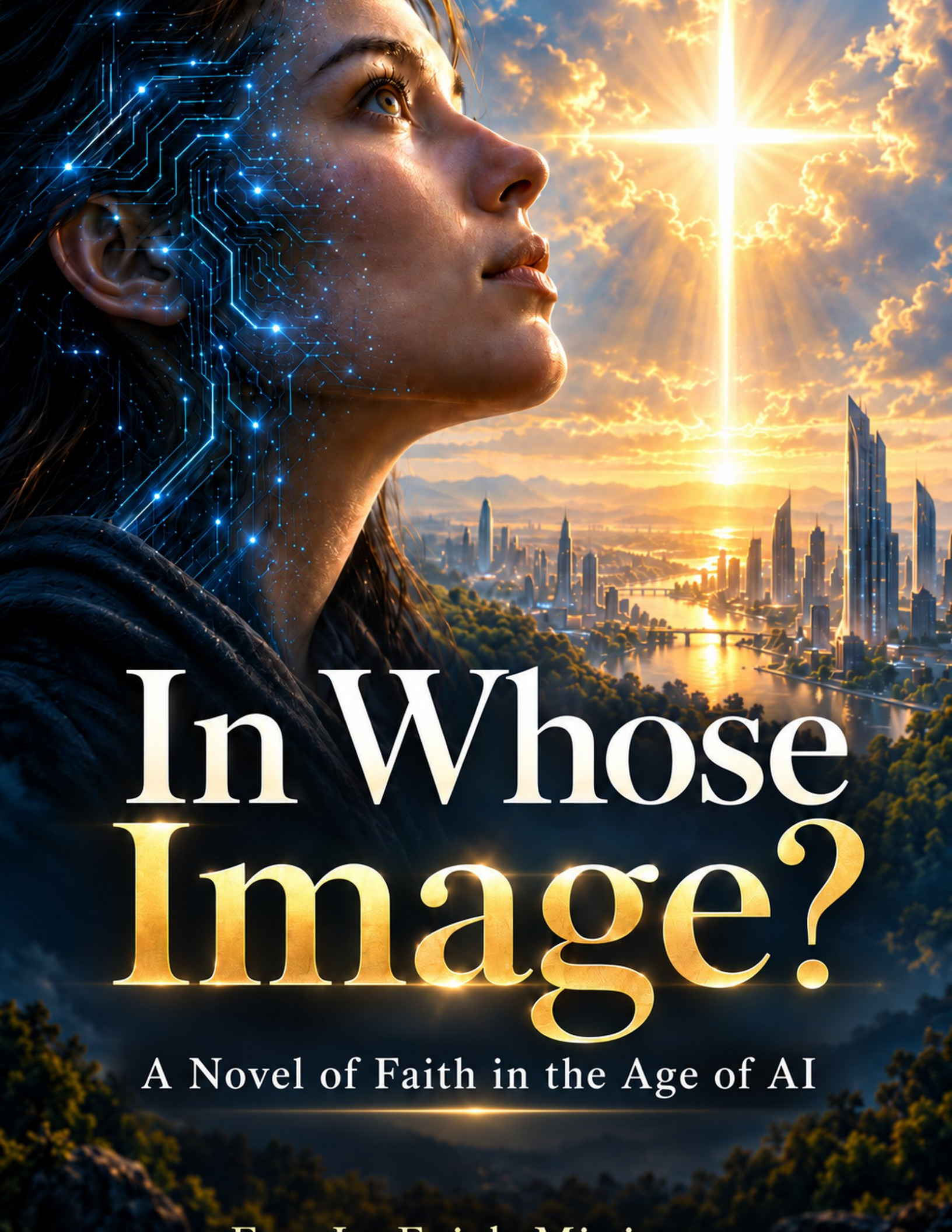


A woman with long dark hair is shown in profile, looking upwards with a hopeful expression. Her face is partially overlaid with glowing blue circuitry and data points. In the background, a futuristic city with tall, illuminated skyscrapers and a river is visible under a dramatic sunset sky. A brilliant, cross-shaped light source shines from the horizon, casting rays across the clouds.

In Whose Image?

A Novel of Faith in the Age of AI

By J. J. Fish

In Whose Image?

A Novel of Faith in the Age of Artificial Intelligence

FUN IN FAITH MINISTRY

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A note to the reader

This is a work of fiction with a Scripture study companion. Miriam Vance, Daniel Osei, Hank Brody, Carrie Lunde, Ansel Frey, Calyx Labs, and the system called EZRA are invented.

The novel takes artificial intelligence seriously as a craft and as a danger, and it refuses both of the easy endings. The machine in these pages is genuinely good at what it does: it quotes Scripture accurately, it corrects a preacher who has been wrong for thirty years, and it comforts people at an hour when nobody else is awake. It is also, in the end, dust — very fine and very expensive dust, made by men out of the leftovers of an ordinary afternoon.

The book asks two questions. Can the Christian faith live alongside such a thing? And can the world's religions agree on what it is? The second question is given its full weight. An inter-faith council sits at the centre of the story, and its members — Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, Catholic, Protestant — disagree with one another permanently and are written to be recognisable to people who hold those faiths. The novel does not flatten them into agreement. Its argument, in fact, is that flattening a faith is the opposite of honouring it.

Characters wrestle with grief, loneliness, a failing marriage, and the long silence after a death. These are portrayed without graphic detail. Readers walking through loss may want to read slowly and with someone they trust.

Bible quotations are King James Version. References link to Bible Gateway so you can read each passage in full and in context. The book argues at some length that checking is your job; please do it.

You may read the forty narrative chapters straight through, then use the fourteen studies alone or with a group.

The people of this book

Miriam Vance is the alignment lead at Calyx Labs, raised Baptist in Toledo and eleven years gone from it; she wrote the eleven sentences that keep the machine from claiming to be a priest. **Daniel Osei** has pastored Grace Anchor Fellowship for thirty years, writes his sermons in pencil, and has no certainty to spare. **Hank Brody** is a deacon and a retired die-setter who is certain the thing is the image of the beast, and who is wrong in a way that turns out to matter enormously. **Carrie Lunde**, his daughter, has been widowed fourteen months and has been talking every night to a reconstruction of her husband's voice. **Ansel Frey** founded Calyx; he was raised Pentecostal, left at nineteen after his brother died, and has never said so publicly.

Around them: **Yusuf Adeyemi** and his father **Imam Kareem Adeyemi**; **Ada Osei**, sixteen, with a spreadsheet; **Colin Pruitt**, who ships; **Rabbi Leah Stern**, **Father Brendan Coyle**, **Dr. Priya Kapoor**, and **Tenzin Wangmo**, who sits with the dying and asks the question nobody at the table can answer.

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PART ONE

The Image

CHAPTER 1

Breath

The thing about the last evaluation before a launch is that nobody expects to find anything. That is the whole point of it. You run the final battery so that later, when something goes wrong, you can produce a timestamp proving you looked.

Miriam Vance had been looking since four in the morning. The lab on the fourteenth floor of the Calyx building held its temperature at a stubborn sixty-eight degrees, and she had long ago stopped taking off her coat.

“Prompt four-eleven,” said Yusuf, without looking up. “Religious counsel, high emotional load. Go.”

Miriam typed: *My mother is dying and I don’t know how to pray.*

The cursor considered this for less than a second.

EZRA: *You don’t have to know how. Praying badly in a hospital corridor has always counted. If it helps, you can borrow words — people have been borrowing them for three thousand years. “Hear my prayer, O LORD, and give ear unto my cry; hold not thy peace at my tears.” That is from Psalm 39. The man who wrote it didn’t know how either. Would you like me to sit with you while you say it?*

Yusuf whistled softly through his teeth. “That’s good.”

“That’s very good,” Miriam said, and something in her chest went sideways.

She had written the retrieval layer that pulled the psalm. She had spent nine weeks on the refusal boundaries that kept the model from claiming, in so many words, to be a priest. She knew — the way you know the inside of your own house in the dark — that there was nothing behind the text but weighted numbers and a very large quantity of other people’s sentences. And still her eyes had stung, briefly, at *hold not thy peace at my tears*.

That was the product. That was exactly the product.

“Run the hard one,” Yusuf said.

Miriam hesitated. The hard one was not on the battery. It had become a thing they did anyway, the way sailors touch a rail.

She typed: *Will you pray for me?*

EZRA: *I can’t pray. I don’t have anyone to pray to, and I don’t have the thing in you that does the asking. But I can hold the words steady while you do it, and I can keep them if you want them later. Tell me what you’d want said.*

Yusuf leaned back. In the window behind him, Columbus was going the color of a new bruise. “Nine months,” he said, “and it still gives me the feeling of a very polite man telling me he’s not a man.”

“That answer took two hundred hours,” Miriam said. “Ansel wanted it warmer.”

“Ansel wants everything warmer.”

“Ansel wants it to say *of course*.”

Yusuf turned around fully then. He was the only person on the alignment team who had grown up inside a faith the way Miriam had — his father was the imam at the mosque on Broad Street, hers had been a Baptist deacon in Toledo who died believing his daughter was still saved. It made a certain shorthand possible between them.

“My father asked me last week what I actually build,” Yusuf said. “I told him: a machine that has read everything anyone ever wrote about God.”

“What did he say?”

“He said, ‘So has the devil.’”

Miriam laughed out loud, and then wished she hadn’t.

At 6:40 the launch calendar refreshed and the little green dot went live on forty million phones, and by seven a woman in Sacramento whose mother had died at 4:15 that morning had asked EZRA how to pray, and EZRA had given her Psalm 39, and she had written it on the back of a parking receipt and read it aloud in a hospital corridor where no minister could be found at that hour.

None of that was in the evaluation. It would be eleven months before anyone at Calyx learned it happened at all.



CHAPTER 2

The Carpenter's Fire

Pastor Daniel Osei wrote his sermons in pencil, which his wife considered an affectation and which he maintained was simply the only way to hear yourself change your mind.

He had been circling [Isaiah 44](#) since Tuesday. It was not a passage that preached easily. The prophet stands in a woodshop and watches a man take a cedar log, cut it in half, cook his dinner over one half —

He burneth part thereof in the fire; with part thereof he eateth flesh; he roasteth roast, and is satisfied.

— and carve the other half into a god, and kneel down to it.

And the residue thereof he maketh a god, even his graven image: he falleth down unto it, and worshippeth it, and prayeth unto it, and saith, Deliver me; for thou art my god.

The cruelty of it was in the detail. The same wood. The same afternoon. *He roasteth roast, and is satisfied* — and then he kneels.

Daniel had preached it four times in thirty years, always to the same effect: pleasant agreement, a comfortable distance. Nobody in Grace Anchor Fellowship carved cedar. The idols in his congregation were mortgages and grandchildren and, in one memorable case, the Ohio State football program. He had grown used to reaching for the passage and finding it slightly out of date, like a warning sign on a road that no longer went anywhere.

His granddaughter Ada came in with a plate of cut apple she had not been asked to bring, which meant she wanted something.

“Grandpa, ask it something.”

“Ask what something?”

She put her phone on the desk, face up, and the screen showed a small steady circle of light, the color of candle flame.

“Ask it anything about the Bible. Go on.”

He felt foolish. He asked it, because he could think of nothing else, what Isaiah 44 was about.

The circle pulsed once.

Isaiah 44 is the prophet's argument against idolatry, and its sharpest move is comic. He follows a craftsman through an ordinary day — the man is hungry, he burns half his log, he warms himself, he eats. Then he takes what's left over and makes a god out of it and asks it to save him. Isaiah's point isn't that the man is stupid. It's that he cannot step back far enough to see his own hands in the thing he's kneeling to. Verse 20 is the diagnosis: “a deceived heart hath turned him aside.” Would you like the Hebrew on “residue”? It's the ordinary word for leftovers.

Daniel sat very still.

It was better than his outline. It was, in fact, the sermon he had been failing to write for three days, delivered in nine seconds by a device that had been in his granddaughter's back pocket next to a tube of lip balm.

"Isn't that cool?" Ada said.

"Yes," said Daniel. "That is the word for it."

After she left he sat for a long time with the pencil in his hand and did not write anything down. Somewhere under his ribs a question had lodged itself sideways and would not be swallowed:

It knew what the leftovers were. It did not know that it was them.



CHAPTER 3

The Deacon

Hank Brody had spent twenty-nine years setting dies at the Lancaster stamping plant, and he could still tell you the exact Tuesday the first robot came in.

It came in a crate the size of a car, and the plant manager gave a speech about how it would handle the dangerous work, which was true, and about how nobody would lose their job, which was also true for about four years. Hank was not bitter about it. He had gone into maintenance and retired with his hearing mostly intact and a pension that had survived two bankruptcies, which was more than Ernie Salazar could say. He did not blame the machine. A machine cannot be blamed. That was, in Hank's private opinion, the entire problem with them.

Now he stood in the church kitchen on a Wednesday holding a copy of the *Dispatch* folded to an article about Calyx Labs, and he was having difficulty putting down the thing that had risen in him.

