

Ode to Flannery O'Connor

by Gerri Giovanelli Bauer

December 1995

"It's almost Christmas! Of course I'm going." Gert's bosom swelled like a peacock's fan. "If you were more of a Christian, you'd go, too, Joe."

"Right. And leave the Mr. Kiddie Porn King of the World Wide Web here while we praise the Lord." Joe leaned back in the recliner and rubbed the scar where his knee met the prosthetic, which hadn't fit properly since 'Nam forced it on him. He picked up *The Atlanta Journal* from the side table. The newspaper's pages crinkled and rattled as he shook them open to the sports section.

"Hush, now, Joe, don't you start that again. And he has a name." Gert twirled around from the hall mirror, and looked into the clean but cluttered living room where Joe sat. With a sigh, she turned back to the mirror, patted a stray hair that interfered with the smoothness of her chignon, and put on her hat. She resumed her reverie with Joe via the reflection.

"He said it was all a mistake. You know that. You heard him confess to Preacher Landing as well as I did. Well, I mean, I told you about it so you as good as heard it yourself. In front of everyone, he did, confessed his sins and said he'd swear it on the Bible but of course the preacher didn't want any desecration of the Good Book he uses to share the Lord's word and so told him, 'Now, son, don't you worry, we believe in you.' Bane said he ended up on that evil Web place by mistake. Not everyone is like you, Joe, interested in computers and connecting them with other computers miles away and carrying on with people on the other end. They're like ghost conversations, I declare, I mean you don't even know if people on the other end are who they say they are, and Lord knows where in the world they actually are."

She stopped to draw in a breath. "I just can't reckon with it. But I surely can understand how someone could become right confused, and end up lost and somewhere wicked."

"Lost. Right," Joe said. "Sounds to me he was running a network of fellow perverts and knew exactly what he was doing. Maybe you could help him find himself in church. You return the lost lamb to the fold and pray over him. I'm staying here."

"You're just looking for another excuse not to attend services," Gert said. "Why don't you just tell me how much you dislike our good preacher? That's your real reason, isn't it?"

She put a hand on the banister and looked up the stairs. "Joshua, oh, Joshua, where are you, honey?" Her voice volume inched upward. "MeMaw is ready to leave now. Hurry, we don't want to be late for church." She watched the staircase but heard no patter of feet. "Where is that child?" she murmured.

"Are you sure you don't want to join me and Joshua at worship?" she asked into the mirror at the reflection of the now-silent living room. She could see Joe ignoring her, his newspaper held in front of him as though a barrier. "Our guests are still asleep and I don't wish to wake them. I'm certain they'll go to the evening preaching."

She pursed her lips at Joe's snort of laughter. "Joe, it's not like they're going to do anything bad if you leave the house. They're a nice young married couple. Sure, he's a bit of a misfit right now, flailing about, but he'll find his way with our help. You have nothing to fear."

"Except them using my computer, the minute we leave, and for who knows what business."

Gert released a loud sigh. "I know you're upset that I invited those two lost young souls to stay with us. But I see this as doing my Christian duty. It's like Preacher Landing says, 'What would Jesus do?' "

"He'd show the fool the error of his ways and send him to the desert to meditate."

"You make a mockery of Christ's behavior?" Gert's mouth formed the oval of an opera singer's in an extended high note.

"No, Gert, I don't. I question how much of this hospitality was your idea or the good preacher's. I'd put money on my guess, too. I question the wisdom of letting an accused pedophile stay in the same house with our five-year-old grandson. Your preacher knows our situation."

"For pity's sake," she said. "What have I done but open our house to a young couple in need. I, for one, fully believe Bane is innocent. Even if he's guilty of stumbling into the Devil's workshop on a computer, it was surely by mistake. You think I don't hear the screeching sound that computer makes when you connect it to the phone line? Sounds like Satan himself. Not that I've ever heard the evil one, mind you. But that noise is like to scare anyone out of his senses and I think that's what happened when Bane ended up stuck in mischief on bad webby places. Why, he just didn't understand. He can mend his ways and atone for his sins. He will. I'm convinced. I can still see him as a young boy when he was not much older than Joshua is now. Remember? He and Beth were angels in the Vacation Bible School pageant. So long ago." She sighed again. "And, besides, Joe, his wife is a sweet, righteous woman. Why, she even cleans the house for me!"

