

The Rapture

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Alice met Bishop Arthur Desmond at the Kmart in Wormwood Hills. She was immediately drawn to him. A tall man in a white linen three-piece suit stands out amid the lower middle-class drab everyone else wears to Kmart. Later, she understood the suit, the jewelry that flashed like laser beams in the Kmart fluorescence and the perfectly groomed everything: They were a part of his ministry. Some churches drew people in with bingo nights, or bake sales, or promises of salvation, but not Bishop Desmond: he adorned himself and people buzzed around him like bees around a flower.

He was drawn to her, he said, when he first saw her at Kmart. She found it hard to believe that anyone noticed her—ever.

Nonsense, he told her. You are a beautiful woman.

Believing this was even harder, she cared so little about her appearance; she had not even showered before dragging herself to Kmart. But that was the appeal of the Bishop. He made you believe things you'd have never thought possible.

I can see into your soul, he told her months later, after she had joined his church and left her home to travel with him. There was no doubt in her mind that he could.

She assisted the Bishop: set up speaking engagements for him, prepared pamphlets for him to distribute, took care of the details. She made just enough money to pay for motel rooms and meals.

The money didn't matter. It was enough for her to be near him. He glowed at times. She watched him intensely when he spoke, watched as light poured from his face. If a little of that light shone on her, it was enough.

A new time is coming, he told her, in heaven, a battle is planned. Signs say it is near. Stay close to me, Alice, he told her. Stay very close to God and he will take us away before the battle begins. A moment will come, the Rapture, and we will be with him. It is so close, Alice. So very close.

That day his sermon seemed frantic. His light turned inward, concentrated and heated him until his face glowed red. His words became more forceful than ever before, hitting the crowd, coming close to knocking them out.

She left him early that evening. He was exhausted, but would not rest, his eyes wild, almost in a panic. She wanted to stay, but he told her to leave, to get some sleep.

There was no knock on the door, only a sudden burst of door and man and cold wind. The noise woke her; the cold wind frightened her. The Bishop stood before her, the white-linen of his suit creased and dirty, his hair shock-wild, tossed by the wicked wind. The cold turned his cheeks red and his eyes shined.

“Bishop!” she exclaimed, almost in admonition, but more to reassure her it was him.

"I want to bring God to you, Alice. I want you to feel Him inside of you like I do."

His voice was intense, like the forceful declarations of his sermon that day.

"I do feel Him, Bishop," she meekly protested.

He caught the pathetic nature of what she said. In one cat-like movement he came to her bed: one knee beside her, his other leg splayed behind him on the floor. He grabbed her arm and pulled her to him tightly, his face inches from hers.

"You don't feel Him like I do, Alice. You don't feel like He's living inside of you, like your breath is His."

Urgently he pulled her closer, murmured, "I want to give you His breath," placed his mouth over hers, and blew.

Alice was limp. When he pulled her to him she was like a rag doll. When he blew, she inhaled sharply, and life came back to her limbs. She pushed the bishop away, but he persisted.

"Accept God, Alice. Accept Him, don't push him away."

She wanted to accept Him, wanted to let Him fill her, wanted His breath to be her breath, but she was frightened of the Bishop.

"I'm scared," she told him.

"The meek shall inherit the earth, Alice. Take Him from me. This is your inheritance, hold Him inside you."

The Lord God...breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being.

He blew and she was filled. She became solid and alive. The Bishop filled her again and again. With ecstasy she accepted Him: his breath, his body, his life.

But God would not stay inside of her. Had she believed, Bishop Desmond told her, she would not have lost him, had she been pure of spirit she would have been filled to her dying day. She feared she had defiled the Bishop, feared her sins would take him away from her.

"I fear for you, Alice," he told her. "I fear the devil will make his mark upon you."

She feared this too. Especially when she found she was pregnant.

Bishop Desmond's eyes burned; they filled with raging fire. His gaze settled on her, blazing, branding her forehead. Unconsciously, as if trying to protect herself, she raised her hand to block his gaze.

He turned from her, eyes closed now, head turning from side to side. He clenched his Bible in his right hand, waving it from time to time, and finally slamming it on the podium.

In a low voice, almost a murmur, as if he was just waking from a deep sleep, he began his sermon.

"I want to tell you, fathers and mothers, sons and daughters, I need to tell you of what is to come.

"Everyday we get out of bed, we climb in our cars, we go off to our job. Everyday we work, we climb in our cars, and we go home. During that day, that long day, children, do you

remember Jesus? Do you remember what your Bible tells you of what is to come? Is your day spent in preparation for His return?"

He paused. Again his eyes caught hers, their fevered look penetrated her. He knows, she thought, he can see inside me, he can feel this child in me, he knows.

Bishop Desmond turned his gaze from her. He paced, eyes closed again, Bible swinging again. Beads of sweat formed on his temples. He wiped them away with a white handkerchief.

"Are you ready!"

His voice shot like a bullet across the room, causing listeners to jump. She sat still, but her heart beat faster, and her palms began to sweat.

"First Thessalonians: Chapter four, Verses sixteen and seventeen," he barked, "*For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever.*"

Again he paused. He was at the podium, his head rested on the Bible in front of him, its words supported him. Slowly he looked up.

Again.

"Are you ready!"

Again the bullet-voice.

The listeners were less startled now, ready this time.

