

Neap Tide

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The needle on the gas gauge was halfway below the quarter-tank mark, making for the red, but Pastor Bellamy knew from experience that it was enough to get everyone home. Only just, but enough. Today was one of those Sundays when he'd had to ask his wife Shonda to slip out during his sermon and, using the money just gathered in the collection plates, take the van to the gas station around the corner and add as much gas as the morning's tithing would buy. Usually it just bought a few gallons. Only once had the collection plate brought in enough to fill the tank, and that was during Patricia Alston's family reunion weekend, when half her relatives from Florence showed up to church with her. Her son—the football coach and only black faculty member at a white-flight academy—was prosperous by back-home standards, and all his own children were grown and doing well for themselves. Everyone down to Patricia's great-grandchildren had at least five dollars to put in the plate. Having a full tank of gas had been such a relief that the next Sunday, Pastor Bellamy felt that rather than pulling extra weight, the van was borne aloft on angels' wings.

But usually he and Shonda referred to the tank as being stuck at neap tide. At neap tide, the pastor had heard his father explain many years ago, the sun and moon have an equal pull on the ocean, and cancel out each other's efforts. Rather than reaching its usual high and low, the tide lingers at a muddling in-between. The pastor's father, Emmanuel, worked in his youth as a boat hand in a pogy fishing crew off of Wilmington. When a school of pogies was spotted, the hands would leave the mother boat in rowboats, dropping their net and surrounding the fish, pulling the net tight like a coin purse to the rhythm of songs not fit for ladies' ears.

Though rarely at its highest, the fuel level had never yet fallen low enough to strand the van on the side of the road with a cargo of old ladies. Add ten dollars' worth, subtract ten miles' worth.

With the van's air conditioner running, Pastor Bellamy sat and watched the front door of his church. A storefront in a small strip mall, the church had a silvery reflective coating on its plate-glass door and windows. On their first Sunday in the storefront space Pastor Bellamy had found that peeping passersby didn't help maintain a spirit of worship. For the previous twenty years the Greater Light Apostolic Church had occupied an actual church building, but the costs—of utilities, maintenance of the building, parking lot and adjoining graveyard, and new glass every few months for another broken window—added up to significantly more than the church's income, which itself was in steady decline as the congregation's tithing dwindled with retirements and deaths.

The door swung open, pushed by Assistant Pastor Maurice Johnson. He propped it in place with a broken cinderblock they had brought from the old church, where it had served the same purpose. There were currently four ladies who rode in the van every Sunday, and it was the congregation's custom to wait until they were all seated in their conveyance before everyone else exited. Alma Priest and Cora Green walked unaided, but Hester Green, who was frail, took Maurice Johnson's arm. As those two made their slow way across the two-row parking lot, Pastor Bellamy looked back to the doorway, where Patricia Alston was waiting. Behind her stood the rest of the congregants. A child squeezed partway past her hip, and was pulled back in by his mother.

Patricia, the pastor knew, was able to walk to the van on her own, but feigned lameness so that she could be squired by Maurice Johnson. The young assistant pastor was a slim, handsome man, full of enthusiasm—for God, for the church, for entrepreneurship, for his wife and their two little girls.

Alma Priest and Cora Green slid into the back row of seats, continuing a conversation that had started before the morning's service. With Maurice steadying her, Hester Green put one foot on the running board, swayed forward and back a couple of times for momentum, and hoisted herself in. She slid in staccato jerks to the

window seat. Maurice returned with Patricia Alston, who stepped into the van easily and sat down by Hester.

“All aboard the Greater Lightning Express!” said Patricia, who liked to be the mistress of ceremonies. Every week she made some sort of hearty comment to let everyone know that the ride had started.

“All aboard the Halleluiah Express,” said Cora Green.

The van pulled out of the parking lot. Maurice Johnson, in the front passenger seat, suggested, “All aboard the Anointed Abundance Express.”

“That’s right,” said Hester Green. “All right,” said Cora Green. “Anointed Abundance,” repeated Maurice. “Yes,” said Alma Priest.

