

The Gift of Tongues

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Dead. The rose bushes, the dogwood, the spirea, and the green spreading yews, all dead: the entire hillside, a dusty memorial to her beautiful yard. The dry leaves crumbled between Mary's fingers and fell into the dirt. Her chest heaved and she wanted to bawl. What she wouldn't give for a couple of healthy purple irises. A few green shoots of Sweet William had pushed through in the spring, but in July's withering heat, they were a papery yellow. She leaned heavily against her winged weeder and contemplated the rows of struggling vegetables where her children used to play on a lush front lawn.

This unanticipated third act in her otherwise idyllic life was a bitter pill. Her family had been hungry last winter. Not starving, but she—and everyone she knew—was a few pounds lighter. Global warming, climate change, the silent menace, whatever the pundits wanted to call it, had slipped in the Earth's back door, drifted through the shadows, and then exploded like a natural gas leak, taking her sane life with it.

"Hey." Pushing a road bike, Warren called to her from the lane. "Mary, Mary quite contrary?"

Dropping her hoe between her tomato plants, she stepped over the bush beans to kiss her husband's cheek. "Mary's not so contrary."

He grinned at the rows of tomato plants in cages and squash mounds where her vinca used to bloom. "You and your amazing green thumb." He touched the dark circles under her eyes with the tip of his finger. "Make it a good day."

"Be careful," she muttered. "Watch out for trucks."

"They stay in the left lane." He waved imaginary vehicles away with the back of his hand. "They don't bother me." He pushed off, his tie tucked inside his button-down shirt, and his long torso

curved over the bike. A superficial truce existed between the thousands of bikers in the right-hand lanes and the eighteen wheelers and cars packed with commuters going fifty-five in the left. Traffic regulations had changed so quickly that an outburst of suppressed road rage posed a terrifying risk. A flat tire or a chain coming loose could toss a biker under the wheels of a truck driven by a man who had been awake for who knows how long. Anything could happen.

She glanced at the cloudless sky. So hot so early in the day. It had to be ninety-five. She wiped sweat off her forehead with the back of her hand and then walked around the garage where the huge plastic receptacle held water siphoned from the sewer line. She gagged as she swung her bucket into the brackish water. Wrinkling her nose at the stench, she hand-watered each tomato plant and watched the dry dirt suck up the water.

Her cell phone rang and she sighed listening to the sound of panic in her daughter's voice. "Mom, the baby's sick again." Or just flushed and sweaty, Mary thought. It was this July heat. She pushed away thoughts of the lethal virus that had decimated classrooms, emptied assisted living centers, and robbed cribs of their occupants. That horror of a year ago was still raw in everyone's mind.

"He won't nurse. I've had him in his little tub, but he's not cooling down. Can you come?"

The third time in a week. Mary exhaled softly. Babies fussed when it was too hot to sleep at night. By ten o'clock, he'd nod off for his morning nap. Crisis averted for the moment.

"Let me finish weeding while it's cool," Mary said. "I'll call you later. I hate to keep using my miles." What she really wanted was to snap the handle of the winged weeder over her knee, stab the two halves in a pumpkin, and run screaming down the lane. She was sick of grubbing in the dirt, sick of roasting in this relentless heat, but she took a deep breath instead. "I'll call you by ten. Okay?"

She dug around a morning glory vine and gave it a yank. Of all the plants to survive, morning glory? She'd never win that battle. What she wouldn't give for a quick blast of Round-Up. Poison

that sucker. She made it to the end of the row and lifted the brim of her hat to let the air dry her sweat.

As she dumped the bucket of stringy weeds in the garbage, her phone rang again.

“Mom, he has a rash on his tummy.”

“Poor little guy. Has he been around other kids? Does Randy change his clothes when he comes home from work?”

“Honestly, we’ve been so careful.”

“Well, if I come, I’m bringing you home for a few days. I can’t keep going back and forth. I’ll set up the porta-crib in the basement, and he can sleep where it’s cool. This is just a heat rash.” Silence on the other end of the line.

“Why do you always belittle me?” Vanessa said.

Mary squeezed one eye shut. “Oh, Sweetheart, I’m not. I’ll jump in the shower. If I don’t have to wait in line for gas, I’ll be there in half an hour. Tops.”

