

“The Sins of the Fathers Visited Upon the Children,” or How I  
Lived More-or-Less Openly Queer in the Southern Baptist Church

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**DECEMBER 2016**

There is a house in the middle of the North Carolina woods, and in that house my mother is not crying. My mother is rejoicing – maybe, if in fact she knows how to rejoice – in her exhausted way. Hers is the same exhaustion her twenty-something-year-old friend Annabelle feels. I, seventeen and tired of this shit, take Annabelle’s sons – Marty and Anthony – outside to play, thankful for unusually mild weather that allows me and more importantly the children to escape.

On the swing-set behind his grandparents’ house, three-year-old Marty says, in the commonplace unconcerned way of toddlers, that his mom says they’re going to stay here for a while. Anthony, two years older than he is, frowns. He knows that something has gone wrong, and I know that Annabelle’s husband pulled a gun on her and that is why my mother and I are here to visit Annabelle and her family after they have run away. My father never pulled a gun on my mother. Sometimes I wish he had.

Back inside the house, my mother’s usually stern face is soft as she plays with Annabelle’s youngest, Jayla, on the floor. Eventually, Annabelle picks up her baby and rocks her gently. She and my mother talk in hushed voices, relief underscored by how tired they are of

their one-day-to-be-ex-husbands. Though Annabelle and my mother have realized that they disapprove of their husbands, that they have been stifled and choked, they do not understand what I have come to. The previous March I huddled beneath my mother's bed and watched through a crack in the curtains as my parents hurled words across the yard. If ever I needed an explanation for how the lady beetles got in in winter, I got it that day, their corpses littering the windowsill as my parents' vitriol seeped through the cracks in the windows' seal.

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“Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as unto the Lord...” (*King James Bible*, Ephesians 5:22). How deadly a statement, when taken to its logical extreme by men who want nothing more than a power trip from their religion. Somewhere there must be a father who read that Scripture and rejected it, but I have never met that man – or did not realize it if I did. I have shared hearth and home with men who twisted the Scripture beyond recognition and forced me with it, but for a child steeped in fantasy books with their ideals of empowerment for the weak and defeat of the dictatorial, it must be easier to recognize a tyrant than for a beaten-down mother trying only to keep her children fed.

So the women talk about their husbands, saying nothing about the Scriptures which embolden such men to their crimes until I grow weary and wander outside again. My mind repeats “the sins of the fathers...” as Marty climbs back onto the swing and asks me to push him again. A paraphrase of the *King James Bible*'s Deuteronomy 5:9, replacing the near-obsolete “iniquity” with “sins,” posits a visitation of the fathers' sins on their children “unto the third and fourth generation.” I wonder, listening to Marty laugh as he flies high, which generation are we, and how is endless punishment because of our fathers something we deserve?

**FEBRUARY 2017**

How, exactly, the sins of the fathers are to be visited upon the children remained unclear to me, except for one thing: the fathers may occasionally be blamed for their children's perceived sins.

For instance: when Anthony lashes out with anger against his Sunday School teacher, the good Southern ladies put their heads together and whisper "the poor dear, don't you know what his father has been doing? Going to the bottle, threatening poor Annabelle... What a shame..."

For instance: my ten-year-old brother cannot sit still, which I call undiagnosed ADHD and good Southern ladies call an attitude problem. But of course, "it's not *entirely* his fault, poor dear, don't you know his father left..." as if our father has anything to do with it except that his departure on December 26<sup>th</sup>, 2015, might save my little brother from the heresy that infects my whole body like creeping rot.

To that point: I am a girl-in-boys'-clothing. "How sad," the good Southern ladies maintain. "If only *her* father had not twisted the Word of God, if only *she* would open *her* heart to the Lord."

To hear them talk, we are our fathers' sins incarnate – inexplicable, twisted, ungodly. I hide in the hallway behind the baptismal during the sermon and think how the words of our oh-so-kind preacher once issued from my father's mouth in just the same way, accusing all of us children of sin because we dare to be traumatized by our fathers. But of course, that too is a sin, and mine alone to bear, because to realize that an all-powerful God could have stopped my

holier-than-thou father from abusing and raping me and didn't is somehow worse than the abuse could ever be.