"The Rapture will come without warning. The Rapture will come like a thief in the night. No alarm will stop it, no barking dog, no fancy barb wire fence. The Rapture will come and you will be ready or you will not. You will be taken or you will not.

"Consider your lives, consider whether you will be deemed worthy of the Rapture, consider whether your soul is clean enough to reside in heaven with the Lord forever! Consider this. Consider this carefully, for dangerous times are upon us. Sin and temptation are everywhere. The Devil is at work here on Earth. Consider this carefully, for if you are not clean, if you have given in to sin and temptation, if the Devil has come to work in your life, you will not be taken. You will remain on Earth and you will experience the horror of the Tribulation: for seven years you will face the terrible reign of the Antichrist."

The Bishop stopped. He looked toward heaven and slowly returned his gaze to the crowd. His face seemed transformed, it seethed. His eyes were accusations and when he spoke again his words were savage.

"You will all face the Devil."

And then he left.

Alice did not know what to do. The Bishop had vanished. Alone, in her motel room, panic consumed her. She knelt, head bowed, and prayed. She prayed for hours, she prayed until her legs were numb, she prayed until her prayer became shabby and used up. She knew

now the Lord had left her. She knew the Bishop was right, knew she would see the Devil. Rising from the floor she went to the bathroom and inspected her face.

She willed herself to see it, the mark on her forehead, at first barely perceived, but then acutely present, like an itch that when scratched flares into intense aggravation. And then the mark on her right hand flared into her sight. A voice spoke to her: "*There is no rest day or night for those who worship the beast and his image, or for anyone who receives the mark of his name.*" She watched in horror as her forehead erupted, her hand too, in flame, and when the flame subsided she saw the letters B-A-D appear in ash.

She closed her eyes, and it seemed she sat at the top of the world, her legs spread wide. Out poured the Tigris and the Euphrates, out poured the holy mother Ganges, out poured the mighty Mississippi. They flowed from her, blood red, their channels full and a flood beginning.

She saw a child float away. A child wrapped tightly in a golden blanket, tucked neatly into a basket of reeds. She cried out, louder than a tornado: her voice whirled and tossed upon the air, spinning into emptiness. She tried to move but the deluge between her legs prevented her. Slowly, in horror, she watched the baby toss upon the crimson currents.

O Daughter of Babylon, doomed to destruction, a voice cried to her, happy is he who repays you for what you have done to us—he who seizes your infants and dashes them against the rocks!

She tried to move again, fighting fatigue, but weakness overpowered her.

Over and over she repeated the Lord's prayer, over and over she prayed: *lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil. Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil, for thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever and ever.*

Suddenly, the rivers converged and a lake formed before her, covering the entire earth. Flames leapt from the waves and the smell of rotten flesh invaded the air. Corpses emerged, blood encased skeletons, moaning.

Again the voice: *Come out of her my people, so that you will not share in her sins, so that you will not receive any of her plagues; for her sins are piled up to heaven, and God has remembered her crimes.*

She tried to scream, but her mouth would not open. She saw the corpses take hold of the baby. She saw them disappear. Saw the baby consumed by fire and blood.

And then the fiery lake receded and a mist settled all around her. The tide of fatigue, overwhelming her, swept away. She could move now, and she ran through the mist trying to find the baby.

In the distance she thought she heard a cry and she darted after it. But each step took her no closer to the sound. She was unsure of where it was coming from, it was moving, encircling her. She stayed where she was and the cry came to her, louder and louder, until

finally she knew it wasn't a cry, but a voice, an angel, shouting, *Fallen! Fallen is Babylon the Great, which made all the nations drink the maddening wine of her adulteries.*

Out of the mist a figure came toward her. A man dressed in white. His hair was blacker than night, his eyes blood red. When he opened his mouth bile poured forth. The angel told her, "Here he is, here is the one you've been looking for, he comes for you now Alice."

He held his hands out for her and from them rays of light pierced through the mist. She was too frightened to move. He was near her now, his arms were encircling her, enveloping her body. He smelled of must as he whispered to her, "take my breath, Alice. Take my breath..."

Alice was in the hospital when a package arrived for her. It sat beside her bed until she recovered enough to notice it. For the longest time she could not lift her head; an injury to her neck, the doctor explained, that occurred when she passed out from the loss of blood during her miscarriage. Alice did not remember, or tried hard not to remember, losing her baby. It felt as if the experience belonged to an Alice of God, not the Alice in the Lane County hospital hating and at the same time despairing for her Bishop. It belonged to another Alice in another time: an Alice she didn't know.

The package beside the bed had no return address and was postmarked from somewhere Alice had never heard of. It was wrapped in brown grocery bag paper—the Piggly Wiggly logo peeking out of the fold. As soon as Alice was able to lift her head, she stared at the package. She knew who it was from. She knew it deep inside her, from the emptiness of her womb, she knew that he had sent this package: the Bishop's last attempt at seduction.

Finally, she opened it. Inside of a vacuum cleaner box surrounded by straw lay the Bishop's leather-bound Bible. His name, Arthur Desmond, flashed in gold-leaf lettering from the brown cover. Alice fingered the name, feeling it between her thumb and forefinger. When she pulled her hand away, she noticed a black smudge. Opening the cover, she saw the charred remains of the word of God. "Ashes to ashes, dust to dust," she murmured.