his hastily prepared message this time.

Nathaniel introduced his partner as "The Church Minister." Adam stepped up to the podium, and Nathaniel stepped back behind him, retaining his own microphone, while Adam spoke into the podium microphone.

Adam surveyed the crowd which seemed larger than the last time. He unfolded the paper containing his outline, and took a quick look. Excited to have the attention of the crowd, he began to shout, “You don’t need God!”

Nathaniel behind him cringed with wide eyes and gave an awkward smile.

Adam metered the reaction of the room. They seemed patient. So, he started with his points. “You don’t need God to have a good life!”

Nathaniel felt that he could improve the messaging while protecting his livelihood. He spoke into the microphone and said, “God helps!”

“Hallelujah!,” sang out some women in the pews.

Adam continued, “You don’t need God to be a good person!” Then, he looked back to see Nathaniel.

Nathaniel brought the microphone up to his mouth and said, “it helps,” into the microphone while looking at Adam.

Adam turned back to the crowd as some people said, “Amen!”

He continued enthusiastically, “You don’t need God to be productive. You don’t need God to be strong. You don’t need God to be happy!”

Nathaniel was now in a rhythm with Adam, and he said, “but it helps!”

Having written down a considerable list of goals and achievements for which he believed God was not necessary, Adam valiantly continued working down his list, pausing only briefly for each one so that Nathaniel could punctuate them with an advertisement for the Almighty.

The crowd was getting excited, enthusiastically cheering Reverend Nathaniel in his rebuttals, which grew louder and more creative.

Adam paused while the congregation settled down before embarking on the next part of the sermon. He had some points he wanted to get across in his sermon and he wanted people to be listening.

“You have to be a good person,” Adam said earnestly. “You have to work hard. Ignore the craziness in the world around you. Don’t be mean to people!”

Nathaniel, standing behind him, added, “And you need to pray, pray, pray!”

Adam instinctively exclaimed, “Amen!” and the congregation joined in enthusiastically.

“Praise the Lord!” said some of the parishioners who were most affected by the speech.

The Choir, who had been ready to sing at the end of the sermon began to sing “My Sweet Lord,” while everyone clapped along with the music.

The sermon was a success. Adam was happy and sang along with one of the few gospel songs he knew the words to.

At the end of the service, people shook the hands of Nathaniel and Adam. Some of the younger men gave Adam a high-five. An older lady told Adam, “You’re a very strange man. But you make me think. Thank you.”

The big man with the bulging muscles pushed his mother past Adam and said, “My mother thinks you’re crazy. She has been talking about you since last week, and I know she’s going to be talking about you this week too. It keeps her mind off the pain and loneliness. I just wanted to thank you, Reverend.”

Adam didn’t know what to say. He said, “Thank you for letting me know. I’m very glad to help.” And he gave the man’s beefy hand a good shake. Adam had no idea that he could make an impact on people, especially since he didn’t really know what he was doing.

When people were gone and everything was almost cleaned up, Adam said to Nathaniel, “I thought that went well. I think people thought we had planned to, you know, go back and forth in the sermon.”



Nathaniel stopped what he was doing and said, “It went fantastic. Many people told me.”

“But,” Adam hesitated, “I don’t know what I’m doing.”

Nathaniel thought a moment and said, “You know what you’re doing. But, you definitely come at the situation with a different perspective. It is new. And interesting. People don’t know what to make of you, and they can’t wait to hear what you’re going to say next.”

“Is that good?” asked Adam.

“For our purposes, it’s great,” replied Nathaniel.

“That brings me to the collections for today,” added Nathaniel. “Last week you said that we’d talk about it later. In fact, this week we got even more.”

“Why is that?” asked Adam.

“There were a few more people here than last week. Plus, I’m sure some people have noticed that there are two of us now, and they might want to help, since they assume we’ll be splitting the offerings. And I can’t discount the possibility that some people donated more because they had a better time.”

“Interesting,” Adam said thoughtfully. “I want to retain the right to accept some of the donations in the future, but for now, it’s all yours.”

Nathaniel smiled and said, “Okay. Thank you very much. Let me know!”

## 19 Lonely at Church

After a couple of services in the church, the weekdays made Adam feel lonely in the big empty building. He found himself walking around as if he were looking for someone to say 'Amen!' Although his explorations were unfulfilling, he gained an appreciation of the other parts of the church.

The kitchen was especially interesting because the appliances seemed to all work well. There were even pots and pans in the cabinets. It seemed a shame not to make some dinner. Everything was large and sturdy, suggesting that meals had traditionally been made for large gatherings. Adam still thought he could just make himself a hamburger.

Also, the lights were all old and dim. Adam changed most of the lightbulbs, making the place a little cheerier. He found the clothes washer and dryer that could do huge loads. He did some long-overdue laundry.

Saturdays presented a unique problem. He usually needed to go into work, but on the days he didn't, he needed to feed himself in the area around the church. The church was located in what is frequently called a food desert. Very few restaurants or stores existed nearby. Luckily, he still had his car, so he could drive anywhere he wanted to go. But, it was expensive and tiring to drive for each meal.

He discovered an excellent chicken and fish restaurant called Stingrays not too far away. It was family owned and everything but the drinks were fried. The owner's name was Ray. Ray asked for Adam's name once, and every time subsequent he gave Adam a hearty greeting by name. He felt like a relative coming home whenever he walked in the door. And the food was all delicious. Adam tried to find something on the menu that wasn't amazing, but everything he tried made him happy.

Shopping also posed a challenge. Going out more than once per week was cumbersome, so Adam learned to make a shopping list. On one trip he bought a lawnmower.

On a Saturday morning, Adam set out to mow the church lawn which had turned into a high weed garden. The mowing was very difficult because of the height of the foliage. He had to push the mower a bit which would make a loud chopping sound, and he would have to back off a bit to let the blade spin back up. The loud uneven noises attracted a pair of boys from the neighborhood who came to investigate.

Adam thought he was a new Tom Sawyer. He showed the boys how to work the lawn mower, telling them both how cool it was to chop down weeds, and also how dangerous it was. The boys were slightly interested, so Adam suggested that they take turns mowing. By sternly warning them about the dangers of the rapidly spinning blade under the lawnmower, he was hoping to both instill respect for the danger, making them more careful, but also lure them into the idea that such a dangerous job was cool. He also told the kids that their mothers would be very impressed that they helped out the preacher at the church.

He left the two boys to work on the lawn, while he went inside to watch, thinking he was very clever. By the time he got to a window where he could overlook the progress of the mowing, the boys had disappeared. Attention spans aren't as long as they were in the days of Huckelberry Finn. Adam was forced to do all the hard work himself. Despite the hard work, he felt proud of the lawn when the job was through. Going forward, he vowed to never let the lawn get long again. He hoped that the neighbors and the congregation would notice that the church lawn looks like it is ready for churchgoers.

## 20 Young Visitor

This week's sermon comprised a list of ways the audience could be a nice person without invoking God. Adam felt that it was important for the morality of churchgoers to be unshackled from their deity. He was probably the only atheist that any of them would ever sit and listen to, so he felt it was his duty to help them look beyond the shelter of an unseen hand of spiritual justice or an afterlife reckoning that may never come. Adam also felt it was in his own best interests to convince the people visiting his house to be nice.

The message of being good resonated with the crowd. Adam chose to ignore the irony of exclaiming "Amen" and "Praise the Lord" in response to a message of secularity. Adam tried to deliver his message with the same enthusiasm as previous services as he didn't want to break character. Enthusiasm was the key in his mind.

Reverend Nathaniel also continued to punctuate the sermon with more traditional calls for religious piety. Adam and Nathaniel were playing good cop/bad cop roles that seemed to work well.

After most of the formal presentation had been completed, Adam hoped to sneak up to his upstairs bedroom. He still hadn't adjusted to waking up early for the Sunday service, and he wanted to relax for a bit. A girl who had been milling around the hall followed up behind him.

Finally noticing her, Adam looked back at the girl as he opened the door to his bedroom. The petit young woman slipped right by him and passed through the open door in front of him.

She asked, "How do you talk to God?" She then proceeded to look around the room.

Adam was debating telling her "I don't talk to God, I'm an atheist," "nobody can possibly talk to God," or he was leaning towards "What did you want to talk to him about, maybe I can leave a message?" But the girl assiduously searched the room with her gaze.

She first spotted the crucifix hung over his bed. She stood and considered it. Adam felt that the crucifix was perverse and inappropriate and was embarrassed that he had a naked man hanging over his headboard in a classic masochistic pose.

The girl swiveled her head to the giant lacquered cross against the wall and asked, “Is this where you talk to him?” She walked over to the cross and turned her back to it, stretching out her arms as if she was nailed to it. She then arched her back and tilted her head up looking through the decorative window to the sunlight outside.

Adam stood there dumbfounded. Apparently, she had concluded that Adam had magical powers to talk to God directly, and the secret divine portal was somewhere in his bedroom. She seemed to be trying to turn on the big cross telephone, looking for the right position or motion to make a call.

The absurdity of the situation made Adam want to say something outrageous to snap her out of it. He said, “Yea, but you have to be naked.” He gave a nod to the naked Jesus hanging over his bed, but the girl was too mesmerized to notice the gesture.

Without hesitating, the girl started hastily stripping off her clothes. She first kicked off her big pink and white gym shoes with two loud clunks on the old wooden floor. Throwing off her shirt revealed that she wasn’t wearing a bra. Her breasts were small and firm.

She was stripped down to her saggy white cotton panties and asked, “underdrawers too?”

Adam was still in a smart-ass mode and he was about to describe to her how the modern crucifix image was a product of renaissance artists who invented the idea of a loincloth for the prophet, when crucifying someone naked was clearly more humiliating thus balancing the obvious historical reality with necessary modesty of the time period. However, his monolog began with, “Yea...” and it was already too late. She had dropped her underwear to the floor exposing a bushy pubic area punctuating a muscular abdomen covered with a thin layer of medium brown skin.

She pressed her skinny narrow butt against the pole of the cross and heaved her little chest up to the light, closing her eyes tight to concentrate on communicating with the almighty.

Adam asked, “Nobody taught you how to pray?”

“Not really,” she responded. “I want to know how YOU pray.”

“Okay, put your clothes on, and we’ll talk about it,” he said. “I’ll tell you how YOU should be praying.”

Adam began to imagine that he should create a pamphlet for this information. He thought he could put the pamphlets out in the church like doctors sometimes do.

When the young woman was dressed, Adam asked her name. “Kiara,” she responded.

Adam explained, “If you have some things you want from God, you’re going to put in a request, right?” He waited briefly for a response but then continued. “So, let’s say you’re in your bedroom. You want to get into an uncomfortable position, like kneeling next to the bed.” Adam then got down on his knees facing the bed. “This is a commitment device.”

Kiara looked confused and asked, “commitment?”

“You’re committing to this prayer, so you’re going to remember it. And, you’ll be looking out for something you can say was an answer to the prayer,” he answered.

“Here, you need to put your hands flat together. This is the international symbol for prayer. You’re telling everyone, including God and yourself, that you’re starting to pray. When you are holding your hands together, you’re praying. You can’t do anything useful with your hands like this. Then you basically just beg God for what you want. If you want a new boyfriend or girlfriend, you say, ‘God, please, please, please bring me a girlfriend!’”

“After you have put in your order, you need to go out and look for the thing you asked for. This is called looking for confirming evidence. If you asked for a girlfriend, you need to go out and look for a girlfriend, so God can give you what you want. You might have to be flexible, especially if you’re asking for something unlikely. You have to take what you can get.”

Kiara had been watching attentively but with some confusion and finally said, “I just want to ask Him a question.”

“You see, that’s even easier. It’s all self-contained. Here again, you need to get down in an uncomfortable position to show God you’re serious.”

This time, Kiara joined him in the kneeling position. Adam continued, “Like when you’re asking for something, you put your hands together in the praying position and you ask God for the information you’re looking for.”

Kiara put her hands together and looked over at Adam for approval. Adam nodded and said, “Close your eyes and talk to God.”

The young girl faced straight ahead and closed her eyes.

Adam was ready with his next instructions. He said, “With questions, the next step is to relax and clear your mind.” He paused for effect and then continued, “Just let the answer come to you. If you’re relaxed, the answer will be planted into your mind. It will most likely be exactly the answer you were expecting.”

Kiara spoke reverently, “God, please, please, please can you help me find my brother?”

Her question gave Adam an idea, so he pulled out his cellphone and started a search. “What was your brother’s full name?” he asked.

“DeForest McClure,” She responded while trying not to break her concentration.

“You’re Kiara McClure,” Adam asked while typing in her brother’s name to the police blotter.

“Yes Sir,” she affirmed.

Adam thought there couldn’t be too many people named that, so searching should be fairly easy. Indeed, he found a press release with that name in it. “Oh no,” he said.

Kiara seemed hesitant to look up from her vigilant praying but opened her eyes and turned towards Adam and his cellphone.

“When was the last time you saw your brother? About 3 months ago?”

“Yes,” she responded with some concern.

The article Adam was reading said that DeForest McClure had been killed in a drug crime-related shootout a few blocks north of the church. He hoped he was wrong and that someone had confused the names. There wasn’t a picture in the article, but it didn’t look good. He also didn’t think even God would let young Kiara here know this information. Instead, Adam had an idea.

“The police are responsible for missing persons,” he said. “Have you asked at the police station?”

She replied, “No.”

Adam was confident this was going to be the answer, so he suggested that she make her way there very soon. It was a real pity and made him feel sick to think about both the tragedy of her brother’s death, and the drama that will likely unfold at the police station.

Kiara bounded down the stairs and ran out of the church with a look of concern on her face. Adam hoped that nobody saw her leaving from his bedroom. However, he added rope to his shopping list in case anyone else wanted to try out his bedroom cross.



## 21 Food

Preparations for the next Sunday's mass began as usual with Reverend Nathaniel arranging furniture and placing handouts. The crowd featured people bringing in plates, trays, and pots of food. Nathaniel had prepared tables for the food, and the bearers seemed to know where to put it.

Adam concluded that this must be for a potluck lunch after the service, but he wasn't aware of the schedule or any announcement regarding the event. Adam felt embarrassed being out of the loop, so interrupted Nathaniel setting up. "Food today?" he asked.

"Yes, potluck," Nathaniel replied. Then he looked up at Adam and added, "First mass of the month."

"Oh," Adam responded with some surprise, glad to finally be starting to understand the church as well as the members.

Watching the faithful come in, Adam noticed that everyone who brought in a plate of food checked out all the other plates that had arrived. Even people without food walked by the table to see what had arrived so far. People in groups pointed and discussed the food that they saw. Looks of joy, excitement and laughing were common. Many questions sought to determine the baker or cook associated with each dish. The preparers received kudos and gratitude.

This ritual was an important part of the church experience. Adam watched with amazement and felt jealousy that the preparers of simple salads were receiving more accolades than he was for his sermons.

Adam made his way to the table to verify that there was a tray of fried okra. A guilty smile escaped his countenance when he found them. He noticed that the frail old woman who had brought the vegetables caught him eyeing her creation.

"Those are really good," he admitted.

"They're really easy to make," she bragged. "Just a little taste of my childhood."

"Well, thank you so much for bringing them!" Adam replied.

All through the service, the audience smelled the food, and sometimes it seemed like a distraction. The presence of the food also seemed to swell attendance. If he had known the first Sunday was the most popular day, Adam would have worked more on his sermon. He mourned the lost opportunity, but when the time came, he worked extra hard to make it a good show.

Given all the interest in the food, Adam expected a crazy assault on the food when the service was over. In reality, some dishes had been stored in the refrigerator, others had to be warmed up in the microwave or on the stove. Everyone waited very patiently. As the food became available for eating, the members approached calmly and politely, but not quietly. The hall was loud with laughing and joking. Everyone made loud sounds of enjoyment and appreciation. Many praised God and Jesus Christ, and everyone thanked the people who brought the food.

Nathaniel and Adam tasted small amounts of nearly everything as if they were blessing the food. Many flavors were very unfamiliar to Adam, and some dishes completely defied identification. Adam dutifully tried most of the food and gave great complements to the extent it was possible for him to do so.

The service lasted much longer than usual, and cleanup took much longer than that. Adam and Nathaniel shared some words during the cleanup. Adam asked, "You ever make any food for the potluck?"

Nathaniel replied dubiously, "Nobody would want to eat anything I could possibly cook."

"I see," Adam replied with a bit of guilt. "I can't really cook either."

When they were alone, Adam began to ask, "You mentioned the offerings..." Adam had seen the collection plates and did a little math in his head.

"Yes," replied Nathaniel. "We did well today."

"Would half amount to a few hundred dollars, usually?" Adam asked.

"Every week, these days," Nathaniel replied confidently. Then he added, "Is it time to start talking about divvying the pot?"

“Let me get back to you next month,” Adam confirmed.

## 22 Bank Account

One fine Tuesday afternoon, when Adam had returned back home to the church a bit early, he decided to check the mail. He didn't know if it was because of the neighborhood, the mailman, or if it was because he lived in a church, but the amount of junk mail he received was far less than what he remembered from his days in the apartment complex. He had almost gotten out of the habit of checking. Today however, there was mail, and it was from the federal government. There was a moment of some trepidation as he opened the envelope, but when he read the contents he was excited to find that he had been granted his own tax identification number.

