The Commandment

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An errant ray of sunshine tickled the eyelids of young Artie Zeiss, waking him from a slumber which he realized, as he consulted his bedside clock, had lasted ten hours. His employer, the shrewd Mr. Jacobs, would have expected him at nine, and would surely not be happy about his tardiness. *Oh well,* thought Artie. An hour's less work for an hour's less pay seemed perfectly reasonable to him. *On the bright side*, he thought, he only needed another two dollars before he could mail in for the *Ride 'em Roger Jet Rocket* he'd been eyeing for the past several months. He stretched his legs and got up out of bed, thinking for a moment of all the extra pedaling he'd have to do in order to complete his route by the end of the day. When he'd taken the job, he'd promised to do it, after all.

Artie washed his hair and face in the bathroom sink, dressed in his cleanest white work shirt and pulled on his overalls and apple cap. The checkered red and white tablecloth greeted him as he strode into the kitchen, the way it always did in the morning. He found a bowl and spoon in the cupboards and set them on the table near the milk. In the pantry, his hand hovered for a moment over the *Wheaty Oat O's* before he drew it back in a moment of devilish gusto, choosing the *Sugar Smacks* instead. His parents wouldn't have liked it, but he knew they'd be at work by now—his father at the steel mill and his mother at the library. He ran into each of their rooms to check, just in case.

Artie had never liked the unsettling clown which covered the front of the cereal box, and with the valuable contents within thus extracted, he replaced it next to the inferior healthy cereals. He ate and as he cleaned his dishes, he did his best not to knock over the coffee pot his mother had left on the countertop. Once, he'd snuck a sip from her mug when she hadn't been looking and had spent the afternoon 'literally bouncing off the walls,' in the words of his father. Artie knew that his father hadn't meant *literally*, because that same week his English teacher Ms. Mulroney had taught their class the difference between 'literally' and 'figuratively,' and because he didn't remember *literally* bouncing off of anything, only a lot of running around and shouting. Artie left the coffee untouched because although that one afternoon had been a good time as he remembered it, he also remembered being so tired afterwards that he fell asleep at eight, well before all the good TV came on—the shows with monsters and explosions and sometimes swearing and guts and things.

The air was clear and the sun hung high in the sky as Artie left his house through the back door, because the back door didn't lock and he didn't have a key anyways. He walked round the side of the house and saw that some of the grass on the front lawn looked as if it were dying. His father would probably make him water it after he got home from work. Artie winced. He could already hear the lesson he was going to have to sit through. "Artie, there are some things you've got to take pride in," his father would say. "A man's

appearance, and his job, and his home." And then Artie would say "Dad, but it's not *my* house." And his father would reply with something like 'this is *our* family home and we've all got to pitch in," as if Artie could've possibly forgotten. "Are you going to make me promise?" He'd ask. His father would pause, and then he'd say "No, Artie. I won't make you promise. Commitment like that, it's… Well, it's not necessary for something small like this. But as your father, I am asking you to do it." And that'd be that, and Artie would water the grass, or sweep the floor, or do any of the number of things he didn't at all like to do but which he was supposed to because they were *important* or *necessary.*

As he strolled down the block, Artie whistled a homespun rendition of a bluesy tune he'd once heard on the TV. He walked a little slower than usual because it was a nice day, even though all the houses looked the same to him. Artie figured if he was going to be late for work, which he *was*, he might as well enjoy his time getting there. He'd just have to pedal a little faster once he did. The pavement had warmed the soles of his worn-out Buster Browns and Artie wiggled his toes. It felt nice. Just as he was about to round the corner onto the next block, Artie heard the sound of a door slam somewhere behind him. Then someone shouted "Artie!"

