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Pastor Brunson's Shofar

Richard Tenorio

My brother finally moved out of the house last week and he isn't talking to me and I got this big-ass bump on my forehead. The bump's gonna heal naturally, but I'm the one that has to do the healing work between my brother and me.

You've seen my brother Tai. He's the guy in dreadlocks who works behind the counter at the Target on Washington Street. If one of the diets I'm always going on actually worked, we'd look more alike. We both have the same rounded chin, the same big lower lip, the same wide forehead. Hell, we even let our hair grow the same length, even though his is in dreads and mine's in these blue and white beads.

Tai works nights, I think I've told you, and sometimes when I'd walk home from the Roxbury Crossing T stop I'd see him in the window in the blue apron and orange shirt they make employees wear and I'd watch him. I'd stand on the street like I was one of those rich white people that go to the Museum of Fine Arts on Sunday afternoons to stare at the paintings. I'd stand there in my baggy black coat in the winter and my sweat-soaked shirt in the summer and my gray hoodie in the fall when the dead leaves fly over the sidewalk and mix with the beer bottles and soda cans and used condoms. I would stand there and look through that window, maybe for a minute, maybe for an hour, and each time I turned away I felt the same way I did when I passed by the Academy Homes the day that little girl got killed. 'Cause that job was killing my

brother, only he was still alive each time it happened. And I thought nothing could be worse. Until he met Pastor Brunson.

I want to backtrack a bit and tell you why I felt this way about Tai. Most kids from Dudley Square, you tell me they got a college degree and a full-time job at Target, I call that a success story. But Tai was different.

The best way I can explain Tai to you is to tell you about this picture of him we got at home. There have been four times in my life when I got all dressed up, and this was one of them. It was thirteen years ago. I was a freshman at Madison Park, Tai was a junior at Latin Academy, and he'd just won the Dr. Martin Luther King Day essay contest. They invited him to come to the youth center at Roxbury Crossing and read his speech. Minister Muhammad was there, and so was Councilor Saunders, you know, the one the *Boston Globe* called an idiot. I was sitting in the front row, on one of those metal folding chairs. I don't remember what my brother said, only that the TV news came and someone from Channel Five interviewed him and I clapped at the end and I was real proud. I was proud of everything he did. Getting into Latin Academy. The trophies he won in chess. Giving that speech. And if I'd done anything worth bragging about, like if our parents had let me go to writing camp instead of saying it was a bad idea, I know he'd have been proud of me.

Tai wanted to go to MIT after they let him in. I wanted him to go, too. But Mom and Dad were worried about how much it would cost. Dad was on workman's comp, and Mom was looking for more hours at the hospital, and they didn't want to take out any loans. Tai said he understood. He'd go to UMass-Boston and then get his master's at MIT. Anyway, he told us, it was where you got your master's from that really mattered. And he was going to pay his own way. That summer, the Target opened on Washington Street, and Tai went in and filled out an application and got his first job.

I used to think it was cool he worked there. Me and Lashaunda and Michelle would come in after school and ask him for free candy bars and sodas until his manager got annoyed and told him to tell us to stop. After he passed his road test and got that used Buick, I'd stop by the little cafeteria they had and sit on one of the red plastic seats and wait for him to close up so he could drive me home. He'd roll down the steamed-

up windows and we'd hear every bump, every police siren, and every car horn behind us on the Southeast Expressway.

And it made sense when he started working twenty hours a week during college instead of the ten he started with in the summer. Why not? UMass had jacked up tuition and they didn't give him much financial aid. Between school and his job, I hardly saw him. The only time our schedules crossed was at night. He'd knock on my door, softly like I taught him, and I'd put away any weed I had and turn down the music. "Almost caught you this time," he'd say, and smile. I'd ask how his day went. "It's over, and that's the best thing I can say about it." Then he'd hitch up his backpack, get up, and close the door silently.

I guess we shouldn't have been surprised when the letter came from his academic advisor. Tai hadn't told us he got a C in economics. Or that he flunked his biology midterm. He'd never flunked anything before. Mom and Dad and him had a meeting at the table. I watched from the top of the stairs. Mom was saying it was embarrassing and his grades sucked and I heard her crumple up the letter and bang the table. Dad just stood there with one hand resting on the counter and the other on his hip. Mom kept on yelling. What did he think they were spending all that money on his education for? Did he think he could get into MIT for grad school with grades like that? How could he get a 31 on a biology exam? I listened to her yell at my brother and I wanted to tell her to shut up and I turned back to my room and shut the door and turned up Bob Marley and sat down at my desk and put my head in my arms and stayed like that until I couldn't hear any more.

No one suggested he leave the job. He needed the money, even though they didn't pay much. A hundred sixty a week when he started, four hundred thirty today. Number one in his high school class and he makes four hundred thirty a week. Bobby Caldwell, the kid Tai tutored in high school for the GED exam, just bought his own house from what he saved up working as a plumber. And Bobby doesn't have to work weekends and Christmas Day and Fourth of July and nights when it snowed so bad the sky was filled with flakes and you had to stagger around on the sidewalks like you were drunk.