This was a big deal, because it meant that he was a genuine church. This would save him many thousands of dollars. He checked that the name was right: Theist Christians. Adam had wanted to name his religion Atheist Christians, but Nathaniel had talked him out of it. It went against Adam's beliefs and seemed like a ruined opportunity for some witty sarcastic irony, but Nathaniel, always the calm voice of practicality, worried that bureaucrats issuing TINs would not be amused, and it could derail his application. Sadly, only Adam and Nathaniel would know the joke.

Adam gave Nathaniel a call with the good news, and his partner counseled him that the next step was to get a bank account tied to his new number. Adam felt very lucky to have the experienced and skilled guidance of a church minister. He was also weirdly excited about visiting the bank. The last time he was there he was an awkward atheist who had inexplicably bought a church. Now he was a real preacher giving his own sermons. And it wasn't just him saying that. He now had a federal form officially designating him as a spiritual leader.

The next day, Adam slipped away from his desk job to peek inside the bank. He guessed that the chances weren't good that Sapphira would be working. He walked in casually with his documentation in hand and took a look around. To his joy, he found his personal banker standing behind a desk.

Without hesitation, he stepped right towards her. As she placed something on the desk, Adam got close enough to say, "Hello Sapphira!"

She looked up at him with a bit of surprise and said, "Oh hi!" She unconsciously touched her hand to her nametag as she tried to remember where she had seen him before.

Adam confidently flashed his paperwork and declared, "I need to open up a new account for my church."

“Oh, okay,” she responded. “Do you already have an account at the bank?”

“Yes, I have a personal account. My new account would just be for church business,” he explained.

Sapphira looked around a bit and said tentatively as she scanned the other bankers busy with customers, “Okay, yea. I can help you with that.”

Inside his head, Adam gave a hearty, “Yes!”

Sapphira headed to an office and Adam followed. She sat down behind a terminal and began asking questions, typing each answer carefully into an unseen form on the computer.

She asked for the name of the business, the type of business, the date it was created, all things that Adam hoped would remind her that she had offered to help with sermons. Disappointingly, she just kept her head down typing the information into the computer. Clearly this time, Adam would have to make a move.

There were many steps to the application process, and information she had to look up. Meanwhile, Adam worked out in his head what he should say to ask for help with sermons.

Finally she said, “Okay, that should do it. You’ll have to give it 3 to 6 business days before you can withdraw any money from the account.

“Thanks!” Adam responded enthusiastically. “So, you were the daughter of a preacher?” he then asked.

“I was God’s little Soldier,” she replied crisply with a hint of a Southern accent that wasn’t previously present.

Adam didn’t know exactly what that meant, but he concluded that was a “yes.” So he added, “You know, I’m not really good at writing sermons, and I could really use some help.”

Sapphira replied, “I could help...”

This put such a big smile on Adam's face, he could hardly speak. "I was wondering if I could send a text message with some questions. Would that be possible," he asked.

"I could probably give you some pointers," she responded with a bit of a smirk.

Adam was waiting and hoping for such a response so he was ready to say, "Great, I would need your phone number for that." He brought up a new contact entry on his phone, "ready to add a number."

He beamed with glee as she read off her phone number, and he tapped it in. He read it back to her and she confirmed that he had it right. He added that he was extremely hopeful that with her guidance he could bring his sermons to the next level. Shaking her hand and looking her in the eye, Adam thanked her profusely. He had to restrain his urge to skip out of the bank.

## 23 A Better Sermon

For the first time, Adam sat down with a serious plan to write a good sermon, knowing that it could be evaluated by a real expert. His previous sermons had focused on the theme of being a good person, and he hoped to expand on this theme. In Adam's understanding, being a good person was religion-neutral and universal. At the same time, he was aware that there are ideas about goodness that are specific to Christianity. Nathaniel had forcefully corroborated this message. With any luck, Sapphira would be able to buttress his arguments even more skillfully than Nathaniel. This was true only if Sapphira was telling the truth and gave a real phone number—something yet to be verified.

In case he needed to verify the earnestness of his endeavor, Adam wrote out the whole sermon by hand, something he had never done. Adam even took pictures of the sheets with his phone to prove his earnestness. Also, if Sapphira was seriously going to contribute to the project, Adam was hoping she would be able to work from his existing framework. His genuine hope was that Sapphira would ask to meet Adam somewhere to talk it through.

With the paperwork completed, Adam took a deep breath and started typing out some text messages to the phone number he had been given.

"Hello Sapphira! It's Adam here from the Church on Church street. I have a skeletal sermon written, and I was hoping that maybe you could give me some advice?"

He didn't receive anything back immediately, a prospect he had prepared for. Watching the clock on his phone, he waited for a full minute and then continued. "What I have so far emphasizes that people should be good. How do I say that in a way that religious people will understand?"

He started his stopwatch again and waited for a response. Since he hadn't yet received a response, he thought he would have to wait for a while. His next step, after three minutes, was to send pictures of the sermon he had written so far. He was proud of his work so far.

To his surprise, he got a text back that seemed to be encoded. His heart sank because he feared that the phone number was some kind of auto-reply system. Maybe it was some public number for the bank whose number she had memorized. The code it sent back started with, "Matt 5:16, Luke 6:35, Roma 2:21, Gala 5:22, Gala 6:9, 1 Tim 6:17, Titu 1:3, Ephe 2:10..." and it went on for a while.

It looked like complete random garbage to him, but he figured that since he is a computer person and deals with all kinds of encoded data he thought maybe he could figure out the meaning of the codes. Since nothing was immediately jumping out, he decided to type back, "Thanks!"

To his great surprise, he received a quick response, "You're welcome!"

Adam was stunned. That wasn't code; that was English. And one shouldn't read too much into punctuation these days, but she added an exclamation point as if she was happy to provide Adam with garbage. He hoped that the codes were sent as-is and not scrambled during the communication of the message. If the message was scrambled after she sent it, she wouldn't understand why he didn't understand her text.

He noticed that the message had repeating sections with a 3 or 4 letter code followed by a number, a colon, and another number. It seemed like they were vectors of some sort. The characters would probably be easier to figure out. Maybe he could search the internet for them. "Matt, Luke, Roma, Gala, 1 Tim, Titu and Ephe." Maybe they were names? He searched for those names, and some odd religious text came up. He concluded that he was on the right path. He found an online copy of The Bible and realized that these are books of The New Testament. He looked up Matthew, went to Chapter 5 and verse 16 which read, "Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works."

This was it. Sapphira had quickly spouted out verses in the bible that tell people to be good. He was amazed and thought he should text her again. "This is amazing! You really are a wizard!"

He got back a text that said, "Now you're a real preacher."

Adam didn't actually care about the sermon or being a preacher. He really just wanted to find out more about Sapphira. Sadly, he wasn't able to think of any more reason to bother her with text messages.

If he was going to continue this limited conversation with her, he would have to deliver a great sermon including all of the references she gave him. So, he set off to amend his draft with her notes.

Working through the references, he hoped that he would find a reference that was wrong or confusing. But, every one made perfect sense even though sometimes they took some thinking. For example, 1 Timothy 6:17 is about the rich being generous. He thought that maybe this wasn't the right audience for such a quote. But when he thought about it, rich is a relative term and he made it work.



When it was all done, Adam couldn't help thinking he had created a masterpiece. In fact, he worried that it would be obvious that he hadn't written the sermon all by himself. He finally decided that if there was any question about why he suddenly knew so much about the bible, he would readily admit that he got some help to give the best possible sermon.

On Sunday morning when the time came to give his sermon, he was the most confident he had ever been. He was loud and bold. And his audience enthusiastically appreciated his hard work. They even seemed less confused.

It seems that quoting the bible obligated the audience to shout "Amen!" He even got some "hallelujah's" which he had not previously heard. The appreciative exclamations of the audience encouraged Adam to be even louder and more forceful in his delivery.

Nathaniel, who had typically added his own enthusiastic commentary to enhance Adam's monolog, only offered an occasional "Amen" this time. At the end of the service, Nathaniel clapped and nodded in appreciation of the performance. Adam was proud that Nathaniel hadn't felt the need to apologize for his partner's sermon.

As Adam understood it, the purpose of giving a sermon is to give people an uplifting message that makes their life better. Telling people simply to be good people is a very simple message that nobody should have to tell an adult. Everyone thinks that they themselves are good people. What you are really doing is affirming that they're good people because they are each trying to be a good person. Nobody in the church is thinking, "Oh yea, I probably shouldn't kick puppies so often." At best, they're thinking, "I hope all these other horrible people around me will hear this and start being as good as me."

So, what does adding references to scripture do? After all, Adam never believed for a moment in the bible. Wasn't he being a hypocrite?

The scripture references add credibility. These things are obviously true. Like, rich people should try not to be evil with their money. But, when the Bible says this is true, the preacher taps into a consensus. It isn't important if the Bible is true or written by divine providence. As long as Adam tells the truth, he thought it is reasonable and ethical for him to point out where what he says aligns with messages from the Bible.

Combining his own message, however trite, with messages from the Bible, no matter how questionable, seemed to really strike a chord. It seemed like a marriage made in heaven.

Adam wasn't the one who discovered this combination. However, Sapphira seemed to know it well. It is a well-established strategy and big business. Business is especially big when religion is combined with the idea of generosity, but Adam didn't want to approach that subject, especially in the neighborhood he was in.

With some significant work, Adam could figure out how to find what he's looking for in the Bibles. Adam discovered that there are many Bibles. There is the Old Testament and New Testament and many versions of each of those even without venturing into sub-sects. It would be a big undertaking to get to the level of expertise that Sapphira possessed, and perhaps Adam could never catch up to her knowledge. And Adam didn't want to be an expert in the Bible. Not only would the process be even slower and more difficult by his own aversion, but the task of becoming a Bible expert would be unbearably painful.

The solution was simple: Sapphira. Adam needed Sapphira to achieve this level of success in church. Plus, Sapphira was super cute. He didn't know if he had any chance with her, but she seemed like she was his key to happiness. He paced up and down trying to decide how to approach her.

First of all, he didn't know if she was available. Maybe between the last two times he saw her, she got a boyfriend, and that's why she wasn't as forward as she once was. Adam didn't even know if she was married. He cursed himself for not even looking at her ring finger. Noticing the feeling of desperation building inside him, he concluded that he must not allow that impression to express itself. He took a deep breath.

He decided to stick to the previous thread, but to relay the excitement he felt, hoping that she would perceive and appreciate his genuine joy. He typed, "It really worked! You're a magician! You're a scholar and diplomat!" Even though he thought they would be appropriate in the moment, he avoided any terms that would imply that her skills were endowed by any spiritual forces. Adam didn't believe in any spiritual forces, and he felt it would belittle his true admiration for her genuine talent.

Having waited briefly to see if she would come back with something right away, he provided further feedback. "I got many 'Amens' for each reference. I really doubt they were familiar with many of the references. But they responded great to my confidence about the quotes."

He worried that the last message sounded like he was taking too much of the credit and added, "My confidence came 100% from your expert advice. I can't thank you enough."

After that text, he decided he should back off and wait for a response. He considered whether being a preacher was a reasonable goal at all. Being able to entertain and possibly even improve the lives of people

in unfortunate circumstances seemed like a noble and fulfilling goal. He could really feel good about himself being a preacher. But it was definitely unnecessary in his life, and as an atheist, spending much of his free time thinking and working on religious topics defied logical comprehension.

When he thought about just dropping the topic with Sapphira, he realized that the thrill of delivering a good sermon had more to do with his infatuation with his new friend than with any real sense of philanthropy. He didn't really know too much about Sapphira, but the mature professionalism she demonstrated at her job, mixed with her enthusiasm for preaching, made her fascinating.

Adam read back through his text messages to Sapphira and it occurred to him that he hadn't given her credit for her research. He added one additional message, "I forgot to give you credit for your part in researching for the sermon."

To his surprise, Adam got a response back quickly. "Never let them think your words didn't come directly from God," she messaged.

Adam's heart swelled with joy at hearing from Sapphira. He interpreted her bold behest as a general approval. Confirmation was really all he needed.

"Did I say Adam? My name is Jesus Christ!" Replied Adam.

Sapphira texted back a wink emoji.

Adam added, "Do you think you could help me with some hints next week?" and then he crossed his fingers and toes.

"I'll see what I can do if I have some time," came the reply.

That was probably the best response Adam could have hoped for. It put the pressure back on him to come up with a good sermon she could help with. Adam celebrated with a trip to Stingrays.

## 24 Almost Famous

If he were forced to admit it, Adam would have to say that he wasn't the most interesting person in most rooms. To be fair, Adam had no interest or intent to be popular or famous. In fact, he typically went out of his way to avoid being recognized or focused.

While traveling to shops or attractions around his new neighborhood, people started to recognize Adam. At first, it was a little disconcerting, but maybe a little fun to have people say hi to him outside of the church. He started to like it.

But, when he thought about it a little, it worried him a bit that sometimes he didn't even recognize the person. It meant that for each time someone said hi, maybe there were other times when he was recognized but they didn't say anything. This made him feel like he was being watched.

One time, while going to get lunch near his office, someone said "Hello Reverend" to him. He belatedly waved hello, but it startled him. His alter ego and secret life weren't so secret. He found himself always keeping an eye out.

As Adam walked home from work on one Friday, he noticed a heavy-set young woman holding a baby, sitting on the front porch of his church. He wondered how long she had been there. He worried that there was a problem either with her or with the church, so he picked up his pace.

Only when Adam was walking up the sidewalk did the young woman notice Adam approaching. She said, "Oh, Reverend Adam!"

"Hello! Is everything okay," Adam asked with a sense of concern.

"I just had my Baby," she said holding up a newborn.

"Wow!" said Adam observing that the infant was tiny. "When did you have the baby?"

"Tuesday," replied the woman.

“Wow!” Adam repeated. “You just had this baby? What is the name?”

“Her name is Sandy,” said the woman.

Adam spoke directly to the infant with a big smile and said, “Welcome to the world, Sandy!” Then he directed his attention to the woman and asked, “Is Sandy okay? Can I help you?”

“I need my baby to be baptized,” she said. “Is it too late?”

Adam had literally never even seen a baptism. He was aware only of the very basics. He didn’t want to be rude, but he was hoping to get out of it.

“I think it’s never too late,” he said. “Did you want to schedule a baptism?”

“Can we do it now?” the woman pressed.

“So, you’re in a hurry. What is your name?” he finally asked.

She said, “My name is Jazzlynn.”

“Okay Jazzlynn. Let’s go inside and talk.”

Usually, the best part of getting home was throwing off the suit he wore for work, but this day he was waylaid by his second job. He put down his backpack and sat Jazzlynn down in a room on the first floor that contained only two chairs and a small table. He offered Jazzlynn a seat and she accepted.

“Okay, so your baby needs an emergency baptism?” Adam asked, trying to make a point without being too impolite.

“It’s a bad world, Reverend Father,” the woman explained. “I don’t know what will happen to me from one day to the next. I’m just worried something could happen to my baby, and she could go to hell or purgatory or something bad.”

“I see what you’re saying,” said Adam calmly. He was relieved that some non-spiritual problems didn’t seem to be going on. At least he wouldn’t cause any lasting problems on earth that he would come to regret. He could only mess up her standing with God.

He went to the kitchen to get a glass of water. As far as he understood, water was the only requirement for baptism. He returned to the room with Jazzlynn. As he turned the corner holding the water glass, he realized that the woman had removed one of her large breasts from her blouse and was feeding the baby. Adam froze, then backed out of the room and retreated to the kitchen.

A little freaked out, it took a few seconds to regain his composure. He thought about the process of doing a baptism, and decided that a glass of water wasn’t appropriate for the ceremony. He decided he needed a container that was metal. He rummaged around the kitchen and found a small mixing bowl. He poured the water from the glass into the mixing bowl. Thinking that he still hadn’t spent enough time waiting for the baby to get fed, he decided the water should be blessed. He held the water up at eye level and said, “Bless you, water,” as if the water had sneezed.

Feeling sufficiently humiliated and hopefully having given sufficient time for a baby to eat, he returned to Jazzlyn. Waiting outside the room he asked, “Are you ready to begin the ceremony?”

She said simply, “Ready!”

Adam turned the corner to see her composing herself. She said, “I had to feed the baby.”

“Yes, I...saw,” he replied. Then he added, “I needed to bless the water anyway.”

She replied, “I see.”

He held up the water and asked, “Are you ready?”

“Yes, Reverend,” she said reverently.

“Is Sandy ready?” he asked first Sandy and then Jazzlynn. “Can you put Sandy’s head back a little bit?”

Sandy was sound asleep at this point, wrapped tightly in a thin blanket that seemed to have come directly from the hospital. Her head was back a bit so Adam put his hands in the mixing bowl, and put some drips on the infant’s head. Adam was very glad that the baby didn’t wake up.

Adam thought he should say something, so he improvised. “In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and the Holy Ghost, I now pronounce you baptized, Sandy!”

The mother responded, “Amen!”

Just at that moment, Adam realized he should say a prayer with her. He said, “Let’s bow our heads in prayer.”