Maurice would be starting his own church soon, Pastor

Bellamy figured. He had been an invaluable assistant over the last few years, but a few months ago he had received the call to preach. He was energetic and full of ideas about how the church might be run better, which he proposed tactfully, framing the ideas as things halfway between experiments and whims. They were big projects—outreach to bring in new members, applying for grants, starting a radio show.

The truth was, the Bellamys were exhausted all the time, between keeping the church nominally afloat and working their jobs during the week. Shonda was an administrative assistant to one of the town commissioners, and the pastor worked the day shift at a convenience store. Pastor Bellamy wished he could tell Maurice that what he needed most was exactly the kind of help he already provided—ushering, helping with the weekly van ride, maintaining the cemetery at the old church, and visiting congregants in the hospital when the pastor couldn’t get off work to make the visits himself. When Maurice would embark on a project, it inevitably reached a stage at which the pastor’s participation was needed, and he simply had no time or energy to spare, so the projects withered on the vine.

Maurice never acted let down, which the pastor appreciated. He knew that Maurice had a calling, and that he would be a fine minister when the time was right.

The first stop on the return trip was Alma Priest's house. Pastor Bellamy wished that she lived the farthest away, so there would be more time for conversation. She was by far the most exotic member of the congregation, a distinction apparent at first glance. While the other ladies her age wore skirt suits and often hats to church, Alma frequently appeared in a long batik dress and rubber-soled clogs. She wore no hat, but swept her braids back and into a tidy bun.

Alma had lived away, mainly in New York City, for more than thirty years before retiring back home. That in itself wasn't unusual. There were at least three couples at Greater Light Apostolic Church who had moved home after spending their working lives in the Northeast. But they had been secretaries and factory workers, a mailman and a delivery truck driver. Alma was a musician. When the pastor asked what kind of musician, she said that she was a pianist, and had played mainly free jazz. Pastor Bellamy recruited her right away to be the church musician. In services he could always tell when the Spirit was upon her, when her restrained church playing would tumble into barrelhouse, and then into inspired improvisations. The pastor sometimes wished that he could stop singing mid-song, hush the four or five voices of the choir, and just listen to her play.

Shonda Bellamy lit up when her husband told her that Alma was a jazz musician from New York. They invited her over for dinner in her first month attending the church. Three hours after she arrived, Alma and Shonda were so deeply engrossed in conversation that there seemed to be no end to the evening in sight. At a pause in their talking the pastor said, "You all are getting on like a house afire, and you know what they say to do when something is on fire." He stood and reached to pick up their plates. "Stop, drop, and roll. And I'm going to stop, drop, and roll into bed."

Carrying the plates to the kitchen, he continued, "But your voices are like music to my ears, so you all should just talk all night, as far as I'm concerned. Won't keep me awake. Goodnight, ladies." Alma thanked him for the hospitality, and Shonda smiled at him and said good night.

In church the next morning the two women greeted each other like old friends, and laughed about their new in-jokes. But in the coming weeks, though Shonda hoped that the friendship would grow, it became clear, through polite excuses and calls only slowly returned, that socializing wasn't on Alma's retirement agenda. From the first night's conversation Shonda knew that Alma had come back to South Carolina following a divorce from a drug-abusing husband, a divorce that also precipitated the breakup of the combo they both played in. She made passing reference to appreciating the quiet of her hometown, and the newly discovered pleasure of solitude.

Shonda was hurt, though she knew that the rejection wasn't about her. "An introvert," she explained, both to her husband and herself. "That's exactly what she is."

"And didn't she say she's always tired?"

"That too. Yes, she did."

"See you next week, Ms. Alma," Maurice called out to her as she unlocked her front door and turned back to wave at the van. Pastor Bellamy waved too, and before putting the van in drive again, he looked at the gas gauge. The needle was now on the half-tank mark.

"Maurice," he said. "Do we have more gas than we started with?"

Maurice peered at the gauge. "Must be expanding in the heat."

"Must be," said the pastor. He drove the van toward the bypass.

"Pastor," called out Patricia Alston. "When you preach on the theme of abundance, like you done today, I can't help but think how much the Lord has blessed me."