It'd be one thing if Tai worked at this low-paying job because it's something he likes. But that's not the case. Tai wants to be a writer. That's why he entered the Martin Luther King Day essay contest, and that's why most of his classes at UMass were in English. But the *Boston*

Globe and the *Boston Herald* aren't interested in you if your work experience comes from scanning clothes across the counter, punching prices into the cash register, and putting plastic bags into shopping carts.

There was one time, and only one time, when Tai tried to mix his writing with his work at Target. He thought the store should have its own neighborhood newsletter. He could write all the articles just like he did when he was editor-in-chief of the school paper at Latin Academy, only these stories would be about what was going on in Dudley Square. His boss said OK, and the next week, Tai was over by the big bulletin board at the front of the store holding a stack of papers, passing them to customers on their way out. It was just two stapled pages with a bunch of small stories about bake sales at Mount Zion AME and English-language courses at the community center, and it looked about as professional as those Spare Change newspapers homeless people try to sell, but I came and took one, and I made Lashaunda and Michelle do the same thing.

A few days later, that little girl got killed at the Academy Homes. You weren't living in Roxbury then, but if you had to take the 66 bus to your temple at night, you wouldn't have had much luck. Cop cars blocked side streets and helicopters made burping noises in the sky and crowds were standing around in the heavy heat of the summer, watching, waiting. A cop was yelling at my bus driver and telling him to turn around and people were honking and the driver was turning the wheel like it was a poisonous snake whose body he was trying to twist. I pressed the yellow button so I could get off and the doors opened and just when I stepped out, I saw Tai, talking with another cop.

"The hell you doing?" I asked.

"I'm taking notes for a story I'm going to write on this." He had out one of the spiral notebooks he used to take to school.

"What happened? Why are all these cops here?"

"Little girl got shot. Killed." He jerked his head over toward the Academy Homes. They looked like cardboard cracker boxes shoved into the sky. "Her brother was playing with a gun. They can't find him." He closed his notebook. "I think you better go home, Crystal."

"I'm not leaving if you're not. I can stand here all day if I want."

"Excuse me, Officer," he said to the cop. He led us away. "The only reason I'm staying is so I can get this down and put it in the

newsletter. I'll come home as soon as I get everything I need. I want you to head home. Mom and Dad will be worried."

"Why are you always taking their side? I'm old enough to do what I want. I'll leave when you leave."

He went back to the cop and asked some more questions and wrote stuff down. He walked toward the yellow police tape and the cop waved him away. Tai's voice raised. The cop shook his head. Tai stomped back to me.

"They won't let me go into the apartment," he said. "Let's go home."

As soon as we got back and finished telling Mom and Dad what happened, Tai ran upstairs. We heard him typing on the computer all during the TV news. He didn't come down until Mom called him to supper the third time. He sped through her meatloaf and dashed back up the steps. Mom shook her head as the typing began again.

The next day I was out late with Michelle and Shameer, and after Shameer kissed me goodnight and let me out of his Corolla, I walked up the front steps real quiet and didn't turn on the hall light. My slippers were still in the kitchen and I put them on and went up to my room as silently as I could. I was in the bathroom brushing my teeth when I heard the front door slam.

Shit, I thought. Shameer must have been drunk and I hadn't noticed. I turned off the faucet and wiped my mouth and went back downstairs. Mom was standing in the kitchen in her nightgown. In the bedroom I could see Dad just getting up. I grabbed the banister to steady myself and saw Tai in the doorway.

"I'm quitting my job," he said. He tossed the bag with his uniform in it onto the floor and stomped past Mom into the kitchen.

"Why you want to quit?" she asked.

"The store owner talked to my manager. He said I couldn't do the newsletter any more. He said it's not what they hired me to do."

"So just like that, you're gonna quit? You're gonna give up the only income you got?" She followed him. "How you gonna pay for your school loans? How you gonna pay for that car you almost crashed into the front porch just now? You think of that? You think of any of that?"

The refrigerator door opened and a can clicked. My slippers made padding noises on the carpet as I joined Tai and Mom. She was sitting at the table. He leaned against the refrigerator, holding a Coke.

"I know you're angry," she said. "I know you worked hard on that newsletter. But you can't quit. Not until you find another job. And get someone else to publish that article if Target won't." She got up and touched his arm. She turned the kitchen light off, her nightgown scraping the floor. He was still standing beneath the bulb when I went upstairs.

Tai didn't do much writing after that, and he didn't do much job-searching, either. Two years passed. The Patriots won another Super Bowl, the Red Sox won the World Series, and Bush got reelected. I got a job and then quit it, Dad messed up his other knee, Mom started working more hours at the hospital, and Tai stayed stuck at Target.