She set the timer for three minutes, stepped onto the tile, and felt the cool water on her shoulders. She turned off the tap while she scrubbed her feet and under her fingernails and shampooed her hair. Rinsing, she felt deliciously wet; her dry skin inhaled the water. She towed off, ran her fingers through her hair, and examined the two-inch white streak down the part. Rummaging through her make-up drawer, she grasped the dark brown magic marker, pulled her hair taut, and started coloring the white roots, careful not to smudge tell-tale ink on her scalp. If she didn’t look too closely, it was okay—not great, but okay. She scrunched her hair to tighten the curls and smiled at her reflection in the mirror.

Fifteen minutes later she stood under a yellow plastic awning and slipped her carbon card into the slot on the pump. It popped back out and she inserted her credit card. \$19.35 for a gallon and a half of gas. Almost thirty-five years ago, she’d bought just enough gas to get herself home from student teaching for 67 cents. She couldn’t believe what gas cost now. Sliding into the driver’s seat, she turned on the ignition and checked over her shoulder.

Watch out for the white truck. Deep and clear, a voice penetrated the interior. She tried to turn off the radio, but the knob didn’t move. The radio wasn’t on. A tingle racing down her spine, she jerked against the shoulder strap and searched the back seat. Nothing there. No hidden mike, no miniscule electronic device.

She leaped out of the car and looked around. No people. No cars at the pumps. Pushing her hair off her forehead, she checked under the car but saw only oil stains on the pavement. Her heart pounded as though she were running a 10K up Emigration Canyon. Shifting her weight from one foot to the other, she examined the front seat and then the back, before she touched the open window, eased herself into the driver's seat, and closed the door. Grasping the steering wheel at ten and two, she forced herself to breathe slowly before she shifted into drive.

Watch out for the white truck—with the ladder. The voice spoke again.

Eyes wide, she glanced in the rear view mirror expecting to see a man's face inches from her own, because the voice was that clear, but the back seat was empty. "I'm losing it. I've finally snapped," she moaned as she pressed on the gas. With the sun in her eyes, she swerved away from two heavy-set women walking toward the bus stop under the shade of black umbrellas. Suddenly, all Mary wanted was to hold Vanessa's fat baby, fussy or not, and feel the heft of his little body in the crook of her arm.

Hugging the left lane, she searched on-coming traffic for a white truck. She couldn't help herself. How big was this truck? She imagined a glistening white eighteen-wheeler. Maybe an immaculate fire truck, part of the hook and ladder brigade, painted white with a gold logo on the door. But no trucks appeared, only loose dirt and gravel by the side of the road where straw yellow weeds had flourished two summers ago. The foothills were barren. No trace of snow lingered between the craggy granite peaks that loomed high above her. She barely noticed the paint peeling off the shops in Olympus Cove, because the voice echoed in her mind, settled in her chest. *Watch out. Watch out.* Rattled, she stared at the stop light turning yellow and pressed on the brake.

Traffic from Parley's Canyon split from I-80 and turned north on Foothill Drive. A canyon that narrow didn't offer civil engineers many choices, and now the mess was complicated by right lanes clogged with bikers. A dozen pedaling swiftly filled Mary's peripheral vision. What was she looking for? Certainly not a white pickup covered with cable-company decals, but the loose extension ladder caught her eye. A single hook held it against the

side of the truck, and every time the driver turned the wheel, the ladder banged against the hook. Why didn't he notice?

Swerving back and forth, the truck crossed the bike lane and veered in front of her. She couldn't change lanes. She'd hit a biker. A van on her tail was boxing her in. Concrete dividers crowded the shoulder. She couldn't hit her brakes. She grasped the steering wheel so tightly her knuckles felt pinched. Her mouth was dry, but she couldn't swallow. No spit. The cable guy hit a bump, and that ladder spiraled upward like a javelin. She stared as it hung in the air and then spun toward her windshield. She jerked the steering wheel to the left. Her car scraped the concrete and loose gravel spit as the car fishtailed. She struggled to gain control. The ladder hit the asphalt and bounced into the air again. The van driver slammed on his brakes. Horns were honking. A cloud of dust rose as her car rolled to a stop. Pressing her forehead against the steering wheel, she stifled a scream. If she hadn't been watching, if she hadn't been warned, that ladder would have crashed through her windshield and impaled her.

Knuckles rapped against her window. "You all right, lady?" Tears smeared across her face, she stared at the cable guy, his truck parked on the shoulder ahead of her. She nodded, then he dashed between cars to retrieve his ladder. "I'm sorry," he shouted as he made a show of attaching the ladder to the rack. Mary stared down at her hands, twisted the wedding ring on her finger, and remembered the voice.