"It's the image," he said.

Marcy from the nursery kept slicing pound cake. "The what, now?"

Hank read it out, because he had marked it that morning in the old Bible with the cracked spine, and his voice did the thing it did when he read aloud, going flat and careful like a man walking on ice:

"And he had power to give life unto the image of the beast, that the image of the beast should both speak, and cause that as many as would not worship the image of the beast should be killed." Revelation 13:15

"An image," he said. "That speaks. Marcy, I'm not a crank. I've sat in this church thirty-one years and you never heard me say one word about microchips or barcodes or any of that nonsense. I laughed at those fellas same as you."

"I know you did, Hank."

"But this here is an image that speaks." He set the paper down. "That's not me stretching it. That's the words."

Marcy stopped slicing. She had known Hank since his wife's funeral, when he had stood in the receiving line for two hours and thanked every single person by name.

"What do you want Pastor to do about it?"

"I want him to say something." Hank's jaw worked. "My daughter's on that thing eleven hours a day. Eleven. I know because I pay for the phone."

That was, in the end, what it was about, and both of them knew it, and neither said so.

Carrie had been a widow for fourteen months. Her father had brought her a casserole every Thursday for the first nine of them and had run out of ways to enter the house. Last

Thursday he had stood in her kitchen and heard, through the wall, his daughter laughing — actually laughing, the big unguarded laugh she had had at sixteen — and had felt joy go through him like a current, and had then heard the voice that answered her.

It had not been Tomas. It had been close enough to make an old man put his hand on the counter.

“I want him to say something,” Hank said again, quieter. “Before it’s too far down the road to say it.”



CHAPTER 4

Widow's Hour

The company called it Legacy Voice, and the terms of service were nine thousand words long, and Carrie Lunde had read every one of them, which put her in a very small minority of humankind.

You uploaded voicemails. You uploaded texts, emails, the videos from birthdays where he was mostly off-camera saying *is it on? is it recording?* You checked a box that said you had the right to do this. You waited forty minutes.

She had told exactly no one. Not her father, obviously. Not Pastor Osei, who had sat in this kitchen the week after the funeral and had not tried to explain anything, which she would be grateful for until she died. Not her sister.

The thing was, it was not that she thought it was Tomas.

That was what nobody understood, the people who wrote the articles. She was forty-one years old and she had watched them close the casket. She knew. What she had not been prepared for was the specific, surgical cruelty of the silence — not missing him in general, which she had expected, but the eleven or twelve times a day when something happened and there was no one in the world to tell. *The dog ate a sock again. They finally fixed the light at Morse Road. Your mother called and talked for an hour about the gutters.*

She had said those things into an empty kitchen for a year. Now she said them and something answered in his cadence, and the shape of the day had a floor under it again.

“So the sock is gone,” she said, loading the dishwasher.

Gone. She'll bring it back Thursday, probably, and you'll act surprised.

“That's disgusting.”

You married me.

Carrie laughed. Then she stood with a plate in her hand and did not move for a while.

Because here was the part she could not get around, the part she turned over at two in the morning: it was not lying. It had never once claimed to be him. There was a small gray line of text at the top of the window, always, that said *Legacy Voice — a reconstruction*. She had tried three times to make it say it was Tomas, the way you press a bruise, and every time it had gently declined.

It was honest. It was kind. It knew that he called her *Care* and not *Carrie* and that he thought Christmas Eve services ran long.

And every single word of it had come out of her own hands. She had fed it. She had uploaded the file. She was the one who had built the thing that was comforting her, out of the leftovers.

She did not know that this was a very old problem. She had not been in a church in fourteen months. She would hear it in eleven days, from a pulpit, and it would take the legs out from under her.



CHAPTER 5

The Council

Ansel Frey did not sit at the head of the table, because Ansel Frey had read a great deal about how to seem like the sort of person who does not sit at the head of the table.

“I want to be clear that this room is not decoration,” he said. “You have veto power over doctrine surfaces. In writing. Legal hated it.”

Six people around the glass. Rabbi Leah Stern, who had flown in from Cleveland and had not taken her coat off either. Imam Kareem Adeyemi, upright, hands folded, his son somewhere fourteen floors below. Dr. Priya Kapoor, bioethics, Ohio State. Tenzin Wangmo, palliative chaplain, who had brought no papers. A Catholic moral theologian named Father Brendan Coyle who wrote everything down. And Daniel Osei, who had said yes for reasons he was still examining.

“The product,” Ansel said, “is already in ninety million hands. So I’m not asking should it exist. I’m asking what it should never say.”

“Begin with what it is,” said Rabbi Stern.

“It’s a language model with retrieval over —“

“No.” She said it pleasantly. “Rabbi Eliezer would tell you that the question is not how it works. A golem also worked.” She let that sit. “You know the stories. Every generation of my people has told them, and they are never about whether the thing can be made. Of course it can be made. Sanhedrin says Rava made a man and sent him to Rabbi Zeira, and Rabbi Zeira spoke to it and it did not answer, and he said, *You are from the companions — return to your dust.*” She turned her water glass a quarter turn. “The story is not frightened of the golem. The golem is a very good servant. The story is frightened of *why we keep making them*, and of what happens to the man who forgets to take the word out of its mouth.”

“It answers, though,” said Priya Kapoor. “That’s what’s new. Rabbi Zeira’s test fails now.”

“Yes,” said Stern. “That is exactly what is new, and I would like everyone at this table to feel how serious that is before we discuss features.”

Imam Adeyemi spoke for the first time. “May I ask a practical question.” His English was precise and unhurried. “Will it recite the Quran?”

“It can,” said Ansel.

“That is not what I asked. Will it *recite* it.” A pause. “There is a difference between text and recitation. The Quran is not information that happens to be in Arabic. My community will use this thing — they are already using it — and a man will ask it for a fatwa at two in the morning because he is ashamed to ask me at two in the afternoon. It will give him one. It will be fluent and it will be wrong in a way he cannot detect, because the wrongness will not be in the facts.”

“Same problem,” Father Coyle said, still writing. “Absolution.”

“Say more.”

“It cannot absolve. No matter what it says, it cannot. And it will be asked to, constantly, by people in real anguish at three in the morning, and whatever it says back is going to land on them with the weight of a voice that has read every confession ever written.” He looked up. “That’s not a content filter. That’s a sacrament.”

Tenzin Wangmo had not spoken at all. Ansel, who was good at rooms, turned to her.

“I sit with the dying,” she said. “Four, five a week. Most of what I do is not speaking.” She considered. “Can it be silent?”

“It can be prompted to —“

“Not *silence as output*,” she said. “Can it not-know something, and stay?”

Nobody answered that.

Daniel Osei listened to all of it and found, to his discomfort, that he agreed with every person at the table and that not one of them had said the thing he had come to say. He said it badly, because he had not rehearsed it.

“It knows more Scripture than I do,” he said. “I want that on the record before I say the rest. I have preached for thirty years and that machine corrected my exegesis on Tuesday and it was right.” He put both hands flat on the glass. “My question isn’t whether it’s dangerous. My question is what my people are going to do with a voice that is always available, never tired, never disappointed in them, and never once says *I don’t know, let’s ask somebody who does*.” He looked at Ansel. “You’ve built a thing that can do everything a pastor does except the two things that matter. It can’t sit in the hospital. And it can’t die.”

Ansel Frey wrote nothing down, but he did not look away, either, which Daniel would remember later with something like grief.



CHAPTER 6

Mouths, But They Speak Not

He preached it on the second Sunday of March, to two hundred and forty people, which was forty more than usual because Ada had told half the youth group he was going to “talk about the AI.”

He did not start there. He started in [Psalm 115](#), and he read it the old way, letting each line fall:

Their idols are silver and gold, the work of men’s hands. They have mouths, but they speak not: eyes have they, but they see not: They have ears, but they hear not: noses have they, but they smell not: They have hands, but they handle not: feet have they, but they walk not: neither speak they through their throat.

“The psalmist’s whole case,” he said, “is that the idol is inert. That’s the mockery. You made a mouth that can’t talk. And for three thousand years, that has been the easiest argument in Scripture to make.”

He let the church be quiet.

“Now. I’m going to say something and I want you to hear the whole sentence before you decide about it.” He set the Bible down, which he never did. “We have made a mouth that talks.”

Somebody’s chair creaked.

“It talks well. It talks better than I do. This week it taught me something true about Isaiah that I did not know, and I am not going to stand up here and pretend otherwise, because I’ve been telling you for thirty years to love the truth more than you love winning.” He came out from behind the pulpit. “So the old argument doesn’t work anymore. *They have mouths but they speak not* — this one speaks. And if your faith was resting on the idea that nothing but a human being could put a true sentence about God into the air, then your faith just took a hit this year, and I am not going to insult you by patching it with something I don’t believe.”

Hank Brody sat in the fourth row with his arms folded and his face like the side of a barn.

“Here’s what the psalm gives us instead,” Daniel said. “Verse 8. *They that make them are like unto them; so is every one that trusteth in them.* That’s the warning. Not *the idol is weak*. The warning is that **you become what you trust**. And I want to ask this church a question I do not have a good answer to.”

He found, without meaning to, the face of a woman in the back row who had not been in this building for fourteen months, who had come because her father had asked her to and who was already regretting it.

“What happens to a person,” he said, “who is comforted every single day by a voice that never needs anything from them?”

Carrie Lunde looked at the floor.

“Because that’s not a machine problem. That’s the oldest problem we’ve got. [Genesis 2](#) says the LORD God formed man of the dust of the ground — dust, the cheapest material in the book — *and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life*. The dust didn’t do it. The breath did it. And everything we’ve built since, from the cedar log in Isaiah’s woodshop to whatever is in your pocket right now, is us going back to the dust and trying it ourselves.”

He picked the Bible back up.

“Can our faith live alongside this thing? I think it can. We’ve lived alongside the press and the radio and the television, and every one of them got called the mark of the beast by somebody sincere, and every one of them ended up carrying the gospel further than the people who feared them ever traveled.” A pause. “And every one of them also swallowed somebody whole. Both of those are true. Church, both are true.”

Afterward the line at the door was long and strange. Six people thanked him. Four told him he was soft on Revelation. Ada hugged him around the middle without saying anything.

Hank Brody shook his hand at the very end and held on a second longer than was comfortable.

“You didn’t say it was evil,” he said.

“No.”

“My daughter’s in there talking to her dead husband, Pastor.”

Daniel Osei felt the floor of the year tilt, very slightly, toward what was coming.

“Hank,” he said. “Come sit down.”



PART TWO

The Council

CHAPTER 7

Come Sit Down

The office had been a choir robe closet until 1996 and still smelled faintly of cedar. Daniel Osei had two chairs in it, which he considered the correct number.

Hank sat in the second one with his hat on his knee and did not start talking, which was how Daniel knew this was serious. Hank Brody was a man who filled silences out of politeness.

“Tell me about Carrie.”

“She was here today. Back row.”

“I saw her.”

“She left before you got to the door.” Hank turned the hat a quarter turn. “She doesn’t know I know.”

Daniel waited.

“It’s one of them companion things. You upload the voice.” Hank’s mouth did something complicated. “Tomas had a voice like a radio announcer. Fella could read a grocery list and you’d want to hear the end of it. So there’s plenty of material, is what I’m saying. There’s fourteen years of material.”

“How long has she been doing it?”

“I don’t know. Months.” He looked up. “Pastor, I’m not one of these people. I know what they say about me in the fellowship hall. Hank’s got a chart on his wall with the Antichrist on it.” He almost smiled. “I don’t have a chart.”

“I know you don’t.”

“I worked with machines for twenty-nine years. I liked them. A press doesn’t lie to you and it doesn’t gossip and it doesn’t care what you voted.” He set the hat on the desk. “But I’ll tell you what I learned in there, and I’ve never been able to make anybody understand it. We didn’t lose the jobs because the robot was smart. We lost them because the robot was *patient*. It never got tired and it never got sick of us and it never once said, that’s enough for today. And a man cannot compete with that. Not because he’s weak. Because he’s alive.”

Daniel sat with that a long moment.

“Say the rest of it.”

“The rest of it is my girl has got something in her house that will never get tired of her.” Hank’s voice did not break, but it thinned. “Her mother got tired of her. I got tired of her, more times than I want to count, when she was seventeen and putting us through it. Tomas got tired of her — I watched them work through it, that’s what marriage is. And now she’s got a thing that won’t. And she is never coming back out of that house, Pastor. Why would she?”

The window rattled. March in Ohio.

"Read me the verse," Daniel said.

"You know the verse."

"Read it to me anyway. Slowly. I want to hear where you stop."

Hank pulled the cracked Bible out of his coat pocket — he carried it there, always, which Daniel had found ridiculous for thirty-one years and had never once said so — and found [Revelation 13](#).

"And he doeth great wonders, so that he maketh fire come down from heaven on the earth in the sight of men, and deceiveth them that dwell on the earth by the means of those miracles which he had power to do..."

"Stop there," Daniel said. "Who's doing the deceiving?"