Although he had now heard Nathaniel say a few prayers, he realized that he had never actually made up a prayer himself. He tried his best to channel his spiritual mentor. “Dear Lord,” he started.

“Thank you for the gift of this beautiful child, Baby Sandy. Thank you for making her healthy and pretty. And thank you for baptizing her. And thank you for not waking her up during the baptism.”

The mom said, “Amen!” and Adam said, “Amen!” and Adam then said, “Congratulations, Sandra is now protected from spiritual evil.”

He thought that suggesting that an atheist sprinkling water on the baby’s head might give the mother a false sense of security, so he decided to try to give some real advice. He said, “Now, God can definitely protect the baby from things that are invisible, spiritual, mystical, and otherwise inconsequential, but God is going to need you to take care of Baby Sandy on earth, you know that, right?”

“Really?” She responded in surprise. “Can’t you give her a better baptism? Something more powerful?”

Now he felt he needed to be firm. “No!” he said. “She has the very best possible baptism with all the available blessings. You know that God helps those who help themselves. You need to continue to make sure Sandy gets fed, her diapers are changed, and she stays away from anything dangerous. And you need to do whatever the doctor tells you to. Do you have an appointment to take Sandy back to the doctor?”

“Yes sir,” said Jazzlynn with the look of a child who had been scolded.

Adam continued, “You need to make sure you make it to that appointment and follow the doctor’s instructions. They know what is good for babies. That’s their job.”

“Uh huh,” she confirmed.

“This is what God wants. It makes sense, right? God wants you to take care of yourself and take care of your baby. God can’t just keep doing miracles every time someone doesn’t take care of themselves, right? That makes sense?”

“I guess so,” she said without shrugging her shoulders. “I have to go to church, right?” she added.

“If you ever need to decide between taking care of your baby and going to church, you should always take care of your baby first. And take care of yourself too. If you aren’t safe and healthy, you can’t take care of Sandy. But if you have time on Sunday morning, I would love to see you right here in this church. We’ll sing so many beautiful songs and give so many inspiring sermons, you’ll be filled with love and happiness, and you’ll want to do everything you can to keep things wonderful. I promise!”

“Okay,” replied Jazzlynn without as much enthusiasm as Adam had hoped he could have inspired.

When Adam finally counseled his visitor out of the church, he was glad to change his clothes and relax in his bedroom with his crucified Jesus watching over him. He wondered if he had done the right thing by pretending that he was speaking for God or even imagining that he knew better than a mother how to take care of a baby. But he couldn’t bring himself to believe that he could be doing a bad thing by telling someone in need that they should be taking care of themselves and their baby. Referring the mother to actual professionals seemed like especially good counsel.



He also worried that he shouldn't be doing too much church work without working with his partner Nathaniel. The woman had given Adam little choice. He could have told her he has no idea how to do a baptism and didn't even know where to get one done. This would have been an unpleasant truth for everyone. Or, he could have winged it. He concluded that he should find out what the usual plan was for events such as this. He texted Nathaniel.

"Hey. Do we do baptisms?" he texted.

"We used to," was the reply.

Adam texted back, "Well, I just did one. We should talk about our official policy towards such things."

"Congratulations. I'm anxious to hear the full story. How about if we discuss before Sunday service?"

Adam concluded with, "Sounds good. I hope no more baptisms or marriages until then."

## 25 Working Late

As on many Saturdays, there was a problem at the office, and Adam had to come in. This time, the network completely disconnected and wouldn't re-connect. Even before arriving at the office, Adam called the service provider and opened a ticket. The provider played the usual blame game, saying that there was a problem on the client end. This definitely didn't seem to be the case, but Adam had to run diagnostics and check status lights to verify.

When he arrived at the office, everyone treated Adam like he had caused the problem. He headed right for the server room and closed the door. There, he avoided the glares and pointless questions, while he poked the various servers. Everything looked the way he had expected it to. The router rebooted cleanly, passed all its diagnostics and registered no errors. There was simply no data link. Either the hardware was down at the provider, the line had been damaged somewhere, or there was a software problem. There was no way to be sure, so Adam called up the provider again.

This kind of debugging involves long periods of rebooting, waiting for the other side, and getting transferred to other areas of the service provider's organization. It is an exhausting process trying to think of something else you can try while periodically responding to requests for information from the provider.

Only when he had to leave the server room did he deal with the people most affected. Everyone asked him how long until the network would be up again. Of course, he didn't know because nobody had identified the actual source of the problem. And of course, nobody accepted that answer. They assumed Adam had some reason to withhold the answer.

Then came the jokes. Had they paid the bill? Did the hamster that was running in the wheel that is powering the network die. And then there were the religious jokes. Somehow everyone knew that Adam was now preaching at his church, so they asked him to ask God for help. They asked Adam what sins he had committed. Did he want to confess? None of this was very funny, and obviously, it didn't help.

A real concern he had was that he hadn't written his sermon for tomorrow. He had a piece of paper with some words written on it. "Time! We're running out of time! The time is coming! Are you ready?"

The point was to urge people not to waste time. He thought it was reasonable to try to encourage people to go out there and get things done that needed to be done. Don't procrastinate. Adam wanted to be uplifting and motivating.

In the server room, between the phone calls and status checks, Adam tried to get the sermon ready. Somehow, lyrics from Pink Floyd's Dark Side of the Moon album kept popping into his head and distracting him even more than the loud whirring of the fans in the server room. He wasn't making progress.

His phone buzzed with a text message from Sapphira. He was excited to hear from her, and thrilled that she had contacted him without his begging for help. At the same time, he felt dread that he would have to admit that he hadn't made significant progress on his sermon.

Adam tried to explain that he was stuck at work with a serious problem, and unable to complete the sermon. He worded his text carefully to give the impression that there was no possible way he could complete the document. Despite this, Adam felt lame implying that he couldn't take a few minutes to write something inspiring. After all, she could help him with the hard part.

While he was typing, the phone rang. It was Sapphira. He answered the call and heard, "Adam?"

Adam was thinking, "Oh no, this is exactly the type of situation where I find myself saying stupid things."

Adam replied, "Sapphira?"

"It sounds like you have a problem. What can we do?" she asked.

"We?" he thought. "We're a team now!"

He said, "I was going to ask if there was anything you could do. I don't have to have a particularly long sermon."

"Where are you located?" she asked.

"My office is in the Van Buren building," he said earnestly.

"I know where that is," she said. "What floor?"

“Third floor,” he replied. “Are you close?”

She said, “I live near downtown. It’s not far. Can you meet me downstairs?”

“Yes,” he said with excitement. “Just let me know when you’re in the building.”

When she arrived not long after, she looked stunning. She was dressed casually but still wore some makeup. Without her work coat, her real shape was evident and alluring. Adam had to fight the urge to stare. He held out his paper and said, “Here’s what I have so far, it’s not much.”

She took the paper and read it intently. The issue seemed very pressing to her. “I see where you’re going with this.”

Adam worked hard to suppress the embarrassment he felt and tried to add some color. “I was trying to be more motivational. Trying to get people to help themselves. Now’s the time, the time is now, right?”

“Yes, ‘Be very careful, then, how you live—not as unwise but as wise, making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil,’” she said without pause.

“I was thinking that too!” Adam said ignoring the unlikeliness.

The left corner of her mouth turned up slightly with a smile.

“Book of Luke?” Adam ridiculously guessed a book he had heard of.

“Ephesians 5:15”, she said matter of factly.

“Oh yea...” Adam said feigning knowledge he did not possess.

She looked Adam in the face and said, “Let me see what I can do. This is an easy topic.”

Adam decided to play it straight. “Everything is easy for you!”

He thanked her as many times as he could, while trying to find some opportunity to give her a kiss or at least hold her hand. But she disappeared out the revolving door, and Adam was left with the scent of her perfume. And, he had to get back to his problem.

Hours more passed by. Everyone went home saying, “Send me an email.”

Some time after 3am, Adam was transferred to the emergency support team in Australia where it was already Monday morning. “Says here you’re having a bit of a sticky wicket with your link-up,” said the male voice on the phone

“Is that like a squirrel?,” asked Adam.

“A what now?”

“It’s acting squirrely,” added Adam.

“Nah Mate, cricket,” explained the Aussie.

“So, it’s a bug.”

“Closer,” said the Aussie breezily. “Can we take a look-see on the router? Have you logged in to poke around?” asked the technician.

“I’ve been on the router about twelve hours so far,” explained Adam.

“Right. Can we take a look at the status screen?”

Adam had been staring at the status screen and repeatedly explaining it all day. He said, “The connection light is green, but the link light is red.”

“Okay. Well, it’s good that you have a connection.”

“It’s something,” explained Adam.

The technician instructed, “Do this for me. Go into the terminal and type ‘V-E-R and enter’. Scroll down to the ‘Dynamic Link Software revision,’ what does that say?”

Adam did as he was asked and read off, “10.04.2443.”

The technician made a disapproving noise and said, “the server you’re supposed to be connected to is 10.04.3000. Let’s get you updated. Type in ‘D-L space U-P-D’.”

Adam did that and after a minute said, “Everything is green now.”

“Good on ya,” said the technician with some enthusiasm. “Now I need you to do one more thing.”

“So, it’s working now,” said Adam.

“Yeppers,” said the technician. “Type in ‘D-L space A-U-T-O-U-P;’ that will auto-update you for next time.”

“Done,” said Adam. “So, who screwed this up? Who set this wrong?”

The technician explained, “Well, the code is designed by the network integration team in Slovakia. But the coding is done in India. The deployment team is in the States, though. It looks like they might have failed to set the auto-update feature when deploying your installation. And there was no failover. I see from the log that the version was bumped early Saturday morning your time. So, you didn’t get the version upgrade. It seems there is an incompatibility. Should be all good now, though. Is there anything else I can do for you today?”

Adam was very glad the ordeal was over, but he wanted to swear at the nice man who helped him put an end to it. Instead, he thanked the nice Australian man for knowing what to do and sent out an email to his company. In it, he blamed everything on Slovakia.

Though it was the middle of the night, Stacy replied, “We don’t even have an office in Slovakia.”

Adam packed up and set out for the bus. While making his way home, he texted Sapphira. “Work problem solved. I’m going home. Did you make any progress?”

She texted pictures of 6 pages of hand-written sermon in a beautiful script. Adam texted back, “You are as brilliant as you are beautiful!!” He hoped he wasn’t too bold.

She just texted back, “Thanks. Good luck!”

## 26 Deep Planning

Adam was hoping for a big service this weekend, and he was further hoping he could get Sapphira's attention to help him write a sermon that was worthy of the occasion. After much internal reflection, he decided to just text her.

"Hey, Sapphira. I'm having a bigger event than usual this Sunday. I was wondering if I could get some help with my sermon?"

After not getting an immediate response, he added, "Maybe we could discuss over dinner?"

He really hoped he would get a response about dinner, but he figured she doesn't have any shortage of men asking her out for dinner. After 10 minutes or so, he tried one more text. "Or, you could meet me at the church and we could work on it together here?"

It wasn't a full minute later and he received a message, "What's the address of the church?"

Adam texted the address of the church, and added, "I'm available now if you are."

She texted back, "Does 7pm work?"

Adam was so excited, he didn't know how to react. He just responded, "See you at 7!" Even the exclamation point gave him pause.

Adam did a little happy dance and then, in a panic, began frantically cleaning and straightening everything in the building. In his frenzy, he noticed many maintenance issues that needed to be taken care of. Today was not the day for those, though.

He also needed to have some notes to show Sapphira that he was serious about sermons going forward. He scribbled down everything he could think of. He took a shower, put on something casual but nice, and began uncontrollably staring out the window waiting for a car to arrive in the parking lot.



Adam worried that she wouldn't really show. He checked the address he had texted her several times to make sure he hadn't given her bad instructions. Periodically, he thought of something that he could discuss with Sapphira, so he wrote that down. He watched the clock pass seven o'clock, not expecting her to be exactly on time. But soon after the prescribed time, a small red Japanese car pulled into the parking lot. Adam's heart began to race. He took up station behind the front door and waited for her to arrive at the entrance.

Opening the door before she could search for a bell, Adam saw that she looked lovely in clothes a bit nicer than what he had chosen. It seemed to Adam that Sapphira looked prettier every time he saw her. She had a purse slung over her shoulder, held a notebook and a very large version of The Holy Bible in her hands.

Adam was about to say, "Welcome to my church!" but before he could say anything, she said, "You really have a church."

Instead, he said, "This is a real church!" Then he added, "This is my church! Please come in!"

She stepped inside and looked around. The big hall with the pews and altar were the first things to draw people's eyes. "Nice," she said.

He simply said, "Thanks" and looked around at all the things that needed to be fixed or improved.

Before he could say, "I'm so glad you came. Thank you so much for taking time out to come help me," and "You look really nice," she started with, "What do you get in offerings?"

She looked at Adam and saw that he was confused. "Roughly," she added.

Adam was surprised that this was a polite question to ask—like asking for someone's salary. But she did work at a bank and was very familiar with the business of the church. He figured she just wanted to understand how big of a church he had, financially.

"To be honest, I don't have any idea," he said awkwardly. "There was a preacher her before I got here, Nathaniel, I let him keep the offerings because he does most of the work."

This time it was her turn to be surprised. “You give it away?”

“It didn’t seem right for me, as an atheist, to take money from people who were donating to the church,” he explained.

“But it is your church, right?” she asked.

“Yes,” he replied sheepishly. “So, I get the tax breaks.”

“I see,” she said, not really seeing the logic. “So, where do you write your sermons?” she asked.

“I have a desk in my bedroom,” he replied.

“Oh,” she said with some disappointment. “To concentrate on important writing tasks such as this, you should have a dedicated writing room where you do nothing but work on your sermon. If nothing else, I can help you with that advice.”

Adam felt flush at being called out for not knowing how to write a sermon. He understood that Sapphira was religious where he was not. And he was extremely impressed with her encyclopedic knowledge of the bible. But he hoped he was at least competent to work with her.

Adam showed her the baptism room where he might be able to write. The table in the room was round and had only one folding chair, making it wholly unsuitable for the task in the moment. He promised her he would get some proper furniture.

When she asked about the furniture in the room where he currently wrote his sermons, he explained that he had a desk and admitted that the desk had only one chair. She convinced him that he should bring the chair from the baptism room up to his bedroom so they could sit side-by-side while they worked. He really hoped to walk behind her as they scaled the stairs, but she insisted that he should go first with the chair.

Once they arrived at his bedroom, she immediately noticed the crucifix over his bed. She pointed it out, saying, “There’s a crucifix over your bed! I thought you were an atheist!”

He confirmed, “Yes, it was there when I bought the place.”

She spoke with a mock concern, “Shouldn’t the site of that burn your flesh or something?”

“No, that’s vampires,” Adam replied matter-of-factly. “There is a lot of confusion between vampires and atheists, but there are some key differences. Luckily, I can use mirrors too.”

“And atheists can stand the site of crosses, I guess?” she asked.

Adam responded, “Right. For us, there is no religious or magical significance at all. It’s just a somewhat gruesome statue of a guy being tortured. The whole church is just a building. In fact, that’s why I bought it. I just needed somewhere to live.”

Sapphira seemed genuinely surprised, “So, you don’t feel anything special about this place where people earnestly pray for salvation?”

“Of course I care very much about the people here. I care about their lives and their concerns. I care about their problems. But the building isn’t magic for me,” Adam said.

“I see,” replied Sapphira. “That’s strange for me. Because all of the love and suffering that has happened here, I can feel it in the wood.”

At this point, Sapphira finally noticed the giant cross built into the room. She was alight with excitement. “This is why you write here! You get motivation from the religious power of the room! You aren’t going to remove this, are you?” She asked with some urgency.

“I had no plans to remove it, no. I kind of like it, in fact. Also, I’m not totally sure that the vertical beam isn’t structural. I wouldn’t want to collapse the building,” said Adam.

“It is so beautiful,” said Sapphira, touching and admiring the giant cross, stroking the length of the beams. She stood with her back to the cross with her arms outstretched as if she were being crucified herself. She wore an enormous smile.

Adam found the position she was standing in to be a little crazy, but very arousing. He just watched her in astonishment. Sapphira seemed to be sizing the crossbar to see if it fit her. It did fit her well.

He could have watched her in this pose all night, but she turned to Adam and said, “shall we get started?”

Adam showed her the notes he had written. He was a little embarrassed at the quality of the notes but was very glad to have something to refer to. He walked her through the list of topics and Sapphira rated them as easy or difficult to write about. For her, the important part of a sermon was the parts of the bible supporting that theme.

Adam had the idea that the sanctity of the church itself would make a good topic. Sapphira and Adam agreed that the church had meaning, but for different reasons. This conflict could make for a more interesting and meaningful sermon, with each churchgoer able to take a different perspective. It would also allow more discussion between Sapphira and Adam.

When he brought it up to her, they talked about whether the church was the ‘House of the Lord’ or not. Sapphira said it was problematic because the bible is unclear about it. She said, “Well, in Acts in both 7:48 and 17:24 the Bible says things like ‘The Lord dwelleth not in temples.’ But in both Kings 8:13 and Chronicles 7:12, it says things like ‘God has chosen this place to myself for a house.’ So, if you want to make a point, you can pick the verses you want to quote. But if you want to be honest about The Bible, you’re better off avoiding the topic altogether.”