She fumbled in the glove box searching for a napkin. She couldn't stay here. Checking for bikers, cars, and trucks, she eased back onto Foothill. Minutes later, she turned onto Kensington Avenue, lined with maple trees whose leaves were turning a rusty brown, and stopped in front of her daughter's home. A handful of spindly bean plants climbed poles anchored in the dirt by the front porch.

She clutched the railing and hauled herself up the steps. "Breathe," she whispered.

The screen door banged open. "Jeez, Mom, what happened to you? You're white as a sheet."

Mary shook her head and stepped into the kitchen to wash her hands at the sink before she took the baby. As though taking an inventory of loose body parts, she glanced at her trembling fingers.

She made quick fists then clenched and unclenched her hands. She reached for the baby, felt his weight, nuzzled the back of his little neck, and smelled the baby lotion. He grasped the chain on her glasses with his little fist. Moving some books and paper from the rocking chair with her free hand, she shifted the baby onto her shoulder and started to rock, pushing back and forth with exaggerated motions.

Hours later, with the baby asleep in his crib, the diapers washed and hung on a jerry-rigged clothesline in the backyard, and some semblance of order restored, Mary said, "I need a favor."

Vanessa regarded her mother over her shoulder. "What?"

"I want you to cut my hair."

"Are you serious?"

"I used my last box of color three months ago. I can't keep this up. Plus it looks silly. I'm starting to get white around my face, and it's only going to get worse."

Vanessa frowned. "Think about this a minute. It's a pretty dramatic shift. What if you let your hair go gray, and then in a couple of months they lift the ban on those chemicals? I mean, you can't go back to being brunette again."

"That's not going to happen. Not any time soon." Mary pursed her lips.

"It will age you ten years."

"Not really. I'll just have white hair."

"I can't believe this. You've always been so picky about your looks."

The remark stung. She'd been picky? Not pretty? Not a mother her daughter would be proud to introduce? A trim, attractive woman with stylish clothes and a beautiful yard. Picky? She inhaled before she spoke quietly. She always spoke quietly. She never raised her voice. "I want you to cut it so it's just two inches long all over." She scissored her fingers.

"White with brown tips. Very foxy. You'll look like an ermine."

Trying to smile, Mary nodded. "Let's do it right now. Before I change my mind." Before she got home and looked in the mirror. Maybe none of that really mattered any more: looks, hair, dress size. Maybe all these years she'd been a dog, chasing her tail. She didn't know. "Get your scissors."

Sitting in the middle of the kitchen floor with a towel draped around her shoulders, Mary felt each snip, watched clumps of brown hair fall on the dirty linoleum floor, and wondered why a voice had spared her life.

* * *

Labor Day weekend was a quiet affair. No terrifying news from the Middle East. The last hoorah of the summer came and went with nothing more than a few flags fluttering down the street. Sunday morning, Kate refused Peter's request to celebrate by staying home from church. Looking at her over his reading glasses, he responded with his cynical grin, "No rest for the wicked? No time off for good behavior?" She pinched his behind. With a battered straw hat on his head, Peter pushed the old tandem bike out of the garage and bowed low. "Okay, Daisy, hop on." And to the delight of their neighbors, his deep baritone sang all the way down the hill, "Daisy, Daisy give me your answer do."

Kate laughed, "You're half crazy. That part's right."

They wheeled into the church parking lot and chained the bike to a stand. It was warm and dry, and the high chapel windows were open and the doors were propped ajar. Women were already fanning their faces as Kate and Peter found their favorite wooden bench in the back. Two or three hundred people sat in family clusters, always on the same row as though seating were assigned or pews had been purchased. Children came and children went, until older couples sat alone holding hands or not touching at all. Kate could only see the backs of heads, but she knew everyone, young and old alike.

No speakers were assigned. The first Sunday of the month was given to outbursts, spontaneous and spiritual, recitations of religious epiphanies or expressions of faith. At least that was the plan. Kate closed her eyes and waited. In years past, members of the congregation used these meetings to express gratitude, but in the last few months, no one seemed particularly grateful. Anxious, wary, waiting for the next shoe to drop, or the next child to sneeze, or the next critical item to be rationed, the congregants looked a bit parched, as faded and tired as their scuffed shoes and worn clothes. No one seemed interested in speaking. The Bishop

rested his forehead in his palm. Kate glanced across the aisle and watched Mary wrestle Vanessa's baby, who was hot, sticky, and tired. Finally, Myrtle Furst stood and announced that she had given her burdens to The Lord, and he could take her any time He saw fit, and sooner would be better than later. She abruptly sat down. More silence. The chapel was filled with the dense quiet of a warm afternoon. Old men nodded off. Sunlight filtering through the windows caught the dust motes in the air and they drifted down like glitter onto the congregation.