"I noticed," he said. "Wasn't she charged as an accessory to his scam? Do you even know all the details about what they were involved in? Or did the preacher withhold that information? Because I found out a lot at the Legion hall, and it ain't pretty."

Gert didn't answer.

"I thought so," Joe said. "How long are they staying? Did you conveniently forget about Joshua? The latest rehab place isn't going to work for Beth any more than the last one did. We'll be looking after Joshua for years to come. Wish I could figure where we went wrong with that girl. I sometimes think it was the way you spent more of your time on churchy volunteering than on raising up a young'un right."

Gert sputtered. "And I think it was the way you were always gone, out at the American Legion or work or someplace or anyplace but church or home."

Gert bent down to adjust the buckle on her shoes and felt her belly trying to spill over the waistband of her girdle. She fiddled with the shoe clasp and then leaned heavily on the banister to straighten up. "Joshua! Come down here right away, and I mean now," she hollered. "We're leaving."

"Gertie, how long did you say they could stay?"

"You know, Joe, that little wife of his, I feel so sorry for her. She is just as meek and mild as can be and she defers to her husband's judgment, like it says in the Good Book."

Joe got up and clumped out of the living room. He turned down the hallway toward the kitchen at the same time a cherubic little boy came barreling down the stairs. The boy jumped the railing before reaching the bottom steps, and collided with his grandfather.

"Whoa, Joshua," Joe said, and tousled the boy's hair. "You know the rules about running in the house. Now get along, young man. Your grandmother's waiting."

"Indeed I am," Gert said. "What took you so long to get down here? I woke you well over an hour ago."

"Mr. Bane was teaching me a fun new game."

"What kind of game?" Joe barked.

Gert straightened the boy's trouser hem and helped him put on the new suit jacket she'd found for half-price at the Goodwill store. She refused to look at Joe. She attached and re-attached Joshua's clip-on tie, smoothed his shirt collar, and patted down his cowlick.

"A card trick," Joshua said. "Except we didn't finish cause MeMaw called me. Mr. Bane says the answer is on the computer and he'll show me later."

"He'll do nothing of the kind," Joe roared. He stalked to the edge of the stairs. "Bane, you up there, up and out. I want you and your wife out of this house in ten minutes, you hear me." He shouted as though they were in the next county instead of on the next floor.

"Joe, please, lower your voice; the neighbors will hear."

"Good. I'm fixin' for them to hear. I want those two out."

"Now, now, everything will be fine." Gert started tsking. "You'll see, later, when we all go to the holiday luncheon this afternoon. You

remember that, at least, I hope? At the church hall, after morning services? We'll sort through everything there. You are going, aren't you? I signed us up a month ago. I'm bringing my nine-layer salad."

Gert pursed her lips again when Joe didn't answer.

"Joe, they have nowhere else to go. I told Preacher Landing they could stay here until the trial."

"And when is that?"

Gert resumed fixing Joshua's hair and neatening his outfit.

"Gert?"

"It was to be sometime in February but I learned it was postponed and may not be until April or maybe later." She spoke as though on a game show with her allotted seconds closing in on zero.

"I'm just trying to be a Christian woman and do my Christian duty. You know what I mean, Joe? Surely you know what it means to love thy neighbor. Or do you need me to ask the widow Deming to help you remember? You recall the young widow, she used to live next door? You certainly were neighborly with her, helping fix her house so she could sell it. Come along, Joshua. We don't want to be late." She grabbed the boy's hand and nearly dragged him out the door.

GERT RETURNED from worship glowing with the word of the Lord and ruddy from the chill of a light snowfall that had mixed with sleet before stopping. "At least my soul is saved," she said to Joshua as she turned the doorknob and pushed open the front door. "We'll have to pray extra for your PaPaw so that he sees the light of the Lord's ways, won't we?" She didn't wait for a reply. "And of course you'll feel the call toward baptism when the time comes, not like your mother, I'm sure. We'll pray for her too even though I know you don't remember her."

"Look, MeMaw, birds!" Look at the red birds!" Joshua pointed toward the bird feeder hanging off a dogwood tree on the side of the house. A pair of cardinals pecking at the seed flew off at the sound of voices. Their flight shook the bough and a dusting of snow fluttered off the branches.