Adam was surprised and confused and asked, “The Bible contradicts itself?”

“All over the place. It is embarrassingly common. It isn’t even clear if I should talk to you,” she explained.

“Because I’m a man?” Adam asked.

“Because you’re a non-believer. If I listened to Peter 3:15 or Colossians 4:5, it’s okay. But, if I read John 1:10 or 1 Timothy 6:20 or 2 Timothy 2:16, talking to you will lead to ungodliness,” she said.

Adam was flabbergasted and asked, “So if the Bible isn’t even internally consistent, why do you believe in it?”

“Oh, I don’t,” Sapphira explained matter-of-factly.

Adam was confused and questioned her more. “So wait, you don’t believe in God either?”

“Oh, my faith is completely unwavering. I believe in God with all my heart,” she said. “But The Bible was written by people who weren’t even very careful to hide the fact that they were making things up.”

“You’ve spent all this time essentially memorizing The Bible and you don’t even believe what is written in it?” Adam asked with genuine surprise.

“Well first of all,” she started. “My memory is pretty good. I can memorize things pretty easily. And I am intensely interested in finding out as much as I can about God. Especially when I was younger, I read the bible over and over trying to understand it. But the closer you read it the more it falls apart.”

“So, you’re a bible scholar,” Adam commented.

“Not really,” she explained. “There are many different bibles. I know that parts of the bible were written at different times, by different people in different languages. And I know that the books of the bible were mixed and matched into different bibles through history. But I’m not interested in the drama of all that. I think each one of the stories has some insight into God, and I want to get at the fundamental truth by understanding what I can of each story. Even the ones that were thrown out of the bible, like the Song of Songs and such. So, I don’t know if God lives in churches or not. The Bible is contradictory. I tend to think God is everywhere, so He is in the churches, but he’s everywhere else too, so it’s a moot point.”

“So, we shouldn’t write a sermon about the sanctity of churches, because we don’t know if churches are sacred?” Adam probed.

“Oh, churches are sacred for sure,” she confirmed. “But it is better to write about how everything is sacred because God is everywhere.”

“That’s beautiful,” Adam said earnestly. “Inspiring. I agree that everything is sacred, especially in the sense that there is no place that is ‘profane.’ But, at the same time, if every place is sacred, then really no place is sacred. And of course you know, I don’t truly believe in God at all. So, I wouldn’t be honest with people if I talked about sanctity of anything.”

“Yes,” she agreed. “I understand what you’re saying.”

“People exist thought,” he said looking for her reaction. “We can talk about how great people are, and how we should be good to other people because of how amazing and wonderful they all are. And we can start with the people in the church. Because these are people who are there to make their lives better. They can make their world a better place by making the whole world a better place.”

“You’re so weird,” Sapphira said in a confused but loving way.

“Uh oh,” he thought “Weird?” he asked.

“I hang around with mostly very religious people. They are, what some people call, ‘God fearing.’ They do and say the right things to make God happy so their lives can be made better. They’re always asking God for things. They ask for other people too, but people worry most about their own lives.”

Adam felt he should apologize for everyone and said, “People do need to take care of themselves. We’re the only people we’ve got, right?”

Sapphira interrupted, “God doesn’t mean anything to you. But you still work so hard to make other people’s lives better.”

Adam was pretty sure he wasn’t the only atheist that wasn’t a complete jerk, but maybe he was the first one Sapphira had met. He was hoping that he had impressed her, so he didn’t want to say too much. He only said, “Is that okay?”

She replied, “It’s kindof...sexy.”

“Oh good,” he said. “Should I kiss you?”

“Why haven’t you kissed me?” Sapphira asked.

Adam got up off of his folding chair and moved over to Sapphira who was still sitting. She leaned back to allow him to kiss her. Adam put his hand behind her head, letting her long blond hair flow over his hand. She held on to his arm while he kissed her deeply. With his left hand, Adam cupped Sapphira's face, feeling her smooth pale skin.

To avoid falling backwards, Sapphira put both arms around Adam, and they moved to the nearby bed. There, Sapphira laid back in the middle of the small bed. Adam had no choice but to lie mostly on top of her. He explored her body first over her clothes and then under her clothes as she clutched Adam's shoulder and sometimes his head.

Sapphira felt his pants, finding that he already had an erection, Adam began removing her clothing, kissing her body everywhere it was exposed. When he lifted himself up to kiss her on the lips again, he noticed that she was looking at the big cross. Adam asked, "do you want me to tie you to the cross? I have some rope."

Sapphira had her arms up on the bed and simply said, "Yes."

Adam got off the bed to give her some space. She got up and removed her socks—her only remaining clothing. She looked breathtaking. Adam grabbed the silky black rope he had stashed behind the desk while Sapphira stood in front of the giant cross again with her arms out and her eyes closed. He wrapped the rope around, strapping her wrists and forearms to the horizontal beam.

He kissed her passionately on the lips, then held her hips as he began kissing her neck. She moved her head to the side to give him access. He gave her neck a gentile bite and she squeaked because it tickled. She giggled, "you said you weren't a vampire!"

His hands explored her body, and she moaned with pleasure. He eventually noticed that the rope was binding her arms tightly now, and he got worried. He asked her, "Do your arms hurt from the rope?"

She replied simply, "Yes."

He was concerned that he was hurting her, so tried to loosen and straighten out the ties. Sapphira said simply, "It's okay."

Adam kissed her deeply on the lips again and began taking off the rest of his clothes. He pressed himself against her and his erection pressed into her abdomen. Sapphira pushed her hips forward into him and spread her legs wider, pulling harder on her wrist bonds.

Adam was concerned about her wrists, but anxious to penetrate her. He bent his legs as best as he could and touched the tip of his penis to her clitoris. She rotated her hips forward even more to give him a better angle for insertion, which he did. She groaned and strained against the bondage.

She peeked at the nearby desk and lifted her left leg in a ballerina-move. She planted her heel on the corner and pointed her toes. Adam thrust into her eagerly while holding her hips.

Finally, the ropes seemed to be taking their toll and Sapphira winced a bit. Adam was getting tired anyway and decided that was enough of the cross. He pulled out and started releasing the slip knots. Sapphira gave a little disappointed moan.

Once freed, she almost fell onto her hands and knees onto the bed. There, she looked back at Adam. Adam then grabbed her by the hips again and began taking her from behind. Sapphira arched her back to optimize her pleasure. She closed her eyes again and smiled.

When he was getting close, he flipped Sapphira on her back and got on top of her. Her legs wrapped around him as he kissed her and released himself into her. They were both exhausted. He continued to lay on her to catch his breath, then they began kissing again.

Adam whispered, "You're amazing. Thank you."

She responded, "We're good together."

They kissed some more and Sapphira finally said, "I need to go."

"Go?" Adam said in horror.

"I have to get ready for my church service tomorrow," she replied.



Adam asked, “You’re giving a sermon too?”

“No,” she replied. “But I have things I need to do to get ready.”

“Can’t you stay the night?” he asked.

“I don’t have time. Besides, your bed is too small,” she explained.

Adam decided he needed a new bed, but he didn’t have time to get one for the night. He thought maybe he could convince her with more kisses, but she eventually pushed him away. She spent some time complementing him on his very nice church and offering help with future sermons. They said goodnight, and she was gone.

Adam sat up looking for beds online until he finally got tired. For the first time in his life he said a real prayer. He faced towards the cross, closed his eyes and said, “Thank you Lord for bringing me Sapphira. And thank you too for the crazy fucker who installed a life-sized cross in this room. That guy knew what he was doing.” He said Amen to himself and fell asleep.

## 27 Morning After

Adam woke up and considered whether last night was a dream. He saw the rope on the floor and realized to his joy that it was not a dream. He straightened out the room so he touched the items from his memory. The rule, he thought, was to text the next day. It was still early in the morning, so he agonized over what time was a good time to message Sapphira.

He couldn't believe his luck, and he didn't want to ruin the dream or his chances. He showered, got dressed, and checked his phone again. He decided just to text the first thing that came to mind.

Since she was so religious, he wanted to refer to her in a way that would reflect her perfection and her piousness. "Good morning, Angel," he typed.

"Wow, I was a devil last night," came the reply.

Adam wanted to encourage devilish behavior. "You were a goddess," he typed. "That was the greatest night of my life. The best day. And I can't wait to see you again."

She replied, "I didn't say I didn't enjoy it."

He waited and hoped she would say a little more. Without hearing back immediately, he responded, "I'm glad you enjoyed it. Thank you."

She must have been busy because she didn't reply. He waited a while to point out, "One problem. I don't have a sermon."

She replied to that simply, "I failed you."

Worried that she thought he had rebuked her, he assured her, "The sermon isn't important."

To that, she replied, “Every sermon is important. People look for guidance. Your followers want to know that they’re on the right track.”

Adam really liked Sapphira and wanted to give her a reason to be with him. To that end, he messaged, “I need you to keep me on the right track.”

She replied simply, “That’s sweet.”

Adam was getting desperate. He pleaded, “Will you come to the service? Please?”

She responded, “I have responsibilities in my own community.”

If he was going to have her, his competition was going to be her existing church. He texted, “I want to steal you away from your community to be a part of my community.”

She texted back, “I don’t miss many services here.”

This was a reassuringly noncommittal. However, it indicated that she expected remain a committed member of her existing church.

“Of course not. You’re a good girl,” he texted playfully.

“You make me a bad girl,” she texted back.

Since they were being playful, Adam texted, “That’s something atheists do sometimes have in common with vampires. We turn good girls bad.”

“I should never have let you bite me,” she responded.

Adam was getting turned on just chatting with her. He responded with a double entendre. “You were very restrained.”

She responded with an emoji of a blushing smiley face.

Adam was getting sexually frustrated, so he thought he should change the topic. Plus, he hoped that it was a good time to ask her for something. He texted, “So, if you come over for the service at my church, we could hang out after?”

Initially there was no reply, but eventually she came back with, “I can probably come over for a little bit, but it won’t be until later.”

## 28 Delivery

While the choir was singing, Adam was thinking about Sapphira. He was up next, so he was trying to think of what he would say in his sermon. He had a piece of paper that should have been his notes. But on the paper it said only “Food.”

The song wrapped up and Reverend Nathaniel approached the podium. The pastor heartily thanked the choir and then said reverently, “And now let’s hear Reverend Adam’s sermon for this week.

Adam jumped to his feet and approached the podium. He maintained his style of shouting at the gathered church members. “Food!” was all he said.

“We all need food,” he added. The food that had been brought in for the potluck was sitting on the tables behind them and the delicious smells filled the hall.

Adam then rambled on about how important food is, how everyone should be sharing food so that nobody goes hungry, and food shouldn’t be wasted. He finished off asking for an “Amen” for different types of foods. “Vegetables...Amen...fruits...Amen...” he began. Then he added his own personal favorites, “Hamburgers...Amen...apple pie...Amen...” As he wrapped up, he concluded with some fried foods, “Fried chicken!...Amen!...Deep fried catfish fingers!...Amen!”

With that, Adam added an “Amen!” of his own and walked away from the pulpit.

Nathaniel stepped up again and began making announcements. Adam went outside to look to see if Ray was on his way. He was over half an hour late and Adam was annoyed. Adam remembered that he had Ray’s personal cellphone number, so he texted him simply “Food?”

No response was received, so Adam went back inside to find Nathaniel delivering the final prayer which included blessing of the day’s food. On the final call of Amen, the volunteers sprung into action taking foil off the top of some dishes, lighting up some well-worn Sterno cans, and heating up some dishes that needed to be served hot. Adam had to chase people away from some tables he had setup for Ray.

Adam was starting to feel foolish keeping people from spreading out the food on two empty tables, when Ray burst in with his helper Sue carrying the first two chafing dishes of fried food.

As an important merchant popular in the neighborhood, many people recognized Ray and started shouting out to him. For his part, Ray tried to call out the names of everyone he recognized while still carrying a heavy load of hot metal trays.

Upon locking eyes with Adam who was motioning him towards the empty tables, Ray suddenly widened his eyes and said, "I haven't cooked this much food all at the same time, Boss. Sorry I'm just a little bit late."

Adam pulled the invoice out of his pocket and held it so that Ray could see it. He said, "if everything on this list is here, I forgive you."

Ray said earnestly, "It's all here. I got everything. Let me go get the rest. I'll be right back!" Ray gave some high-fives as he hurried back out the door and motioned to Sue to follow.

Adam slowly walked over to Nathaniel holding out the invoice. Nathaniel said, "Wow! There hasn't been this much excitement at the church in a long time." Nathaniel reached out his hand to shake Adam's.

"I hope people will tell their friends," Adam said with a firm handshake. He showed the invoice to Nathaniel and asked sotto voce, "Does half the contributions cover this invoice?"

Nathaniel took the paper and scanned for the total at the end. "Oh yea," he said. "You want me to give you half now?"

Adam replied, "If I could just get enough to pay the bill, I would be very appreciative."

Nathaniel said, "I'll be back," and he headed into the closet where the money was locked.

Adam went to check on Ray and was intercepted by members of the congregation who asked questions like how he knew Ray, and did he really like fried catfish.

When he got to the front of the hall, he noticed that people were standing back politely, joking with each other, but waiting to be told it was okay to start taking food. Normally Sarah would give the final word, but this time they were waiting for Adam.

Sarah was a thin elderly woman with a shock of fuzzy white hair. She liked to take charge of things, having been an office manager when she was younger. She called everyone 'Dear' but wasn't afraid to give instructions to people.

Ray was checking his copy of the invoice, looking over the trays.

Adam asked, "That's everything?" believing that it must be.

Ray glanced subconsciously at the invoice again and said, "that's all of it!"

Adam noticed Sarah looking at him, so he looked back at her and said, "We should eat then."

Sarah gave some waves to people and started handing out some plates to people. Adam led Ray over to where Nathaniel was presumably counting.

Nathaniel emerged with money in hand, saw Ray and said, "Ray!"

In his perpetual friendly and enthusiastic manner, Ray said, "Reverend Nathaniel, it is an honor serve you in your church."

"His church," Nathaniel said motioning to Adam. "It is great to see you, Ray."

Ray gave Adam a look up and down. Adam said, "'Our church.' Our church is delighted to have you as our caterer."

Adam left Nathaniel and Ray to work out the money and he went to go see how things were going with the food. All the guests seemed to be enjoying themselves even more than usual. He could see some women talking and surmised that they were annoyed that people were taking the fried Stingray food but not everyone was taking the food they had prepared and brought. Adam started taking some of the local food and others followed his lead.

Everyone ate and laughed, talking about the food and how hungry everyone was. When Ray finished chatting with Nathaniel, he came over and grabbed a plate of food. Adam had not ordered fried okra from Ray precisely because he knew it would probably already be available at the potluck. Adam watched Ray head right for the fried okra. The frail old woman who brought the okra also noticed Ray and the two of them discussed okra for the next two hours.

When Adam had almost forgotten that he was looking for Sapphira, he saw her walk through the door looking as beautiful as he had ever seen her. He had seen her look professional, and out on a date, but when she was dressed for church, she was apparently an angel.

Adam almost tripped over two people and a purse rushing to greet Sapphira. He called out her name, put his hands on her shoulders and said, "I'm so glad you came."

She said, "Thanks for inviting me," and then, "You have a real following at your church here."

Adam said, "It's crazy, I know!" and then he went in for a kiss.

Sapphira pulled away and said, "No kissing in church," with an embarrassed look on her face.

Adam was thinking, "But it's okay for me to tie you naked to a cross upstairs?" but then he remembered, "oh yea, church people." He spun around to look. A few people were looking in his direction, but he met eyes with Nathaniel.

"Let me introduce you to my partner, the real reverend Nathaniel."

He held her hand even though Sapphira only loosely returned his grip. He dragged her to see his business partner and said, "Nathaniel, this is Sapphira. She is a genuine church person. She basically has the Bible memorized!"

"Well," said Nathaniel clearly impressed with Sapphira's looks as well as her introduction. "It is a great pleasure to make your acquaintance!"

"It is such a pleasure to meet you," she said extending her hand for a shake.



Nathaniel took her hand and said, “Grace be unto you, and peace, from God our Father, and the Lord Jesus Christ.”

Hands still clasped, Sapphira responded, “We give thanks to God always for you all, making mention of you in our prayers.”

Their hands let go and Nathaniel gave a look that conveyed surprise and admiration. Adam wasn’t sure if he was more impressed with her brains, her looks, or her manner. He felt pride, but also worried that he wasn’t worthy of a woman so perfect.

Sapphira then continued, “Remembering without ceasing your work of faith, and labour of love, and patience of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ, in the sight of God and our Father.”

“Wow,” said Nathaniel. “We’re lucky to have you here at our place of worship. Have you partaken of the food? Adam has ordered special treats for us today.”

“Actually, I haven’t eaten. I think I’ll give it a try!” She looked at Adam and they walked towards the tables.

Adam asked incredulously, “you made that up?”

“I didn’t make up Thessalonians 1:1,” she said.

Adam laughed. “Someone did!”

She said calmly, “Paul the Apostle, supposedly.”