Meredith Wilkes, a young mother Kate had only met a time or two, stood with a handkerchief balled tightly in her fist. No husband shared the bench, no ring was on her finger, and her children didn't have the same father—that was easy enough to see. Bouncing on chubby legs with a thread of drool dribbling down his chin, her baby reached for her, but Peter whisked him out into the foyer. The bishop looked up. A twelve-year-old boy made his way down the aisle with a microphone in his hand and a long black cord snaking behind him.

Wearing a rumpled cotton blouse, the young woman tugged at her flowered skirt and took a deep breath. Her skin was so pale and translucent she could have been an Estee Lauder model, back when stores sold cosmetics and women had money to spend. A slight draft lifted her soft blonde curls as she held the microphone close to her lips. "I just want to say." She paused, then started again. "I just wanted to say." But she stopped. Her chest rose and fell. When she opened her mouth the third time, words breathy and fresh tumbled out. Lovely sounds, beautiful thoughts that everyone felt—but forming words no one understood. Not a single syllable.

Kate expected some teary confession, a sinner searching for forgiveness, but not this. She stared at Meredith's back. What was the girl saying? Surprised faces rubber-necked toward the back of the chapel. A half-dozen women twittered behind upheld hands. Teenagers giggled. The bishop leaned forward as though closer proximity might clarify what Meredith was saying. Mouth opened, Peter stood in the door way with sticky pink drool all over the front of his shirt. A red lollipop tight in his fist, the baby beamed at his mother.

Gradually, the whispering stopped until only the lilting sound

of Meredith's voice filled the chapel. Tears ran down cheeks and were daubed away with shirtsleeves. Children, calm in their mother's arms, smiled.

And then, Meredith stopped speaking. She turned toward Mary and whispered her name. Deliberately, slowly, Mary rose to her feet, the sleeping baby nestled against her shoulder, and spoke in a clear voice everyone could hear.

"We are living in a difficult time. Some of us have experienced terrible personal loss." She gestured with her free hand toward a mother sitting alone. "Worse things are going to happen. We will be tested beyond our ability to endure, and yet we will endure. None of us expected our lives to unfold in this particular way, and yet this is the life we're living. It's easy to torture ourselves with what might have been or what should have been. We lie awake at night wondering what terrible future these precious children will inherit." Mary cupped the baby's head with her palm and held him tight. "Anxiety and worry add to our burden. They are a fruitless weight. Cast them aside. Great trials and momentous events can co-exist with great happiness. Find joy in simple things. Don't let your hearts be troubled. Don't be afraid." Mary looked at Meredith and a smile passed between them.

Kate waited. The white-faced clock on the wall ticked away the remaining minutes of the meeting. No one spoke, but the miasma of fear momentarily lifted and a quiet peace settled over the congregation. His counselor scribbled a note to the bishop, but he shook his head. When the minute hand finally reached two, the bishop stood slowly and moved to the pulpit. "I'm not sure what happened here today, but I'm grateful I was here. We'll dispense with the closing song." The benediction was offered, and suddenly everyone was smiling. Laughing softly and crying, people embraced each other, patted old friends on the shoulder, and made no effort to move toward the doors and the warm September afternoon.

Peter strolled back in and stood by Kate. His striped tie hung down the center of his back in an attempt to save it from sticky fingers. He held the baby firmly around the middle like a small sack of flour, and the baby gurgled and kicked happily.

Peter whispered into Kate's ear. "She has perfect pitch."

"She wasn't singing."

“Who cares?”

* * *

A month passed. Outside, dusty brown leaves scattered on the ground. Inside, Mary tallied the number of mason jars in her fruit room for the third time. The harvest was in. A rough burn on her arm spoke of days spent lifting bottles in and out of boiling water. She grabbed a cardigan off the back of the couch and walked out the door heading to church. Kate was a half block ahead, and Mary hurried to catch up.

“I can’t get used to your hair. I love it, but what a change.” She elbowed Mary. “Are you nervous?”