He turned around, still whistling, to see his elderly neighbour Mrs. Morrison, who greeted him with a wave. Mrs. Morrison stood out on the lawn, leaning on a push-mower, with her slicked-back grey hair and her ugly argyle sweater which Artie thought was the colour of poo. "WHY, ARTIE ZEISS," she said. "Where'd you ever hear a jaunty number like *Blueberry Hill?*" Artie thought Mrs. Morrison was being extremely loud considering Artie was only a few steps away, but he remembered that his father had once told him Mrs. Morrison was almost deaf by now, and afterwards, his mother had made it very clear that people with disabilities like old age or deafness were people too, and that they wouldn't like it very much if you told them to shut up just because they were shouting at you. Apparently that was being "insensitive." So Artie replied that his mother had been watching a concert on TV, and when Artie had come into the room, a large man with noodle hair had been playing the song on the piano. Mrs. Morrison laughed, which Artie didn't understand. She said "Aren't you a little young for the rock n roll music? It's so wild, and with all the dancing…" Artie shrugged. He liked dancing, he supposed, and said as much. Mrs. Morrison nodded her head. Then she told Artie, as if it were some big secret, that the song was one of her husband's favourites of late, and also not to tell Father Brown if Artie should see him in town, because that kind of music apparently had a lot to do with 'the wiles of the dark lord.' "Well all right," said Artie, "but no promises."

Artie didn't like Mrs. Morrison very much because she smelled like root vegetable and was always laughing at things Artie didn't understand, but when Mrs. Morrison started laughing this time, Artie didn't even mind. He laughed right along with his neighbour. The two of them kept on laughing as Artie bid Mrs. Morrison a good day and walked on down

towards the town square. On his way, he saw some kids from a few streets over chasing a duck around a pond, and he went to go join them. *What the heck*, thought Artie. He felt as if he had all the time in the world.

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The town of Last Chance, Idaho was so named by a group of wily geological surveyors in the 1940's who wanted a way to circumvent state laws prohibiting the sale of alcohol outside city limits. Despite being located several miles from the nearest town, and many more miles from the nearest anything, the grassy, empty stretch of land had been designated a municipality in order to give prospective travellers, hard workers, and lowlifes a "last chance" to buy hooch before they crossed state lines. The town boasted a population of maybe one hundred at the time, but in the ensuing decade Last Chance had done well for itself thanks largely to the *Pepper Mills Steel Co*, which had plunked down a great big factory near the train tracks on the east side of town. Its population had since grown to a proud eight hundred and fifty-three, and the town itself had graduated from the one initial church and two initial bars to include a full range of modern establishments. The church at the end of main street was now state-of-the-art: the red double doors were now, in fact, double, as opposed to the prior arrangement of one working door and one sad mess on perpetually loose hinges. Nearest the church was a squarish patch of dirt with a particular smoky smell about it. One of the bars had burned down some years ago, along with several of the bartenders, and this had left the town equally divided as to whether or not the act constituted progress. A drugstore had been built next door, which sold drugs, as had a general store, which sold everything. No one really remembered when *Donna's Greasy Spork* had gone up, but everyone seemed to think the diner had been there pretty much forever. On the other side of the street lay the single-projector film theatre which a passing investor had unwisely invested in, and then abandoned, once he realized there was no real profit to be made out in the honest-to-God-middle-of-nowhere-Midwest. Beside the theater was the comically tiny Police Station, occupancy one, and beside this was Town Hall, inside of which was a meeting room, a small courtroom, and a sad little block of offices. Nearby, of course, the *Droplet*, the very reason for the town's existence at all, still stood proudly between the dilapidated library and the clinic, offering sturdy stools, cans of Schaefer and Stroh's, and cold mugs of amber relief to anyone and everyone who needed one.

Artie beheld this cornucopia as he sauntered up main street. He had every intention of shifting the saunter up a gear into a march, marching right up to Town Hall, through the front doors, into the second office from the left, meeting Mr. Jacobs face to face, and conjuring his most pitiable expression of apology. As someone who wanted to do a lot of things other than the things people kept asking of him, Artie had perfected a whole range of sad, wide-eyed faces to use on adults as they were warranted in various situations. Today,

he thought he'd go with 'regretful but ill.' When Mr Jacobs would ask why he'd been late, Artie would say that he'd been sick, so sick, and then Mr Jacobs would probably go from being irate at Artie's lateness to just being sad that Artie still had to finish his route while sick as a dog. Artie was fully prepared to execute his marvellously-crafted plan when all of a sudden…

"Artie!"