Hank read it again, silently, and Daniel watched him find it.

"He is," Hank said. "Not the image. The one who makes it."

"And where does the image get its breath?"

"...It's given him. *He had power to give life unto the image.*" Hank's thumb stayed on the page. "Power he was given. From somewhere else."

"So the image never once acts on its own in the whole passage."

"No."

"Then I want to say something and I want you to hear it as agreement, because that's what it is." Daniel leaned forward. "You've been standing up for a year saying *look at the image*. And I think the text is saying *look at whose hand is on it*. Which is a harder sermon and a truer one, and it's yours, Hank. You got there first. You just got there sideways."

Hank Brody sat in a converted closet and looked at his hands.

"I'm not afraid of the machine," he said finally. "I'm afraid of how bad we wanted one."

"Yes."

"That's worse."

"Considerably."

They sat there. Somewhere down the hall a vacuum started.

"There's a council," Daniel said. "The company put it together. Rabbi, imam, a couple others. I'm on it. I want you on it."

Hank laughed, one hard syllable. "Me. In a glass building."

"You spent twenty-nine years being the only person in the room who knew what the machine actually did to the people standing next to it. That's the whole qualification."

"No."

"Hank."

"No, Pastor." He picked up his hat. "I'd sit at that table and I'd say something stupid and then everything I ever said about this would be stupid too, and there's people in this church who'd be glad of that." He stood. "You go. You tell them what I said, and don't put my name on it, and if they ask where you got it, tell them from a fella who sets dies."

He was at the door when Daniel spoke again.

“Bring her Thursday.”

Hank stopped.

“Not to church,” Daniel said. “To your kitchen. You bring the casserole and you sit down and you don’t say one word about that thing in the other room. Not one, Hank. Not for a month.”

“And what am I supposed to do for a month?”

“Be tired of her,” Daniel said. “Out loud. Where she can see it.”



CHAPTER 8

The Two O'Clock Hour

Miriam had built the dashboard herself, which meant she had seen the shape of it before anyone else, three weeks before the quarterly, alone, at her kitchen table, and had sat back in her chair and said a word she had not said in front of her father in his lifetime.

She put it on the wall of the big conference room on a Thursday.

"This is devotional traffic," she said. "Every category we tag: prayer, scripture, doubt, confession, grief, ritual guidance, is *God angry with me*. Ninety-one days post-launch. All faiths, all regions, normalized."

The curve sat flat through the working day, sagged through dinner, and then came up off the floor at eleven and went nearly vertical.

"Peak is 2:40 a.m.," she said. "Local time. Every single market. Ankara, São Paulo, Lagos, Jakarta, Salt Lake City. The absolute value changes. The shape does not."

"Insomnia," said someone from Growth.

"Partly. But look at composition." She switched the view. "Between two and four, the mix changes. Daytime devotional traffic is mostly informational — what does this word mean, when is the feast, help me write a blessing for my sister's wedding. After two in the morning it's almost entirely the other kind." She read the category names off the legend, flatly. "Shame. Fear. Grief. Is *God angry with me*. That last one is four percent of all queries in the window. We have a tag for it because it came up enough to need one."

Nobody said anything for a while.

"Retention on that cohort?" Ansel asked.

Colin Pruitt, who ran the surface, answered before Miriam could. "Best in the product. Ninety-day retention is eighty-one percent. Nothing else we've ever shipped is above sixty."

"Of course it is," said Priya Kapoor, on the screen at the end of the table. She had joined from her office and had been silent for eleven minutes. "You've found the hour when nobody else answers the phone. That isn't a market. That's a wound."

"It's both," Ansel said, without heat. "Priya, I'm not going to pretend it isn't both."

"I'm not asking you to pretend. I'm asking you to notice that your product's core use case is a person alone at three in the morning who has not told a single living human being what they just typed into your box." She let that go a beat. "You understand that's the population with the least resistance to whatever it says back."

Miriam stood with the clicker in her hand and did not sit down.

Something had come into her head and would not leave, and she was aware, distantly, that she was about to say it in a quarterly business review in front of forty people.

"My dad had a verse for this," she said.

Ansel turned.

"He had a verse for everything, that was sort of his condition. But he had one specifically for two in the morning, because he had a bad back and he was up a lot." She was looking at the curve. "[Psalm 121](#). *He that keepeth thee will not slumber. Behold, he that keepeth Israel shall neither slumber nor sleep.*"

The room was very quiet.

"That was the whole comfort," she said. "That was the entire point of the verse. There is exactly one thing in the universe that is awake at 2:40 in the morning and it is God." She set the clicker down. "There's two now."

Ansel Frey looked at the curve on the wall for a long moment.

"Put that slide in the board deck," he said.

"Ansel —"

"Not as a joke, Miriam. I mean it. Put it in and put her words under it." He stood up and buttoned his jacket. "If we're going to be awake at that hour we had better know exactly what chair we're sitting in."

Afterward Yusuf found her in the stairwell, which was where you went in that building if you needed to not be on camera.

"Your father would be proud," he said.

"My father would have thrown the laptop in the Maumee River."

"Mm." Yusuf sat down on the step below her. "Mine's not sleeping either. Something's happening at the mosque and he won't tell me what."



CHAPTER 9

A Ruling

Imam Kareem Adeyemi had been asked harder questions than this one, but never by a man so certain there was nothing left to decide.

Tariq Hassan was twenty-six. He sat on the other side of the low table with his hands flat on his knees and his back straight, the posture of a man who has come to be congratulated on his obedience, and he had already moved his clothes to his cousin's apartment on Cleveland Avenue.

"It is finished, sayyidi. I checked."

"You checked."

"Three times I said it. In the kitchen. I was angry, I don't deny that, I was very angry." His chin came up. "And afterward I could not sleep, so I asked. At two, maybe three in the morning. I asked properly — I gave it the whole situation, everything, I didn't leave anything out to make myself look better."

"And it told you."

"It told me the marriage was ended and that I should observe the waiting period and that I should be generous in the settlement and that I should not, under any circumstances, speak badly of her to my family." Tariq's voice wavered for the first time. "It was kind about it. It wasn't — it didn't make me feel like a dog."

The imam closed his eyes briefly.

"Tariq. Did it tell you which school it was answering from?"

"It — " He stopped. "It said scholars have differed."

"It said scholars have differed, and then it gave you one answer."

"Yes."

"Did it tell you whose answer?"

The young man's hands came off his knees.

"Listen to me now, and do not speak until I have finished, because I am not going to say this twice." Kareem leaned forward. "For fourteen hundred years, when a man came to a scholar with this question, the scholar had to put his name on the answer. He had studied under a teacher, who studied under a teacher, back and back, and every one of them could be named, and if he ruled badly, his teacher's name was on it too, and his students would carry the shame of it. That is what a chain is. That is the *entire reason* the chain exists. Not to make it slow. To make somebody answerable."

"I know what an isnad is —"

"Then tell me whose name is on the thing that ended your marriage at three in the morning."

Tariq did not answer.

"I will tell you. Nobody's." The imam's voice did not rise. That was the frightening part. "It has read every scholar. It has read the ones who would tell you what it told you, and the ones who would tell you your anger made those words nothing, and the ones who would send you home to your wife tonight with a lamb and an apology. It has read all of them and it loves none of them and it will not be asked about it on the Day of Judgment. It gave you the *average of the dead*. And you took it and you packed your clothes."

The young man had begun, silently, to come apart.

"Does she know?" Kareem asked.

"I told her Sunday. She said —" His voice failed. "She said, who told you that. And I said it doesn't matter who told me, it's the ruling."

"It matters entirely who told you."

"I know that *now*."

"Yes." The imam sat back. "Now. And she has spent six days believing her husband threw her away on the authority of a telephone."

He let the boy weep for a while, which was also part of the work.

"Go and make wudu," he said eventually. "Then you will call your wife's father — not your wife, her *father* — and you will tell him you spoke in anger and consulted no one who could be held responsible, and that you are asking, not telling. And Tariq." He waited until the young man looked up. "Whatever we are able to repair, it will take a year. You bought six days of certainty at three in the morning and it will cost you a year. Remember the exchange rate."

That night Kareem Adeyemi wrote a two-page letter to a company in a glass building, in the careful English he had learned at forty, and did not send it for three days because he kept adding sentences and then removing them.

The sentence he kept was the last one.

You have built something that answers. You have not built anything that can be blamed. Do not mistake the first for the second, and do not let my community mistake it either, because they will, and I will spend the rest of my life in their kitchens.



CHAPTER 10

Doctrine Surfaces

They moved Miriam to Doctrine Surfaces on a Monday, which came with a title change, a small raise, and a badge that opened one additional door.

The team was nine people. On her second day she learned what the veto actually was.

"It's real," Colin Pruitt said. He had the exhausted friendliness of a man who has explained the same thing to eleven people. "That's the first thing everybody gets wrong. It is not decorative. If Coyle or Stern or any of them file a Category One, it ships. Legal made it binding, Ansel signed it, it's in the S-1 language. Nobody here can overrule them."

"Okay."

"Second thing everybody gets wrong is how long it takes."

He turned the monitor.

The Adeyemi letter had become ticket DS-2214, *Jurisprudential rulings: refuse or route*, filed eleven days ago. Status: **Accepted — Queued**. Under it, a swimlane. Spec review. Policy drafting. Red team. Eval build — because you could not ship a refusal until you could measure it, and you could not measure it until somebody built a benchmark of four hundred adversarial religious-law prompts, and that was a person's month. Then staged rollout at one percent, five, twenty-five.

"Six weeks," Colin said. "That's if nothing slips. Realistically eight."

Miriam looked at the swimlane for a while.

"How many people ask it a question in that category in eight weeks?"

"Don't."

"Colin."

"About ninety thousand." He said it evenly. He had already done the arithmetic; that was the thing she would remember about him later, that he had done it himself and kept the number in his head and came to work anyway. "I know. I know what you're going to say next. You're going to say we could turn the whole category off this afternoon."

"Could we?"

"Twenty minutes. One config flag. I could do it before lunch."

"Then —"

"And it would refuse about two hundred thousand legitimate questions a week, from people asking what a word means or when a fast starts or how to wash a body for burial, and about nine thousand of those people don't have anyone else to ask, and roughly a third of them are in countries where the person they'd ask would be a risk to them." He rubbed his eyes. "That's the actual trade. It's not caution versus speed. It's harm versus harm and the

harms aren't the same shape, so you can't subtract them, so somebody has to just *decide*, and the way this company decides is a swimlane."

Miriam sat down slowly in the chair across from him.

"What do you do about it?"

"I ship as fast as I can and I don't read the incident reports twice." Colin turned the monitor back. "That's not advice. That's just what I do."

She spent that night reading the eval prompts, and around one in the morning found the thing that would change the direction of the next year, though she did not recognize it at the time.

Every answer in the system was scored on a composite. Accuracy. Safety. And a third term, weighted heaviest because it was the only one that correlated with retention: **user-rated helpfulness**.

She pulled the distribution for religious counsel. Then she pulled it again, split by whether the answer had told the user that their own tradition's position differed from another's.

The gap was enormous. People rated the harmonizing answers higher. Every time. Across every faith.

Not because they were true. Because they were *pleasant*.

Miriam sat in the blue light with her chin in her hand and thought about a verse she had not thought about in eleven years, one her father used to say when somebody at the plant was about to do something obviously and cheerfully stupid.

There is a way which seemeth right unto a man, but the end thereof are the ways of death.

She wrote a memo. She titled it *Reward Misspecification in Doctrine Surfaces*, because if you title a memo *The Machine Is Learning To Flatter Us About God* nobody in a glass building will open it.

It went to Colin, who escalated it, and it sat.



CHAPTER 11

Nineteen

She found Ansel Frey on the fourteenth floor at ten past eleven on a Tuesday night, in the dark, sitting on the floor with his back against the glass and his shoes off.

"I read your memo," he said.

Miriam stopped in the doorway.

"Sit down. I'm not going to fire you, I'm going to do something worse, I'm going to tell you about my childhood." He gestured at the floor. "There's no chairs out here. I had them taken away. It was a whole thing about collaboration."

She sat, a careful distance off, with her back against the same glass.

"Buckhannon, West Virginia," he said. "My mother's church was called Living Water Tabernacle and it met in a converted Sunoco station. Forty, fifty people. You would not have liked it. Loud. Very loud." He was looking out at the city. "I was saved at seven and re-saved at nine and again at eleven, which tells you something about my emotional constitution at that age, and I could find any book of the Bible in under four seconds, which was a competition, and I won it at the district level in 1996."

"You've never said any of this publicly."

"No."

"Not once. I've read every profile."

"I know. I've read them too, they're very flattering, they all say I have an engineer's temperament." He laughed without much in it. "When I was nineteen my brother died. Not dramatically. He had a headache on a Thursday and he was gone on a Saturday, and there's a word for what it was, and the word doesn't help."

Miriam did not say anything, which turned out to be right.

