

Betty

By Jacqueline Bracken

It was the twentieth year of her son's imprisonment—Maurice. It was five years after she decided to quit using. It was summer. Betty had even begun to work part-time again for a wealthy family, helping with the house and cooking. She was returning to work from a visit to the Charles Bass Correctional Complex, the Nashville prison situated in the hills a ways from town. She wore a loose floral shift, her frizzy black hair slicked back into a tightly wound, low bun. She parked her teal Dodge Neon. She glanced at the passenger seat. Maurice's father, Mario, had left his bright banana peel smashed into the cloth upholstery. She shook her head—a movement of disappointment she had mastered. *God forgive me, I shouldn't be say anythin' but why do I this? Why do I feel the need to keep on goin' with these two?* She caught a glimpse of herself in the rearview mirror. Her face was puffy, red like cranberry bread pudding. She stared at her chocolate eyes. In the reflection, she saw her son's looking back at her.

Maurice sat across the cold, gray metal table staring at her. His bright yellow jumpsuit fitted loosely on his aging frame. He held his face in his hands; the silver chain drooped from one wrist to the other, forming a distorted smile. He was cleanly shaven. No facial hair to conceal his leathery skin. A middle-aged man sat before her in silence. She still saw her son, the troubled seventeen-year-old finally convicted of murder. She looked around the visiting room. The yellow was overwhelming, like a forest of Maples in autumn—the golden dying leaves clinging to the Maple branches, fighting for their fleeting life.

Beside her sat his father, Mario. Her priest had coaxed her to bring him to visit their son. For the first time, Mario looked weak, disheveled. He slouched in his blue sweatpants, white Hanes t-shirt, and large Titans windbreaker. In the shape of a horseshoe, his short gray matted hair clung to his shiny bald head. His beard was long, unkempt, and masked his emotionless expression. *This is family time, huh.*

“Pheeww, it’s a hot one out yonder today.” She broke the silence. Her brow furrowed, concerned about the rising August temperatures.

“Really? I haven’t been let out yet. It looks like a hot one though. It’s bright enough.” Maurice smiled and put his hands over hers on the table.

“How they been treatin’ you in here, feedin’ you enough?” Her forehead still scrunched. Her hands under his.

“As best as can be expected I guess.”

“Your father has gone and had another one of those strokes.” She turned her head towards Mario. He was absent from the moment like he had been from their lives.

“That’s too bad. I’m sorry to hear that.” Maurice did not even turn his head to look at Mario. A brief moment of silence ensued before she tried again.

“Father Robinson preached a mighty sermon this past Sunday.” She pulled her hands from underneath his and grasped his fingers tightly.

“Momma...don’t. Did you speak to the lawyer I was tellin’ ya about?” Maurice leaned back in his chair—his hands in his lap.

“Momma?” She could not bring herself to look at either of them or her reflection in the metal table. She looked at the linoleum floor.

“Mmhm.” She closed her eyes. A single small unnoticed tear rolled down her cheek.

“Well, did you?”

“I ain’t sure.” She wanted to stand up, walk away. She fidgeted with her hands.

“You ain’t sure? Momma, let me tell you what you need to say to him. His number is here on this slip of paper. Momma, are you listenin’ to me?” Maurice leaned forward, grabbed her upper arms. She looked past him out the window at the green rolling hills. The emerald landscape soothed her red, tearing eyes like medicated drops. *God is good.*

“Stop. Just stop.” She pressed her lips together, closed her eyes, slipped the paper into her pocket, and shook her head. She wondered why she came every week. Their conversations never varied from the weather, the gospel, and parole. They were as stagnant as the southern summer air. So thick and still, the air could be sliced like a moist piece of peach cobbler.

She got out of her car. She ambled slowly up the stone and concrete driveway lined with thick prospering evergreens. Her employers’ gray four-story mansion adorned with massive white columns and topiary awaited her return. She took one step at a time—her weight swinging from one side to the other, like a thick stalk of wheat in the wind. The sun beat down on her somnolent soul. The air was humid, stifling. She breathed laboriously like it was a chore. She focused on her breath, the heaving of her lungs. Perhaps it was the dense heat causing the sharp pain in her chest or the call. Droplets of

perspiration speckled her brow and neck. She glared at the sweltering sun. Her vision lost, blackened from the searing sight.

God is good. She thought back to the sprawling brown brick church, the altar, the large audience, the microphone, the robust choir, the urgent evangelical message. She envisioned the visiting preacher who laid his hands on *her*. She could still feel the electric pulse run through her weary body like lightening in the sky. *God is good.*

She walked into the house through the butler's pantry to the kitchen. It was time to prepare supper. She grabbed the cast iron skillet from the hook that hung from the stove and put her apron around her waist. She pulled out a container of butter from the fridge. She turned on the gas, threw a dollop of butter into the pan, and watched the yellow chunk sizzle. It slid across the pan, trying to run from the heat. It could not escape, just melted.

Her ambivalence toward her son's parole bubbled like the butter in the skillet. She did not want Maurice and Mario back in her life. She thought of the dusty road that ran through Gravel Hill. The narrow road lead from the small downtown composed of a Piggly Wiggly, Texaco station, and not much else to the double wide she grew up in with her grandparents. The road cut through a wheat field. She remembered how the wheat would shimmer and sparkle in the sunlight as if it were made of gold. The only positive memory of her childhood she could manage. She remembered mostly her first pregnancy at seventeen, her oldest son Kenny, quitting high school three months before she graduated, running to Nashville in search of her mother, mixing with the wrong crowd, and then Mario.

Mario gave her what she thought she wanted—a small house in East Nashville, Louis Vuitton bags, Rebecca Vaughn lingerie, a yellow Pontiac Firebird. What he really gave her was a cocaine addiction, drunken beatings, and a son, Maurice. She never had the courage to leave. She waited until Mario left them. An opportunity to work at Sunbeam bakery opened up. Twenty years she balanced raging addiction, her troubled son, and mixing the ingredients for the bread. Then the night when the police came banging on her door, yelling “Police open up.” She felt guilty as they swarmed in around her standing in her nightgown—her son taken from her for killing a drug dealer. Maurice left her. Finally, alone she was able to get clean. She had faith. *God is good.*

She rinsed the green beans in the sink and added them to the butter. She turned on the oven and pulled the casserole out of the refrigerator. She placed it on the counter top. The mother, Lisa, came in to check on dinner, on her.

“Betty. How’s it going?” Lisa took a seat at the kitchen table.

“It’s good.” She spiced the green beans.

“I checked on the name of that lawyer you gave me.” Lisa waited for her to look up. “He has a very good reputation.”

“Why thank you Mrs. Davis. I’ll be keepin’ that in mind. Dinner will be ready in about twenty minutes.” Lisa disappeared into the family room.

Betty reached into the pocket of her floral shift. She rubbed the piece of paper between her fingers. She smoothed her apron, and put the casserole in the oven.