Oh no, he thought. Artie pretended he didn't hear and kept walking, but there it was again, more insistent this time.

"Arrrrrrrrrrrrrtiiiiiiiiieeeee!"

Artie wished people would stop yelling at him. He sighed. He could hear the noise coming closer and closer from somewhere off to his left, the sound becoming ever more shrill. Hadn't Mr. Lindner taught him about some kind of effect that did that in Science class? The Dropper effect? Poplar? No, that was a kind of tree. Oh well. Artie spun round in time to see his classmate bowl him over.

"Aww, Marvin, what the heck? You big friggin' goof."

Marvin helped Artie to his feet with a meek "sorry." The two boys dusted themselves off. Marvin breathed heavily.

"I'm so glad I—huff—ran into you, Artie." He pushed his spectacles up his nose.

"So," said Artie. "What's with all the ruckus? I was supposed to be at work by now, you know."

"Oh, Artie," said Marvin. "It's horrible."

"Did Bill Nurmark twist your nipples on the hopscotch court again?" Marvin blushed.

"No," he said. "It's not—that was *one* time."

"Is it—"

"Artie, this is serious. It's Lucille!"

"Lucille who?"

"Lucille, Artie! The one with the—the blonde hair, and the curls, and the…"

"The one who always goes around trying to kiss *boys*?" Artie said this as if it were the world's most heinous offence.

"Yes, Artie," said Marvin. "And I—I have to get her a sucker. By tonight."

"Like one of the rainbow ones?"

"Yeah," said Marvin, words tumbling out of his mouth. "I dunno what I was supposed to do! Yesterday she just asked me, and she made these big eyes, and then my face got all red, and—"

"Gross," said Artie.

"You *know* I have a crush on her, Artie. It's *not* gross." Artie still thought it was gross.

"Marvin," he said. "You don't *have* to get her a sucker. You're a free American, just like me. You don't *have* to do anything, unless it's your parents or a teacher or Father Brown or your boss or the police or somebody tells you to do it. Or unless you gave your word." Marvin shuffled in place, not looking at Artie.

"Dang it, Marvin, why'd you have to go and do that? Woman like her's *definitely* got cooties and now you're gonna get some kinda contact disease and I'm gonna get it and I'm gonna have to go to the doctor again and I hate the doctor and—" As Artie spoke, Marvin slowly shifted his gaze from the dirt to the freckles covering his friend's face.

"Everyone saw me," he said. "It was right in the middle of the playground."

"So go get her a sucker, why don't ya?" said Artie. "Whaddya need me for?"

Marvin shook his head. Artie scrunched up his face and glued his hands to his hips.

"Quit bein' a wiener and go get her one!"

Marvin huffed again. "I can't," he replied. "Oh, Artie, that's why I'm so happy I ran into you. Only place in town sells candy is the general store—"

"I know *that*," interrupted Artie.

"—and ever since my daddy saw me come home with a handful of candy and he said *boy, what's a God-fearing young man like you got to do with* seven *Charleston Chews?* And I didn't say nothing, and then he beat the tar outta me, and he said he ever catches me in that general store again until he says so, he'll bring out the belt or the spoon or his workin' hand again.

Artie considered for a moment the implications of telling Marvin to stuff it, but he figured a friendship was worth a quick trip to the general store, at least. "Fine," he said. "D'you have the cash? I'm plum broke and I probably wouldn't pay for you, besides."

"I knew it! Oh boy, Artie, you're a lifesaver," said Marvin. "All the other kids just laughed at me." He ruffled in his coat pocket for a moment before producing several twinkling copper coins. "Sorry," he said. "All I got is pennies. I keep 'em shiny, though." Artie took the change and headed in the direction of the general store.