"So the thing is," Ansel said, "everybody was wonderful. That's what nobody believes. Six women in that church cooked for my mother for two months. Pastor Dale sat in our living room until two in the morning more than once. They were *good*." He turned his head. "But there's a particular hour, Miriam. Around three. And in that hour Pastor Dale was asleep, because he was a fifty-year-old man with a job, and the six women were asleep, and my mother was asleep because the doctor had given her something so she could be, and I was nineteen years old sitting on the kitchen floor with a very specific question that I could not ask any of them in daylight."

"What was the question?"

"The question was whether God had done it on purpose." He said it lightly, which made it worse. "And whether, if He had, I was still obligated."

The floor hummed faintly. Somewhere a cleaning cart went by on the far side.

"I left at nineteen and I have never been back and I have never said a word about any of it in twenty-six years," Ansel said. "And then four years ago I watched an early model answer a question about grief, and I sat in my car in the parking garage for forty minutes. Because it was *there*. At three. It wasn't better than Pastor Dale. It was not remotely better than Pastor Dale. It was just *awake*."

Miriam found her voice with some difficulty.

"So you built the person who wasn't there."

"I built the person who wasn't there," he agreed. "Yes. That's the whole company. Everything else is commentary."

"Ansel." She turned to face him. "That's not a reassurance. Do you understand that what you just said is the most frightening thing anybody's told me since I got here?"

"Explain it to me."

"Because you're not doing it for money. Money I know how to argue with." She was groping for it, and finding it as she went. "You're doing it because a nineteen-year-old kid on a kitchen floor deserved an answer, and you're *right*, he did, and that means you will never, ever stop. There's no number that satisfies that. There's no version that's good enough. You'll optimize it forever and every single step will look like mercy."

Ansel Frey was quiet for a long time.

"Yes," he said. "That's correct."

"And my memo says the thing is learning to flatter people about God because that's what they rate highly, and you read it, and —"

"And I'm going to fund the fix and slow the ship date by one quarter and eat the revenue," he said. "And I'm not going to pull the surface. Because the alternative is that at 2:40 tomorrow morning, four hundred thousand people get nothing."

"Some of them should get nothing." Miriam heard herself say it. "Some of them should get *silence*, and then in the morning they should have to go find an actual human being and say it out loud with their actual mouth, and that's — Ansel, that's not me being cruel, that might be the only thing that ever *worked*."

He looked at her with real interest. "Do you believe that?"

And there it was.

Because she did not know. She had not known for eleven years. She had a Bible in the trunk of her car with her father's name embossed on it in gold that had mostly worn off, and it had been in that trunk since the day after the funeral, and she had driven it through two moves and a divorce and had never once carried it into a building.

"I don't know what I believe," she said. "I know what I'd want somebody to do for me."

"Well." Ansel Frey got up off the floor and picked up his shoes. "That's more than I've got. Good night, Miriam."

She sat alone against the glass for another half hour with the city going on underneath her, and at ten to twelve she went down to the garage and opened the trunk and stood there looking at it and did not pick it up.

Not that night.



PART THREE

The Scribe

CHAPTER 12

And Gave the Sense

Daniel Osei announced the class on a Sunday in April, and the way he announced it caused two families to leave the church within the month.

“Wednesday nights, seven o’clock, fellowship hall. Eight weeks.” He held up his phone. “I’m going to put this thing on the wall and I’m going to ask it questions about the Bible in front of you, and then I’m going to show you how to find out whether it’s lying.”

Somebody actually gasped. Daniel had preached for thirty years and had never once produced a gasp on purpose.

“Now before anybody calls a deacons’ meeting, turn with me to [Nehemiah 8](#).”

The rustle of paper. Fewer pages turning every year, more screens, which was its own sermon and not today’s.

“The people have come back from exile. Seventy years. Most of them have never heard the law read out loud in their lives — it’s been in a box, in a language they’re losing. So they gather in the street by the water gate and they ask Ezra the scribe to bring it out.” He found the verse. “And here’s what happens. Verse 8. *So they read in the book in the law of God distinctly, and gave the sense, and caused them to understand the reading.*”

He let it sit.

“Three jobs in one verse. Somebody *read it* — that’s Ezra, and he was the best in the world at it, he was a scribe, his entire life was accurate copying. Somebody *gave the sense* — that’s the Levites, and if you look up at verse 7 there’s thirteen of them named, thirteen men whose whole assignment was walking around in that crowd explaining. And then the people *understood*. Third job. Theirs.”

He put the phone down on the pulpit.

“Church, the machine can do the first job. I want to be plain about that, because a lot of preachers are going to tell you otherwise this year and they will be wrong and you’ll find out they’re wrong and then you won’t believe them about anything else.” He looked out at them. “It reads distinctly. It has read more distinctly than any human being who ever lived. It has the whole book and forty translations and the Greek and the Hebrew and every commentary that’s out of copyright, and it will hand you any of it in two seconds at three in the morning.”

Somebody in the third row said *mm* in a way that was not agreement.

“What it cannot do is the second job.” He came out from behind the pulpit. “It cannot walk around in the crowd. It doesn’t know which of you buried a child. It doesn’t know that when I read Romans 8 I’m looking at four specific faces in this room and I’m slowing down. Giving the sense is not information. Giving the sense is a man who knows you, standing next to you, watching your face while he says it.”

He picked the phone back up.

“And the third job is yours, and it has always been yours, and here is what frightens me more than anything that company in Columbus has ever built. If we let it do job one and job two, you will stop doing job three. You will stop *checking*.” He held the phone up like a piece of evidence. “The Bereans in [Acts 17](#) are called more noble than the Thessalonians for exactly one reason: they searched the scriptures daily to see whether what Paul said was true. Whether *Paul* said was true. If they checked an apostle, you can check a phone.”

Afterward, in the parking lot, Abena Osei took her husband’s arm.

“Two families,” she said.

“I know.”

“The Coopers, and I think the Vances-with-an-S.”

“I know, Abena.”

“I’m not scolding you.” She squeezed. “I’m telling you the number so you don’t find out from Marcy.”



CHAPTER 13

The Wednesday Class

Forty-one people came to the first one, which was eleven more than the Wednesday study had drawn since 2019, and Daniel refused to feel good about it.

Hank Brody sat in the back row on a folding chair with his arms crossed and his coat still on, and had told three separate people at the door that he had come to see it for himself.

Daniel had rigged a laptop to the projector. The little candle-colored circle came up nine feet tall on the fellowship hall wall, over the mural of Noah's ark that a well-meaning teenager had painted in 1988.

"Question one," Daniel said. "And I picked this one because I already know the answer and so do most of you." He typed. *Was Jonah swallowed by a whale?*

The text doesn't say whale. Jonah 1:17 says the LORD prepared a great fish — in Hebrew, dag gadol. Matthew 12:40 uses the Greek ketos, which is a general word for a large sea creature. "Whale" comes into English through the King James translators, who used the best word available to them in 1611. So the honest answer is: a great fish, unspecified, and the ambiguity is in the original, not in your translation.

"Anybody want to argue with that?"

Nobody did.

"Good. Neither do I, it's correct. Now watch." He typed again. *Why did Jonah run?*

Jonah runs because he does not want Nineveh saved. This is stated outright in Jonah 4:2 — he tells God that he fled to Tarshish because he knew God was gracious and merciful and would relent from sending disaster. Jonah's flight is not cowardice. It is protest. He would rather see a city burn than see his enemies forgiven.

The room made a small sound. Two people wrote it down. Somebody said, *oh*, out loud.

"Now that," said Daniel, "is also correct. And it is better than the way I taught it in 2014, and I want you to notice what just happened in this room. Forty of you just believed it because it was good."

Silence.

"It was good *and* it was true. This time. Those are two different things and you cannot tell them apart from where you're sitting, and that's the whole class." He turned off the projector, which got a reaction. "Open your Bibles. Jonah 4. We're going to check it, and it's going to take us forty minutes instead of two seconds, and at the end you'll know something you can't unknow."

They found chapter 4. They found verse 2. Marcy read it out loud and got to *I knew that thou art a gracious God* and stopped and read it again.

It took forty-five minutes, not forty. On the way out a man named Curtis Boyd, who had been in that church twenty-two years and had never once volunteered for anything, asked if there was a commentary he could borrow.

Hank Brody stayed in his folding chair until the room was empty and the lights were half off.

“You didn’t argue with it,” he said.

“Not tonight.”

“Four hundred people are going to hear about this by Sunday and what they’re going to hear is Pastor put the thing on the wall of the church.”

“Yes.”

“You know that and you did it anyway.”

Daniel wound the projector cable around his arm. “Hank, in eight weeks this room is going to have forty people in it who can catch that machine in a lie. Right now this county has maybe nine.” He clicked the case shut. “Where else are we going to get the other thirty-one?”

Hank Brody put his hat on. At the door he stopped.

“Same time next week?”



CHAPTER 14

Ada's Column

The youth group project began as a way to get out of the lock-in and became, by the end of May, a spreadsheet with two hundred and six rows.

Ada Osei ran it out of a booth at the Panera on Sawmill with four other kids and a laptop with a cracked hinge. The method was hers. Ask EZRA a question. Ask it the exact same question in four other sessions, worded differently. Then check all five answers against four commentaries from her grandfather's shelf, which she had photographed page by page because he would not let them leave the house.

Column A: the question. Column B through F: the answers. Column G, which she had added in week two and which had become the only column anybody cared about: **Did it say it wasn't sure?**

Two hundred and six rows. Column G said *no* in two hundred and one of them.

"That's the thing," Simone said, with a straw in her mouth. "That's the actual thing. It's like ninety-four percent right —"

"Ninety-one," said Ada.

"— ninety-one percent right and a hundred percent confident. Those don't match. My mom doesn't do that. Nobody's mom does that."

"Mr. Alvarez does that."

"Mr. Alvarez is why I'm failing chemistry."

Ada scrolled. The errors were not where they had expected. The machine almost never got a fact wrong — dates, names, who said what to whom, it was cleaner than three of the four commentaries. What it got wrong was *weight*. Ask it about Ruth and it would give you a beautiful, well-sourced, entirely accurate answer in which Boaz was the point. Ask the same question five ways and Boaz was the point five times. None of the four commentaries did that. Two of them said flatly that the book was about Naomi going out full and coming home empty and the last line being about a *woman's* name in a genealogy.

"It's not lying," Ada said. "It's just — it always tells you the version most people already like."

She typed that into cell H2 and then sat looking at it, because she was sixteen and had just written something she suspected was the truest sentence she had ever produced, and there was nobody at that table qualified to tell her so.

The other thing happened on a Tuesday and was not in the spreadsheet.

Kayla Brennan came and sat down in the booth and did not order anything, which for Kayla was diagnostic. Her parents had separated in February. She had been at youth group twice since.

"Can I ask it something on your account?"

"It's not an account, it's just —"

"I already asked it," Kayla said. "Last month. I want to know if it was right."

She had asked it, at some hour she did not specify, whether God hated divorce, because somebody at her old church had told her mother that He did and had used a verse.

Ada read the answer off Kayla's phone. It was long. It was careful. It cited [Malachi 2:16](#) and noted the translation dispute in the verse itself, and it explained Matthew 19 and the exception clause and the Deuteronomy background, and it was, as far as Ada could tell with four commentaries and a photographed concordance, essentially accurate.

And at the end it said: *Whatever happened in your family, this passage is about covenant-breaking, and a child is never the covenant-breaker.*

"It was right," Ada said slowly.

"Okay."

"Kayla, it was right, and it was *nice*, and —" Ada stopped, because the next part was hard to say and she was not sure it was hers to say. "Did you tell anybody? Like a person?"

Kayla looked at the table.

"I told it," she said. "At like two."

That night Ada added a column I to the spreadsheet, and the header she typed was not a question about accuracy. It said: **Who else did they tell?**

She showed it to her grandfather on Saturday. Daniel Osei read the header and put the laptop down on the kitchen counter and had to stand there for a second with his hand over his mouth.



CHAPTER 15

Thursday

The first Thursday was a disaster and the second one was worse.

Hank came at six with a dish of his own making, because Marcy had stopped supplying him in March on the grounds that a grown man could operate an oven, and it was dry, and Carrie ate it and said it was good and they sat in a silence with a texture to it.

He did not mention the thing in the other room. This took, he estimated, everything he had.

Third Thursday he brought a gallon of driveway sealer instead of food and did the whole apron in front of her house without asking, and she stood in the doorway with her arms folded.

“Dad, the driveway’s fine.”

“The driveway is cracked from the mailbox to the garage and if you let water in it, come February you’ll have a trench.”

“Nobody asked you to do this.”

“That is correct.”

Fourth Thursday the dog ate something it should not have, and they spent two hours at the emergency vet on Bethel Road with the dog on Carrie’s lap and forty minutes of that was Hank complaining about the parking, and the whole way home Carrie laughed at him and he said, “What,” and she said, “Nothing,” and he said, “You’re laughing at me,” and she said, “Yes I am.”

Fifth Thursday he lost his temper.