Inside, Joe, Bane, and Bane's wife, Ashley, sat in the living room, quieter than death. Bane, pale and doughy with dark hair and hooded eyes, wore wrinkled chinos and a drab polo shirt. He sat on the sofa next to Ashley, a wisp of a girl with dark circles under her eyes and hair as pale as the thin arms that jutted out of a shapeless dress. She coughed delicately. Joe sat in the recliner. He gripped the remote and glared at the television, which was tuned to CNN on mute.

"Oh, my, well, I'm glad to see everyone getting along," Gert said in her Sunday School voice. "Just let me get my salad from the refrigerator and we'll all head back out to church for the luncheon. Is everybody ready?"

"Uh, ma'am, if you don't mind, I reckon it'd be best for me to stay put as I'm feeling a mite poorly and so is Ashley," said Bane. His gaze darted from Gert to Joe and back to Gert before lighting on Joshua.

"You poor child," said Gert. "I can see you both need sleep. You just go right ahead and ..."

"... and get to the church hall with the rest of us," Joe growled. "And give thanks I don't throw you out on the street today on account of your wife's ailing."

Gert opened her mouth to protest but stopped when she saw the look on Joe's face. "Now, now," she tsked. "Let's just get our coats on, shall we? Come along, come along." She ushered the grim group outside, where the sun had broken through. A mix of ice and snow crystals dusted the landscape and sparkled in contrast to the gloomy faces of the silent walkers headed toward the car.

By the time they reached church, the sun had faded and a misty mix of snow and sleet had begun to fall again.

THE CLUSTER of people gathered around the preacher fell silent when Joe, Gert, Joshua, Bane, and Ashley entered the church hall.

"Greetings, come in, close that door, it's mighty cold out there today," Preacher Landing boomed while keeping a good distance from the rush of icy air. "Welcome!"

"A wonderful sermon this morning, sir," Gert said. Her voice seemed loud. The church hall's lights were brighter than usual. "Especially the part where you reminded us that only those without sin can cast the first stone." So what if the preacher said no such thing, she thought. Her face felt flush and she could sense her chignon coming loose like it always did, no matter how much AquaNet she sprayed. She shifted her hat to hide the offending tresses and adjusted her hatpin.

"Amen, sister, on this blessed day," Preacher Landing said. He lightly touched Gert's coat at the elbow and looked into her eyes. "I was just thinking especially of you. Only the blessed know how to make room at the inn." Gert beamed. The preacher had a way of making whomever he spoke with feel they were the only person who mattered.

"I certainly hope you will grace us with your nine-layer salad today," he continued.

"Mercy me! I forgot it! Oh!" Gert stepped back and fanned herself with her gloves. Droplets of water from where she'd touched the wet outdoor stair railing flitted off and landed on the floor. "Joe, you go, no, I'll go, I'll run back home. Thank the Lord it's not that far." She started to totter toward the door.

"Let me help, er, Sister," said Bane in a gurgled voice. He'd no sooner gestured toward Gert before Joe reached forward and grabbed his wrist. "You stay right here and let your wife go if help is needed," Joe said. "Because you and I got something to say to the good preacher, don't we?"

Gert glanced over her shoulder, eyes wide with a mixture of annoyance and fear. Bane stared at Joe through slit eyes. Ashley stood next to Bane like a specter. Her head was bowed, her eyes focused on the linoleum.

Preacher Landing clasped his hands behind his back. "How can I help you, Brother Joseph?" he asked.

"By finding another inn for these two," Joe said. "Doors are closing at mine come tomorrow morning. Got any extra beds at your place? These poor young folks got to find someplace to go."

Preacher Landing blinked rapidly. "Why, Brother Joseph," he said. "How sad Sister Gertrude must feel about this. Perhaps that's why she failed to mention it to me. I know how seriously she takes her Christian duties."

"Including her duty to protect her young grandson from varmints," said Joe.

The preacher blinked some more. "Sadly, I regret I cannot extend an invitation to these worthy young folks at this time. My wife's mother is in delicate health and is visiting us at this moment. Surely you understand."

"Sure do," said Joe. "Got me a grandson and I aim to keep him miles away from perverts."

Gasps filled the shocked silence. Gert fled the building and let the door bang behind her.

Joe looked around at the assembled crowd. "Anybody else here fixin' to step forward and do their Christian duty?" No one answered. Minutes stretched. No one offered to take in the couple.

"I don't have to stand for this b.s.," snarled Bane. With three swift strides, he was at the door. He yanked it open, lurched out, and left the door open behind him.