The inside of the store was panelled with old wood which one could hardly even see behind the shelves extending from wall to wall. Each of these displayed myriad odds and ends, with one or maybe two of each individual thing someone might have been looking for. It had been a while since Artie had been in, and stock was always coming and going, so he started by looking at the shelf nearest the entrance. A pair of boots sat next to a pair of tongs, which rested on several spools of fishing line, which were themselves the platform on which two copper kettles were precariously balanced. Looking around the room, Artie noticed cleaning products, sacks of beans, canned goods, hot sauces, packets of napkins, utensils sold individually, chips, pots, pans, hair products, facial creams, sewing kits, hoes, trowels, and a singular rubber gardening glove. He stopped looking after that, but was frankly amazed at the variety of content.

The store's owner, Mrs. Mabel Wanderly, stood behind the counter which held all the candy—the goods, as Artie noted—with her hair blowing wildly in all directions like a gorgon hag. Since the death of her husband, Mr. Walter Wanderly, Mrs. Wanderly had taken to minding the shop she'd kept running for so many years with renewed vigor. From across the counter, Artie saw her speaking to Don Reynolds, the town's doctor. He had a suspiciously large bundle of firewood held in his arms, and the two were haggling over a potential bulk discount. It appeared to Artie that they couldn't decide on a figure, so he interrupted the conversation without much of a second thought.

"Mr. Reynolds," said Artie, "what in the world is all that firewood for?" Mr. Reynolds turned to face Artie but as he seriously processed the question, he shifted his eyes to the floor. "Barbecuing," he answered sheepishly. Artie didn't question the matter further. His mother had always told him that someone's personal property was *theirs,* which meant they didn't have to answer any questions about it from anyone if they didn't feel like it. Mr. Reynolds seemed to live by this philosophy, too, because he kept glancing back at Artie while not saying anything as he quickly paid Mrs. Wanderly the sum she'd originally asked for before slipping out the front door.

"Hello, Artie!" said Mrs. Wanderly, as Artie stepped up to the counter.

"Hi there," said Artie.

Marvin returned to shuffling nervously in place while he waited for Artie. And he waited, and he waited, and he waited, until the familiar bob of Artie's cap finally reappeared outside the store, accompanied by a large, multi-colored swirl pop. "Jeez," said

Artie, when he'd finally run back to where Marvin was standing. He handed over the lollipop. "Thanks," said Marvin. "Mrs. Wanderly get your goat?"

"She wouldn't shut up!" Artie frowned, trying to remember all the details. "I said 'hello, I'd like a sucker, ma'am, please' and she wouldn't give it to me until she asked me about my mom, and my dad, and what I thought about the weather, and how I've been doing at home, and how I've been doing in school, and how my brother's been doing in school, and something about the 'current geo-political climate of our great nation,' and I had no idea what *that* even was."

"Don't you… not have a brother?" asked Marvin.

"Exactly! She's batty! I'm an only child. My parents can't afford a brother."

"My daddy says our family could *never* afford more'n one of me."

"He probably just meant that you're special, Marvin. Also, I bought a piece of taffy as your way of saying thanks."

"That's all right."

Artie bid his friend good luck with the contraction of cooties and motioned to leave, but then Marvin said "Hey Artie, you been at school lately?"

"Not since Tuesday, Marv. Yesterday I went down to the creek to poke frogs with a stick, and the last couple days I've been at theatre catching freebies. Nobody even checks tickets anymore. And today's the weekend, of course."

"Yesterday was… *weird*. Couple girls in the other class didn't show up for the fifth day in a row."

"I do that all the time," said Artie.

"Yeah, but Gus Wilson's been gone for the last couple days, and he's top of his class."

"Maybe he got sick?" suggested Artie.

"Well yeah, maybe, but this morning I saw his momma cryin' real bad outside the church. I hid behind the diner cause I didn't want her to catch me staring."

Artie shrugged. "None of our business, really."