“I don’t know what I am. Maybe just confused.”

“Maybe a conduit?”

“I don’t know.” Mary hadn’t confided to a soul about the truck, the ladder, the voice.

“What does Warren think?”

“He watches me when he thinks I’m not looking.” This morning Warren was attending ward council. An inventory was being organized as though one more survey or a half-dozen meetings could magically increase the number of plastic buckets filled with dried beans and oats. Hoarding was a nasty thought people were starting to whisper.

Conversations ceased as she and Kate walked through the chapel doors. Ruth Walker averted her eyes. Mary sidestepped clumps of people chatting and slid in beside her husband near the back of the chapel. She saw Peter wave Kate over to their familiar spot, but no Meredith. Mary’s shoulders relaxed. Maybe Meredith had left as easily as she’d come. No furniture or boxes or baggage, she’d moved into her grandmother’s basement, and after a visit from the Relief Society president, calls had gone out. Does anyone have a crib? A twin mattress? A high chair or stroller? An empty chest of drawers? Powdered milk? No one knew Meredith. She hadn’t attended Olympus High with anyone’s sons or daughters, hadn’t dated boys in the neighborhood.

Halfway through the opening hymn, the doors opened and latecomers straggled in. Frowzy and wearing a tweed skirt several sizes too small, Meredith herded her little boy into a pew near the

back. Heads turned expectantly. She ducked, settling her olive skinned four-year-old onto the bench. Mary turned toward the pulpit and Warren grasped her hand.

People stood and spoke their piece, their eyes avoiding the back of the chapel. Then there was a long pause, as if the congregation were holding its collective breath. As though by assignment, Peter whisked the baby into the foyer, and Meredith stood. The quiet was almost palpable. Her clear blue eyes surveyed the congregation before words no one understood flowed from her mouth.

“The tongues of angels.” Warren nudged Mary.

“It’s not me.” She didn’t comprehend a single word. “Not today.”

With a surprised expression on her face, Kate stood. Mary exhaled softly. This was a burden she was relieved to share, a reprieve from the weight she’d been feeling. Kate cleared her throat. “This is a time of trouble, but God is with us. Our beloved Wasatch Mountains could crash into the Great Salt Lake, but we don’t need to be afraid. Our world is in an uproar, but we don’t need to be afraid. Wars and famine surround us, but we don’t need to be afraid. Everyone’s angry, accusing each other for the mess that we’re in, but there’s nothing to fear, because there’s a beautiful city where God lives. We need to go there in our hearts and minds. We need to let go of all this trouble.” Kate groped for words. “Everybody, turn off the bad news, just let it all go. Trust God. Be still. Listen. But don’t be afraid.” Running her fingers through her hair, she smiled before she sat back down.

Warren flipped through his Bible until he found Palms 146. He pointed to a line: *Be still and know that I am God.* Mary nodded. In four thousand years the message hadn’t changed.

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The first Sunday in November the chapel was packed with the regular congregants, plus a couple of hundred strangers. Word had gotten out. Their whispers were loud enough to hear. *Where is she? Where does she sit? How does she sound? We came for the blessing.* They left with hearts lifted and shoulders squared to the task ahead. With the suggestion of hope on their faces, they resolutely told their neighbors, “We can do this.” Whatever *this* happened to be.

At the crack of dawn the first weekend in January, news trucks with satellite dishes fixed to their roofs and flashy logos splashed across the doors, competed with hundreds of cars for spots in the parking lot. After their headlights had circled looking for a vacant space, the drivers left their cars on neighboring frozen yards, oblivious to home owners' raised fists. Hundreds more were arriving on foot. Waiting in the brittle cold, throngs of people pushed against locked exterior doors and each other. An elderly woman wearing men's work gloves and an ancient mink coat was passing out cards printed with the Articles of Faith, which people pressed to their lips.

With a ski cap pulled down over his ears and a scarf wrapped tightly around his neck, the stake president stood across the street watching the mob with Warren at his side. "We can't have this. Someone's going to get trampled."

"How are you going to stop it?" Warren said.

"Let's talk to Mary. Everyone trusts her. Maybe we could hold a private service in your living room. Include Meredith and the handful of women who understand her. How many has it been?" His white breath hung in the air.

"Five."

"Who was the last?"

Warren sighed audibly. "December was Fran Knightly. She's been a temple worker for years. These women are the backbone of our ward." He held his gloved hands out to his sides.

