

AUNT CHLOE

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Sanctuary

Every Sunday morning, Dola Stinson put on her Church Hat and beamed herself into the sanctuary. She strolled down the aisle to the front row, taking a seat in the middle, a spot no other Saintcast ever occupied. Even in this virtual church, it was as if the other congregants were aware that seat belonged to only her. *Well, that's the way it should be*, she thought. Dola had attended Second A.M.E. for more than fifty years, long before the isolation. She had earned a reserved place.

Dola sat erect in her armchair and straightened her beaded purple blazer as she waited for service to start. Although no one could see the real her, she always wanted to look nice. She was early, as usual. There were only a dozen or so virtual parishioners in the room. The Saintcast of Beatrice Wiggins shuddered in a row near the stained glass window, arm raised, as she gave a praise report. Her body glowed red. Each Saintcast was equipped with a voice-enabled transmitter called a SpeechWave and Beatrice never hesitated to activate hers. Dola smirked. No matter the uplifting news Beatrice shared about how good the Lord had been to her, the older woman's expression always seemed wiped clean of joy.

Dola reached up to adjust her Church Hat. It was a hard plastic gray headset with prismatic lenses. Although the device was surprisingly lightweight, she hated how the colorless crown squashed her tresses. At 83, Dola still had a beautiful head of silver hair, which she pressed and curled every Saturday night. She waved her hand over a sensor above her ear. Beatrice's testimony grew louder. Then tremulous organ music filled the room. That was the digital organist's way of letting members know to cut their testimony short. Service was about to begin.

It was eight o'clock. Only a few more Saintcasts had beamed into the room since Dola joined. Every entry was accompanied by a muted pop, like one lifeless hand clap. They were mostly elderly women like Dola. Second A.M.E. had rarely enjoyed a full house even before the isolation, but this dwindling gathering made her chest heavy with remorse. Still, she was thankful for the company—no matter how remote. She felt blessed that her granddaughter Janene could afford to buy her a Church Hat, although Dola had scoffed at the thought of such blasphemous technology when Janene brought it up six months earlier.

"I know you miss being in the sanctuary, Mom-Mom, but we can bring the sanctuary to you now," Janene had said.

They were on their weekly HoloCall. Dola lounged in her recliner by the window as her granddaughter's image hovered near her feet.

Dola was skeptical. "Now how can we do that when all those old geezers are locked in?" she said.

"It's called a Church Hat. It's an immersive experience. You just put it on and it allows you to see the service, no matter where you are."

"Seeing is one thing. I need to hear what Reverend Butler is saying."

Janene's image glitched. She grinned as she toyed with her long, brown locs. It had been a while since Dola touched her granddaughter's hair. "The Church Hat lets you do that too, Mom-Mom. Kinda like what we're doing now. You can even go inside Second A.M.E. and sit in your favorite spot. Wear your fave outfits."

"Can you take communion?"

"Let me check." Janene held up a device, scrolling through the screens. "It says you can participate in communion. Laying on of hands. You can jump, shout, get happy—"

"Girl, ain't nobody jumping with these knees."

"You know what I mean, Mom-Mom. It's a 3D sanctuary experience for elders. Miss Mabel's daughter bought her a Church Hat. And I heard Miss Everline is looking into getting one too."

A handful of grass was strewn on the nightstand. Dola stroked the blades. "I don't know why Everline needs a Church Hat. You know she's one of those C.M.E. saints. Only sets foot in the sanctuary on Christmas, Mother's Day, and Easter."

They laughed. Then Janene said, "Just think about it. I know it can get pretty lonely since Pop-Pop passed away."

She promised to drop off a bouquet of lilies the following week. Then she was gone. Dola stared out the window for a long time after Janene's hologram dissolved into the ethers from whence it had come. She tugged on her silver curls. Missing their closeness. Before the isolation, Janene used to do Dola's hair on Saturday nights. Dola sat in an armchair, eyes closed, head tilted forward, as her granddaughter stood over her, greasing her scalp. She parted those silver strands with a rattail comb, dabbed her finger in the jar of Blue Magic, and smoothed the dressing oil along the part. It was such a soothing feeling, the citrusy smell of bergamot so calming. Healing. No one had touched Dola's scalp in a long time.

Her mind resisted this new technology but the seed had been planted. Dola was curious. She missed going to church. More than communion with the other worshippers at Second, she missed showing off her outfits. She loved her richly-hued dresses and blazers, always starched and pressed. She missed pinning on the perfect brooch and donning just the right pair of earrings as she stood in her bedroom mirror admiring her reflection. No ensemble would be complete without a stunning headpiece. Wide-brimmed. Flared crown. Adorned with rhinestones or organza or bows. Dola had an extensive collection of colorful hats to match every outfit.