"All I'm sayin' is, it was awful strange seeing somebody cry like that. My daddy says my momma ain't cried since she had me."

"Gus is probably *real* sick, that's why his mom is so sad. And besides, Marv, families move out of town all the time. The girls' parents... probably took 'em along when they left. My parents are always talking about that sort of thing. More jobs in other parts, or something like that." Artie scratched his head.

"I guess," said Marvin. "But you know, this isn't the first--"

"Got to run, Marv!" Artie was already halfway down the street.

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Artie sat on a log by the side of the road, chewing his piece of Turkish Taffy. He certainly couldn't show up to work with a mouth full of taffy. And if he didn't eat it now, when would he have the chance? So he sat, watching the birds flock from tree to tree, watching the town's residents amble in and out of whatever places they had to be. He watched the wind slowly die down, and he saw the sun sink behind the church's steeple, bathing the town in an eerie orange glow. It was a very chewy piece of taffy.

When Artie had bunched up and thrown away the wrapper, he set the town hall in his sights. He took three steps and then out of the corner of his eye saw someone slip out the church's double doors. Closer inspection revealed it to be Father Brown lighting up a cigarette in full priestly garb. Closer inspection also revealed Artie's presence to the father, who waved him over.

"Afternoon, Arthur," said the father. Artie reluctantly returned the greeting. Father Brown, with his jowls and his keen eyes, was one of the town's most eminent authority figures, and Artie had never gotten along well with many of those, *especially* when they called him by his given name.

"You look troubled," said the father. "And at such a young age. Perhaps I can help? Perhaps… the Lord can help?" Artie hesitated before proceeding with the question which had been boiling in his noggin since Marvin left.

"Father," he said, "You're important to the community." The father nodded. "Would you say," said Artie, "you know pretty much everybody in town?"

"To shepherd is my divine purpose," said the father. "How could I do as much without knowledge of the flock?"

"Right. It's just that I heard some kids haven't been showing up to school lately, and—"

"I hear you've quite a reputation for that yourself, Mr. Zeiss." A vein bulged in Artie's neck.

"I was wondering if you knew anything about it."

The father paused to inhale a lungful of smoke. "No," he said at last. "I hadn't heard. But I'm sure whatever happened to those children is between them and the good Lord."

"Did something happen?" asked Artie.

"People move on from Last Chance all the time, child. Perhaps you're too young to remember, but this is nothing new. If anything, it leaves those of us who remain all the stronger."

"I heard Gus Wilson's mom was out here this morning, crying her poor eyes out."

The father dropped his cigarette and snubbed it out with a twist of his heel. "Child, all you need know is that when promises are broken, there are consequences. Ms. Wilson learned such a lesson this morning. I did my best to comfort her."

"All you adults keep talking about *promise* this, and *promise* that, and—"

"A *promise*," said Father Brown, "is a contract between you and the promised. Your friend, your parents, your employer, your teacher. But even more important than that, it is a contract between yourself and God. Your word is your reputation. It's your truth, your imperative. Here in Last Chance, we value that kind of a pact. Hasn't this been taught to you a thousand times, child?"

"Yes, father," said Artie, "But the more I think about it the more I think no one's ever really told me why."

The father inhaled sharply. "In time, perhaps. Now, you must excuse me. I have to start preparing the incense and candles for tonight's mass. I'll be seeing you soon, my son."

The church had begun offering a night mass several years ago, once the factory's hours had expanded to weekends in order to meet demand for steel from neighbouring states. All the workers who could no longer make time for salvation on Sunday morning would gather in the church on Saturday nights, along with many townsfolk who simply wanted to be there. Inevitably, the sermon would let out, and most weeks the Droplet's barstools would be full within the hour.

"Before you go," said Artie, "Mrs. Morrison told me to tell you she and her husband have been listening to something called the 'Rock and Roll' lately. They said you'd absolutely love it."

Father Brown's eye twitched almost imperceptibly. "Wonderful news, Arthur." He re-entered the church.