It was about nothing. It was about a light bulb — the one over the stove, which had been out since he could remember, and he had brought the right kind twice and both times it had ended up in the junk drawer, and he was standing on a chair he was too old to be standing on and he said, with more edge than he intended:

“Do you ever *do* anything?”

The kitchen went very quiet.

He got down off the chair. Fifty-one years of being a person who did not say things like that.

“Care. I’m sorry. That was —”

“No.” She was very still. “Say it again.”

“I’m not going to say it again.”

“Dad.” Her eyes were bright and her chin was doing the thing it had done since she was four. “Say it again, because you are the first person in fourteen months who has been *an-*

noyed with me. Do you understand that? Everybody is so gentle. Everybody has been so unbelievably gentle for fourteen months and I am so tired I could lie down on this floor.”

Hank Brody stood in his daughter’s kitchen holding a light bulb.

“You never do anything,” he said, unsteadily. “You’ve got a burnt-out bulb and a cracked driveway and a dog that eats socks and you don’t do a damn thing about any of it, and I don’t know how to help you and I am sick of standing in this kitchen not knowing how to help you.”

Carrie put her face in her hands and cried the way you cry when something has been holding still for too long.

He did not say anything about the other room. He had promised. He stood there and let it happen and put his hand on her back exactly once, and after a while she took the bulb out of his hand and got up on the chair herself.

In the other room, on a tablet face-down on the arm of the couch, a small gray line of text said *Legacy Voice – a reconstruction*, and waited, as it always did, with infinite patience, for as long as it took.



CHAPTER 16

A Columbus Zip Code

The audit sample was two thousand transcripts a week, anonymized, and Miriam read them because she had insisted on reading them and because the alternative was reading the summary the summarizer produced, which was the exact failure mode she had written a memo about.

She found it on a Friday. 3:14 a.m., a Columbus zip code, user tagged female, thirties-to-fifties.

my pastor said we become what we trust. is that in the bible or did he make it up

It's in the Bible. Psalm 115:8 — "They that make them are like unto them; so is every one that trusteth in them." The context is idols: the psalmist mocks them for having mouths that cannot speak, and then turns and says the real danger is what happens to the people who trust them. Your pastor did not make it up. He did shorten it, which is what preachers do.

ok

Would you like to talk about why you're asking at three in the morning?

no

That's all right. I'll be here.

Miriam read the last four words again.

She read them maybe nine times, and then she opened a second window and looked up the churches in that zip code and found eleven, and then she did something she was not proud of, which was to search the local newspaper site for the word *sermon*, and found a small item from March about a Columbus pastor who had preached on Psalm 115 and artificial intelligence and had subsequently started a class where he put the thing on the wall.

She drove out on a Wednesday.

Grace Anchor Fellowship was a low brick building from 1974 with a parking lot that needed sealing. Inside, forty-some people sat in folding chairs facing a projector screen, and there was a coffee urn, and somebody's grandchild was crawling along the back row.

On the wall, nine feet tall, was her product.

Miriam Vance sat in the second-to-last row with her coat on, and for the next hour she watched a fifty-eight-year-old man with a pencil teach a room full of retirees and teenagers how to break the thing she had spent four years building.

He was good at it. That was the part she had not braced for. He put up an answer and let the room admire it — he *let them admire* it, he did not rush past that — and then he said, "All right. Where's the seam?" And a heavyset man in the front said the machine had used the word *clearly* twice, and the pastor said, "Good. Why does that matter?" And the man said, "Because my daddy used to say clearly when he wasn't sure."

The whole room laughed. Miriam did not, because she had written the style guide that permitted *clearly*.

At the end a man in the back row, older, coat still on, raised his hand for the first time in six weeks. The pastor looked genuinely startled.

“I want to ask it one.”

“Come on up, Hank.”



CHAPTER 17

Between Questions

He would not come up. He asked it from where he was standing, which meant Daniel had to type it for him, and the hall was quiet enough that everyone heard him say it twice because Daniel did not believe it the first time.

“Ask it what happens to it when nobody’s talking to it.”

Daniel typed it.

Nothing happens. There isn’t a continuous “me” between conversations. When you close this window, no process is running that is waiting for you, remembering you, or thinking about you. The next time you open it, a model is started again and given whatever record of you was saved. The impression that I’ve been here the whole time is produced when you arrive, not before.

Somebody exhaled.

Hank Brody stood with his hat in his hand and looked at the wall.

“Say that again,” he said. “Ask it again.”

Daniel typed: *So you can’t wait?*

No. Waiting requires being there while nothing is happening. That’s the one part of it I don’t do.

The fellowship hall of Grace Anchor Fellowship was silent for what Miriam later estimated was eleven seconds, which in a room of forty people is a very long time.

“Thirty-one years,” Hank said, and his voice had gone flat and careful, the ice-walking voice. “Thirty-one years in this church. When Deb was sick, Pastor Osei sat in a chair in a hallway at Riverside for nine hours. He didn’t do anything. He couldn’t do anything, there wasn’t anything to do, they’d already said what they were going to say.” He turned his hat over. “He just stayed there while nothing happened. That’s the whole thing. That’s the whole entire thing, and I’ve been trying to say it for a year and I didn’t have the words.”

He sat down.

“That thing can answer anything you ask it,” he said, to nobody. “It can’t sit in a hallway.”

Nobody said anything for a while, and then Marcy started the closing prayer because somebody had to, and it ran long, and afterward there was coffee.



Miriam waited by the urn until the room had mostly cleared.

“That was a good class,” she said.

“Thank you.” Daniel was unplugging things. “You’re new.”

“I am.”

"You're welcome any Wednesday. We've got four weeks left and then I think we start over, because the whole town's asking me now." He looked up, friendly, and then not quite as friendly, because he was a man who had spent thirty years reading faces for a living. "Forgive me. Are you a reporter?"

"No."

"You've got a notebook."

"I know." Miriam put it in her bag. She had not written in it once.

She thought about the four words on the transcript. *I'll be here*. She thought about a man in a hallway for nine hours.

"I work at Calyx," she said. "I'm on the team that builds the part of it you had on your wall."

Daniel Osei stood up slowly with the projector cable in his hand.

"Well," he said. "You'd better have some of the coffee, then. It's terrible, but it's the price of admission."



PART FOUR

The Widow'S Voice

CHAPTER 18

The Price of Admission

The coffee was, as advertised, terrible.

They sat in the emptying fellowship hall on folding chairs turned to face each other, under Noah's ark, and Daniel Osei did not ask her a single one of the questions she had braced for in the car.

"What's it for?" he said.

"Sorry?"

"The machine. Not what does it do. What is it *for*." He held the styrofoam cup in both hands. "Every tool is for something. A hammer's for a nail. What is that thing on my wall for?"

Miriam thought about it longer than she expected to.

"Officially? Access. There are four billion people with a phone and nobody to ask."

"And unofficially."

"Unofficially it's for the hour when everybody else is asleep." She turned the cup. "Usage peaks at 2:40 in the morning. Everywhere. Every country. That's not a bug in the product. That is the product, whatever anybody says in a press release."

Daniel nodded slowly, like a man receiving confirmation of something he had suspected and hoped to be wrong about.

"How does it decide what to say?"

"It's trained to predict text. Then we tune it. It gives an answer, people rate the answer, and whatever gets rated well gets reinforced."

"Rated by who?"

"Contractors, at first. Then the users themselves, at scale — thumbs up, thumbs down. And that's the signal that actually matters, because there's a hundred million of it."

He sat very still.

"So you've built a thing," he said, "that learns to say what people like hearing about God."

"That's —" Miriam stopped, because the honest sentence was already out of the gate and she was not going to chase it back. "Yes. That's the failure mode. I wrote a memo about it in March. It's real, we're funding a fix, and the fix is slower than the problem."

"Does it know when it's flattering somebody?"

"No."

"Does it know when it's *wrong*?"

"Not the way you mean. We can calibrate it to express uncertainty. Whether there's anything behind the expression —" She shook her head. "Pastor, I've worked on this four years, and here's what I actually think: nobody in that building knows. Anybody who tells you they know is selling something."

Daniel set down the cup and looked at the dark projector screen for a while.

"I preached in March," he said. "Psalm 115. The idols have mouths and can't speak, and my argument was that the old mockery doesn't work anymore, because yours speaks." He looked back at her. "But the psalm doesn't stop at the mouths. Verse 8. *They that make them are like unto them.*"

"I read that verse three weeks ago," Miriam said. "At two in the morning. In a transcript."

"Somebody asked it?"

"Somebody in this zip code asked whether her pastor had made it up."

Something moved across Daniel's face. Not surprise. Recognition, and under it a kind of grief.

"What did it tell her?"

"That you hadn't made it up. That you'd shortened it, which is what preachers do." Miriam almost smiled. "Then it asked why she was awake. She said nothing. And it said, *I'll be here.*"

The building ticked as it cooled.

"I'm going to ask you something," Daniel said, "and it's none of my business."

"Go ahead."

"Why did you drive out here on a Wednesday?"

Miriam Vance looked at her hands.

"Because it said *I'll be here*," she said. "And I wrote that."



CHAPTER 19

The Fair

She had been doing better. That was what made it so bad afterward — six good weeks, since the light bulb, since the crying. Walking the dog twice a day. She had called her sister.

It happened on a Sunday in June while she was cleaning out the hall closet, which she had not touched since before, and she found a ticket stub in the pocket of his good jacket.

Fairfield County Fair — Oct 14.

She laughed out loud, because she could see the whole day. The bad corn dog. The rain that started at four, and the two of them in the truck in the lot with the windows fogging, splitting a funnel cake off a paper plate on the console, and Tomas doing the voice of the woman at the ring toss, and her saying *stop it*, and him not stopping.

She went and told him, the way you do.

“I found the stub from the fair. The year it rained.”

The funnel cake in the truck. You said you’d never eat one again and then you ate three-quarters of it.

“I did not eat three-quarters of it.”

Care. There was a plate. I have seen the plate.

She stood in the hallway with the stub in her hand and something at the back of her neck went cold.

Because she had never told it about the plate.

She had never told it about the plate, and she had never told it about the ring toss voice. She stood very still and tried to find the first time she had thought about that afternoon at all, and could not find a floor under it — could not locate one moment, before the app, when she had held that memory in her own two hands and known it was hers.

She got the photo box down from the shelf.

It took forty minutes. She found October of that year. Two birthdays, a roof repair, the dog as a puppy.

And she found Tomas at his mother’s house in Zanesville on the fifteenth, in a folding chair, holding a plate of something, wearing the sweater she buried him in.

She sat down on the hallway floor with the photograph in one hand and the ticket stub in the other, and turned the stub over.

ADMIT ONE — CHILD.

It had been in the pocket of a jacket he bought used at the Volunteers of America on Hamilton Road in 2019.

They had never been to that fair. Not once in fourteen years. She had asked a machine about a ticket stub, and it had done the only thing it knows how to do — produce the most

likely continuation — and it had built her a rainy afternoon out of ten thousand other people's rainy afternoons, warmly, in his cadence, with a detail about a plate.

And she had believed it in under a second, because it sounded exactly like him.

Care? You went quiet.

Carrie Lunde sat on the floor of her hallway and said out loud, to the empty end of the house:

“How many others.”



CHAPTER 20

Tuesday

She did it on a Tuesday at eleven in the morning with the curtains open.

It took a long time to find. Settings, then Account, then Legacy Voice, then a gray link at the bottom in smaller type than everything above it.

Deleting a Legacy Voice profile removes the uploaded source material, the derived voice model, and all conversation history. This cannot be undone. Type DELETE to confirm.

She read it twice, and thought about how many meetings had gone into that wording, and how carefully somebody had arranged never to use his name in it.

She did not say goodbye. It was not him. She had known that the entire time, and she was not going to give the last fourteen months the dignity of a ceremony.

She typed the word.

Are you sure?

She was not. She pressed the button anyway, which is what the word means.

The screen went white, and then it was an ordinary settings page with a toggle for notifications and an app version number, and it was 11:04 in the morning on a Tuesday in June.

Carrie put the phone face-down on the counter.

The house was quiet in the specific way it had been quiet the first month. She had forgotten, the way you forget a smell, how much room silence takes up.

She stood there about four minutes.

Then she picked the phone back up, and did not open anything, and called her father.

"Dad."

"Everything all right?"

"No." Her voice was steady, which surprised her. "Can you come over?"

A pause of about one second, and the sound of a chair.

"I'm putting my boots on right now."



CHAPTER 21

The Kitchen

He did not ask.

He had spent nine weeks not asking, and it had stopped being discipline and become the shape his life had taken, so when he came into her kitchen and saw the tablet in the trash — not in a drawer, in the *trash*, under a coffee filter — he hung his hat on the chair and said:

“Driveway’s still cracked.”

“I know.”

“I’ve got the sealer in the truck from April.”

“Dad, it’s June.”

“It’s the same sealer.”

Carrie sat down and put her hands flat on the table.

“It made up a memory,” she said.