We tried to help. Dad circled jobs in the classified section of the *Globe*. Mom suggested teaching. Bunker Hill had some community education classes and I'd bring home the catalogs when I was still a student there. But the catalogs just sat unread where I'd put them on his desk, and it made me mad. He was letting one bad thing shape the rest of his life. And I had no reason to think there would be anything more to that life than working five days a week at Target, Sundays through Thursdays, four in the afternoon to eleven-thirty at night.

You nodded when I said Pastor Brunson's name. It's hard to miss hearing about him with all the TV ads he runs, the god-awful books he writes, and the argument he got into with Deval Patrick last fall. He wouldn't support Deval for governor because Deval was in favor of gay marriage and Pastor Brunson said the Bible's against it. Isaac Scoggins, the pastor over at Mount Zion AME, got the two of them to make up, and when the *Globe* ran that front-page photo of all the black ministers laying hands on Deval before the inauguration, Pastor Brunson was right there beside him, flashing that million-megawatt smile at the camera.

I met him one afternoon in August. If I'd still been at Bunker Hill, I'd have been thinking about school starting up soon. The day was depressing enough. Late summer, no sunshine and plenty of heat. The sky was blue-gray like a Brillo steel wool pad you use to clean the sink, and the air made me tired. One of Tai's co-workers had quit the day before and they made my brother come in early. I was bringing him his lunch, just like I'd done in high school. But when I went to Aisle Nine, he wasn't at the register.

"Over here, Crystal," he said.

He was by the bulletin board, talking with a customer. At least, I thought this guy was a customer. He wasn't pushing a shopping cart and he didn't carry one of the orange baskets you pick up at the entrance. All he had was a clipboard and some fliers. Underneath his tan coat I saw a fine black suit and a tie redder than a stop sign. He and Tai were looking at the clipboard.

"So you say I should add more information?" the man asked.

"Yeah," Tai said. "Like what's the easiest way to get to your church by public transit. Most people in this neighborhood don't drive. They take the bus or the subway."

"And you think we need to offer services in Spanish?"

"Definitely. There's a lot of Latinos here. Salvadorans, Dominicans, Hondurans. Some are Catholic, but I bet others would love to hear a Pentecostal service."

The man looked at Tai. His eyes made me think of a hungry animal, like a wolf or a tiger. His whole face sort of leaned forward so you felt it was going to come rolling off that thick stump of a neck. I could tell he waxed his skin and hair more than I had when I was at Madison Park. Something about him seemed too polished. He pronounced every word perfectly, but his voice still reminded me of Shameer trying to get into my pants.

He stepped toward Tai. I backed away, but my brother didn't move.

"Thank you, young man. I don't believe I have the privilege to know your name."

"Tai Merrick." They shook hands. "This is my sister, Crystal."

He flashed his dental work at me. "Pastor Gene Brunson, Garden of Hope Church. We just opened our doors last week. Can I expect you at one of our services?"

My upper lip crinkled. "Uh, no thanks, our family goes to Mount Zion AME," I said, ignoring my brother's look of surprise. "I just came by to give this to you, Tai."

His hand stretched out to take the bag with his lunch, but his eyes stayed on Pastor Brunson.

"I appreciate the help you gave me with the flier I'd like to put up on your bulletin board," Pastor Brunson said. "Jesus appreciates it, too." He held out the clipboard. "Why don't you make those changes you suggested and bring it back to me? I can't pay you, since my church

just started up. But I'd be happy to put your name on the flier, and maybe even get you mentioned in our church newsletter."

I'd never seen anyone look happier about doing work they wouldn't get paid for. "Really?" Tai asked.

"I would consider it an honor to have you on board."

"Tai, can I talk to you for a minute?"

He looked irritated, but I walked toward Aisle Nine. There were long lines in the other aisles and Tai's coworkers Odell and Wanda were giving him angry stares. I rested my arm on the cold metal counter.

"Please tell me you're just humoring this guy," I said.

"He was interested in my suggestions. Maybe I can help him out."

"He's a snake-oil salesman. Guy's walking around in a thousand-dollar Armani suit and hundred-dollar shoes and he says he can't pay you. That's bullshit." Tai put a finger to his lips. "And bringing up Jesus. You think he really means it? I don't."

"Tai, you gonna open up your aisle anytime today?" Odell asked from the 12-items-or-less line. Most of the people in line had a lot more than 12 items.

"I don't know if he means everything he says," Tai said. He pushed his key into the register and people started coming over. "But he sounded interested in my skills, which is a lot more than I can say about other people. I'm gonna help him out."

Pastor Brunson was still at the bulletin board, reading the different postings. He waved goodbye to me. I pretended I didn't see him when I walked out.

Tai was in his room typing when I got up the next day at eleven a.m. This was typical for me because I didn't have a job and didn't see any reason to wake up early. I shuffled past Tai's room on my way downstairs.

"What are you working on?" I asked.

"I'm finishing that flier for the pastor."