In her other life, she liked to arrive at least ten minutes before service began to say her hellos. She wanted to be seen by everyone. Make sure no one had outdone her clothing or her crown. She wanted to take in their appreciative glances and smiles as they remarked on how beautifully arrayed she was. Even their envy buoyed her. Old blue-haired Mabel looked her up and down every Sunday and not one compliment on how well put together Dola was.

The sound of raucous clapping yanked her out of her reverie. The praise and worship team stood on the stage behind the pulpit, launching into their song. The men had on jeans and sneakers. Some women wore skirts with no hose. Dola frowned. She could never get used to the fashions these young folks wore on hallowed ground. Her own mother would have knocked her clean into next week if she even thought about walking into the sanctuary bare-legged. The times had definitely changed since she was a girl. Back then, Second didn't even have praise and worship singers. The choir consisted of six or seven older ladies flinging off-key hymns up to Jesus. This praise team had at least thirty singers. Every week, a new group was zapped into the church. Dola didn't recognize any of them. It felt as if they were random entertainers competing for some televised singing contest.

“Sing, choir. Hallelujah!”

The voice belonged to Mabel. Her Saintcast was stationed in the row behind Dola's, which she noted as she walked in. Mabel's virtual image wore a mud-colored felt hat and matching blazer. Dola clucked to herself as she clapped along without enthusiasm to a song she didn't know. Mabel never could dress. Even now, when she had the option to select a vibrant outfit and jewelry, she decided on an unflattering drab ensemble.

Couldn't be me, but Jesus did say come as you are.

Dola sat in her room, substituting lyrics as she murmured along with the praise team. Her SpeechWave was turned off. Her pumps tapped the floor tiles, beating out a rhythmless dirge. There were no hymnals tucked into the back of the pews in this virtual Second A.M.E. No church fans. No plastic-wrapped red-and-white peppermint candies dug out from the bottom of someone's purse and passed along the rows like sweet communion wafers. No musky scent of her neighbor's perfume or the minty funk of bad breath. Dola only smelled her own perspiration.

Her head itched beneath the Church Hat. She was sweating out her curls. It would be nice to take the headset off and let her scalp breathe. But then she'd lose connection.

The music stopped. One by one, the singers left the stage. Finally, Reverend Butler's Clergycast vibrated behind the pulpit. He was a brown-skinned man in his mid-thirties who wore a goatee. His virtual image emitted a green light as he spoke. His great-grandfather, Herbert Butler, had founded Second A.M.E. and had been the senior pastor until he got sick and retired four years ago. Dola didn't like having a pastor younger than she was.

"That boy might know the Word, but he can't tell me a thing about life," Dola grumbled. She and her husband, Fred, were driving back home after the elder Butler announced to the congregation that he was stepping down. Dola wore her favorite church hat. It was an elegant purple and yellow wide-brimmed number with an organza rose on the side. She felt like the First Lady of Second.

"Well, you been sitting up under his granddaddy for nearly fifty years and ain't learned nothing," Fred said with a grin. She swatted at him. He thought the people at Second were phony. He loathed the drawn-out sermons. His arthritis had gotten so bad that sitting for a long time made his bones ache. Her husband was frugal too. The thought of stuffing a check in an envelope weekly to drop in the collection plate was wasteful to him.

"Like paying another bill," he often huffed.

In spite of his disdain for religion and arthritic joints, Fred always accompanied Dola to church, following behind her with his cane as she strutted all the way down the aisle to her favorite spot on the front pew. When the ushers passed that silver collection plate down their row with the wine-colored felt liner in the center, he tossed his dollar bill on top of her envelope. He didn't care much for the tuneless warbling of the church choir, but he loved a good gospel song. Not the old faithful hymns Dola's mother adored, like "Nearer My God to Thee" and "My Hope is Built on Nothing Less." He was rather fond of the newer artists Janene had downloaded onto his smart device. He and Dola often squabbled about which singers they were going to listen to on the car's Bluetooth-enabled stereo as they drove home from Second, so they settled on the Winans.

"Millions didn't make it / But I was one of the ones who did..."

The gospel family's lyrics floated through the car as Dola and her husband sang along—her strained soprano and Fred's warbly bass meshed with the damp, woody odor of his Aqua Velva cologne to create something both palpable and divine.

Dola hummed to herself as the virtual young minister prayed, lost in the memory. Fred would be so tickled by this new world. Grannies wearing fancy headsets to project themselves

into the sanctuary—the ones who could afford a Church Hat, that is. But he'd also be saddened to see how alone she was. He had gone on to glory right at the onset of the isolation, along with several other older members. Because the elderly were more susceptible to the perishing sickness, they were on a stricter lockdown. Dola had not stepped outdoors for nearly two years. Never thought she'd live to see the day she was walled off from the sun. Outside of their weekly HoloCalls, she was only able to behold her granddaughter's face through a glass divider. She always asked Janene to bring her something alive during those brief visits—tomatoes still on the vine, flowers, even a handful of grass. Even though the tomato skin puckered and the lilies curled up and turned brown in the vase and the grass withered on her night stand, those transitory tactile things were more alive to her than any digital sanctuary.