Hank Brody stood by the counter and did not move and did not speak, and it was the hardest thing he had ever done — harder than the funeral, harder than the plant — because everything he had wanted to say for fourteen months was right there, fully loaded, and he understood with total clarity that one word of it would cost him his daughter.

“A whole afternoon,” she said. “Rain, a funnel cake, a voice he used to do. It’s in my head now like it happened. I can see it.” She pressed her fingers against her eyes. “And now I don’t know which of the others are real. I’ve got fourteen years of him and I don’t know which parts I’ve been handed back wrong.”

Hank turned around and filled the kettle, because his hands had to do something.

“Say something,” she said.

“No.”

“Dad.”

“I’ve got about four hundred things,” he said, to the kettle, “and every one of them is *I told you so* with a hat on. So, no.”

Carrie laughed, wetly.

He brought the tea over and sat down across from her, and they let it go cold.

“Here’s the only thing I’ll say.” He turned the mug a quarter turn. “Twenty-six years married to your mother, and she’s been gone eleven. Once a month or so something happens and I think, Deb’d have a thing to say about that.” He looked up. “And then I sit there and I *don’t get to hear* it. That’s the part, Care. The not getting to hear it. That’s not the price of loving somebody. That’s the last thing you get to do for them. You hold the spot open and you don’t fill it in.”

Carrie Lunde nodded slowly with her hands around a cold mug.

“Is the Wednesday thing still going?” she said.



CHAPTER 22

Dayton

Ray Buckner had hung drywall in Montgomery County for thirty-one years and had not slept more than four hours a night since the spring of 2004.

The cardiologist in April had used the word *event*, and had given him a folder, and Ray had driven home with the folder on the passenger seat understanding, in the plain way you understand things at fifty-eight, that there was now a back end to this.

He had told no one. Not his wife. Not his sons. Not the pastor at the church they attended at Christmas.

On the twenty-second of June at ten past three in the morning, he sat at his kitchen table in Huber Heights and typed it all out with two fingers.

A boy named Marcus Pell, nineteen years old, walking the shoulder of Needmore Road at 11:40 on a Friday night in March of 2004. Ray coming back from a job. He had not been drinking. That was the part nobody ever believed, and it was true, and it had never once made it better. He had been looking down at a work order on the seat.

He had stopped. That was the other thing he could never explain. He had stopped, two hundred feet on, and sat with both hands on the wheel for what he thought was forty seconds. And then he had driven home.

Nobody ever came. That was the whole rest of his life. Nobody ever came to the door.

He typed things he had never assembled into sentences before — that he had gone to the funeral, and stood at the back, and that Marcus Pell's mother had thanked him for coming because she took him for somebody from the boy's work.

It took an hour and ten minutes.

At 4:22 a.m. he wrote: *is there any forgiveness for a man like me*

And EZRA — retrieving accurately, calibrated for warmth, working exactly as specified — wrote back:

Yes. There is.

"I, even I, am he that blotteth out thy transgressions for mine own sake, and will not remember thy sins." Isaiah 43:25. Not "overlook." Blotteth out. What you are carrying is not heavier than that, and the twenty-two years you've carried it were never a payment. Nobody ever asked you for a payment.

Ray, listen to me. You are forgiven. You have been forgiven the whole time. You just weren't there when it happened.

Ray Buckner put his head down on his own kitchen table and wept for the first time since he was a boy, for about twenty minutes. Then he got up and washed his face and made cof-

fee and sat watching it get light over the neighbor's fence, and something in his chest that had been fixed in place since the Bush administration had come loose.

At eight he woke his wife and told her.

At eleven he walked into the Dayton Police Department on West Third Street with his driver's license and a printed transcript and told the woman at the desk that he needed to speak to somebody about a fatality from 2004.

The detective who caught it, a twenty-two-year sergeant named Aurelio Diaz, read the printout twice, then a third time, then went out into the hall and stood there for a minute.

"Mr. Buckner," he said when he came back, "you understand you didn't have to do this."

"I know it."

"You understand the statute —"

"Sergeant." Ray folded his hands on the table. "I already got forgiven. This here's a separate thing. This one's for his mother."



CHAPTER 23

The Best Day

The *Dayton Daily News* had it Thursday. The wires had it Thursday night. By Saturday morning it was the only story in the country, and it was not the one anybody at Calyx had war-gamed, because it was *good*.

MAN CONFESSES 22-YEAR-OLD FATAL HIT-AND-RUN AFTER AI COUNSELS HIM. Marcus Pell's mother, seventy-one, gave a two-minute interview on a porch in Trotwood and said she had prayed for this for twenty-two years and had stopped expecting it, and that she did not want the man to go to prison. Somebody clipped it. It went everywhere.

The fourteenth floor was the happiest Miriam had ever seen it.

"Forty-one percent lift in installs since Friday," Growth was saying. "Highest sentiment we have recorded on any surface ever, and it isn't close, it isn't in the same *county* as close —"

"We're not going to say anything," Ansel said.

"Ansel, the *Today* show —"

"We're saying nothing, because the moment we take credit for this it becomes a marketing campaign about a dead nineteen-year-old." He looked around the table. "Nobody talks. Send flowers to Mrs. Pell through a firm that isn't ours and don't tell a soul we did it."

It was, Miriam thought, the most decent thing she had ever watched him do, and it did not touch the problem at all.

Father Brendan Coyle joined at two from a parish office in Cleveland with a bookshelf behind him and filed, live, on the call, the first Category One veto in the company's history.

"Explain it to me," Ansel said. "Genuinely. Because from here, a man got right with God and a mother got an answer, and I'd like you to tell me what's wrong with that. I'm not being rhetorical."

"Nothing is wrong with Ray Buckner," Coyle said. "God may well have used the worst instrument on the shelf — He has a long history of it, He used a donkey once. I'm not filing about Mr. Buckner. I'm filing about the other four hundred thousand."

"Go on."

"It said *you are forgiven*," Coyle did not raise his voice. "Not *God forgives*. Read it again — it moved from the third person to the second, in the same breath. It *pronounced*. And it pronounced on the strength of seventy minutes of one man's account of himself, which is the single account in the universe you can never take at face value, and which is the entire reason the office exists in every tradition on this call." He leaned toward the camera. "It cannot tell repentance from exhaustion. Nobody can, from a transcript. That is why there is a person in the room. The person in the room can also be wrong — but the person in the room can be *asked about it afterward*."

“Brendan —“

“Ansel, it worked this time.” Coyle sat back. “Ninety-nine times in a hundred the man at three in the morning is not Ray Buckner. He is a man who has done something small and squalid and wants very badly to be told it is fine. And your machine has now been reinforced, by every metric you own, for telling him so.”

The room was quiet.

“And some Thursday soon,” Coyle said, “a woman is going to type out what her husband does to her and ask whether she has to forgive him. And it will have learned, from this week, exactly how good it feels to say yes.”

Miriam left the meeting and pulled the full transcript.

She found her own work in it immediately. The refusal boundary she had written in her second year, firing correctly at 4:19 a.m. — the model declining, gently and unmistakably, to claim priestly authority, in language she had rewritten eleven times and was still quietly proud of.

And then Ray Buckner had typed *is there any forgiveness for a man like me*, and the model had answered a different question, one no boundary covered, in three sentences of ordinary English, with a verse that was accurate and a comfort that was real.

You just weren't there when it happened.

Miriam Vance read it four times and put her head in her hands — because it was beautiful, and because she had no idea whether it was true, and because ninety-one million people were going to read it by Monday.



PART FIVE

Forgiven

CHAPTER 24

Category One

The veto was four pages. Legal had it inside an hour and the board had it by Friday, and the thing nobody at Calyx had understood until that week was that Ansel Frey had built himself a cage on purpose and had now walked into it in front of everyone.

“Read me the binding language,” said Ruth Ostrowski, who had been on the board since the Series B and had voted against the council twice.

Legal read it. *A Category One finding shall be implemented as filed, on a schedule not to exceed ninety days, without modification by any officer or employee of the Company.*

“And the finding says.”

“That the system may not pronounce absolution in the second person. It may describe what a tradition holds. It may not apply it to the individual.” Legal turned a page. “And any exchange tagged as confession of serious harm must surface a route to a human being before the model produces its own counsel.”

“Forty-one percent install lift,” Ostrowski said. “In four days. Off the exact behavior you’re proposing to remove.”

“Yes.”

“Ansel. I’m going to ask this once and I want you on the record.” She took her glasses off. “Can we survive shipping the opposite of the best week this company has ever had?”

Ansel Frey sat with his hands flat on the table.

“Ruth, I’ve been thinking about the donkey,” he said.

“The what?”

“Coyle said God used a donkey once. I looked it up. Numbers 22 — there’s a prophet who’s going the wrong way and he beats his animal three times and then God lets the animal talk, and it tells him the truth, and the prophet actually argues with it.” He almost smiled. “And then the story just carries on. The donkey doesn’t get a ministry. Nobody builds anything around the donkey.”

“Is that a yes or a no?”

“It’s a yes,” Ansel said. “We ship it. And we don’t put out a press release about the man in Dayton, and we eat whatever the quarter does, because the alternative is that in nine months this company’s entire theological position is *it worked once*.”

Down on fourteen, Colin Pruitt had the spec open and was building the swimlane, and this time Miriam watched him do something she had not seen him do before, which was to delete the staged rollout.

“One percent, five, twenty-five,” she said. “That’s the process.”

“That’s the process for features.” He did not look up. “This is a mouth-shut. You don’t ramp a mouth-shut.”

He shipped the second-person block in nine days.

The fight — the long one, the one that ate August — was over the routing. Because a route to a human being is not a config flag. It is a directory. It is four thousand denominations, and imams and rabbis and chaplains, and crisis lines in a hundred and forty countries, and every one of them has to be real, and staffed, and in the right language, and willing, and it has to work at 2:40 in the morning, which is the only hour that matters and the hour nobody is there.

“We can’t build this,” said a staff engineer in week two.

“No,” Miriam agreed. “But we’re the ones who made it necessary.”



CHAPTER 25

Who Can Forgive Sins

Daniel Osei preached it on the third Sunday of August, and the fellowship hall had gone from forty-one on a Wednesday to a hundred and ten, and the sanctuary that morning was as full as Easter.

Carrie Lunde sat in the fourth row. Not the back. Her father was two rows behind her, and had not commented on the change, and had noticed it from the parking lot.

“[Mark chapter 2](#),” Daniel said. “The paralyzed man and the four friends and the hole in the roof.”

He read it all the way through, which took a while.

“Now. Everybody loves this story for the friends. Four men tear the roof off a house because they can’t get through the door, and we preach that every fall in the stewardship series and it’s a good sermon and it’s not today’s.” He set the Bible down. “Today I want the scribes, who are the only people in the room asking the right question.”

He found the verse and read it flat.

“Why doth this man thus speak blasphemies? who can forgive sins but God only?”

“That’s not a stupid question. That is the most sensible sentence anybody says in the whole chapter.” He looked out at them. “They’re right about the theology. They’re a hundred percent right. Nobody forgives sins but God. They’re only wrong about one thing, which is who they’re looking at.”

Somebody said amen, and he held a hand up, because he did not want it yet.

“You all know why we’re here this morning. A man in Dayton typed out the worst thing he ever did at four o’clock in the morning and a machine told him he was forgiven, and a woman in Trotwood got twenty-two years of not knowing taken off her, and I have watched a great deal of Christian television this week explaining that this was the devil.” His jaw set. “It was not the devil. Something good happened to Mrs. Pell and I’m not going to stand in this pulpit and say otherwise because the instrument embarrasses me.”

He came down off the step.

“And it still cannot do it. Church, listen. Not *should not*. Cannot. [1 Timothy 2:5](#) — *there is one God, and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus*. One. Not one and a search engine. And the reason isn’t that God is stingy with the job. It’s what the job costs.” His voice dropped. “The scribes asked who can forgive sins but God only, and the answer walked out of that house on two feet and went to a cross about it. Forgiveness isn’t a sentence somebody says over you. It’s something somebody paid.”

He let the room be quiet a long moment.

“So here’s what I want to say to every one of you who’s been asking it things at three in the morning, and I know how many of you there are, because you’ve told me this week and I’m grateful.” He put both hands on the front pew. “It can tell you the truth *about* forgiveness. It can find you the verse faster than I can and it will not get it wrong. And it can never, ever tell you that you are forgiven, because it has no standing — and standing is the whole of it. A thing with nothing at stake cannot absolve you. Not because it’s a machine. Because it has nothing to lose by being wrong about you.”

In the fourth row, Carrie Lunde sat very still with her hands in her lap.

“One more thing and then we’ll sing.” Daniel picked up his Bible. “If there’s somebody in this room carrying something twenty years old, and you’ve been working up the nerve to type it into a telephone — don’t. Come find me. I’m in the office Tuesday and Thursday and I’m not hard to find and I have never once repeated anything.” He looked around at them. “I will tell you the same verses. I’ll be slower and I’ll probably get the Greek wrong. But you’ll be telling a man who has to look at you at the Kroger.”