"He's got you working for free and getting up early to do it." Tai slept late, too, but only because of his job. "Must come in handy, being able to make people do that."

But Tai did get something for it. Two weeks after I went with him to mail the flier, I noticed a manila envelope lying on our front

porch like a dead rat. It had Tai's name on it. Someone had taped it shut, and Tai cut it open with the scissors Mom kept in her desk. Out came a Bible and what looked like a DVD case with Pastor Brunson's beaming face on it.

"It's two CDs," Tai said. "'He Has Faith In Us' and 'Going the Distance for God.'"

"Throw those out," I clapped a hand to my forehead. "And that Bible, too. Don't we have enough Bibles in this house?"

I tried to grab the case from him, but he pulled it away.

"Don't tell me you're keeping that shit?"

"I'm gonna listen to it." He smiled and held up a hand. "I owe it to him. He did take the time to send these to me. They're probably funnier than that crap you watch on the Letterman show."

"At least Letterman intends to be funny," I said. "I don't even want to know what's in those CDs you got."

The minute Tai put that first disc into his CD player, I knew what I was hearing. I remembered summer vacations in Huntsville, Alabama, when me and Tai were kids and Mom's crazy sister, my aunt Louisa, suggested they take me to a faith healer and get my lower back cured. I never thought I'd hear that kind of preaching again, certainly not here in Massachusetts. But the booming voice, the panting on the microphone, and the organ music in the background all sounded strictly Southern.

Then I started listening harder. No way this guy was from the South. Another planet, maybe, but not from the South. "Want you to know God has a plan for us," Pastor Brunson said. "All of us. The woman in the front row with the nice makeup and the Christian Dior outfit. The man in the back with arthritis leaning over a cane. All of us. The slave and the Pharisee. Jesus knows every last one of us. He's there when we get up in the morning. He's there when we go into the Waffle House and have breakfast."

"He's there when we go in the bathroom to take a dump," I said.

"He's there when the landlord raises the rent. He's there when the drug dealer's out sellin' weed to your kids. He's there when the mother's got two children and a third on the way and the husband walks out. Jesus is there for us. And he knows what's gonna happen. The good

and the bad. And the only way we can get through the bad is if we accept His word."

I shook my head and walked out.

Tai listened to those CDs a lot. He played them in his room and he played them in his car and he played them on his iPod when he went out for a walk. Mom and Dad and me tried to laugh it off, but every time we heard Pastor Gene's voice come on upstairs, the conversation got a little quieter, like we were a TV show and someone had just turned down the volume.

The cold and the rain of November turned into the snow of December. Icicles formed big teeth on people's roofs, and cars coughed as their owners stepped on the gas to get them out of snowdrifts. The house was drafty and I went to sleep in my coat and when I heard the whistle in the kitchen on a Sunday morning, I thought someone was making coffee. I buttoned my coat and went downstairs, and I saw what Tai was doing.

"What are you ironing that suit for?"

"I'm going to church."

"You think Ike'll recognize you?" Ike was what everyone called Reverend Scoggins at Mount Zion AME.

"I'm not going to Mount Zion." Another puff escaped the iron like a dragon's breath. "I'm going to Garden of Hope."

Now it was my turn to make a little puffing sound. "You going to hear that lunatic?"

"He asked me to. I got a call the other day when I was at work. He said he wanted to thank me for helping with that article. They came out with their newsletter, and it's on the front page. He wanted me to stop by for services today. I couldn't turn him down."

"I don't like this." I put the kettle on the stove, poured water into it, and turned on the flame. "I could understand you giving him a hand with that article. But now you're listening to those CDs all the time and going to his church. I don't want you turning out like Aunt Louisa."

"Goddammit, Crystal, this guy took an interest in me." He smacked the ironing board, straightened his back, and glared over his shoulder. "I know he's weird, but he's a good man, and he wants to help me."

"The guy's a phony. You saw how he was dressed. And the way he recorded and packaged those CDs, it's pretty professional. That whole Jesus thing is just a gimmick."

"It's not a gimmick." Back he went to pressing those wrinkles and sending up smoke. "And why shouldn't he make money off it? He does a good enough job. He may not know the Bible as well as Ike, but he's a hell of a lot more interesting."

"So's a street gang. You gonna start hanging out with one of them next?"

He didn't answer. He just put the white shirt on over his undershirt, fastened his black pants, and stepped into a pair of shoes that gleamed like Mom's silverware. The kettle was hopping up and down on the burner. I turned it off and saw my brother head out through the smoke, black suit coat bulking up his shoulders and red tie round his neck like a hangman's noose.

Three hours later, he was back.

"What did you do all that time?" Mom asked.

"You better take those fancy clothes off and help your mother with the laundry," Dad said. "She's got three loads that need to go down to the basement."

Tai didn't take off his coat. He scooped up that first load in his arms. One of my socks fell. I picked it up.

"You dropped something," I said.