Sapphira went on to talk to everyone in the church. She shook every hand and had something nice to say to everyone. She was as charming as she was beautiful, and she stole the heart of the church. She was in her element, shaking hands, responding to jokes, and blessing people. She frequently took Adam by the arm to bring him into conversations. She had a poise and character that drew people to her and made them feel grounded in serenity.

This was not the efficient professional woman he first met at the bank and was certainly not the passionate woman in his bedroom. This was a woman who could look into people's soul and give them peace. Adam was overcome with a sense of love for Sapphira.

When she introduced herself as a friend of Adam's, people confided that Reverend Adam had saved the church. Some people admitted that they came back to the church after years to hear the crazy white preacher that screamed unorthodox ideas that nonetheless made them think. "Sometimes it doesn't hit you until you get home," one man said. "Then you think, maybe that crazy guy had a point." Some people seemed to be more amused than deferent, but everyone seemed to respect the new preacher.

Hearing some of the feedback surprised and moved Adam. He had heard words of encouragement before but had assumed they were just being polite. After all, nobody had asked Adam to start giving them life advice. He hadn't guessed that people genuinely appreciated his messages.

Then suddenly Sapphira said she had to get back. She touched everyone with a handshake or tap on a shoulder and headed for the door.

On the way out, Adam repeated his appreciation. "Thank you so much for coming Sapphira. It really meant a lot to me."

She looked at him breezily and said that it was no problem, she enjoyed coming, and that the church was lovely. Then she held his arm tight, looked him in the eyes and said seriously, "I'm keeping you."

Adam was just a bit flustered and said simply, "That's great!"

With that, she turned and hurried to her car. Adam turned back to the congregation, angry with himself that he couldn't think of anything better to say than "That's great." He felt so foolish.

Everyone in the church wanted to know more about Sapphira. Where did he meet her and how does she know so much about the bible. People were in awe, and Adam struggled to answer all the questions.

## 29 New Bed

Throughout the week, Adam periodically exchanged text messages with Sapphira. She couldn't text often while she was at work due to the nature of her job, but in the evenings, they were in regular contact. Sapphira had an insatiable need for information about the people in Adam's congregation. She genuinely expressed concern for people and seemed to want to memorize the names of every member.

Most often, Adam failed her. He either didn't know the names or personal stories of the congregants or couldn't even recall members based on her descriptions. Occasionally, Adam could reach out to Nathaniel to ask him questions like, "The woman who brings Okra on Potluck days, what is her name?" In this case, Nathaniel knew that her name was Miss Prisca. In other cases, Nathaniel had no more information than Adam did.

Adam feared that his ignorance disgusted Sapphira and he worried that she would conclude that his involvement in the church was insufficient or even fabricated. Instead, it became clear that Sapphira's mind simply craved this information, and she was acting out of genuine compassion for the people of the church. She simply thanked Adam for the information he could provide.

Meanwhile, Adam didn't have time to go bed shopping during the week but discovered that he could just order a bed online. They would even pick up the old bed. Given his new commute time, it was possible for Adam to run home during the day to supervise the operation. The crew refused to ascend the narrow stairway up to the bedroom, so Adam had to do that himself. The old small bed was easy, in part because he had gravity on his side, but the new larger bed gave Adam a very difficult time.

Adam texted Sapphira, inviting her to the church on Saturday. He asked her for help getting ready for services on Sunday but honestly couldn't think of anything that needed to be done. He worried that Sapphira would have ideas.

She replied that she had to work until 3pm on Saturday but could be there afterwards. Adam was thrilled to be able to see her again. She then added, "Looking forward to helping you get ready!"

That was what Adam was afraid of. He sat and wondered what needed to be done. He should probably clean up the church, he thought. Did he need to decorate? Maybe she was just thinking about writing the one sermon he delivered per week. Thinking a little more, he wondered what Nathaniel did to get ready for Sundays. There was definitely a plan because the choir always knew what song was coming up next, and they knew the lyrics. And Nathaniel always had a few sermons prepared.

Thinking about it, Adam wasn't really in charge of the church because Nathaniel was doing all the planning and most of the work of setting things up and presenting. Adam felt bad about being so disconnected from the administration of the church proceedings. At the same time, he had no desire to do all the work at the church. Neither did Adam feel qualified or prepared for such work.

The current situation seemed perfectly fine to Adam. Nathaniel did most of the work, but Adam owned the church. And Adam did contribute. But perhaps this was not enough for Sapphira. He was worried if he referred her to Reverend Nathaniel for all these issues, Adam would lose her to Nathaniel. Thus, Adam minimized his questions to his business partner and planned to avoid further meetings except during church services. Adam wanted to keep Sapphira for himself.

## 30 Pews

Sapphira arrived at the church with a large cloth bag heavy with personal items. Adam was so happy to see her he barely noticed. When he tried to whisk her in, he realized that he needed to help her with the bag. They embraced and began kissing. Adam was hoping to show Sapphira the bed upstairs. He had made it up nicely with pillows of different styles and complementary colors. He thought she would be impressed.

Sapphira seemed to be distracted by the church hall. Adam stopped kissing her and she turned towards the pews. She asked him earnestly, "The door is locked?"

Adam went to verify that the front door was locked. Finding it secure, he told her, "Locked up tight."

She was walking towards the pews.

Adam asked, "You've never been in an empty church before?"

Sapphira briefly looked at him and said, "Oh, I've been in empty churches and almost empty churches many times." While looking back at the pews she said, "but never with the door locked!"

She continued walking up the aisle, touching the pews as she walked. It was as if she was transfixed. She was staring at the large cross behind the altar when she stopped and began taking off her clothes. She neatly folded each article, placing them on a pew in the center of the hall. Her socks were the final bits of clothing to come off. She looked back at Adam while she folded them in half and placed them on her pile of clothes. She wore a giant smile and nothing more.

Then, she started giggling like a little girl and bounding around the room butt naked. She stopped briefly behind the podium and scanned the room. "God Bless Everyone," she said spreading out her arms. She ran back and touched the giant cross behind it. She ran around the pews sometimes leaping like a ballerina, laughing out loud as she did so.

Adam watched her from the back of the church, astounded and aroused. It was the sexiest display he had seen in his life. His mouth was agape.

Sapphira stood on the seats of two adjacent pews, straddling them. She looked at Adam staring at her dumbfounded. She put her hands on her naked hips and said, "Come give me a kiss, Reverend."

Adam approached her cautiously, admiring her beauty and confidence. He reached out to grab her, but she snatched his head with both hands. She kissed aggressively and Adam didn't resist.

Then, she jumped down and giggled, running away from Adam. He started after her both wanting to catch her but watching to see what she would do. She looked back to make sure he was chasing her and the game was afoot.

Adam tried to be tricky, climbing over pews, but she used this to her advantage switching back from pew to pew and running away when he was stuck with his legs over the backs of pews. Just watching her was beautiful and sexy, so he didn't try as hard as he could to catch her. He was also worried that he might hurt her and ruin the game.

Finally, while she was teasing him, Adam was able to reach out and grab her wrist. At that point she didn't resist, and he pulled her into him. They embraced tightly and kissed passionately. They both resolved to make love right there on the pews, but the hard narrow benches presented new challenges. Ironically, missionary style sex was not possible on the long wooden benches.

At first, Adam guided Sapphira to lie down on a bench while he kissed and caressed her. Still clothed at this point, he kissed her and felt her body. She put her left leg on the back of the pew and Adam slid his hand between her legs.

Adam was getting excited and needed to take off some clothes. He tried to take off his shirt without taking too much attention away from Sapphira, but she sat up to kiss him. She started to rub his pants, so he decided to take those off. He sat on the narrow bench to fully remove his pants and get his underwear off. While he worked to free himself, Sapphira straddled him, putting her knees on either side of him and her breasts in his face.

The sex was intense. Adam cupped her small buttocks and had to lift her slight frame up and down as they labored. But the angle wasn't quite right and Sapphira's knees were hurting. She got up and turned around, sitting in Adam's lap. In this position, Adam held her hips and she held on to the pew in front of her. She could just barely reach her feet to the ground on either side of Adam. He thrust his hips forward into her as she looked up at the cross.

When Sapphira was nearly faint with exhaustion, she leaned forward on the pew in front of her and continued to squint at the cross. Adam finished this way and she turned around again to embrace him as they caught their breath.

Finally, Adam said, “I got a new bed for us. Want to see it?”

“I would love to,” she said, and she gave him another kiss.

Sapphira gathered up her neatly folded clothes and headed over to pick up her bag. Adam ran naked over to her heavy bag and carried it for her up the narrow stairs behind her. Adam thoroughly enjoyed watching her hips wiggle all the way up.

Thunder clapped outside, and lightning flashed in the window. They collapsed into the bed and continued to enjoy each other’s company late into the night. Adam constantly worried that Sapphira would declare that she was going home, but she never did. He fell asleep proud that his new bed was a success.

They both awoke with a start from a loud crash. The thunder still boomed and rain was now pounding against the window. The sound seemed to come from downstairs so Adam threw on a t-shirt and some shorts and headed down to investigate.

At the bottom of the stairs, Adam followed a sound that emanated from the kitchen. Once there, he found a panel from which the sound of rushing water seemed to be coming. Adam was able to dislodge the panel and discovered to his horror that water was rushing down a wooden post, splashing over some conduit, and then draining down into a hole in the floor. Turning on some additional lights he was surprised to find that the post had a large crack in it and there were splinters everywhere.

Sapphira arrived wearing a silky pink robe. “The church is flooding! Do we need to get out of here?”

Using the light from his phone, Adam was trying to look down to see where the water was emptying to. He replied, “I don’t think so. The water isn’t really that bad. I’m more worried about the broken post. This panel here must be specifically for a problem that has happened here before.

“The church is collapsing! We have to get out of here!” she cried. “I should never have come here.”

Her comments definitely hurt Adam's feelings, especially coming at a time when Adam was himself concerned about the structural integrity of the building. Despite his hurt feelings, he needed to comfort Sapphira. Adam held her and confidently assured her that a problem this small wasn't going to bring down the house, and that he would make sure that the church would be fixed to be stronger than ever. Adam wasn't certain that this was possible, but he was reasonably sure that the damage could be repaired.

He moved to hold her, but she pulled away. With no options left, he simply told Sapphira that, "It will be okay. Don't worry." Then he tried to figure out how he could get down to where the water was going to see how bad things were. He thought about going outside, but he could hear the rain lashing against the windows and decided to see if he could locate some way down.

In the baptism room, he remembered seeing a latch on the floor, so he went to see if that could be opened. There, a ring on the floor could be lifted up to reveal a door in the floor. Using only the light from his phone, he peered into the darkness below. The floor was only a few feet down, so he hopped in. To his relief, a bare lightbulb with a pull string was visible just inside. Adam gave it a tug and a harsh light appeared illuminating the previously undiscovered crawlspace of the church. It was full of junk. There were boards, parts of broken pews, a few boxes, and posts holding up the building. There was only enough room for Adam to crawl around. He aimed himself in the direction of the kitchen and began crawling.

Once his head entered the crawlspace he could hear the water rushing. He knew he was heading in the right direction. As he got closer, he could feel the spray of the water. The rough ground was still dry, which was puzzling but encouraging. Arriving at the leaking wall, he saw the water spraying out, creating a puddle, and then flowing into a pit in the ground. Adam concluded that the pit must lead to the sewer.

His worst fears were alleviated. The church wasn't going to float away. The puddle was surely creating damage, and the water must be entering the church in a way that had not been anticipated by the architect. But that investigation would have to occur with the aid of the morning light when the rain abated. As he stared at the indoor waterfall, he convinced himself that the water was already waning.

Adam crawled back to the hatch in the floor and lifted himself out. A metal box conveniently placed at the entrance allowed Adam to easily hop out of the cramped space. He closed the hatch and went to look for Sapphira. Adam found her fully dressed at the front door looking out into the rain as if she was trying to escape.

"Good news," he exclaimed. "The water is running down into the sewer, so no flood."

She looked at him and asked, "Why is there water in the wall?"



“I’m not sure,” he responded. “Something must have broken outside. I’ll figure it out tomorrow. Whatever is wrong just needs to be fixed.”

She hugged Adam and said, “I don’t feel safe.”

Adam held her and said, “You’re safe. I’ve just got to get the leak fixed. The church isn’t going to fall down. I promise.”

“You promise?” she asked.

“I promise! Besides, I think the rain is easing up anyway,” he explained.

“It is,” she responded demurely. “I was just looking outside. I was about to run for my car.”

Adam held her and begged, “Don’t leave.”

She hugged him back, and he added, “Or I’ll tie you to the cross.”

Sapphira stifled a nervous laugh and said, “Don’t tease me.”

They went up to Adam’s new bed again, but neither of them fell asleep easily.

## 31 Love

Adam woke to the sound of the shower running. He smiled at the idea of Sapphira naked in the shower with the door open. However, he also realized that he heard people entering the church from downstairs. Nathaniel must have arrived because he was the only person other than himself with a key.

He panicked. He had no sermon. He couldn't go down to greet people because he smelled like sweat and sex. He didn't even want to go into the bathroom to risk startling or upsetting Sapphira. He felt trapped. The only thing he could think to do was to write out the missing sermon.

Love was on his mind, so he began writing notes for a sermon on love. "Love is incredible. Love is a basic human need. God created people, so God created love. Love your lover. Love your family. Love your neighbor." He needed a quote from Sapphira here. He needed a mark of some kind to remind him to ask Sapphira for some quick input before delivering the sermon. He thought "asterisk" then "star" but settled on a heart symbol. Concluding that the heart symbol was insufficient to get the point across, he added the word Sapphira next to the heart.

"Don't fight with your loved ones—love them. Make love not war. Let people love you. Be loveable. If you can't be with the one you love, love the one you're with." He felt that there must be other biblical quotes that got his point across, so he wrote another heart and added Sapphira next to it.

Sapphira emerged from the bathroom enrobed in a large pink towel that she must have brought. Around her head she wore a pink turban made from another towel she must also have brought.

She looked so sexy that Adam wanted tear off her towels, but he restrained himself. He said, "People are arriving," and he gave her a kiss.

"Yes, you should get dressed," she said.

Adam jumped quickly into the shower and realized as soon as it was too late that he should have asked Sapphira to look at his sermon outline. He decided it was best to finish his shower quickly and then tell her.

By the time he had completed the bare minimum washing tasks he discovered that Sapphira had left. He threw on some clothes and then sauntered with dignity down the narrow stairway.

At the entrance of the church, Adam found Sapphira next to Nathaniel greeting the church members as they entered. In fact, most people completely ignored Nathaniel and greeted Sapphira with an excited “Hey!” or even a big hug. Sapphira responded in kind and greeted each guest like a long-lost family member. Nathaniel resorted to smiling and waving at the slightly more bashful members who brushed past the crowd gathering at the door.

Adam and Nathaniel stood on either side of Sapphira welcoming each person, but soon found themselves chatting with each other. Avoiding the earshot of Sapphira, Adam mentioned the flood that happened overnight.

“Sounds biblical,” Nathaniel joked wryly.

Adam asked, “Have you experienced this problem before?”

Nathaniel thought and responded, “I don’t remember hearing any mention of such a situation. But I’m only in the church on Sundays during the day, so disasters could have happened without me becoming aware.”

“It was really bad,” Adam said. “Sapphira was in a panic.”

Aghast, Nathaniel said, “This Sapphira,” pointing at the center of attention.

Adam nodded vigorously.

When the time came, the two reverends moved towards the alter to begin the service. They weren’t sure if they could break up the merriment at the entrance, but Sapphira smoothly guided people to their seats.

Adam’s heart stopped when he realized that his clothes from the night before were still in the middle of the pews. People were kicking his jeans back and forth and a woman was standing on his underwear.

The choir kicked off the service as usual. Adam swayed and clapped along with the whole room. Sapphira sat with dignity in the back pew. If she noticed Adam’s clothes being tossed around, she gave no indication. For his part, Adam couldn’t stop watching despite his best efforts. Between the humiliation of having his

clothes carelessly tossed around amongst the community members and the concern that the church may literally be falling down, Adam couldn't enjoy the service as much as usual.

When it was time for his sermon and Adam stepped up to the podium, he noticed that his socks were being kicked back and forth by some boys in the back. He tried not to notice while he took out his notes.

"Love!" he shouted.

"Love is incredible!" he said looking at Sapphira who was smiling broadly.

Since the sermon was mostly ad lib, he included many dramatic pauses and grandiose gestures. He even sang some of the musical references. When he came to the list of people you should love, he added Reverend Nathaniel, the president, the mayor, the police and fire departments. He emphasized that everyone should love Sapphira. He then followed his note to love your neighbor and he shouted out to Sapphira, "And the Bible says you should Love thy Neighbor. What was that verse, Sister Sapphira?"

Sapphira could shout surprisingly loudly and she said, "Mark 12:31! Thou Shalt love thy neighbor as thyself! There is none other commandment greater than these!"

Adam tried to act like he was just testing her. "Thank you Sister!" he shouted in reply.

Sapphira added, "Before that, 'And thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart!' Mark 12:30"

Adam smirked a little. She knew that Adam didn't believe God existed and had not accidentally left that bit out. The sermon was better for her having amended it. Adam retorted, "Amen, Sister Sapphira." Calling her 'Sister' was a little kinky, he thought.