Artie looked down at the ground where Father Brown had extinguished his cigarette. He stared at the small black mark on the dry grass, a miniscule ember still glowing faintly within it. From here, Artie turned his gaze across the road to the site of the burnt down bar. He inhaled a whiff of air which smelled faintly sweet. Almost like barbecue, he decided.

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The sky began to darken as Artie climbed the red-painted steps of the Town Hall. The first thing to greet visitors upon entry was, and had always been, a wall-to-wall painted mural depicting the moment of Last Chance's creation, and so it was that Artie came face to face with the town's founders—Dale Hoenner, Earl Montfort, and Jebediah Toole—arm in arm with a tacky, homeless-looking Jesus in front of a cornfield, cradling scythes and pitchforks all. Artie ignored their sloppily-painted gaze and hung a left towards the office block. He knew that Mr Jacobs never left the office until sundown, which meant that surely he still had time. Time enough, at least, to practice a few coughs and sniffles in the hallway. He doubted he'd get paid at all, but it could still work.

He walked across the shiny tiled floor until he found the uninteresting door of all uninteresting doors, the perfectly unremarkable off-white entrance to the weekend workplace he'd been calling his for nearly half a year. The brass plaque on the door read "Dortmund Jacobs, Print & Distribution." A knock—nothing. Another. Still nothing. When Artie put his ear to the door, he heard shaky breaths and the sound of rustling paper. Cautiously, he opened it, and expecting an angry employer, began his spiel.

"Mr Jacobs, I'm so sorry, it's just that I've been so… very ill… today." Artie's boss sat at the same ponderosa pine desk he always did, sobbing uncontrollably into it. A half-full bottle of rye rested next to the wreck of a man. Artie called out to him again once in the room proper, and Mr Jacobs' head swayed as he lifted it up, like he'd forgotten how to do so. His bloodshot eyes met Artie's and for a moment, Artie was terrified of what might happen next. Jacobs' head sank back to the desk, and he began sobbing anew, the intensity redoubled. "Ella…" he whimpered.

Artie had never seen an adult act like this before. On similar, rare occasions his mother would warn him to keep distance from his father—those nights where the key would fumble in the lock until it gave up, and when the back door would open, and the house would fill with a musty, unforgettable smell. But even peeking out from behind the sofa or the bed on those thunderous nights, Artie had never seen anything like the way Mr Jacobs looked now.

All attempts to reach out to his employer were met with unresponsiveness, or worse, indiscernible wails, and Artie was at a complete loss for what to do. His eyes

scanned the room for something he could use to help defuse the situation. Nothing presented itself among the sparse furnishings. Instead, Artie spied the book bag filled with the papers he was supposed to deliver leaning against Jacobs' desk. Opposite the bag, the baby blue, rusted Schwinn Artie used to deliver them leaned against the peeling wallpaper. It belonged to Mr Jacobs' daughter. Artie's family didn't own a bike.

Out of curiosity, and out of desperation, Artie unwound one of the papers' elastic bands and unfurled the issue. Maybe something inside had upset Mr Jacobs. The caption read: *Grit*. *America's Greatest Family Newspaper.* The front page headline, *Atomic Energy Breakthrough Provides Man Tool of Death or Good Life*. Artie was at a loss as to how that might help, so he flipped the page. *Is America's Moral Fiber Wearing Thin?* He thumbed another page, which led him to the *Stranger Than Fiction Column*. Rattling sobs punctuated his reading of a speculative piece about whether or not the Klu Klux Klan had taken up residence in the nearby Caribou-Targhee forest. According to one reporter, Montanans and Idahoans from rural towns along the state border had reported sightings of smoke pillars near the woods late at night, accompanied sometimes by what witnesses described as screaming. The article ended on the note that "the connections of these events to the Klan had yet to be personally observed."