As we walked down the basement steps, I asked how the service went.

"They do any speaking in tongues?"

"One guy fell down after Pastor Gene blessed him. Pastor Gene put his hand to his forehead and he collapsed. Needed two men to lift him up and get him off the stage."

"I thought this guy was supposed to be a healer."

"It was one incident, Crystal. The service was amazing. There must have been a thousand people in that church." I blinked. I don't know how many people come to your temple on Fridays and Saturdays, but back when we went to Mount Zion, Ike was lucky if he got thirty people on a Sunday.

"Were they all from the neighborhood?"

"I don't think so. I think they came from other parts of the city. There were as many whites and Hispanics as there were blacks." I blinked again. You know how hard it is to find a white face on Blue Hill Avenue.

"Did everyone stay for three hours?"

"Most of them. Pastor Gene preached the whole time, except for the gospel music at the beginning." He turned the washing machine on and hummed something about a sanctuary. "And he didn't just preach, either. He was dancing on the stage. He was running up and down the aisles high-fiving people like he was at a Celtics game. He even borrowed some lady's perfume bottle so he could spray the congregation and call it anointing."

He laughed when he banged the washing machine door shut and walked back up the basement steps. But then he started humming that gospel music again, and I felt cold and empty in the darkness, and Tai's footsteps sounded like steel doors slamming shut between my brother and me.

Every Sunday, Tai would go to Garden of Hope. Get up at eight, wash, shower, cologne stinking up the hallway. Dishes rattling downstairs as he dumped them in the sink. The door closing. Me rolling over and looking out the window at the pink sky and my brother on the snow-covered sidewalk, his shadow bending to the left like it didn't want to go with him.

Mom complained about Tai leaving the dishes for her to wash, so he got up a little earlier to do them. Dad complained church was taking up time from helping out at home, so Tai started going to the Johnnie's Foodmaster on Blue Hill Avenue after services to do the week's food-shopping. It reminded me of when I'd play him in chess when we were kids. Each time I blocked one of his pieces from advancing, he'd work around me.

Pastor Gene was with him at night just as much as he was with him on Sunday morning. I didn't tell Mom and Dad this when it first started happening, but when Tai came home from work at midnight, he'd make himself a mug of coffee, bring it upstairs, and play one of Pastor Gene's CDs. And Pastor Gene was saying things that weren't on the first two CDs he'd sent. *How many of the damn things does my brother*

have? I wondered as I listened to Pastor Gene talk about how there was a flood coming and we better get ready for it.

It was February and the snow was starting to creep away from the streets and sidewalks like the tide going out at Carson Beach. Gray and black patches of concrete and asphalt broke up the whiteness. My room still felt drafty, and I kept wearing my coat to bed. But the cold made it hard to sleep, and when the phone rang one Sunday and I saw "8:30" on my alarm clock, I shot up in the sheets, stumbled into my slippers, and ran downstairs before the ringing could wake up Mom or Dad.

"Crystal, this is Walter." Walter was Tai's supervisor. "Could I speak to your brother?"

He was walking out the door, all dressed up. I called for him to come back. He took the receiver.

"Hi, Walter. What is it? I was just headed out." His brow crinkled. "No, not to the store. I don't start till four-thirty." He gripped the phone tighter. "No, I didn't get the message on my answering machine. I didn't know you wanted me to switch shifts because Orlando quit."

He sat down on one of the kitchen chairs and put his elbow on the table and pressed his hand to his forehead. He was shaking his head and I knew he'd be taking off the double-breasted suit coat, perfectly-creased pants, and shoes that looked like black Cadillacs on his feet and exchanging it all for his Target shirt and apron. And in a way, I was glad.

"I'm not coming in this morning," my brother said.

I almost dropped the carton of orange juice I'd taken out.

"You heard me," Tai told the telephone. "I said I'm not coming in this morning."

Walter squawked something.

"Go ahead, fire me. I'm not bending on this. I've bent on everything else and I'm not bending on this."

I put the orange juice next to the glass that laid on the table. Walter started speaking again.

"Walter, if you're going to fire me, do it right now. I can't come in this morning. If you want me to come in at four-thirty, I'll come in at four-thirty, just as I've done the last five years. But I'll never work on a Sunday morning for Target again." He stood up. "Why? Because I've got to go to church." He moved toward the door. "I started going last year. It

didn't use to be important to me, but now it is. I'm sorry, Walter. I'm not coming in this morning."

He listened for a few seconds, nodded, and said, "Okay. Fine. Nice working with you." He dropped the phone into the cradle, walked past me, and slammed the door.

I didn't have any time. I shoved my bare feet into my mud-streaked sneakers, pulled off Dad's plaid buttoned-down shirt he'd left hanging on the chair, grabbed my keys where I'd hung them above the microwave, and ran outside after Tai. One of my shoelaces was untied and I didn't want to stop and fix it.

He slowed down and watched me approach, hands on his hips.