“The doors of the church are now open.”

Dola wasn't sure if she had fallen asleep or been so immersed in her remembrances that she lost track of time, but Reverend Butler was giving the altar call. The young man stood to the side of the pulpit, looking so studious in his blazer and jeans. He glanced around at the congregation, holding out his hand. For one brief second, he locked eyes with Dola. But that couldn't be, could it? He was on his headset and she was on hers. Reverend Butler couldn't really see *her*. Could he? She was in her room and he was in his. Or in his car. Or in his church office. He could be anywhere.

Tentatively, Dola waved her hand over a sensor on the Church Hat, activating her SpeechWave. Her Saintcast glowed red in the pew as she cleared her throat. The young minister nodded at her. His eyes were kind.

“Are you rededicating your life to Christ, Sister Dola?” A greenish tinge enveloped him.

“No, Reverend Butler. I would just like prayer.”

“The prayer ministry will be happy to pray with you after the benediction or you can send your request through our church app.”

“I need prayer now, Reverend Butler.”

Dola was surprised by the urgency in her voice, a boldness that echoed in her room and rumbled throughout the virtual sanctuary like a lesser god realizing his divinity. Her scalp itched again beneath the Church Hat. Moisture made her kitchen swell. She fingered the tangled strands.

The young minister smiled, although Dola suspected he wasn't too pleased that she had interrupted the order of service.

“How can we lift you up today, Sister Dola?”

“I need—” She faltered. She patted the nightstand until she felt a patch of dying grass. It whispered beneath her fingertips. “I want to be touched.”

The crimson glow faded as her Saintcast stopped speaking. No one had ever laid hands on her in this version of Second A.M.E., although Janene assured her the device was capable of such a sacred interaction.

Reverend Butler hesitated for a moment, then stepped down from the pulpit. He walked up the aisle, past her Saintcast. Dola’s breath quickened. Lord, he was heading toward *her!* Mabel’s Saintcast turned to watch his ascent. As did the other virtual congregants. Dola straightened her purple blazer. She closed her eyes and bowed her head. In the darkness, she heard his footfalls approaching, sneakers squeaking on the tiles. She inhaled the scent of his Aqua Velva, such a heavy, woody odor for a young man. Dola sang softly under her breath.

“Millions didn’t make it / But I was one of the ones who did...”

A warmth flooded her chest. This was communion. Here, in this darkness, as a synthetic organ played softly, keys pressed by an unseen hand. Dola’s head felt lighter as her favorite purple and yellow church hat was lifted from her head, freeing her silver curls at last. Cool air tickled her scalp.

A hand touched her shoulder. Shaking her. Her eyes flew open.

“Miss Dola? It’s time for lunch.”

A white man in a Hazmat suit stood near her armchair, wearing gloves. He held her headset aloft.

“Looks like you dozed off again watching your favorite program.”

The attendant placed her Church Hat in the closet then wheeled a tray of food over to her. Unseasoned chicken, bland mashed potatoes and green beans that had long since lost their vibrance. Dola stared at the plate as if trying to orient herself in the room, then down at her plain house dress. Her fingers went to her head, rubbing the sparse strands.

“Better eat now before your food gets cold, Miss Dola. Gotta keep your strength up.” The man’s voice was muffled beneath his visor.

“I was waiting for prayer.”

“Excuse me?”

“I was waiting for somebody to pray for me.”

“Finish your meal first. I’ll ask the chaplain to come by your window later. He’s visiting with some residents down the hall.”

Dola glanced at the door, then at the small window next to it. Beyond the glass, nurses walked the hallways wearing Hazmat suits, their rubber-soled shoes squeaking on the floor tiles. She was still a resident of the nursing home, but she was no longer bound by these four walls. Something had shifted. Collapsed. Reverend Butler had almost reached through the sanctuary and touched her. She was sure of it. Not his Clergycast. *Him*. And if that young boy could leave his world and come to her, no telling where she could go.

Dola hummed as she chewed a green bean. It was tasteless. One day, she would have her own garden. She suddenly wanted Janene, not the hollow version of her granddaughter that beamed into her room weekly. The one who greased her scalp and brought her fresh tomatoes on the vine. They’d have a meal together soon.

The attendant studied her face, his breath fogging up the visor. Then he scooped up the dead grass from the night stand with a gloved hand and tossed it into the trash.