The Missing Years

by Meakin Armstrong

Sweetie Bozard sits in her usual pew near the altar rail. She clears her throat while Pastor Hinnant announces the theme for the Fourth of July church float, “Tend to the Soil of Your Heart.” He looks about the sanctuary. He smiles.

Sweetie coughs.

The pastor says, “It's a parable from Jesus. Many people don't pay attention to their hearts, you see. They think that covering them up with asphalt is the way to go…”

Again, Sweetie makes a rumbling noise in her throat. Grace, sitting just behind her, straightens out her new black silk skirt—a maxi she bought in New York City, only a few weeks before she had to move back to home. She runs her hand over her skirt and watches Sweetie: As soon as the announcements are over, all will be asked to sing—and Sweetie, the oldest white woman in Venice Springs, will be ready. She has always made those awful noises before the singing began.

Next to Sweetie is her grandson Andrew, in a size-too-small Sunday suit. Even now, after all of these years, Andrew is easily recognizable. His hair is still oddly orange, and hanging disconcertingly from his scalp in thick, doll-like clumps. Sweetie spits into a handkerchief. The pastor delivers more announcements. Andrew pulls at his collar and tries to find more room inside his suit. Grace smoothes out her skirt and watches them both.

It's a hot day, much like that one many years ago, when Andrew and Grace were in sixth grade. They sat in the two desks farthest back, just inches from the lockers. The two of them rarely spoke; every day was as uneventful as the day before. Like most days, the air was heavy and stagnant. Mrs. Hamrick was at the chalkboard, drawing out triangles and squares. Students took notes or stared at the board. Grace was writing out her name in the margin of her notebook. Dots of sweat gathered along her forehead. She was

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tearing a page from her notebook and neatly folding it into a fan when she noticed Andrew in the next row over, unzipping his fly.

Andrew smiled at her while he pulled out his penis. He then held it between his fingers and tugged at it, stretching it much like a rubber band. Quickly, Grace looked away. She watched Mrs. Hamrick at the chalkboard, but just off, she could still see him. Grace looked at him again, but just for a flash: his penis had grown larger. Before Grace could absorb what was happening, Mrs. Hamrick shouted, “Andrew Bozard!”

Seemingly as one, the class turned around and looked at Andrew while he tried to zip up his pants. Boys laughed. One of them said, “He's playing with his wiener!” Girls made faces. Grace did her best to appear as outraged as any other girl.

Mrs. Hamrick grabbed Andrew by his arm. He shouted, “I wasn't! I wasn't!” His pants were only partially buckled when she dragged him to the principal's office. Andrew's shoes squealed against the linoleum of a long gray hallway while he shouted, “I wasn't! I wasn't!”

As Andrew's voice grew more distant, it seemed as though everyone in the class was watching her. Keith Greencoat smirked. Amy Shelton shook her head and then frowned at Grace through her braces. Someone dropped a pencil. It echoed, or at least it seemed to. Another person coughed. That echoed, too.

Then, from the other end of the hallway, came the sound of Principal Loadholdt's paddle, the well-known BOARD OF EDUCATION. Andrew's screams grew higher-pitched. Grace's eyes skidded around the classroom. One boy said in schoolyard singsong, “He's going to hell…”

Most of all, there was Marshall Bobo: He was turned around in his desk, and watching Grace while Principal Loadholdt's paddle went smack, smack, smack. Andrew's screams were desperate, almost girlish, but Marshall just watched her, his face blank.

Grace looked away. A moment later, she looked back: Marshall still watched her while the paddle sounded smack. Andrew's screams grew still louder, until they were a long and desperate wail.

Grace flipped through her math book and then slammed it shut. She looked up: Marshall was still watching her. He watched her the entire time.

Then it was silent.

After a few moments, Mrs. Hamrick's shoes made tapping sounds in the hallway. She stopped in the doorway, as if to regain her composure, then gathered up Andrew's books and put them in his locker. At the board, she drew out more triangles, as if nothing had happened. For social studies, she gave a pop quiz.

Recess was canceled. Instead, students sat quietly at their desks, their hands folded in front of them. Mr. Loadholdt came in at the end of the day. Holding the BOARD OF EDUCATION in his hand, he told the class that Andrew had been suspended. Andrew could have been expelled, but he was lucky. Mr. Loadholdt's eyes stayed on Grace, pinning her against the lockers when he said the word, lucky.

For the rest of the year, Grace remained in the back of the class, the seat next to her empty. Andrew sat in the front, in a special desk Mrs. Hamrick had brought in, one that didn't have any obstructions, drawers, or hiding places.

During the remainder of the year, Grace and Andrew spoke only once, when he offered to walk her home. Grace couldn't think of what to say. She stared at her shoes, at the cracks in the sidewalk and the little weeds growing there. She looked over at the girls who might be watching. She wanted to say yes, but also no. Before she could say “Okay,” Andrew ran down the street, his backpack flopping wildly.

Sometimes, while Andrew was off by himself, in his special desk, Grace wrote out his name in the margin of her notebook. Once, she drew his penis as best as she could remember it, and then scratched it out. Now and then, when Mrs. Hamrick wasn't looking, she watched the back of Andrew's head and sat with her legs farther apart than she knew was polite.

Now Andrew is thirty-three. In the pew just ahead, he pulls at his collar and twists in his too-tight suit. His neck is razored-red and darkly pimpled. During the years when Grace was in Brooklyn,

Mother says that he got drunk and tried to rob some discount furniture store. How Andrew arrived at that point is a mystery because Grace had been gone far too long. In a small town, everyone is tied to everyone else's story. Leave the place and you leave the drama. It is as though she stepped into the lobby during the climactic part of the film and came back during the final credits when lives have been changed and all problems solved. But who is to say: Grace is back in town after many years, along with her children. She's living with Mother, and getting a divorce. She lives in the same bedroom she had as a child. How long she will be in town, no one knows. Sometimes it's hard to say if the film has ended or if it is just beginning.

Sweetie Bozard keeps on with her hacks and coughs. Andrew still watches Pastor Hinnant, his eyes attentive. He raises his hand to volunteer for the float construction team. When they pray, he nods his head along with the pastor and holds his hand in the air, his palm an antenna receiving the word of God. His eyes are shut vise-tight. He says, “Thank you Jesus. Thank you Jesus”

Grace looks through her eyelashes as she holds her knees too far apart. “Thank you Jesus,” Andrew says. Only the seams of Grace's long skirt keep her knees from getting wider. She keeps them apart until the prayers near their end. This is how adventures are born; taking a risk changes lives. Maybe that's why Andrew undid his zipper: when rules are broken, lives get started.

Along with the others, Grace says “Amen.” Her knees strain at the seams until she suddenly closes her legs again, because that's not really how lives are changed. And also, those missing years are just too much. Andrew would have said, Thank you Jesus. Thank you Jesus. He would have lectured and gone on and on with his zipper kept closed. Thank you Jesus. He'd stand before her with his disturbing hair hanging in clumps, fully clothed, because he is done with whatever it was that made him smile and bare his penis all those years ago.

Pastor Hinnant asks all to stand. Andrew tries to help his grandmother up, but Sweetie pulls away. Like a mountaineer, she

grips the pew in front of her and steadies herself with every rising inch. Hymnals are turned to page 287. The whole congregation sings— children, teenagers, newlyweds, and the long-since-married. Sweetie's voice soars above all the others until it fills the sanctuary of Venice Springs Evangelical.