"Now that's what I like to hear. I hope He continues to do so."

Before he was done speaking, Patricia's voice surged over his.

“You see, there was a time when I didn’t think I would ever walk again. My knees were ruined. Thirty years standing at the counter at the DMV will do that to you.”

“Seem like it shouldn’t take that long to get your business done,” said Pastor Bellamy. “What was it, a title transfer?”

She swatted at his shoulder with her scarf. “You know I worked there.” Pastor Bellamy turned off of the bypass and onto a two-lane state highway. “Everybody came to see me while I was laid up after the knee replacement surgery. My children, my former co-workers, my sorority sisters. And I told every one of them, ‘I don’t see how I’ll ever walk again.’ But I prayed on it, and my children and my former co-workers and my sorority sisters would pray over me when they came to visit, and sure enough, I was soon back on my feet and good as new.”

“Does that mean you don’t need my help anymore?” asked Maurice.

“Not exactly good as new,” Patricia amended. “I just mean that it felt that way— that’s how relieved I was to be on my feet again.”

“I see,” said Maurice. “All right.” The van was pulling into Patricia’s driveway, a straight gravel line leading to the small brick ranch house. An overgrown field was behind the house. The pastor remembered Patricia’s father raising tobacco there many years ago. Now he watched as Maurice escorted her to her door.

Shonda Bellamy had belonged to the same sorority as Patricia Alston, though twenty years later and at a different college. She hadn’t been active in the organization since the day she graduated, with the exception of an occasion when Patricia had two tickets to a chapter luncheon in Columbia. Congressman Clyburn was the invited speaker and, unable to go herself, Patricia had offered her tickets to the Bellamys.

The luncheon in Columbia was unusual in that it was something the Bellamys had talked about doing ahead of time, and then actually did. They talked about other plans—about starting a garden in their back yard, volunteering for voter registration drives, maybe

even joining an overseas mission trip sponsored by one of the large churches in town. When the time came to make a decision, though, they were always prevented from doing what they wanted because of the Greater Light Apostolic Church. More often than not they used up their own cash covering the shortfall in the church budget. Reading the church's initials on a folder of bank statements one night, Shonda said, "G-LAC—more like 'we lack.'" Sundays had long been impossible too, but with Maurice Johnson now taking an occasional service to give his own sermons a test run, Pastor Bellamy allowed himself to hope that in coming years he would be able to take some weekends off.

Both Green sisters were now asleep, and didn't stir when the pastor's cell phone rang. He answered the phone and heard Shonda on the line. "Where are you? Do you need me to come get you?"

"Outside Ms. Patricia's house. What's wrong?"

"You haven't run out of gas yet?"

"No. We got"—he looked at the gauge—"looks like three quarters of a tank."

"Okay, you stopped and filled up, then," she said. "I just realized that when I went out this morning to get gas, I went in the store to get a coke and the paper, then drove away and forgot about the gas. I just found the money in my pocket."

Patricia Alston had kept Maurice standing at the door for several minutes while she talked, but now released, he got back into the van.

"Maurice," Pastor Bellamy said, "by any chance did you put gas in the van this morning?"

"No," Maurice said, laughing. "I got twenty-five dollars to my name until payday. Sorry."

"We should have run out miles back," the pastor said. "How is it we're still rolling?"

When the van pulled up in front of the sleeping Green sisters' house, the tank was full. Pastor Bellamy saw the third sister, Nettie, who didn't go to church, waiting for her sisters on the other side of

the storm door.

“Maurice,” he said. “Are you ready to take this church?”

Maurice looked at him, startled. “You mean as head pastor?”

“Head pastor. I’m ready to move on.”

“I would need to pray over that,” Maurice said.

“Pray over it and talk with your family,” said Pastor Bellamy, but Maurice was already praying.

When Maurice lifted his head, he clapped once loudly, and bounded out of the van. Sliding open the back door, he reached in, smiling, and held his hand out to Hester Green, who had woken up at the sound of his clap.

Pastor Bellamy opened the door on the other side. “Ms. Cora,” he said, touching her shoulder. “Come on now. Let’s wake up and get out.”