"Where are you going?" he asked.

"Are you crazy?" I said. "You become as crazy as Pastor Gene? You just said goodbye to your job back there. Mom and Dad are gonna have a fit." It was cold, but I was sweating from running so fast. I was shaking, too, as if I had a fever. "You get back in that house and call Walter and tell him you're coming to work."

"No," Tai said.

He turned away and started walking back up Blue Hill Avenue. I joined his shadow.

"Then I'm coming with you."

"The hell you are." His eyes whipped me. "You can't go to church dressed like that."

"I can go to church any way I want. If I can't tell you what to do, you can't tell me what to do."

The sun glinted off a beer can crouched by a grating.

"Go back home, Crystal. Stop following me."

"I won't leave until you do."

We passed Chang's Laundromat and Reggie's Liquors. A Vietnamese woman pushed a shopping cart piled with garbage bags past us.

"Mom and Dad are gonna be pissed," I said.

"Well, let them be pissed. I'm not gonna back down on this."

"You're the one they depended on."

"Other people are starting to depend on me, too."

We made a left turn onto Geneva Avenue. The church steeple greeted me like a middle finger.

I've never seen so many cars in a parking lot.

All kinds, too. Cadillac Escalades that you could fit a whole family into and tiny VWs that looked about as comfortable as a phone booth. New and old, Massachusetts and out-of-state license plates, bumper stickers for WAAF-FM, the New England Patriots, Notre Dame, Kerry and Edwards. Lots of Baby on Board signs.

My shirt fluttered in the wind like a butterfly's wings. We flowed into the river of people dammed up at the glass doors. It reminded me of the South Shore Plaza on a Friday night.

Black heads, white heads, coffee-colored heads. Bald, dreadlocked, curled, blonde. Cologne and perfume. Red coats, green coats, purple dresses, jeans, slacks, skirts, nylons. Black suit coat and plaid buttoned-down shirt and sneakers with one shoelace untied. The doors swallowed us like Jonah's whale.

Handshakes. Smiling black men and white men and white women and black women. Have a program, Miss. I put it in my shirt pocket. It's probably still there. A lot of people said hi to Tai. He didn't introduce me to any of them. Gospel music coming from a corridor. We went in.

A room with more seats than the screening room at the South Shore cinema. Only at the front of the room there wasn't a movie screen but a stage with two levels. The choir was in the second level, in purple robes. I guess that was what Pastor Gene thought heaven was like. Purple angels singing Soul Train songs. He'd come up with stranger stuff.

People kept saying hi to Tai and inviting him to sit with them. Each time he smiled and shook his head. He led us to a spot near the middle, well behind most of the congregation. I blinked.

"You don't want those TV cameras to see me," I said.

Yes, there were TV cameras. They were moving left and right like the ones at the TD BankNorth Garden that focus in on the fans during game breaks. And I saw a big JumboTron above the gospel singers that was showing images of some of the congregation singing and clapping.

"You think with all these weirdos here, I'm gonna look out of place?" I asked.

"Crystal, if you say one more thing, I'm leaving you here." Then his face changed to politeness. A white man who looked like he'd crawled out of a crypt walked down the aisle toward us.

"You're not sitting in your usual spot, Tai," he said.

"I wanted to give my sister a wider view. Frank, this is Crystal."

I liked Frank even less than I did Pastor Gene. His suit was the color of spoiled milk. His hair was blacker than an oil slick. And his pasty face had lots of lines, a puckered mouth, and no humor beneath those black brows.

"I'll let Pastor Gene know where you're sitting," Frank said. "I hope you'll enjoy the service, Christine. We've got a special one planned for today." He twisted his lips. "Of course, they're all special. But this one's a little more so."

"Who's that?" I asked after he disappeared into the crowd.

"Frank helps Pastor Gene. He's sort of like his second in command."

"Creepy-looking guy."

"Will you please keep your voice down? I don't want someone to hear you."

"You care more about this church than your own family." I felt tears come and blinked them back. I stared at the purple robes. Tai didn't say anything.

The congregation clapped along with the music for twenty minutes. People kept coming in. Mothers with their kids, old couples, teenagers with backwards ballcaps. I was beginning to think maybe I didn't look out of place and I thought of telling Tai that but decided not to. He looked like he was having fun. Clapping and humming and moving his hips. But it didn't feel right. I'm the one who knows how to dance and my brother was moving and shaking and I was standing as stiff as a Wasp from Beacon Hill at a rap concert.

Floodlights focused on the stage and the choir and congregation got quiet. At center stage stood Frank. He welcomed us to Garden of Hope and thanked the choir. Then he gestured to the back of the room. The floodlights followed his hand.

Pastor Gene came running down the aisle like a bull in Seville and the cheering and clapping started again. His blue coat flapped

behind him as he hurried to the stage. He ran up the steps, shook hands with Frank, and seized both sides of the pulpit.

"Good morning," he boomed out.