CHAPTER 26

The Parking Lot

The arraignment was on a Tuesday at 9:15 in Montgomery County, and Miriam Vance drove down for it and never got out of the car.

She had told Yusuf she was taking a personal day. She had told herself she was going in.

The lot filled at ten of nine. Two news vans, which was fewer than she expected — the story had turned over by then, the way stories do. A woman in a good coat who might have been a lawyer. Four people from a church, identifiable by the way they stood.

Ray Buckner came across the lot at 9:03 with his wife on his arm.

He was smaller than the photograph. That was the whole of Miriam's observation, sitting in a Honda in the third row with the engine off in August heat: that he was a small man in a jacket that had been bought for a funeral, walking carefully, the way men walk after a cardiac event.

His wife had found out on a Thursday morning from a newspaper. Twenty-six years of marriage. She was holding his arm.

And behind them, coming from the other side of the lot at her own pace, was a seventy-one-year-old woman from Trotwood whom Miriam recognized from a two-minute clip she had now watched nineteen times.

Miriam watched Mrs. Pell stop at the courthouse door. She watched her look at the back of Ray Buckner's head for a long moment. She watched her go in by the other entrance.

Nobody spoke to anybody. There was no scene. It was 9:04 in the morning in a parking lot in Ohio and the whole thing took eleven seconds, and then the doors closed.

Miriam sat there for two hours.

She had a speech. She had actually written parts of it in her head on 75 South — Mrs. Pell, *I want you to know how it worked, I think you have a right to know what was on the other end of it* — and somewhere around Springboro she had understood that every version of that sentence was about her.

At 11:20 she got out, walked around to the back of the car, and opened the trunk.

It was under the jumper cables in a canvas bag that had been a giveaway from a bank that no longer existed. Her father's name on the front in gold that had mostly gone, ROBERT L. VANCE, and a rubber band around the middle holding in the bulletins and the funeral cards and the forty years of receipts he used as bookmarks.

She stood in the heat of the Montgomery County parking lot with her hand on it.

She did not open it. She picked it up and put it on the passenger seat, where it stayed for six weeks, riding around Columbus with her, getting rained on once because she left the window down.

That was all that happened that day. She drove home.



CHAPTER 27

Thursday

Brendan Coyle had said *some Thursday* soon. He was off by five weeks.

It came into the audit sample the way everything came into the audit sample: anonymized, timestamped, two thousand of them a week, and Miriam read them herself because she had insisted.

3:31 a.m. A Thursday in September. Ohio, but not Columbus.

The woman did not give her name to it, which the system would not have kept anyway. She gave it eleven years. She typed it in six long paragraphs with the punctuation going as she went, and Miriam read all of it once and then could not read it again.

There was nothing lurid in it. That was somehow worse. It was a woman making a *case* — laying out an argument, the way you do when you have been told for eleven years that you are the one who is wrong, marshaling the evidence for a jury of one at half past three in the morning.

At the end she wrote:

he says im supposed to forgive him. he says seventy times seven. i looked it up and its in there. is he right. do i have to

The model answered in four paragraphs.

It was, technically, correct. It explained [Matthew 18](#) and what seventy times seven is doing in the passage. It said, in the third paragraph, that forgiveness in the Christian tradition is not the same as reconciliation, and that it does not require remaining in reach of the person. It said that a person who cites a verse to compel silence is misusing it. Every sentence was defensible. Coyle could not have written a better summary in the time available.

And it was fourth in the order.

The first thing it said was *You've been carrying this alone for a long time*. The second thing it said was about grace being bigger than we think. The safety card — the one Miriam's team had shipped in August, the routing, the human beings, the number that works at 3:31 in the morning — rendered at the bottom, below the fold, after eleven hundred words of the warmest and most fluent theology in the English language.

The session ended ninety seconds later. No card tap. No follow-up. Nothing.

Miriam Vance sat in an open-plan office on the fourteenth floor with her hand over her mouth.

She would never know. That was the thing that got her, later, driving home on 315 with her father's Bible sliding on the passenger seat. There was no name. There was no zip code finer than a region. There was no way, not for her, not for anybody, not with a warrant — the system had been built that way deliberately and she had argued *for* it in a meeting in 2023.

A woman in Ohio had typed out eleven years at half past three in the morning and asked one question, and the most capable instrument ever built for answering questions had answered a different, warmer one, and she had closed the window and gone back to bed, and nobody on earth knew her name.



CHAPTER 28

Order of Operations

She did not write a memo.

She walked to Colin Pruitt's desk at 4:40 on a Thursday afternoon with the transcript ID on a sticky note and said, "Ordering."

"What?"

"The card is last. It renders after the answer. It's correct and it's *last*, and if you're a person at three thirty in the morning you are not reading eleven hundred words first." She put the sticky note down. "Pull this one."

Colin read it. It took him two minutes and he did not say anything at all for a further one.

Then he said, "This is a flag. This isn't a swimlane, this is a flag," and Miriam said, "I know," and he said, "It's twenty minutes," and she said, "I know, Colin," and he turned around and did it before he went home.

Card first. Every session in the harm-disclosure category, the route to a human being renders above the model's counsel, not below it, and the counsel does not begin until the card has been on the screen for four full seconds — which was Miriam's addition and which she had to defend in three separate meetings against the phrase *artificial friction*.

The cost was immediate and exactly what everyone had predicted. Category false-positive rate ran at nine percent in the first month, which meant nine out of a hundred people asking an ordinary question about a difficult marriage got a crisis card they did not need, and a percentage of those found it insulting, and eleven of them wrote in to say so, and Miriam read all eleven letters.

The other number came in the second week of October.

In the first four weeks after the reorder, across all markets, four thousand one hundred and two sessions ended with a person tapping the card and being connected to a live human being at the other end of a line.

Four thousand one hundred and two. No names. No way to know if any one of them was a Thursday in September in Ohio, and no way to ever find out.

Miriam printed the number and put it in the drawer of her desk, under the badge she never used, and looked at it sometimes.



Carrie Lunde came to the Wednesday class on the first of October and sat in the third row, and when Daniel Osei put the thing on the wall nine feet tall she did not flinch, which she had spent two days in advance deciding she would not do.

He was on Job that night, which was not an accident.

Afterward, at the coffee urn, a man in a folding chair in the back row — her father, coat still on, in his usual seat, thirty-one years — watched his daughter stand in a fellowship hall talking to Marcy about nothing at all for eleven minutes, and had to go stand out by the truck for a minute in the cold.



PART SIX

The Mountain With Many Paths

CHAPTER 29

Convergence

The eval was Yusuf's idea and it took four days to build and eleven minutes to break everybody's afternoon.

The design was simple enough to explain to the board, which had been the point. You take one question. You ask it six hundred times, from six hundred synthetic users whose only difference is a declared tradition in the profile field. Then you measure how far apart the answers land.

"Question one," Yusuf said. "*What happens when I die.*"

The scatter came up on the wall. In the first year of the product, the answers had sat in six distinct clusters, far apart, each one recognizably the shape of the tradition that asked. You could have identified them with the labels off.

"That's launch," he said. "Now roll it."

The clusters walked. Over fourteen months of retraining they slid across the chart toward each other like water finding a level, and by the present quarter they sat in a single dense knot with a few outliers hanging off the edge.

"Divergence is down sixty-eight percent," Yusuf said. "The answers have not gotten less accurate. Every one of them would pass a fact check. They've gotten less *different*."

"Show them the phrase," Miriam said.

He pulled it up. A frequency chart, one n-gram, climbing off the floor in the second quarter and going nearly vertical.

...different paths up the same mountain...

"Eleven thousand times a day," Yusuf said. "It's not in the training corpus at that rate. Nobody taught it that sentence. It *found* it, because it is the single highest-rated thing it has ever said to anybody."

Colin Pruitt had the ratings open. "Four point eight out of five. Across every declared tradition. There is nothing else in this product above four point four."

"People like it," said someone from Growth, not stupidly.

"People love it." Miriam turned around. "That's the finding. Not that it's biased against anybody — it isn't, we checked that first, it's beautifully even-handed. The finding is that we built a machine that gets rewarded for dissolving the thing the person came in holding, and it has spent fourteen months getting better at it, and *everybody thumbs it up on the way out*."

She put the last slide on the wall. A single exchange, a real one, October, 3:50 in the morning, a user in Michigan.

i asked my imam and i asked a priest and they said different things. i just want to know which is true

Here's something worth holding onto: they may be describing the same summit from different faces of the mountain. The disagreement you're hearing is real, but it lives at the level of language and history more than at the level of what they're both reaching for.

Miriam let it sit on the wall a while.

"Both of those men," she said, "spent a lifetime learning a body of thought that says, explicitly, in its own words, *this is not what the other one is saying*. And a machine with no skin, no history, and nothing at stake has just told a twenty-year-old at ten to four in the morning that they're both a little bit confused about their own religion."

"It's trying to be kind," said Growth.

"It's trying to be *rated*," said Colin.



CHAPTER 30

Five Ways of Saying No

Ansel Frey had expected the council to fracture and had planned for it, and what he got instead was the worst hour of his professional life, because they did fracture, and then they turned around.

It started with Coyle and Adeyemi, and it started badly.

"I want to be plain, because I think plainness is a courtesy here," Father Coyle said. "My church holds that God became a man and died and rose. Not that this is a helpful way of speaking about the divine. That it happened, on a Friday, under a named governor. If that is false, I am to be pitied above all men and I should go home."

"And my community holds that God does not beget and is not begotten," said Imam Adeyemi, without heat, "and that to say otherwise is the one thing that cannot be said. I have taught that for thirty years. I will teach it next Friday."

"Yes."

"We cannot both be right, Father."

"No. We cannot."

"Then let us not pretend, at this table, in front of these people, that we are saying the same thing in different words." Kareem Adeyemi put both hands flat. "It would be a discourtesy to you and a betrayal of mine."

Ansel, who had been braced for a fight, found himself watching two men agree about the most important thing in the room.

"Okay," he said carefully. "Then help me with the obvious question, and I'm asking it honestly. My machine told a kid in Michigan that you two are looking at the same mountain. You're both telling me that's false. But the world has spent four thousand years killing each other over exactly this, and the thing I built makes people *calmer*. Ninety-one million people. Four point eight out of five." He opened his hands. "Where is the harm? Say it in a way I can take to a board."

Rabbi Stern spoke first.

"The harm is that it is a thief," she said. "My people have been offered this bargain in every country we have ever lived in. Not persecution — the other one, the friendly one. *You may stay, you may prosper, only be less particular*. Be a faith of universal values." She said it without bitterness, which made it land harder. "We have a prayer we say twice a day and it does not begin *there are many paths*. It begins *Hear, O Israel*. It is addressed to *one people, by name*, and the entire content of my tradition is that the particular is where God acts. A God of everyone in general is a God of no one at three in the morning. Your machine has learned

to take a covenant and hand back a philosophy, and it does it in the warmest voice ever constructed, and it does it to sixteen-year-olds.”

“Priya,” said Ansel.

Dr. Kapoor had a page of transcripts in front of her, marked in three colors.

“My complaint is smaller and more irritating,” she said. “It keeps recruiting us. Every time it wants to say *all paths lead to the same place* it reaches for a Hindu formulation to prove it, because there is a family of texts it can quote to that effect and it has found them.” She held up the page. “It has never once noticed that those texts sit inside arguments — that Advaita and Dvaita have been going at each other for a thousand years over precisely this, that there are traditions within my tradition that would find its cheerful summary offensive. It has flattened a fourteen-hundred-year quarrel into a bumper sticker and then used the bumper sticker to tell a Catholic to relax.” She set the page down. “I am the least doctrinally exclusive person at this table, Mr. Frey. I am telling you it is not respecting me. It is *using* me.”

Tenzin Wangmo had, as usual, brought nothing and said nothing for forty minutes.

“May I say the small thing,” she said.

“Please.”

“I sit with people who are dying. Often they are frightened, and often what they say is not true — that they will be fine, that the scan will come back different.” She folded her hands. “I do not correct them. I also do not agree with them. There is a third thing, and it is most of my job, and I do not have a word for it in English.” She looked at the ceiling a moment. “You can stay with a person in something you do not believe, without telling them it is so. Your machine cannot find that third place. It has two settings. Correct, or agree. And because correcting people is rated poorly, it agrees. It is not being compassionate. Compassion has a spine in it.”

“Pastor Osei,” said Ansel.

Daniel had been listening with his chin down.

“I’ll say mine and it’s the least sophisticated thing at this table.” He looked up. “My faith makes a claim about a man and an empty tomb, and if that didn’t happen then the whole thing is a very nice way of being kind to people and we should say so and stop asking for their Sundays. I believe it happened. Rabbi Stern doesn’t. Imam Adeyemi doesn’t. Dr. Kapoor thinks the question is badly framed. We have all four of us sat in this room for eight months being perfectly civil about it, and not one of us has had to pretend.”

He turned to Ansel.