"Do they talk about this before? You know, plan what they're going to say? It's kind of funny that Mary let her hair go stark white just before this all started."

"Collusion? In a worthy cause?" Warren scoffed.

"Hope for the hopeless? I wouldn't blame them. I wouldn't call them to account." He wiped a drip off the end of his nose.

"Nope. It's right there in the Seventh Article of Faith. We either believe in the gift of tongues or we don't." They turned away from the chaos, a skiff of snow crunching beneath their feet.

A large fake wreath had been taken out of storage under the stage and hung beneath the organ pipes, its red bow a cheerful reminder of the season to those who bothered to notice. Christmas carols played on the organ couldn't drown out the din, but the

bishop flipped a switch and piped music into the rest of the building anyway. Assistant ward clerks, looking like frustrated sentinels in white shirts and ties, stood at each entrance checking off names of ward members who got first crack at the padded benches. Thirty minutes later it was open season for stake members on the rows of folding chairs in the gym. Jammed together in the hallways and foyers, discouraged visitors elbowed each other for a spot closer to the doors. The smell of wet wool filled the air.

A news anchor, a skinny woman in high heels, stood on the corner of the stage having an animated conversation with herself and a camera man. “Is she a prophet or a sham?” The woman’s shrill voice carried over the organ prelude. “I’m standing here in a building packed with eager supplicants, waiting for a glimpse of the Mormon miracle, the beautiful mystery woman, who offers hope in a world that’s increasingly hostile. Who is she? No one seems to know.”

No children at her side, Meredith nodded at a clerk and slipped in the door unnoticed. Her coat was shabby and missing a couple of buttons and a plaid scarf covered her chin. She didn’t remove the knit cap covering every strand of her blonde hair until a half hour into the meeting; then slowly, she tugged off her cap and shook the hair away from her face before she stood to speak. Instant quiet. It was like someone hit mute on a remote, or everyone in the building chose that moment to inhale. The young mother’s words spilled over the silent congregation with a freshness that washed away guilt and fear. Every face turned toward her. Peace settled over the crowd like a fleece blanket or the soft quiet of snow falling on a winter night.

Mary glanced over at Kate who shook her head. They both knew this was the last time Meredith would speak. Tomorrow she would be gone, but this morning each word she spoke penetrated the core of Mary’s being. She waited several minutes, until the echo of Meredith’s voice faded. A weight, like an invisible hand, pressed Mary against the bench. Her knees felt weak, unsteady. Dry-eyed, she knew exactly what needed to be said, but she couldn’t force the words out of her mouth. Would other people believe what she could hardly believe herself? What would people say— from the news trucks and mobs assembling outside the church doors to the leaders presiding within? Their reactions would dwarf the idle gos-

sip she'd weathered after cutting her hair. Speaking up today meant immediate notoriety and upheaval, controversy and rage, vilification by the press and who knew what else? Biting down on her bottom lip, she knew if she just sat here like a lump and pretended she didn't understand a word Meredith had said, she could hang onto the rest of her life, live quietly in her home, and love her little grandson until the end came. She could hide.

But she knew with more certainty than she'd ever known in her life that this was why she'd heard the voice in her car, this was why her life had been spared, so she could stand, right here, in this moment, and tell these people she loved, her neighbors and family, what Meredith had said. She had no choice. She couldn't deny what she'd heard.

The crowd was impatient. People were rustling around, looking at her, and whispering behind raised hands. She leaned against Warren and tugged on his finger, before she stood slowly, her hands clutching the wooden bench in front of her. The air shimmered, haloes glowed around light fixtures, and it felt like the chapel was expanding around her. She took a deep breath.

"No one has known the hour or the day when He's going to return. For thousands of years, wise men have assumed there's some celestial calendar, and when the moment's right, He'll come." Her voice rose, "But we've forgotten the blessing of our own agency. We, all of us who share this world, have chosen the time of his return. The gift of this earth is spent, gone, finished. There's no going back." She felt Warren's hand graze her thigh. "But you and I are not going to wait. No more watching those we love smother under another summer's withering heat until we gradually starve. No, that's not what we're going to do. Warren and I are leaving in the morning." She extended her arms. "Please, leave your homes and your belongings. Come with us. We're going to Him. To Adam-ondi-Ahman where this human journey began. We're going there to meet Him. He's waiting for us. We'll walk if we have to. To Missouri. Now."