"Good morning," everyone except me replied.

An organ pealed. A thousand rear ends settled into seats. Pastor Gene placed his hands on the pulpit.

"Wasn't that wonderful?" he asked. "Thank you to the Garden of Hope Gospel Choir! They've been working real hard to get you pumped up. Which I don't understand why you're not. Gimme a high-five." I looked around in surprise. "Just high-five the person next to you. Do it. Do it now. Do it before you can think about it."

He started nodding like his head was the turret of a tank. Everyone was high-fiving each other.

"Funny what you can do when you stop thinking about something and start doing it. That's what faith's all about. It's why we come here every morning on Sunday. It's why we come here when there's six inches of snow on the ground. It's why we come here when a drug dealer waves a knife at your face and makes you hand over your purse on the way here. Because you can tell that drug dealer that they ain't got the real wealth." He pointed to his heart. "The real wealth is in here.

"Let's talk about faith and wealth. Git those Bibles open. Matthew's Gospel, chapter six."

I looked in the empty compartment in the pew in front of me, but there wasn't a Bible. None of the compartments had a Bible. It looked like everyone had brought their own, including Tai. Everyone's book had "Garden of Hope Bible" imprinted on the front.

"Matthew's Gospel, chapter six. I'm in verse twenty-one. 'Where your treasure is, there will your heart be, also.'" He repeated it. "I know we all got an idea of what our treasure is. Maybe it's an 18-inch TV set or one of those big SUVs I see in the parking lot. And I know some of us are still digging for our treasure. It hasn't come up yet. Our arms are getting sore and our knees start feeling weak. But we keep on digging. And you know why? It's because of that word." He pointed to the JumboTron, which now had the word FAITH on its screen.

He jumped off the stage and onto the carpet. It was the color of dried blood.

"Without faith, we ain't got nothing." He was slowly walking up the aisle. "If we don't got no faith, we got nothing. All that other stuff is meaningless if we don't have possession of the fundamental reason God put us here on earth."

He moved up that aisle like Moses through the Red Sea. The congregation rippled toward him like the big tall sea-plants in the New England Aquarium.

"If you have faith, everything else will come easy. If you have faith, you can survive when your enemies put a crown of thorns on your head and nail you to a cross. If you have faith, you can survive being locked in the sewers of Rome by the authorities. If you have faith, it don't matter when terrorists fly airplanes into buildings or the federal government says a woman has a right to an abortion or judges in this state say homosexuals have a right to get married. It don't matter. It don't matter."

People were starting to cheer and clap. He looked like a bulldog that had just chewed off part of his master's shirtsleeve and was waving his head around with it.

"We got the faith to survive all that. We got the faith to be good Christians. We got the faith that will sustain us through the Tribulation and until the Second Coming. We got the faith to see us through. Though the road ahead be so black we cannot see, faith will lead us in the right direction."

He was back on stage now.

"I want to talk to you about faith. Want to tell you what God prophesied would come true on January 20, 2007. Want to tell you God's prophesy.

"See, God predicted that fifty years earlier, a modern-day prophet, a man of faith, would be born. A prophet cast out of his homeland like Jacob. A man whose journey would conclude before his fiftieth year, which would then become a year of jubilee.

"I am that man of whom God spoke." Frank was walking down the aisle toward him, holding a big box. "I am going to be rewarded by God for the faith that has survived every test. For the faith I am not afraid to proclaim. My friends, help me proclaim my faith."

People were reaching into their pockets. Frank handed Pastor Gene the box. Pastor Gene took out what looked like a long, gnarled tree root.

"The ancient Israelites said that at the commencement of the jubilee year you had to blow the shofar." I remembered you telling me about them blowing the shofar on your New Year. "My friends, lift up your whistles and join me."

Suddenly everyone was taking out whistles and blowing them so their cheeks stuck out like bullfrogs and that piercing sound was squeezing my eardrums and that shofar of Pastor Gene's was bleating like the horn at a hockey game when the Bruins score a goal, only louder and longer, and the deep notes of the shofar resounded against the squeaks of the whistles and my ears were ringing and I put my hands over them until the sounds stopped.

"Hallelujah," Pastor Gene said. He placed the shofar on the pulpit. "Book of Psalms says make a joyful noise unto the Lord. Hallelujah. With trumpets and sound of cornet make a joyful noise before the Lord, the King. Because this is a year of jubilee, my friends, and we have much to celebrate." His voice slowed. "But we will also have many tests this year. Just because this is a jubilee year doesn't mean Satan is asleep. Oh, no, my friends. This very minute, Satan is plotting and scheming how to take the fruits of Jubilee away from you. Satan's gonna test your faith, just like he did to Our Lord Jesus Christ. You gonna let Satan win?"

"No!"