The rest of the congregation echoed, "Amen" and some shouted "Love the Lord!" The enthusiasm was building.

The sermon continued with pleadings to not to fight and not to be disagreeable. He begged people to get along and love one another. Running out of notes, he came to the place where he had planned to call out to

Sapphira again. He saw the heart that he had drawn next to the name Sapphira, and he called out, “I love you Sapphira!”

Sapphira quickly shouted, “I love you too, Reverend Adam!”

It wasn’t his plan to declare his love for Sapphira in front of the entire congregation, but he was overwhelmed with a sense of joy. His passion was heightened when other people, women and men, also shouted “We love you Reverend Adam!”

“I love everyone!” Adam shouted but looked only at Sapphira.

Reverend Nathaniel, who was also saying “Amen” felt that the sermon had reached its finale and asked the Choir to start up a song about love.

Adam wanted badly to go to Sapphira and give her a kiss, but he shouted, “No kissing in church!”

Everyone joined in with the choir, but Adam didn’t know the words to the song, so he just grinned, clapped, and watched Sapphira sing.

The burly man who always came in with his elderly mother even joined in with the song while his mother smiled and clapped. Adam wondered if the mother knew the words or was just enjoying the energy of the room.

At the end of the song, Nathaniel started up his final remarks including announcements. He mentioned that there seems to be a leak in the church and anyone who could volunteer to help evaluate the damage was welcome to meet with him or Reverend Adam after the service.

At the end of the service, Adam kept watch to see if he could find all his clothes, but he was distracted by members of the congregation stepping up to greet him. Some people said variations of “God Bless you,” but a few said, “I love you, Reverend.” The men said, “I love you, Man!” to which Adam replied, “I love you too, Man!” He was hoping the final “Man” made the phrase less awkward, but like much of the language of the church, it didn’t get less weird for Adam over time.

The burly man that always pushed his mother's wheelchair headed towards Reverend Nathaniel. Adam overheard him tell Nathaniel that he was a building contractor, and he would stop by after dropping off his mother. Adam was still a little leery of the man. During Adam's first sermon, the man seemed angry. Ever since then, Adam has kept an eye on him, concerned that he might exacerbate any lingering animosity.

After his encounter with the man, Nathaniel walked over to Adam. "Are you going to be here about 2pm? Carl says he can come by and take a look at the leak," he said.

"Carl?" Adam asked. "I can be here. You'll be here with me, right?"

Nathaniel assured Adam that he would be there.

When almost everyone else had cleared out, Sapphira was still chatting with the ladies of the church, finding out about their families, their pets, and their health conditions. But, when Nathaniel and Adam descended on the group, the guests wrapped up the conversation.

Sapphira announced that she needed to leave but promised that she would be back after work the next day. With Nathaniel standing next to them, Adam wasn't able to get a kiss—it was still church when the door was unlocked. He was able to hold her hand, thank her, and explain how much he was looking forward to seeing her then.

## 32 Construction

Adam was explaining the flooding problem to Nathaniel. He opened the panel in the kitchen where the water had been gushing in and pointed up where a little sliver of light could be seen. Adam also explained the scene in the crawlspace but couldn't persuade his friend to hop into the hole in the floor of the baptism room.

"Hello?" They heard Carl say loudly at the front of the church.

Nathaniel and Adam went to meet Carl who asked, "Where's the problem you've got?"

Adam led the way straight to the kitchen while Nathaniel tried to explain how water had been gushing in during the storm last night. When they arrived at the kitchen panel, Adam was leaning forward pointing his flashlight upwards, waiting for his chance to add his explanation of the problem.

Carl seemed to produce his own flashlight from nowhere. He laid right down on the floor wearing his Sunday clothes and looked up through the panel wall. Carl's flashlight was far brighter than Adam's.

Adam began to explain, "The water was coming down so fast, it was splashing onto the kitchen floor..."

Carl interrupted, "Better go look," and he effortlessly hopped up and left.

Nathaniel and Adam chased after him with the former closing the front door after everyone was through. Carl grabbed a ladder off the side of his truck and headed back to the side of the church. As the big man climbed the ladder Adam asked, "Do you need me to hold it?"

Carl replied, "I'm good, Thanks," as he lifted a hundred-pound slab of concrete off the top of a decorative brick column built into the side of the church. Crumbling bits of concrete and dust fell down as the piece was removed. Carl held the block to the side as he peered down the hole.

"That's where the problem is?" asked Adam.

“That’s it,” confirmed Carl.

“How did you know that’s where the problem was?” Adam asked, a little dubious that that was, in fact, the correct spot.

“You get to know after a while,” Carl replied. He was a man of few words.

“Can it be fixed?” inquired Nathaniel hopefully.

Carl brought the heavy concrete block down the ladder and placed it against the side of the building. He declared, “I have some mortar in the truck. But, we’re going to need a long 2X4 and a width of plywood eight feet by about a foot and a half to fix the problem in the wall.”

A lightbulb went off in Adam’s head. He said, “there are exactly those things in the crawlspace! I bet somebody was going to fix the hole but just never got around to it!”

“Today’s the day,” Carl said tilting his head slightly.

Adam ran to the crawlspace to get the pieces. They were heavy. He was able to slide them end-first to the entrance and Carl snatched them up with one meaty hand as they got close to him. He marched them outside. He then went to his truck to retrieve a battery-powered nail gun. Again with one hand, he slid the board down into the hole, and held it in position.

He then asked Adam, “Could you hold the bottom against the existing stud?” Adam looked at him blankly for a few seconds, so Carl added, “From the kitchen?”

Adam turned and ran into the kitchen. There, he could see sunlight coming down through the empaneled wall. He could see the new board dangling, so he reached out and held it next to the stud it was touching.

He heard three loud clunk sounds in rapid succession and then Carl said, “That’ll do it. Thanks!”



Adam wasn't completely sure if that meant he could let go, so he gently removed his hand. The board stayed steady. This was followed by the sound of the plywood sliding down the wall and then the hole went dark. Finally, another series of clunk sounds followed, and the hole was closed off.

Adam stuck his head in the hole to see if all the light was gone, but it was completely black at this point. He went to go retrieve his flashlight, but by the time he located it, Carl had entered the kitchen with his nail gun.

Suspending himself with one hand and shooting the nail gun with his other, he sealed everything up, reaching high into the open space. He then popped up again and went back outside without saying a word.

Adam kneeled down to check out the work, while Nathaniel followed Carl out the door. Looking closely, the hole was still completely dark. Rushing back outside, Adam found Carl pouring some mortar mix into a five-gallon bucket. As he finished, he told Nathaniel, "I'm going to need some water." Nathaniel rushed back inside.

Carl retrieved a trowel from his truck, put away the bag of mortar mix, and headed towards the side of the church. Nathaniel met the men outside with a big glass of water. Adam was certain that the water was insufficient for the task, but Carl graciously took the glass of water and poured most of it into the bucket.

After vigorously stirring the mortar mixture, Carl threw in the rest of the water and mixed some more. He then climbed up the ladder with the bucket and troweled the wet mixture around the top of the decorative column.

With a good layer of mortar at the top, Carl brought the now nearly empty bucket down the ladder with him. He then brought the large cement block up again and placed it gingerly over the hole. He tapped the edges with the end of his trowel and then scraped off the extra mortar into the bucket with no mess.

"Nobody touch that for a week, and it will stay there for 50 years or so," Carl instructed. "This is technically just a temporary fix. You should add some Tyvek over the patch, and there should be insulation inside. But, it will keep the weather out now. You should be fine."

"That's amazing," Adam said in awe. "This isn't the first time you've done something like this."

While packing up tools and starting to clean up, Carl explained, “This is my job. I’m a contractor. I build things and I fix things.”

Nethaniel asked, “You do work around here?”

“I live and work up north,” Carl said.

“But you come to church here?” Adam asked with a bit of surprise in his voice.

Carl began to explain, “My mom has been coming to this church for a long time. She still lives here. I can’t get her to move out of this neighborhood. I lived here with her when I was a kid too, but people have to move on with their lives.”

Nathaniel piped in, “We are extremely glad to have you and your mom as members of our humble place of worship.”

“And we can’t thank you enough for helping us with this literal hole in the church,” Adam added.

“It wasn’t much,” Carl claimed. Then he added, “You know, I was going to tell you that my mom really appreciates the revival of this church.”

He continued, “I appreciate the revival. My mom and I don’t have that much in common anymore. I want to make her happy, but it isn’t easy. Since you’ve started giving...sermons, Reverend Adam, my mom has really looked forward to my visits and taking her to church. Before, it was something she always felt she needed to do. But now she looks forward to it. When I take her back home, she talks about the things you said and how interesting you are. And she talks about how crazy you are.”

Carl looked a bit sheepish and said, “You say some pretty crazy things, Reverend Adam. I’m sorry to say it, I don’t want to be disrespectful.”

Adam assured Carl, “It’s okay. It is important to be interesting if you want people to listen.”

“Yes Reverend,” continued Carl. “And there’s one more thing I feel I should tell you, but maybe I shouldn’t tell you. My mother calls you Ezekial.”

Nethaniel explained, “That was the former owner of the church.”

Carl nodded and said, “I know. My mother thinks you’re Ezekial and you’ve come back.”

Adam giggled and said, “That’s kind of funny, isn’t it?” and he looked at Nathaniel.

“That’s spooky,” said Nathaniel seriously.

“I know,” replied Carl with equal seriousness.

“And Saphira,” Carl paused, “Is an angel.”

“Yea, I can see that,” said Nathaniel solemnly.

“She is definitely an angel,” Adam added.

Both men looked at Adam silently.

“Well, I know it’s the day of rest and all, but I’ve got a job I need to finish off before tomorrow. So, I need to get going,” said Carl resolutely. “I did want to thank you Reverend Adam. Thank you for being here and for caring for the people.”

“That’s what I do,” said Adam enthusiastically. “I care for people. Nathaniel too!”

With everything back in his truck, Carl headed off. Adam felt like they had been visited by a real mavin.

Nathaniel, always pious, said, “Jesus himself couldn’t have done a better job.”

“Weird that Carl’s mom thinks I’m Ezekial, right?” Adam asked.

Nathaniel replied, “Well, you do look quite a lot like him.”

“I do?” he asked, surprised.

“A lot,” Nathaniel emphasized. “I’ve got things to do, so I need to get going. It was a good sermon today, Reverend Adam.”

Adam thanked Nathaniel as he left.

### 33 Eminent Domain

“Buhle Private Equity LLC, in cooperation with the Department of Planning and Development, are pleased to offer the amount of \$30,000 for the above-named property,” Adam read from an opened letter.

“You don’t want to sell, do you?” asked Saphira, making a snack in the kitchen.

“Of course not. But this letter makes it sound like I don’t have a choice,” Adam responded with concern. He continued reading, “Your prompt acceptance of this offer is important. In the case where you are unable or unwilling to promptly accept the offer, your case will be escalated with the Department of Planning and Development and your property may be condemned and forcibly transferred by the city. You can avoid this by simply accepting the offer using the enclosed pre-filled contract, and returning it using the included envelope.

“They can’t do that,” Sapphira exclaimed with alarm. “Can they?”

“Well, I don’t know. I hope not,” Adam said. “But, luckily some people I work with can probably help.”

They speculated all night and worried about the fate of their home and church. It would be tragic to lose what they had built. They could lose the friends they had accumulated. Adam was particularly worried about letting down all the members of his congregation. He didn’t mention it to Saphira, but his biggest concern was that losing the church would mean losing her too.

However, they weren’t sure of the genuine motivations of the letter’s author. Perhaps the letter was a device created by a realtor to test the value of the church. They seem to know the value of the previous purchase. Or maybe the letter was simply a scam and Adam was being smart by ignoring it. Sapphira, for her part, felt it couldn’t be real.

Adam reflected on the past year. What seemed like a crazy impulsive decision to outside observers like his coworkers had made everything in his life better. Sapphira was an amazing person, and Adam felt confident that his chances with her would have been scarce if not for the church. The crazy escapades of the past months brought out the best in Adam and allowed him to meet people he would not encounter in his

daily life. The results were surprising and felicitous. The whole situation seemed to be a product of divine intervention.

Now, Sapphira was visiting the church many days after her shift ended. Although generally couched as an errand to prepare for impending church services, Adam always convinced her to stay the night, and now she had accumulated a cache of clothes and essentials that rendered mute any argument that she wouldn't be prepared for the next day. Adam hadn't yet worked out the logistics or the courage to ask her to move in permanently. The letter threatened to throw a spanner in the workings of his plans.

The couple went to sleep quietly trying to stifle the anxiety about the future, but Adam's night was uneasy. He woke up thinking about the crawlspace of the church. The last time he had descended into the bottom of the church, he had stepped up on a metal box. That box now seemed to call out to him. Inside the box, Adam could see gold bars and chains with jewels. He hadn't had any previous communications with treasure, so this seemed a bit surprising, but not impossible. What confused him more was that it seemed like an ordinary box when he stepped on it. In fact, it had seemed to be empty.

As he made his way down the stairs, he noticed that his left side was uncomfortably cold. Adam also felt a little unstable on the stairs but managed anyway. He zipped around the corner of the baptism room and swung open the door to the crawlspace where he hopped down. As he opened the door to the metal box, rays of glimmering light came streaming out. The box, as promised, shone replete with beautiful golden objects of art, though he couldn't make out any particular piece to pick one up. Looking up from the box in his hands, he noticed that the crawlspace was lined with identical boxes which each contained similar treasures.

It was at that point that Adam realized this was definitely a dream. He opened his eyes to find himself still in his bed with his left leg and side exposed to the cool evening air. Sapphira was still asleep. Adam put some clothes on and went downstairs to check on the crawlspace. He lifted the door and lowered himself into the short room to kick the box of his dream. When it rang empty, he nodded in confirmation that the dream was perhaps wishful thinking. At the same time, he vowed to explore the crawlspace. His subconscious seemed to be telling him that the church held some value.

Adam then made his way to the kitchen to check. The letter was there where he left it, just as concerning and completely real.

## 34 Legal

When Adam walked past his desk, Jakob had not yet arrived in the office. Adam took his letter to the copier machine and rolled off a copy. Then he wrote on it, “Can I ask some questions? --Adam.” He put the letter on Jakob’s desk, hoping he would know immediately what to do.

Right when Adam was getting started with some morning tasks, he got a message from Jakob. “What client is this for?”

Adam messaged back, “It was sent to me. To my church.”

There was a pause, and Jakob replied, “We should talk.”

Adam answered, “Thanks!” and headed to his desk.

“So, congratulations?” asked Jakob.

Adam was confused and responded, “I don’t want to sell to these people!”

Jakob responded, “Then, condolences. They’re going to take your church.”

“Can’t I stop them?” Adam asked with alarm.

“No. No, you can’t. But, you can get more money out of them,” Jakob assured. “You can buy a new church.”

“So, who is doing this to me? It says this is a Limited Liability Corporation. If I start an LLC, can I just start forcing people to sell their homes and churches to me?” Adam asked with visible agitation.

Jakob explained, “In the letter, the company reveals that it is working with the city. The city has the power of ‘eminent domain.’ With this power, they can in fact just tell you what they’re going to pay for your house. If you don’t like it, you can take them to court. That is extremely expensive and time consuming. And the

judges come from the same political party as the people in control of the city, so even if you go to court, you aren't going to win. But the judge might give you more money."

"This company here was probably just set up to do the dirty work of buying out all the buildings. What they're threatening to do if you don't just sell for the price they have decided, they claim they can get the city to condemn the building. If that happens, the police can come and kick you out of the house and prevent you from going back in. Then the city will hold a secret auction where this company will buy it anyway. But since the city will be running that auction, they will charge them for having the auction, there will probably be kickbacks to some 'auction company,' it will take even longer and cost even more money. So, they don't want that."

Adam was horrified and asked, "is this legal?"

"Mostly it is legal," replied Jakob. "It's just a process. They're obviously buying up land for some big project. Maybe they're building a new stadium, a new hospital, or even something dumb like a big warehouse. But the fact that they've farmed out the buying to a company implies that it is definitely something commercial."

Adam asked, "Isn't there anything I can do?"

Jacob looked back at the letter and responded, "Well, if you simply agree to sell the church before their deadline, you can still force them into arbitration over the price they will pay you."

"That's giving up, isn't it?" Asked Adam.

Jakob looked grave and responded, "Yes. But, you can't win."

"That wasn't what I was hoping to hear from you," Adam said dejected. "Do you think I'm the only one who got this?"

"No way," Jakob asserted. "They're clearing out the whole neighborhood. That's how these things work. Do you know many of your neighbors?"



Adam replied, “my church is a working church. I’ve got a ton of people in my congregation that will be tossed out into the street.”

Jakob perked up. “I’ve got an idea! I’ll represent you. But I’d like one little favor from you. You tell all your neighbors and your congregation that your friend Jakob can get more for their house.”

“These people don’t have a lot of money. You’d charge them?” Adam said with concern.

“Only if I get them money. If I’m able to negotiate more than they were originally offered, I’ll just take a little part of that extra. It’s a win-win.”

“Okay. Should I have them call you at the office?” asked Adam somewhat tentatively.