## **JUNE & JULY 2017**

The little girl sitting on my lap at Vacation Bible School frowns at my painted nails and short hair and asks, nose wrinkled in confusion: "are you a boy or a girl?"

I have given up pretending not to dodge the question. The good Southern ladies are shaking their heads again. I stare down at my hands-which-lead-to-wrists and wonder, if I slit them in the baptistry, what would those good Southern ladies say when they found me? Would they once again say I simply lacked faith? Or would they finally understand that my father's sin is what led me to this place?

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On the roof of the cabin at Panama City Beach, I go to stand next to Emily. After two years in the same church, I am still not sure if Emily and I are friends. Wearing men's gym shorts and a tank top, I know how the other "girls" see me. I know Michael-the-youth-pastor would be satisfied if I left his perfect youth group and never returned, happier still if I confessed my sins before his God. I have given up weighing my sins by the compass of fathers, but I am still afraid of Michael, of the patriarchy he represents.

That day I learn something: Emily is afraid of her mother and I think she wishes she were like me, so unmoored from wanting to live that I am able to live more-or-less openly queer in the midst of the Southern Baptist Church. We are trapped by our parents' faith, but on the roof of

that church camp cabin, we are free when I tell her that I am a boy, I will one day be a man, if I don't kill myself before I can grow up and lop my chest off, and nothing Michael or my mother or anyone else on earth or in heaven can say will stop me from choosing life or death for myself, on my own terms.

I will not let my father's sins define me, nor the fear that he and men like him instilled. Michael sends his sermons like arrows right into my stiff neck that year, locking eyes with me as he delivers line after line about a wrathful God who will punish those who refuse to accept his ever-so-conditional love. Strangely, when the metaphorical blood clots, I find my neck has become stiffer still. Not even the hottest hellfire can stop me from leaving the church now.

## **APRIL 2018**

Marty expresses an envy of his little sister's dresses, and I think to myself, how can I leave him here? College breaks like a longed-for dawn on my horizon but I am the only one in this hellhole of a church who sees him and all these other children for who they are – perfectly human, beautiful not only in spite of but because of all the things perceived to be sin.

I see them, even though I do not know who Marty will be when he grows up, even though I am no seer and cannot even predict that any of these kids will escape and find themselves happy somewhere.

I can do nothing but leave them, so that someday, maybe, one of them will come across my Instagram and see that I escaped, and that, perhaps, they can too.

And if I die because I choose to reject everything that tried to blame me for the sins of my father, then they can weigh my example among the checks and balances of fear vs. freedom.

## **JULY 2021**

Beyond the years I spent in that hateful church, beyond the fathers who exploited my friends and I, beyond the children I had to leave behind, two little girls play on a trampoline. It is the summer of my junior year of college and I am babysitting for the first time since COVID-19 came to East Tennessee. My hair is long and bleached blond now, but I remain a mystery, my gender a funhouse mirror, different from every angle. At work I use he/him, shielded by ETSU Housing and Residence Life's need to claim a diverse staff; in class I only come out if it becomes relevant. Off campus I still wear cargo shorts but never bring up why. Who cares about being yourself? In East Tennessee few people know what the transgender flag looks like and fewer still would allow me to babysit their children if I came out to them. Yes, librarians are overwhelmingly a liberal sect, but I would rather not risk the future of my resume on such a risky generalization. This may just be a babysitting job, but I'll need letters of recommendation eventually. Better not to take chances.

The screen door creaks shut as the girls' mother, Julia, picks her way across the pebbled landscaping, nervous and hesitant.

"I was looking at your backpack pin, and- what pronouns do you use?"

"He/him at school," I tell her, heart jumping out of my chest into 'this is the part where she forbids you to ever come near her children again' coupled with a spark of hope because, after

all, no one who hates my existence actually knows what the transgender flag looks like, “but it doesn’t really matter.”

“It *does matter*,” she insists, more passionate than I have seen her even in her role as library director. She calls the girls over.

“Girls, this is Emrie.”

They nod, and just like that, we go back to playing on the trampoline.

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*About the Author:*

*Emrie Gilbert grew up in rural East Tennessee, where he developed a love for the mountains, literature, and the study of sociology. His writing seeks to explore the effects of religious trauma on children and young adults through nonfiction, poetry, and fiction. Emrie can be reached at [emgilbert99@gmail.com](mailto:emgilbert99@gmail.com).*

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