"No," Pastor Gene said. "None of us wants to let Satan win." His voice slowed even more. "But maybe Satan's gonna win anyway. Because to say he ain't gonna win is one thing. But to be vigilant and make sure he don't win is another. How many of us is gonna do that?" Everyone was cheering and raising their hands. "I can't hear you. How many of us is gonna do that?" The cheers got louder. The organ joined in. "How many of you is willing to put something on the line so that Satan doesn't win?" My ears started hurting again.

Pastor Gene asked the congregation for money. He said it was a new church and the weather was going to start getting warmer and the church was going to need a new air-conditioning system to comply with the state government regulations. "Not to stick it to Deval," he said, but his government was making it necessary to have a good AC system to keep everyone cool and make Garden of Hope a viable place for kids to come in off the streets when school got out and they had all these

temptations. The estimated cost was two and a half million. Pastor Gene wanted to get started by raising a hundred thousand dollars right now.

The number flashed on the screen. He started by asking for ten people to pledge twenty-five hundred. They were all white people. He made one of them an elder and the guy collapsed. He asked for fifteen people to give a thousand. He said any elder of the church who wasn't up on that stage didn't deserve to have a place as an elder. More people, more white people, left their seats and got up on the stage. He got seventeen people giving a thousand. Now he wanted twenty people pledging five hundred. Tai rose out of his seat. I grabbed him. "You don't even have a job anymore!" He shook away from my grip and hurried up the aisle like a cow in the slaughter pen. He got in line. He was the only black person in line.

I got out of my seat. People saw me and smiled. One held out his hand for a high-five but I walked past him. My heels hurt.

I'd never been up on stage before. Tai was always the one who got to go up. I thought back to the Martin Luther King Day essay contest and him in a different suit with a better life ahead of him and I started to cry and I didn't stop myself this time.

When my eyes cleared I saw Tai going up to Pastor Gene and I pushed past a bald white man and his fat wife and thrust myself between my brother and the pastor. And I grabbed the microphone.

"Don't give him your money!" I yelled at Tai. "Don't give this man your money." Everyone flinched and Frank's mouth dropped open. "Put that checkbook back. You don't have a job." I was crying again. I couldn't see anything. "This man is my brother," I said. "He quit his job today so he could come to your church. He doesn't have a source of income anymore. He doesn't have a nice house or a big SUV like some of you. He shouldn't be giving you his money."

Pastor Gene stood still. Tai stared at me. Everyone stared at me. I didn't know what to say so I said the most direct thing I could think of.

"Come on, Tai. We're going home."

"You don't have to go, Tai," Pastor Brunson said. "You don't have to give me any money. This church blesses all of its congregants."

"Oh, shut up, you old snake-oil salesman!" I pushed him, hard, in his stomach.

"Get off the stage, you bitch!" Frank said. He grabbed the shofar. He swung it toward me. Pastor Gene jumped in front of me. It hit him in

the head with a loud thwack. I was so surprised I didn't look where I stepped. The ground went out under my right foot. I lost my balance. I fell through the outstretched hands of people trying to catch me like a messed-up mosh pit. The red floor hit my head. Never was I so happy to have the world go black.

That's why you didn't see me for a week, and that's why I made you write down your phone number and email address in the little notebook I carry so if I ever hit my head on the floor of an evangelical church again, I can let you know.

I was at Mass General. Mom paid for it. I told her once I'm done with these classes and get a job, I'll pay her back. Only now it's more difficult 'cause I missed all five classes last week and the instructor said I have to go to the other location in Waltham to make them up.

Everyone came to the hospital to see me, except for one person. I went to see him yesterday.

In some ways it was the same. He was in Aisle Nine, wearing that tee-shirt and apron. Customers were giving him things to scan and put into plastic bags. It was seven-fifteen. He walked over to the table where I was sitting.

"Make it quick, Crystal. I only have a 20-minute break today 'cause Jamal quit."

"You don't care, do you."

"I do care. Mom told me you were OK. I was too angry about what you did to come."

"He talks all about money and nothing about forgiveness."

"He talks plenty about forgiveness. He says God put you there to test his faith. Up to that point, he never put himself in physical danger for anyone. Not even his wife and kids. He didn't know if he was strong enough. Now he knows."

"You're still going to Garden of Hope."

"You don't understand. Frank's gone. Pastor fired him when he regained consciousness. And I got my job back after Pastor sat down with Walter. I don't ever have to work on a Sunday morning again. It's a small thing, but Pastor says small things add up to big steps."

The floor looked hard and the table was an accusatory shade of red. "You're my brother," I said. "I love you. Pastor Gene took you away from me."

"Pastor Gene didn't take me away from anyone. Before you got up on stage, I didn't know if he was for real. Now I know." He lowered his voice. "He offered to pay for your hospital fees. Mom and Dad wouldn't let him."

"Tai," Odell called. "Five minutes."

"I got to go," he said.

I didn't want to watch him go. I ran out of that store. Like Lot's wife, I turned to watch him through the window one last time. A Garden of Hope Bible bulged under his arm as he returned to the checkout counter.