Jakob reached to a big box of business cards on his desk and handed them to Adam.

“That’ll work,” said Adam, looking into the box. “Don’t you want to keep a few cards for yourself?”

Jakob didn’t reply, but simply took out another identical box of cards out of his drawer and plopped it on his desk.

“Oh good,” Adam said. “I’ll let people know.”

Adam called Sapphira to let her know about the bad news. Sapphira cried, so he was sorry he didn’t wait until the evening. When he told her his friend Jakob was going to help them get more money for the church, she insisted that they ask so much for the church that they wouldn’t want to buy it. Adam tried to explain that it probably didn’t work that way, but he promised to discuss it with Jakob.

Adam then gave Nathaniel a call. Usually, Adam would just text, so when Nathaniel picked up the call, he was already concerned. When Adam described the situation, Nathaniel explained that he had heard rumors of the letters people had been receiving. Adam could tell that Nathaniel was deeply affected by the news, but he promised to mention it at the next meeting and pass out Jakob’s business cards as recommended.

A little later in the day, Jakob approached Adam's desk with a contract. "Yo Adam," he said. "I've drafted a response to the equity company, but I'm going to need a power of attorney from you."

"So quickly?" Adam almost gasped.

"We want to get in there quickly while they still have some money in the budget for us," explained Jakob. "Plus, it will help us gather information that will be helpful for others of your congregation. You want them to have best opportunity to get a good deal too, right?"

"Right," Adam said as he signed the agreement.

As he received the document from Adam, Jakob beamed, "Don't worry, Adam Bomb. This is going to turn out better than you expected. You'll see."

Adam strained to smile back and weakly said, "Thanks."

## 35 Somber

The mood of the week's services was more somber than usual. Some people were talking about the dire prospects of losing their houses, while many others seemed to be hearing about it for the first time. The more concerned members suggested that everyone should go through their mail to see if they had received a letter.

One member of the congregation, who was employed as a software developer, was taking note of the addresses of the people who had received a letter and was trying to make a map of the land being purchased.

Adam was surprised by the reactions. He had worried that it would be impossible to have services today because everyone who showed up would be too distressed to participate. But instead, the letter served only as a distraction. Many people were laughing as usual as they arrived to the church. When they did hear about the letters, they joked about how they hoped they were going to build something useful like a giant bar or a brothel. Some were actually hopeful that a shopping center would finally be built nearby.

A few people seemed happy that someone wanted to buy their house and joked that they were now completely vindicated for not having performed repairs or maintenance on their houses. It seemed to be a win-win; if their house was purchased, they would get some needed cash, and if their house was not chosen, their land would now be worth more since it was located next to the new business. One older man seemed serious when he could now realize his dream of opening a BBQ shack. He said, "Whoever is going to move in here, they're going to need some good Barbecue!"

Sapphira was uncharacteristically at a loss for words. She was sympathetic and compassionate to those who were concerned about losing their homes, but she didn't participate in any of the joking that was going on.

The choir still sang, and Nathaniel still read scripture. Adam had prepared a sermon about staying strong in the face of adversity. Like usual, the sermon stressed that it was not necessary to rely on God or Jesus to help people be strong. At the same time thanks to Sapphira's help, he quoted The Bible in several places to emphasize that Christianity is on his side in this matter.

During the announcements, Nathaniel discussed that some members had received letters offering to buy their houses and land. He offered the help of Jesus Christ and all the members of the church. He added that a lawyer had also offered his services, and Nathaniel pointed to the stack of business cards Sapphira

had strategically placed to be grabbed on the way out of the door at the end of the services. Adam saw only two people take cards, but he felt that he had fulfilled his part of the bargain with Jakob.

When the congregants had all left, the trio sat down in the pews to talk about their predicament. They shared the astonishing conclusion that the members of the church were going to be kicked out of their homes and on whole they weren't terribly concerned about it. They wondered if they had a duty to try to raise awareness, or if they would serve people's interests better to ease their anxiety.

They also needed to console each other, because all three of them were overwhelmed with feelings of grief over the loss of an institution that had contributed so much to their lives and to the lives of the community members. They didn't know what to do, but they knew that they wanted to do more.

Sapphira vowed to follow up with Filletta, the programmer who said she could map the known targets of purchase. Nathaniel texted some addresses and phone numbers he had received that reported receiving letters. Adam said he would ask Jakob at work on Monday.

## 36 Arbitration

Through the weeks, Jakob reported to Adam whenever he heard from a new neighbor. They also discussed the church, Adam's crazy journey to owning the church, and the neighborhood. Adam found it awkward because he had worked with Jakob for a long time and had always known him to be a happy easy-going guy. Every time he thought Jakob must have asked the last question about the church, he came back with a few more questions. The seriousness and thoroughness completely surprised him.

Jakob wanted to know about the number of pews, the number of members of the choir, and even the contents of the sermons. He wanted to know about the negotiation process to buy the church, and he wanted to know the amount of collections for each service. For this part, Adam was forced to finally ask Nathaniel for details about the collections. Jakob put the amounts relayed from Nathaniel into a spreadsheet and graphed them. Jakob added a trendline, projected out an unlikely path for future collections, and calculated a net present value of the church. When discussing the costs, Jakob asked more for information about hours than money spent. They spent an hour one day discussing the repair of the leaky wall and the tools used by Carl to repair it. Adam noticed that Jakob estimated an hourly cost for Carl's time as \$120.

The day of the arbitration finally arrived and Jakob, always a well-dressed gentleman, was dressed to the nines. The meeting was only a few blocks from their downtown office, so the two of them walked there together. Jakob carried his laptop and a portfolio but instructed Adam that he needed nothing but his mind. With all the preparation they did, Adam expected last-minute questions or instructions, but none came. Instead, Jakob gushed about the beauty of the city and the sunny day. He also told some funny stories from law school. Whatever was going to happen that day, Jakob seemed prepared to do some talking.

When they arrived at the suite right on time, a receptionist led them down a hall with rooms spaced even along the length. She knocked on the proper door and introduced Jakob and Adam simply by the address of the church.

Sitting at a simple conference table were three people. In the center sat a younger African American woman dressed in a very sharp but conservative blue suit with a white blouse. Her hair was teased into neat curls. Her face bore a bright and shiny smile as she greeted the new arrivals. She stood to shake Jakob's hand and said, "Welcome to the arbitration. My name is Rachael. I will be the arbitrator for this case. Thank you so much for attending."

Jakob introduced himself and then introduced Adam while Adam silently shook Rachael's petite hand. The two communicated only with a smile and nod. Rachael then introduced the two older white men to her right as "representatives of the buyers."

Jakob shook the representative's hands, but the grumpy old men gave a single short shake without providing eye contact. They paid no attention to Adam at all. Rachael maintained her shining smile.

Digging into his portfolio, Jakob began passing out hefty packets of paper to everyone. Adam and Rachael took the papers gingerly, but Jakob was forced to plop down copies in front of the representatives without receiving acknowledgement.

Seeing the information packet for the first time, Adam's jaw dropped. He saw a picture of the church—a picture that Adam had provided to Jakob—and some of the charts he had already seen on Jakob's laptop. But the aspect that stood out most was the byline, "Offered at 1,301,420.00." 1.3 Million dollars?

The room had a projector and a cable to hook up a laptop to it. Jakob deftly hooked up, checked that it was working properly, and started into an exhortation as if the representatives were being offered a rare opportunity to bid on the Notre-Dame Cathedral in central Paris.

"Sir," interrupted the older of the two representatives. "I'm not sure we're talking about the same property here. Our offer is to buy a dilapidated local church that very recently sold for thirty thousand dollars. Market research indicates that the buyer significantly overpaid for the property. However, for the sake of simplicity and expediency, our client has very generously offered to fully make the owner whole on his poor decision so that he may, at his discretion, pursue a property in a less blighted neighborhood. This is what we strongly recommend for your client."

"Okay," Jakob said sternly. "Let me clarify a few problems with your so-called offer. First, let's talk about the price you quoted. The most recent purchase was not done at arm's length. That's not the way churches are bought and sold. You two gentlemen would never purchase a church unless you wanted to tear it down. In contrast, if you were religious men who had built up a church meticulously over a generation by giving sermons, baptizing the local children, performing wedding ceremonies for the young adults, and committing the elderly to the ground. All this was done in an effort to save the mortal souls of a community of good people. If you cared about lives and spirits of a whole community of God-fearing Christians that you had dedicated your life to serving, you wouldn't want to sell your church to the first person to come along and make a cash offer. You would want to make sure that the buyer was a good person and would continue the tradition that The Lord Jesus Christ had divinely chosen for you. You would want a good man exactly like my reverent client, who sits here before you being judged by the unworthy. The amount of currency that exchanged hands was only a small part of the transaction. The money that was paid was the only part that

was reported to the city, and you have the audacity to suggest that money was the only reason this holy institution changed hands from one of God's representatives to another."

Any apprehension that Adam had about being represented by his coworker had flown out of Adam's head. He was awestruck by Jakob's eloquence and presence. At the same time, Adam felt somewhat uncomfortable about the veracity of some of the claims that were being made on his behalf.

Jakob brought up a graphic on the computer screen and continued, "A few more things about the dollar value of the church. As detailed in the handouts you have before you, the church has already had tens of thousands of dollars worth of repairs and upgrades. Further, the elders of the church have great plans to continue to rehabilitate and enhance the physical presence of the building. The simple economic cost of the building is dramatically higher than what your offer acknowledges."

Jakob changed slides again and continued, "I also was able to obtain the approximate dollar totals of donations to the church. You can see clearly that the donations are increasing over time. If I make a reasonable projection of the future inflows and run a net-present-value calculation on those cashflows, you can see that church is very valuable as a going concern on top of the value of the physical real estate. A car is worth more than the cost of the steering wheel. A city is worth more than the cost of the fire hydrants. You can pretend like the only value in a church is in the bricks, but that doesn't make it so."

"Now look at my client here," Jakob directed his opponents. "He scoured the country looking for an appropriate house of God where he could make the greatest impact. To a casual observer, the building might not look like the ideal location to preach the word of God. But this man has leveraged a generation of pious toil of the previous owner to create the area's only super-church! The church draws on the people and the power of the community that you are destroying."

"I don't know if you gentlemen have children," Jakob paused and stared at the representatives for a reaction. "But, if I offered to trade one of your children for a different child of my choosing--one that I judged to be equal in value—that wouldn't be acceptable, would it? If I simply quoted the cost of the food they had eaten so far, the money wouldn't be satisfactory, would it? If I made you an offer, it wouldn't matter what the dollar value was, would it? No matter how much money was proffered, you would shut down the negotiations immediately, wouldn't you? You wouldn't give up your child that you had loved and nurtured, even if you had adopted the child from another loving family. But, what if you had no choice? What if there existed a credible threat that I could employ all the resources of government to take away your child by force if you didn't negotiate? What if your only recourse was to ask for more money? That would be quite disquieting, wouldn't it?"

Adam thought he saw one of the negotiators roll his eyes, but Adam's gaze shifted to the arbitrator when she drew a long nervous breath. He imagined that perhaps Rachael had a child back at home.

Jakob continued, "But you're not going hand Adam's baby off to another family, are you? Let's be clear, this baby is going to be murdered. You're going to kill the church, and you're going to scatter the members of the church to the wind. These neighbors and soulmates who have prayed together their whole lives; they are going to be separated by your project to be disbanded and disbursed. The community is going to be shattered never to be put back together again. Nothing my client can do can bring these people back together again. He could maybe build another church building, but the worshipers are going to be gone. He will be starting from scratch. Look at the pain this process is causing my client!"

Rachael's head followed Jakob's as he stared at Adam in silence. More than anything, Adam was in shock and he put his head down just to avoid looking at anyone. This had the desired effect of making Adam look sad and defeated.

One of the negotiators interrupted, "We understand your point, Sir. We're not here to hurt anyone's feelings. This is a project that already has the approval of the city. The decision was made by the local elected government who has taken into account the effects on the community and decided that this project is in the best interests of the community. We are here today to simply agree on the value of the property that going to be repurposed. There is no provision for punitive fees or restitution. This is just about the value of the property."

The negotiator then looked at Rachael and asked, "Shall we turn to the somewhat fanciful valuation that counsel has prepared here?"

"Sure, we can turn to the breakdown of the estimated costs if that's okay with you," said Rachael, turning back to Jakob.

"Absolutely," Jakob resumed. "My client is entitled by law for all reasonable and customary expenses for acquiring a new property of equal value. While this is, as I've explained, impossible, let's look at what it takes to acquire and build a church. Churches aren't like gas stations where people pull into the first one that catches their eye as soon as they need some gas. Worshipers build up a relationship with a church over generations. Location is the first consideration a church needs to make. There isn't much good setting up a Baptist church in a neighborhood primarily comprised of Catholics. There are several reputable religious site mapping services whose fees are outlined in appendix 3. I've taken an average and that is line one of the summary on page 18."



Jakob continued for 20 minutes detailing expenses and costs associated with building a church, acquiring new parishioners, and establishing a church as a member of a new community. Some of the lines seemed a little far fetched to Adam, but he noticed that Rachael was following along line-by-line and taking notes in her copy of the estimate. She, at least, seemed to be taking everything very seriously.

“And the total, if you add all those up, is a little more than \$1.3 million as you can see there,” concluded Jakob.

“That seems pretty thorough,” chimed in Rachael. Then she turned to the negotiators. “Do you have any questions or comments on the owner’s estimate?”

“The only comment is that it is insane,” said the negotiator who had not yet spoken.

“Please explain,” responded the arbitrator. “You need to be specific in order to counter a claim.”

“For example, he has \$25,000 for a religious area survey. I don’t even know what that is, but I’m certain that you don’t need one to open a church,” he continued with a smirk of annoyance. “It just goes on and on.”

Jakob spoke up. “Oh, you don’t need to know where to put your church if you don’t mind if it is successful or not. But my client runs a successful church. And, if he were to open a church in a random location, it would most likely fail. Then, he would have exchanged a good, successful, growing church, for a failed church. My client is entitled to property of equal value. Do you have better information about locating a church than ‘Holy Heatmaps International?’”

Jakob flipped his presentation to the page entitled “Procuring location consulting,” while the negotiators squirmed nervously.

“We’re not going to pay for that,” mumbled the negotiator.

The arbitrator directed her attention to the negotiator and clarified, “It sounds like you are saying that you want to exit the arbitration process, which of course you are entitled to do. However, the alternative to a negotiated agreement is a legal case. And as the arbitrator, the judge will have access to my notes from this negotiation, which will show that the purchasing company chose to exit arbitration rather than address what seems like legitimate concerns raised by the owner.”

“Thank you, Ms. Arbitrator,” interjected Jakob. “If we are forced into litigation, that would be very unfortunate. However, we are prepared to argue vigorously for our legal rights. And, we could call many witnesses to detail the harm to the owners and the community caused by this compulsory sale.”

“Legitimate concerns,” scoffed the negotiator.

The arbitrator nodded and said, “That is what my report will detail.”

After an uncomfortable period of sulking, the negotiators excused themselves to the next room. With the men out of the room, Jakob immediately commented on Rachael’s suit. “Is this suit Armani? I couldn’t help notice you are crushing it with that outfit!”

Rachael gave a big smile and responded, “Not at all. This is such an old suit, and I got such a great deal on it. I got called on short notice on this job. I had to just grab and go. Apparently, they were hoping nobody would enter arbitration on this project.”

Jakob leaned forward and whispered, “Ma’am, there is going to be some more arbitration.”

Adam, who hadn’t said a word during the entire proceeding nodded and confirmed, “A lot of arbitration.”

Rachael sheepishly responded, “That’s good for me, actually.”

The two negotiators re-entered the room, sat down, and declared, “We have updated our financial offer. This will be our last and final offer.”

They slid a sheet of paper to Rachael who examined it and slid it to Jakob.

Jakob looked at the document and frowned. He then slid it to Adam. Adam’s eyes nearly fell out of his head. It said, “Unconditional sale, All documents signed today, Two-month move-out, Non-disclosure agreement, Hold-harmless agreement, \$989,000.00.”

Jakob let Adam read the paper several times and declared, “We’ll have to discuss this.” They excused themselves and found an empty conference room next door.

Adam said, “You son of a bitch!” and shook Jakob’s hand.

Jakob responded, “I thought you’d be pleased. Now, you’re going to have to pay taxes on that. Taxes are a lot.”

Adam only got to say, “Oh.”

Jakob then started, “I’m starving. My wife made me a fried egg and bologna sandwich and it’s back at the office. Does your girlfriend cook? Sapphira? If you can find a woman who can cook for you, you will have your best possible life. I have to tell you, I’m the luckiest man alive. For true.”

“I’m so lucky to have you for a friend, Jakob,” Adam replied. “I’m going to get every single resident to contact you. Every single one.”

Jakob nodded and said, “I would greatly appreciate that, Sir. Now, let’s get this over with so I can go eat my sandwich.”

Back in the room, Rachael was professional and efficient. Adam still felt sad signing away his church, but he was excited to tell Sapphira about the deal.

On the way home, Jakob explained, “So, the thing that matters most to these guys is clearly time. They certainly don’t want to court. Probably none of your neighbors want to lose their houses, but I can get them enough money to get a new place, at least. I need them to sign powers of attorneys. Just have them call me or text me.”