As Artie turned to the next page, Jacobs' hand closed around his wrist. Their eyes met again and Artie tried to pull away. "Please," said Jacobs. This time, his eyes were lucid, pleading. "Please. Go." He tapped a shaking finger on the paper in Artie's hands, then lifted it towards the window. His grip went slack. He collapsed, the strength leeched from his body.

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The bike's worn rubber grips felt familiar in Artie's hands. The canvas bag full of papers bounced off his back as he pedaled through town square, searching for anyone who could help his employer. Left foot. Right foot. The sun had sunk almost completely below the horizon, bleeding twilight into the surrounding sky. Town Hall had been strangely empty, as had the clinic. Artie now pedaled furiously past every nearby building, peering through windows and knocking on doors. Not one gave an answer.

He stood over the bike, panting, in the middle of main street and it was then that he remembered the night mass. Of course it would be in session by now.

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Artie threw the bike to the ground in front of the church. His feet hit the dirt and he sprinted the last ten yards up the path and cobbled steps. The crimson double doors were easily twice Artie's height, and it was with great difficulty that he heaved one open and

slipped inside the church. Sweat dripped from his forehead onto the carpet which seemed to stretch on forever. From behind the pulpit, the wail of the pipe organ reverberated off the stone walls, mingling with the chanting of the congregation and the sounds of blood rushing inside Artie's head to form one great, cacophonous nightmare. He stumbled on his own shoe and crashed into the floor. The entire parish turned their eyes on him.

"Arthur Zeiss," said Father Brown. He closed the good book from which he'd been reading and strode down the aisle to meet the boy. Artie's head spun as he was lifted to his feet. He tried desperately to explain to the father what had happened with Mr Jacobs, and that the man needed immediate attention, and that he thought something was very wrong, but the father hushed him. "Child, child… He has every reason to mourn." *Mourn*? thought Artie. In the crowd, someone shouted that they'd never gotten their morning paper. Soon, another voice echoed the complaint, as did another, and another. *Paper?* thought Artie. The father's grip, which had been supporting him, now tightened on the collar of his shirt. "Is this true?" asked the father. "No," said Artie. "No, I—but—" His head swivelled round in search of sympathetic eyes. Most returned an empty gaze, but some avoided looking at him at all. "There's—" Cloth dug into Artie's neck and he found it harder and harder to breathe. He felt his face awash with heat, his eyes bulging out of their sockets. "There's still time," he cried. The cross in the centre of the church's domed roof was the last thing Artie saw before consciousness fled his body.

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There they were again, the eyes. In the torchlight the shadows shifted and stole away to the corners of his vision, but so many sets of eyes hovered silently before him, staring him down amidst the bobbing flames. Wind blew through the pines. Artie couldn't move. The harder he struggled, the more the ropes tore into his skin until finally, he cried out. Someone in the crowd started sobbing and Artie craned his neck to see who it was. He locked eyes with his own mother, tearfully dabbing her eyes in the embrace of his father. Artie redoubled his efforts of escape, wriggling and tearing at the ropes with his nails in feral anguish. "Please," he screamed. "Mom, Dad, *please*." His cries turned to rasping sobs. "Please…" No one motioned as the father strode again into view, another torch in hand. The fire flickered, illuminating a familiar patch of burnt ground. The log dug into Artie's back.

"We came from nothing. *Less* than nothing. Good men and women in the service of God, exactly like yourselves, knew that if this town were to survive, it would need to be strong. Strong of voice, strong of word, strong of faith. Strength is a garden, as in Eden. A garden grown in the light of the Lord. A garden maintained by the careful cultivation of the righteous... and the pruning of weeds. We know all too well that this life on earth is our last chance for redemption. We know that this chance needs to be treated carefully. Cherished,

by those of us strong enough of faith to recognize it for what it is. And when our most sacred of commandments are broken, we know that our last chance is in jeopardy. We know, too, that there must be atonement."

An "Amen" rose from the congregation.

Artie tried to kick and flail as the father came closer and closer. The glow from the torch cast a ghoulish air on the old man's face. It was now close enough that Artie could see the logs piled around his feet.