Ashley jumped as though she alone were prodded by the whoosh of chill air. Bane was already at the bottom of the outside steps and picking up his pace. She stared and finally walked after him as though it were an afterthought.

In the distance, the peacock blue of Gert's hat bobbed as she opened and climbed inside the family sedan. "MeMaw," yelled Joshua, who'd climbed atop a chair and looked outside. "I see MeMaw's hat!" He clambered down and started running. "She's leaving! MeMaw, wait for me!"

"Joshua, no!" Joe started from where he stood with the preacher, but slipped on a wet patch where the water from Gert's gloves had landed. His good leg buckled and he landed on his bad knee. "Joshua, get back here!" he hollered as he rolled onto his side and struggled to get up. Spittle from his hoarse cry sprinkled the arm of

Preacher Landing, who stepped back and brushed at the sleeve of his wool suit jacket.

Gert sat in the car and wiped at the inside of the window while the defroster blasted at full strength. The shards and slivers of ice that networked across the windshield were just thick enough to hinder visibility. Bane wrenched the door open and shoved her hard across the bench seat to the passenger side.

"Mercy me!" she shrieked. "Bane!"

"Yeah, that's my name," he said. He put the car in gear and stepped hard on the gas. The wheels spun and squealed on ice patches before the car jerked forward with a thrust that jolted them both back against the seat.

"Young man, what do you think you're doing?!" Gert yelled. "Stop this instant! Get back inside that church hall and bow before the Lord!" Gert had an odd thought about how she'd always been proud of Joe for backing into parking spaces so they could make easy exits.

"Shut up," Bane said, and floored the gas pedal. "I've had about enough of you and the Lord. Ain't you figured yet he done put you in the wrong place at the wrong time?"

Gert heard herself say, "Oh, no, the Lord is never wrong," but her lips didn't seem to move. She knew, too, that only seconds were elapsing but time had stretched into a long, rubbery pull of horror. Bane cut the wheel hard at the end of a row of parked cars. Through a halo of defrosted windshield Gert saw little Joshua running out of the church door and down the steps. His small face was bathed in light that had etched a circle through the gray batting of cloud cover. Something inside her lumbered awake as the car sped in its slow-fast way toward the base of the steps, where Joshua would soon be standing. As though her movements were someone else's, she yanked out her hatpin and stabbed blindly at Bane's hands on the wheel.

He yowled and jerked his hands back while still flooring the gas pedal. The car fishtailed and spun out of Joshua's path. The vehicle clipped the end of a mini-van and went up sideways on two wheels, and continued to spin around.

Bane's surprisingly heavy bulk slid and squished Gert against the passenger-side door. Everything now seemed to happen simultaneously. She could hear the door scrape against the asphalt at the same time she heard herself scream at Bane to get off her at the same time she strained her neck to keep her head raised an inch above the side window glass. The car slid and spun around yet again, and she saw a flash of the scene at the church door. Joe had come outside. His arms gripped Joshua in a protective embrace and they both stared toward the car with open mouths. Both were now encircled in the same weirdly glowing light that had first hovered over Joshua.

As the car revolved away from the building she saw, briefly and with her peripheral vision, a dark moving mass on the other side of the vehicle. The car landed back on four wheels and collided with the mass, which seemed to merge into Bane's black overcoat. Gert realized the dark mass was Ashley. She'd hit the driver's side of the windshield. The impact had occurred just as Bane had slid back to the driver's side when the car straightened onto four wheels.

Bane's head had banged into the driver's side window, and now hung at an odd angle. His hands were no longer on the wheel, but his foot remained pressed against the pedal. Ashley's body lay crumpled against the hood and windshield. The crunch and screech of metal had given way momentarily to the whoosh of tire air when the car thudded down. Like evil quaking before the rightness of the Holy Spirit, realized Gert. My Lord, those two children have been saved, yes they have, she thought wildly.

The car spun one more time. In her last glimpse at the front of the church, Gert saw Joe and Joshua again. Her heart swelled and merged with love, such great love, for them. She reached out, or tried to reach out, to them as she spun by. She felt bathed by an inner radiance.

The massive trunk of a live oak rose up before her and blotted out all else. The parking lot layout had been designed to accommodate the historic oak. Its nearly horizontal limbs snaked out and around and loomed larger as the car slid closer. The last thing Gert noticed

before the collision, just before the car flipped onto its roof, was how rivulets of the snowy water soaking sections of the bark made the tree appear to be weeping purple tears.

