

Writer sample from “In the Know” a young adult novel in progress.

Chapter Four

We are going to prayer night, again. Mama is driving with both hands gripping the wheel, like someone who is paranoid or maybe half drunk. At every red light, she twists her hands on the wheel and looks over at me as if she is expecting something. Mama goes to Ladies’ prayer night every week now. Apparently, a man is so much trouble that it takes a whole night to ask God for help with him. I go sometimes, not because I like praying but I like how Mama is afterwards. For the next few hours, she will be hopeful and calm-like. She’ll say things like – ‘Wait and see the workings of the Lord.’

Mama has something to tell me. I can tell by the way that she’s watching me. She looks like she’s about to say something and then stops. She’s waiting for some sort of opening, the right time to pull the trigger. It probably has something to do with the house selling. How could she think I don’t know? The walls at Grandma’s house are as thin as cheese slices and one of my best friends ever live across the street from my house. I try not to think about our house being gone and strangers living in it. Somehow, that’s not real – it’s like my house is waiting for us while we’re on this strange trip.

I heard Mama on the phone when the toothy realtor called. Mama sounded like she was hearing about the death of a sick friend. “So quick...yes, it is better this way...”. It was the last string, the last thing to keep us from floating up into the hemisphere. I decide to let Mama off the hook.

“I know about the house being sold,” I mumble.

She exhales and almost looks deflated.

“You do? It happened quicker than we thought.”

“Yeah.”

“It’s going to be okay.” She offers.

But how can I believe her?

Even though the church is big, there are only a small number of women that come to Prayer. Usually, the sanctuary feels like it’s pulsating with music and hand clapping and praise, but with these few women here it feels still - like it’s waiting. We meet up front, near the alter. Half the lights are on, but you can still see the gleam on the brass cross and cup. The church always smells like lemony furniture cleaner. It’s mostly older women and women like Mama – women with troubles that come to pray. Most of the ladies don’t treat me like a child and pretend my problems are small. I am a part of the circle, they call me Little sister.

Sister Grimes starts off by taking prayer requests. Sister Grimes is a minister and she is thin-thin. She reminds me of the girls on TV with eating problems, except Grandma say her whole family is skinny like that. Sister Grimes reads a scripture about God listening to our pleas and then she asks for requests. When you’re ready to ask for help, you slip your hand up. At first, no one raises their hand.

“Come on, sisters, no need to be bashful here. Go ahead and punch in your prayer request to heaven’s computer.”

I imagine God working a way at his laptop, when an e-mail pops up that says ‘Help’. It probably makes Him roll His eyes.

One sister, who has a hand over her heart, slips her other hand up in the air. She asks that we pray for her son in jail. She doesn't say what we should pray for in the situation. We all know her son and realize he probably did whatever he was charged with, so should we pray that he get out or learns while he serves. Everyone nods and a few let out a 'help-Jesus' moan, like they already know the answer. Then others make their requests – help my daughter, help my finances, help my job situation, help, help, help.

I wonder how God feels having all these folk gang up on Him, wanting things. Grandma doesn't do prayer meetings, because she doesn't enjoy the company of women and Dancing with the Stars comes on TV that night.

Mama slips her hand up. "Please pray that God blesses me with a good job."

Everyone has submitted a prayer request, but me.

"Little sister," Sister Grimes calls, "Do you have a prayer request?"

I should've seen this coming, but I was thinking about how these requests are always the same. It maybe a different woman, but the same needs over and over again. People are looking at me. I feel prickly, aggravated.

"I don't have a prayer request," I pause, "But why don't we list the prayers that God has answered."

I didn't mean to say it with an attitude, but that's how it came out. Maybe that's how God wanted me to say it. There is hushed silence and Mama is tensing up beside me. Sister Grimes tightens her hands on the little podium and looks down at her papers. I wonder if she is saying a little prayer. Then she looks up and moves her mouth around like she is tasting something.

“You know, that’s not a bad idea. I like it. The next time, we’ll start with praise reports and thanksgiving, and then have prayer requests. Thank you, little sister.”

I can feel the sigh coming out of Mama’s body. The ladies begin their prayer exercises or that’s what I call them because sometimes they march around the sanctuary while praying, sometimes they kneel at the alter, sometimes they circle around one lady and pray, and sometimes they pair up and pray. Their movements look like a sort of odd dance. They say their prayers out loud, so it sounds like some ancient music, like something you would hear on the history channel. I don’t join in. Sometimes, I walk, but mostly I use this time to think, which lately I do too much of anyway.

At the end of the prayer exercises, some of the ladies seem tired, others refreshed. Mama is talking with Sister Grimes as we walk to the parking lot. Mama has her hands jammed into her jacket pockets and Sister Grimes has a big Bible pressed to her chest like a shield.

“That’s a real smart girl, you have there,” she says. You can tell that she doesn’t mean it in the nice way. “We’ll be praying for ya’ll. Don’t get discouraged. The Lord can work everything out for you and your husband. My cousin, you know Retha, her husband left her for two years and came back.” Sister Grimes is smiling like she is so pleased with herself, but Mama is just looking uncomfortable. I can tell that she doesn’t want me here. The silence pushes Sister Grimes into doing more talking. “Yes, two whole years he was gone. I believe that he had some sort of mid-life crisis. He ran off and took up with a woman a little bit older than his daughter. He went vacationing and clubbing. Then he got sick.” She slaps her thigh and pauses, “He took sickness to bring him back to his senses and he came home to Retha.” I imagine her brother-in-law shaking water off himself as he staggers unto the beach and then falls next to his girl toy, while poor Sister Retha is at home balled up on a couch crying.

“What she take him back for?” I blurt out.

Mama gives me the stink eye and Sister Grimes looks like she wants to choke me.

“It’s grown folk’s business. You wouldn’t understand,” Sister Grimes says.

“Go wait in the car,” Mama says and gives me the keys.

From the car, I can see Sister Grimes and Mama having a deep conversation. Mama’s hands are fluttering around as she speaks, then Sister Grimes’ hands make sharp, sure gestures. Sister Grimes flips open her Bible and jabs at some scripture. She is probably telling Mama that she can get Daddy back and the house. That this big mess will work out fine and there is nothing for any of us to do, except doing nothing is how we all got here. There is a moment that Mama looks weepy and Sister Grimes holds her hand and prays for her. I can’t stop myself, I blow the horn.