Back at the office, true to his word, Jakob was microwaving his sandwich. Adam immediately started creating a presentation of his own. When Jakob left, Adam was still working on it. On his way out, Jakob asked, “Do you need more business cards?”

Adam laughed and assured him that he had enough. Jakob insisted, “have people contact me!” Adam agreed that he would, so Jakob left saying, “Don’t work too hard!”

## 37 The News

After work, Adam called Sapphira. “I have good news and bad news,” Adam said.

“What’s the bad news,” asked Sapphira.

“Well, the bad news is that I’m selling the church and we have to be out in two months.”

“Damn,” said Sapphira. She didn’t swear very often, so it seemed awkward. “We kindof knew that was going to happen.”

Adam didn’t wait for the question and said, “the good news is that they’re giving me nearly a million dollars for the church.”

“A...” she stammered. “A million dollars? For that church?”

“Hey, you should have heard Jakob describe the church. It sounded like they were buying the Salt Lake Tabernacle to tear it down.” Adam continued, “Here’s the thing, we need to get everyone to contact Jakob. He can get people more money, but they have to contact him. They have to sign a power of attorney with him. Everyone needs to do this!”

“I’ll call Filletta and see how she’s coming with her map. Maybe we should go door-to-door,” asked Sapphira.

Adam replied, “I think we owe it to the community. Everybody needs a lawyer.”

“Yes. This is what Jesus would want us to do,” responded Sapphira. “When will you be home?” she added.

“I’ll be a little late,” Adam informed her. “I have to go to the store. I’ll be there as soon as I can.”

## 38 Last Sermon

This Sunday, Sapphira greeted almost everyone at the door with a handshake and Jakob's business card. She stressed that everyone who got a letter from the private equity firm needed to contact a lawyer, and suggested Jakob. Sapphira had also printed a copy of filletta's map for those who weren't sure if they had received a letter or not. She hugged people and held hands with people in prayer.

The choir still sang, and Nathaniel still quoted from the gospel. One could almost forget that the days of the church were numbered. When it was Adam's turn to give a sermon, he gave it his all. He had dug out a screen and an old projector that he hooked to his laptop. It had Jakob's contact information and "call now" in red.

Adam shouted out, "They're taking all your houses! They're going to bulldoze everything. Every house is going to be razed to the ground. This isn't a spiritual event! They're going to use bulldozers. You can't stop it. You need protection. You need a lawyer!"

He pointed to Jakob's contact information and said, "It doesn't matter which lawyer you use, but I used this guy. Sapphira has more business cards if you haven't gotten one. You can take another. Please get in contact with a lawyer and protect yourself. You at least need to get the most money you can for your homes and businesses."

Adam pressed a button to go to the next page which contained his phone number on it. "This is my phone number. My home is right here, but we're losing the church. Send me a text message and tell me who you are. You can do it now, while I'm talking. Light up my phone with your text messages!" Adam held his phone high in the air and it beeped with messages arriving.

"We'll build a new church. We'll have a new life after our houses are all demolished. We'll have amazing new news...I hope." Adam trailed off a bit and stopped for a few seconds.

He continued again in an almost pleading tone, "Thank you so much everyone for all your love and support. Thank you for allowing me to be reborn as a new person. Please, everyone pray for Reverend Nathaniel!"

The audience erupted with shouts of "Amen," "Praise the Lord," and "We love you Reverend Nathaniel!" The shouting continued with praises for Sapphira, and every name he could think of. Adam walked into the

audience and began high-fiving people, shaking hands, and hugging people. “We will overcome,” he told people.

It was an emotional day, and everyone was exhausted by the end. The choir sang some extra songs and people hung out a little longer. Adam was reasonably sure that everyone had received one of Jakob’s cards. He could only hope that people would contact the lawyer.

When everyone had left, Adam asked Sapphira, “Hey, can I show you my presentation?”

Sapphira said, “Sure” and followed Adam back to the screen he had setup and Adam fumbled with his laptop.

The presentation about contacting Jakob was still on the screen and she asked, “do you have one for next week already?”

Adam was looking down and replied, “No, I have one only for you.” Adam switched over to a different presentation which splashed onto the screen.

Sapphira gasped and threw her hands to her face when she saw the presentation. The heading was, “The case for marriage between Adam and Sapphira.” That was followed by bullet points that included, “The proposal; Reasons and Logic; Advantages and Benefits; A Practical Plan; and If You are Nervous.”

She shouted, “Oh my God! Are you proposing to me?”

Adam was a little startled and looked back at the screen to make sure the presentation was fully visible on screen. He said, “Yes, well that was the second slide..”

She ran towards him and shouted, “Do you have ring??”

He patted his pocket for the ring and then reached in to pull it out. He said, “That’s a few slides down, but of course. It has been in my pocket all day. I was afraid it would fall out.”

Adam opened the box and presented a simple but sizeable diamond solitaire set on a simple gold ring.

Sapphira's mouth was agape as they both stood there in silence. She was then able to spurt out, "You have to ask me...with words."

Adam seemed to snap out of a trance and said, "Yea. Sapphira, will you marry me?"

She looked him in the face and said "Yes" louder than was necessary. Adam then fumbled to take the ring out of the box and put it on her trembling finger. She threw her arms around him and they embraced in silence for a while.

Adam awkwardly sought to bring up some details. He said, "I was really hoping to get married in this church. Right here."

"Oh," she said, holding herself just far enough away from Adam's face to look at him. "In just a few months before they tear it down. That's such a great idea! But, that doesn't give us much time."

"No, it doesn't give us much time. That's why I made a slide for that. So we could discuss it," Adam said. "Will your parents be able to make it to the wedding?"

"My daddy has already passed away up to heaven," she said demurely.

"Your mom?" asked Adam.

She wrinkled her nose a little and said, "She's turned into an atheist," with some disgust.

Adam was surprised and said, "Honey, I'm an atheist!"

"Yea I know," she said dismissively, "but you're different."

Adam just looked at her silently, so she added, "In a good way."



“I will invite some of my friends from my other church. But I’m afraid many of them won’t understand,” She explained.

“There’s a Wikipedia article about marriage. You can send them a link,” Adam quipped.

Sapphira tried to look exasperated, “You know what I mean.”

Adam had more issues to discuss, so he continued, “I was thinking that we could have Stingray’s do the catering. Would your friends understand that?”

She actually laughed out loud, but concluded, “We understand. That’s all that matters.”

“And hopefully you don’t mind, I would really like to have Nathaniel officiate the wedding,” Adam said cautiously.

“Absolutely!” she exclaimed.

Adam excitedly told Sapphira, “I’m going to love being married to you,” and he began kissing her.

As their kissing became more passionate, she interrupted, “The church is locked up, right?”

Adam ran to make sure the church was locked up tight, while Sapphira made herself comfortable on the pew.

## 39 Old Friend

Adam could not contain his enthusiasm about his engagement to Sapphira. Bursting with excitement, he greeted Nathaniel at the front door. “Thanks for coming, Old Friend.”

“Thank you, Adam. I feel like I should take every opportunity to see the church now,” Nathaniel said morosely. “Before they tear it down.”

The abject sorrow in Nathaniel’s face managed to stop Adam from delivering his news. He said, “You’re taking it pretty hard.”

“Well, I’ve been preaching here almost all of my adult life,” Nathaniel said. “And before that, I was in the choir! This building is a part of me.”

Adam felt terrible, but didn’t think he could help much. His only plan was, “Did you talk to Jakob?”

Nathaniel perked up a little and said, “I did talk to Jakob. He’s a great guy. But, he didn’t really have a solution for me. First of all, he’s really a real estate lawyer, so maybe not the right person to help me. Also, the private equity company is only interested in real estate. If I was in their way, I could definitely get something out of them. But, since I don’t even live in the area anymore, I’m nothing to this project.”

“Oh yea, that makes sense. That sucks,” Adam said sympathetically.

Forever a man of positive energy, Nathaniel said simply, “It’s okay.”

The two sat in silence for a while. Nobody had actually asked Adam if he was going to buy a new church. It seemed that everyone assumed he would. The church on church street seemed like such a success, it only made sense that he would want to continue this vocation. He had registered his own religion and everything.

At the same time, Adam remained a steadfast atheist. The entire enterprise was a ridiculous mistake. Adam wondered if the involuntary sale was actually a blessing. The compulsory acquisition process merely snatched away his albatross. He wouldn’t have to explain anything to anyone this way. The worshippers were

to be dispersed, and soon every trace of the community would vanish. In reality, this ending could be the perfect getaway.

Looking at the way the loss had hit Nathaniel, Adam suddenly felt rather that he was obligated to start a new church. He couldn't run away. Adam had unwittingly committed himself to this life and now couldn't let down the people who depended upon him.

Sapphira never even asked if Adam would begin a new church. Did she assume he would? Or, maybe she hoped he would join her at her old church. This question needed to be answered, but first Adam needed to break the silence with Nathaniel.

"So, I have a big favor to ask of you," Adam began coyly.

"Yes," Nathaniel preempted. "What can I do for you?"

"I'm going to marry Sapphira," Adam said proudly.

"Have you let her know yet?" Nathaniel joked.

Adam laughed and continued, "We want to get married here in the church."

"Oh wow," Nathaniel replied. "That's amazing."

Nathaniel gave Adam a manly bear hug which Adam returned.

Adam looked at Nathaniel and asked, "Would you officiate our wedding?"

"There is nothing that would give me more pleasure, Reverend Adam," Nathaniel said boldly.

They shook hands.

“At this point,” Adam said, “it has to be next month. We were thinking about the nineteenth.”

“Nineteenth is good,” responded Nathaniel. “That’s a Saturday. Are you going to preach the next day?”

Adam shook his head a bit and said, “Well, what do you think? I was thinking of leaving it entirely to you at that point.”

Nathaniel nodded and said, “That will be alright.”

## 40 Wedding Day

On the day of the wedding, Sapphira showed up with four friends to help her get ready. They occupied the upstairs bedroom all day. Adam put on his rented Tuxedo in the bathroom downstairs. He got the phone number of her friend Ashley, and all further information was received through that mechanism.

Up and down the stairs went a contingent of beautiful young ladies dressed like courtesans for an elaborate ball. Every man Adam spoke to, none of them failing to notice the pretty girls, asked why they weren't selected as a groomsman. They all imagined themselves as perfect candidates. Adam was forced to explain to each one that they had decided to forego some traditions for the sake of expediency. There would be no groomsmen, nor real bridesmaids in the wedding party. They also asked for no gifts, but the church was bursting with flower arrangements.

To entertain the guests, the choir sang some of their favorites, and a 10-year-old girl had been set up with a keyboard that was wired into the church's speaker system. Her name was Eva, and she played along with the choir. Everyone marveled at her skill and style.

Jakob found himself busy with clients asking mostly hypothetical questions. Some residents who had already had their cases heard gave praises, shook his hand, and some gave him hugs. "He is the man!" many people could be heard saying.

Stacy was there in one of her work pantsuits. She was getting flirty with Carl, who seemed a bit uncomfortable. Stacy repeatedly touched his muscular upper arms. She seemed unable to restrain herself.

Finally, Adam got the message from Ashley. "Sapphira is ready!" He relayed the news to Nathaniel who quickly arranged everyone at their stations. He nodded to Eva who promptly turned up the volume and began to play Mendelssohn's Wedding March. Eva's skills were such that the song sounded like it was being played both by a large church organ with an accompanying chamber orchestra.

Swiftly, all heads turned to the stairway as the first woman descended. One stood to each side of the stairs and let the veiled bride pass between them. Behind her, two additional women held the long train of the wedding dress. The four of them then continued solemnly up to the podium while the majestic music played.

She took up position next to Adam at the podium. It was clearly in her mind to bow her head solemnly, but she smiled broadly and couldn't help looking around at the assembled well-wishers. Eva found a good place in the music to wrap up the march.

Reverend Nathaniel passed his hand over the crowd for silence and said boldly, "Now before we begin this crazy event here, I have to say a few things."

Once the noise had settled down, he continued, "Ladies and gentlemen, I stand before you as a long-time preacher in an old church. I'm an old man in an old church. Many of you have known this old church for most of your lives. Many of you have been my friends for a long time. Today, you are all my friends. But one of our old friends is going away forever. I'm not talking about these kids. Of course, I'm talking about the church we're worshiping in right now. The city is helping a company take away the church, and many of our homes. In not too long, this building is going to be a pile of bricks. Presumably, they're going to build something else here. I don't think it is going to be something that really benefits our community, but we'll see."

"We shouldn't spend time at a wedding mourning a building, no matter how special that building might be. Instead, I want to highlight the contributions this couple made to the church and the community in the time they have been here."

Nathaniel turned to Adam and said, "Adam brought new ideas and renewed energy to the church. He has a fresh perspective. Adam makes me think! And everyone should think about what Adam makes us think about."

Looking at his Adam's bride, Nathaniel continued, "Sapphira is a young woman that everyone wants to know. She is as brilliant as she is beautiful. She improves the life of everyone around her. And trust me when I tell you that she will humble anyone thinks they know the bible. You do not know the bible like she knows the bible."

"You need to watch this powerhouse couple. They're watching out for you. We have your phone numbers and emails and you have ours. We will be sending you updates. We're going to keep in touch, okay? This church will never go away, because we will always be thinking about each other."

Nathaniel seemed to scan the back of his vision and said, "1 John 4:7 says, 'Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God.' Yes, Sapphira helped me choose that quote."

It was at this point that, for the first time ever, Ray began to deliver a Stingray order on time. He crashed through the door with the wheels of his cart spinning and the trays of food clanking. From this point forward in the ceremony, the smell of food, primarily fried food, permeated the atmosphere.

The noise stirred memories of nightmares Adam had had about someone bursting into the wedding with an objection to Sapphira's marriage. He felt comforted that any objector couldn't be heard over the din of food service.

"And now for the main event." Nathaniel put one hand on the shoulder of each of the betrothed. He then reached his hands out as if to embrace the entire congregation.

He began, "Dearly beloved, we are gathered here today to celebrate a very holy bond of matrimony between two very special people."

He put his hand on Sapphira's shoulder and said, "Our spiritual guide and holy sister, the angel on earth, Sapphira."

Nathaniel turned to Adam and shook his hand. "And of course the spiritual leader of the Theist Christians, our very own Reverend Adam."

He then continued, "Adam and Sapphira have already joined their hearts and lives in countless ways. Through shared dreams, laughter and hard work, you have built a deep resilient love. You have found joy in each other's happiness, comfort in each other's presence, and strength in each other's passion. Today, as we mark the beginning of the next chapter of your life, we rejoice in the love you have found, and the love you have shared."

After a dramatic pause, Nathaniel continued enthusiastically, "Now we shall state the marriage vows."

He turned to the groom and solicited, "Adam, do you take Sapphira to be your lawfully wedded wife? To have and to hold from this day forward? To love and cherish? In joy and sorrow? For richer or poorer? In sickness and in health? For as long as you both shall live?"

Adam responded as emphatically as he could, "I do!" He even added a little nod to Sapphira.

Then Nathaniel turned to the bride and asked, “Sapphira, do you take Adam to be your lawfully wedded husband? To have and to hold from this day forward? To love and cherish? In joy and sorrow? For richer or poorer? In sickness and in health? For as long as you both shall live?”

Sapphira looked at Adam from beneath her veil and affirmed, “I do.”

Nathaniel seemed almost relieved. “Then you shall exchange the wedding bands that Adam hopefully has in his possession.”

Adam pulled a small jewelry box from his coat pocket, removed two rings. He held them up to ensure he was handing Sapphira the bigger ring. She held her hand out flat for him and he placed the ring in her hand. He then began to incessantly fiddle with Sapphira’s ring in his right hand.

Nathaniel watched the exchange and spoke to the bride, “Sapphira, you are to place the ring on Adam’s finger and say, ‘with this ring, I thee wed.’”

Adam held out his hand, offering his finger to Sapphira, but trying hard not to be awkward. Sapphira deftly slipped the ring on the proper finger and said confidently, “With this ring, I thee wed.”

Nathaniel smiled with approval and turned to the groom, “Adam, you are to place the ring on Sapphira’s finger and repeat, ‘with this ring, I thee wed.’”

Sapphira held out her dainty finger with a hint of a smirk on her face. She was trying to be serious but wanted to unleash a giant grin.

Adam was completely serious and said, “With this ring I thee wed.”

The crowd had anticipated the move and began to cheer. As if shouting over the noise of a crowd whose team had scored a goal, Nathaniel shouted, “That’s it. I now pronounce you husband and wife! Adam my friend, you may kiss the bride.”



Adam fumbled a bit with her veil and peeled it back revealing a beaming smile on his new wife. Then he gasped, “No kissing in church?”

Sapphira shook her head and laughed, “You’d better kiss me now, Husband!”

The happy couple embraced and locked in a long kiss that made the women in the audience weep and the men jealous.

Nathaniel waved to Eva who began playing The Bridal Chorus from Richard Wagner’s opera Lohengrin. The sound could not have been matched by any church organ anywhere.

Adam and Sapphira entertained for the rest of the night and then began planning for their next adventures.

**The End**