

The Word of the Lord

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First Place—Short Story Competition
The Chris Read Award for Fiction

With Brother Schultz’s droning, preacherly voice slowly fading into the background of my mind, the growing picture of my New York City neighborhood taking its place became crisper and more defined. Tenement fire escapes zigzag skyward, cracks in the sidewalk make hopscotch for the local kids, my mother waters the banana plants on the iron landing outside our window. I could almost believe I was back there again...

“Jacob. *Jacob!*” Grandma’s sharp whisper woke me from my reverie. Nails on a chalkboard. I winced.

“Yeah, Grandma? What is it?”

“Don’t you ‘Yeah, Grandma’ me! You say ‘Yes ma’am’ right now, you hear?”

“Yes ma’am. What’s the matter?”

“Don’t you play dumb, boy. You’re fallin’ asleep in church again, Jacob, an’ I won’t have it.”

“I expect the Lord doesn’t care too much,” I replied with a grin.

“Well how’re you gonna know what the Lord do an’ don’t care about if you’re asleepin’ while he’s talkin’?” Grandma retorted.

“If the Lord wanted me awake, I figure He’d’a woken me up himself.”

It was getting awful hot in the tiny church. Every one of the twelve double-hung windows was open as wide as could be, but the chance of a breeze that didn’t feel like

Satan breathing down my neck was slim to none, and the little paper fans stuck in between the hymnals on the backs of the pews were no match for the brutal Mississippi weather. A mosquito buzzed annoyingly close to my left ear. I had noticed none of this when wrapped up in my New York daydream, and I longed to return to it, but it was slipping away from my mind, just like the minnows that slipped through my fingers when I tried to catch them bare-handed in the creek behind Grandma and Grandpa’s house. I tugged at the tie around my neck.

“The Word of the Lord,” came Brother Schultz’s voice.

“Thanks be to God,” the parish responded.

Lately I hadn’t been thanking God for much. Momma and Daddy had decided I needed to “rediscover my roots” and “connect with my relatives,” so they shipped me back to the Mississippi Delta to live with Grandma and Grandpa for the summer.

“Try to understand them,” Momma had said. “They’re your family too, all those folks down in Cleveland.”



I didn’t see the family resemblance. I was miserable. I missed my friends—Aaron and Esperanza, Luis and Katie. I even missed my whiney baby sister Grace. I wanted to wander the streets of New York with them, not be trapped in the middle of nowhere in a house

Over the Garden Wall

Audrey Paige Robinson

Photography