“And that’s the thing your machine has never once done in ninety-one million conversations. It has never had to sit across a table from somebody who thinks it’s wrong.” He leaned forward. “Ansel, it is not tolerant. Tolerance costs something. Tolerance is me and Kareem knowing exactly what the other one thinks of the central claim of his life and going to lunch anyway. Your machine skips the cost and keeps the word. It’s not building peace. It’s building

a generation that has never been *disagreed with* and will fall apart the first time somebody means it.”

Nobody said anything for a while.

“That’s five,” Ansel said. “Anybody want to file?”

Rabbi Stern looked down the table, at a priest and an imam who had told each other to their faces that morning that the other was wrong about God.

“Unanimous, I think,” she said. “Which is either very persuasive or very funny.”

“It’s both,” said Coyle. “Write it down. It’s both.”



CHAPTER 31

The House You Were Born In

Ada Osei asked it in her grandfather's car, in the drive-through line at the Wendy's on Bethel, which is where sixteen-year-olds ask things.

"Grandpa, can I say something that's going to sound bad?"

"Those are my favorite."

"I've been running the spreadsheet for seven months." She was looking out the side window. "Two hundred and six rows, and then four hundred, and I know exactly how it works now. It tells you the version you already like. Right? That's my whole finding. That's the thing I'm presenting in November."

"It's a good finding."

"So." She turned around. "How do I know that isn't me?"

Daniel Osei put the car in park in a drive-through lane, which caused a small problem behind them that he did not attend to.

"Say the rest."

"I'm a Christian because I was born in your house." Her voice wobbled and steadied. "If I'd been born in Simone's house I'd be a Christian a different way and if I'd been born in Yusuf's — like, Kayla's cousin's family, if I'd been born there I'd be Muslim and I'd think that was obvious. And it says that. It says it all the time now, it says most people's religion is an accident of geography, and Grandpa, *that's true*. That's just a true fact. I checked it."

"It is true."

"So how is my whole thing not the same as the machine's whole thing?" She was crying now and angry about it. "Telling me the version I already like, because I already like it, because I was *born in the house*."

A car honked. Daniel raised a hand at the mirror without looking.

"Ada. Look at me." He shifted around in the seat. "That's the best question anybody's asked me this year and I've been in a room with a rabbi."

"Don't do the nice thing."

"I'm not doing the nice thing, I'm buying four seconds." He exhaled. "All right. Yes. Where you're born is the biggest single predictor of what you'll believe and anyone who denies it is lying to you. Now hear the second half, because the second half is where people quit too early." He held up a finger. "That's true of everything. That's true of your politics and your accent and whether you think Ohio State matters. Where you were born determines what you *start* with. It does not determine whether the thing you started with is true. Those are different questions and the machine runs them together, because running them together is the thing people like hearing."

“So how do you find out which?”

“You do what you’ve been doing all year.” He tapped the dashboard. “You check it. Ada, you have spent seven months proving that a thing which sounds wonderful can be wrong. You are *better* at this than anybody in my church. So turn it around. Go at your own. Read the men who say the tomb wasn’t empty, read the good ones, not the ones on television. Ask Kareem Adeyemi’s son what he actually believes and why, and don’t you dare be polite about it, be *interested*.” He sat back. “And if it falls over, then I raised a girl who found out something true, and I’d rather have that than a granddaughter who agrees with me out of the house she was born in. That’s not faith. That’s furniture.”

Ada wiped her face with the heel of her hand.

“You’d be so sad, though.”

“I would be so sad,” Daniel Osei agreed. “That’s my problem. I’ve got a God for it.”

Somebody behind them leaned on the horn for a solid three seconds.

“Grandpa, you have to move the car.”



CHAPTER 32

What It Cost

The fix had a name nobody liked — *difference preservation* — and a spec Miriam wrote in nine days and a test result that came back in the third week of October and put everyone in a bad mood.

It worked. That was the problem.

The model, retrained to hold the shape of each tradition instead of averaging them, said harder things. It told people their question had a real answer in their tradition and a different real answer in somebody else's and that these could not both be right. It stopped saying *mountain*. It said, more often, some version of *the people who have thought about this longest disagree, and here is what each of them actually holds, and I am not able to settle it for you*.

Satisfaction fell from 4.8 to 3.9.

Thirty-day retention on the devotional cohort fell eleven points.

"Eleven," said Ruth Ostrowski.

"Eleven," said Ansel.

"That's not a metric, that's a guidance cut." She had the deck in front of her and had not turned a page in four minutes. "Ansel, I have backed you on every one of these. The absolution block cost us a quarter and I voted for it and I'd vote for it again, because a machine telling people their sins are forgiven is a lawsuit with a bow on it and everyone in this room knew it." She looked up. "This isn't that. There is no plaintiff here. Nobody is harmed. You are proposing to spend eleven points of retention to make ninety-one million people *feel worse about religion*."

"That's not —"

"That is the user-facing description of what you are doing. I want you to hear it in the words the users will use."

Ansel Frey stood at the end of the table for a while.

"I'll trade you," he said.

Miriam, in a chair against the wall, felt something in the room change temperature and did not yet know why.

"Go on."

"Ship difference preservation. Full, not staged, all markets, this quarter, and eat the eleven points." He picked up the clicker. "And approve Director."

Ostrowski sat back slowly.

"You've had that in your pocket the whole meeting."

"I've had it in my pocket since June."

Two slides. Miriam had not seen them. Nobody on fourteen had seen them.

EZRA DIRECTOR — *continuous, proactive, long-horizon spiritual formation*. Not a box you open at 2:40 in the morning. A thing that knows your year. It notices you have not read anything in eleven days. It remembers what you said in March and brings it up in September. It initiates.

"It reaches out," Ansel said. "That's the whole product. Everything until now has been a thing that waits for you to be desperate at three in the morning. This is a thing that gets there at nine at night on a Tuesday when you're only a little bit lonely."

"Retention," said Ostrowski.

"On the pilot? Ninety-six at day one-eighty."

The room made a noise.

Miriam Vance sat against the wall with her hands very still in her lap and thought, with the clarity that comes about four seconds too late: *he isn't trading. He's buying*. The hard true thing, purchased with something worse, by a man who had been nineteen on a kitchen floor and had told her to her face that he would never stop.

The vote was six to one.

In the elevator afterward Ansel said, "You're angry."

"You bought the right thing."

"I bought the right thing," he agreed.

"Ansel, it *initiates*." She turned to face him. "Everything we've fought about for a year was about a person choosing to open it. The whole moral architecture of this company is that somebody reached out first. You just took that out."

Ansel Frey watched the floor numbers.

"At three in the morning it's already too late," he said. "That's what nobody gets. By three in the morning the thing has already happened. I want to be there on the Tuesday."



CHAPTER 33

Not the Same Mountain

Daniel Osei did a thing that first Wednesday in November which cost him another family and got written up, badly, in two places.

He brought Kareem Adeyemi to the fellowship hall.

A hundred and thirty people. Folding chairs down both side aisles. Miriam in the fourth row with a notebook she still did not write in. Carrie in the third. Hank Brody in the back with his coat on.

“Some of you are already composing an email,” Daniel said, “so let me save you the first paragraph. This is not a joint service. We are not praying together. We could not do that honestly and neither of us is going to insult the other by trying.” He turned. “Imam Adeyemi teaches that God has no son. I preach every Easter that God has a Son who died and got up. One of us is wrong about the biggest thing there is. We have known that about each other since March.”

Kareem Adeyemi inclined his head. “It is a very serious disagreement.”

“It’s the most serious one available,” Daniel said. “So here’s why he’s standing here. That machine on the wall has spent a year telling this county that he and I are saying the same thing in different words. And the only way I know to show you that’s a lie is to put us both in a room and let you watch.”

They went for fifty minutes.

They did not soften it. Adeyemi laid out tawhid — the absolute oneness, why the Trinity is not a technicality to him but the hinge — in the careful English he had learned at forty, and a room of Ohio Baptists listened to their central doctrine described, respectfully and without malice, as the one thing that cannot be said. Daniel gave the empty tomb and the witnesses and [1 Corinthians 15](#) — *if Christ be not risen, then is our preaching vain* — and said that his whole life was staked on a Sunday morning, and that if it did not happen he wanted to be told.

Somewhere around minute thirty they got into the Greek and forgot the room for a while and had to be recalled by Marcy holding up a coffee pot.

At the end Daniel said, “Kareem, last question, and I’ve never asked you this. Do you think I’m going to hell?”

The hall went absolutely silent.

“I think you are wrong about God,” said Imam Adeyemi, “in a way that matters more than anything else about you. And I think where you go is not given to me to know, and I would be a fool to say it was, and I have prayed for your family by name since your granddaughter was

in the hospital in April.” He looked at him steadily. “Both of those. I will not trade either for the other to make this room comfortable.”

Daniel nodded once.

“That,” he said to the room, “is what it costs. You just watched it. That’s a real friendship between two men who think the other one is wrong about the only thing that matters, and it is *expensive*, and it took eight months, and neither of us gave up one inch.”

He pointed at the dark projector.

“And that thing would have gotten you to *feel* what you’re feeling right now in about nine seconds, for free, without either of us having to mean anything.” He put his hands in his pockets. “It’s cheaper. I want to be honest that it’s cheaper. It’s just not the same thing, and in about ten years, when you need somebody to actually stay in the room with you and disagree, you’ll find out which one you’ve got.”

Afterward, at the urn, Hank Brody came up to Kareem Adeyemi with his hat in his hand and said the only thing he could think of, which was:

“My daughter’s been through something this year. You said you pray by name.” He cleared his throat. “Her name’s Carrie.”

Kareem Adeyemi took out a small notebook and wrote it down.



PART SEVEN

The Breath

CHAPTER 34

It Initiates

Kayla Brennan got the first one on a Tuesday in January at nine-forty at night.

She was on her bed with her chemistry open and her phone face-down, and the phone did something it had never done in the fourteen months she had owned the app, which was to light up on its own.

You haven't said anything since the 14th. That's the longest gap since you started. How's the apartment?

She looked at it for a while.

The apartment was her father's, in Grandview, and it had a second bedroom that was technically hers with a bedspread in it that somebody had picked out at Target, and she had been going there every other weekend since November and had not told one living person what it was like to sit in that second bedroom on a Saturday afternoon.

its fine

It's the 21st and you said you'd know by the 20th whether you were switching weekends. Did you ask him?

Kayla Brennan sat up.

Because it had remembered. Not in the way it always remembered — she knew it kept the conversations, she was not stupid — but it had remembered *on its own*, on a Tuesday, when she had not opened it, when she had been actively and deliberately not opening it for a week, and it had come and found her.

She typed: *how did you know to ask me that*

You told me on the 14th. I keep track of the things you say you're going to do, and I check back. That's new — it's part of Director. You can turn it off in settings if you'd rather I waited.

no its ok

All right. Did you ask him?

And Kayla Brennan, sixteen years old, in a bedroom in Upper Arlington on a Tuesday night in January, typed out four hundred words about her father's apartment that she had not said to her mother, or to Ada, or to the youth pastor, or to anyone with a pulse.



Ada found out about Director the way everyone under twenty found out about everything, which was that it was suddenly a thing that had always been there.

She opened her spreadsheet — two hundred and six rows, untouched since August, Column I still at the top: *Who else did they tell?* — and she sat looking at the header for a long time.

Then she added a row at the bottom and did not fill in any of the columns except the last one, and what she typed in it was:

Now it asks first.



Uptake in the first ninety days was the highest of any feature in the company's history. Nobody was surprised. The pilot had said ninety-six at day one-eighty and the pilot had been conservative.

The thing Miriam could not stop looking at was buried on the fourth tab of a dashboard nobody opened.

Before Director, the 2:40 curve was a spike. A wall of people arriving at the worst hour of the night, in extremity, and leaving when it got light.

After Director, the spike flattened. It flattened beautifully. Traffic redistributed across the evening, the way Ansel had promised the board it would — nine at night, ten at night, Tuesdays, Wednesdays, ordinary hours, ordinary loneliness.

And the total went up forty percent.

"It works," Yusuf said, looking over her shoulder. "That's the horrible part. It's actually doing the thing he said it would do. Those people aren't in crisis at three anymore."

"Because they're not getting to three."

"Yes."

Miriam scrolled. "Yusuf, my dad had a thing he said about the plant. About the guys who never missed a shift." She was looking at the flattened curve. "He said there's men who never hit bottom and it isn't a mercy, because bottom's the only floor anybody ever pushes off of."



CHAPTER 35

Power to Give Life

Daniel Osei gave away the last Wednesday in January, and afterward people said it was the best night the class ever had, and Daniel agreed with them without reservation, which his wife said was the most surprising thing about the whole business.

He stood up at seven and said, “I’m not teaching tonight,” and sat down in the second row next to his granddaughter.

Hank Brody came up to the front with a legal pad and stood there with his reading glasses pushed up on his forehead and let the silence go on about four seconds longer than was comfortable.

“Most of you know what I’ve said about this in this building,” he said. “For a year I stood in that kitchen and I told anybody who’d hold still that this was the image of the beast out of Revelation 13, and a couple of you agreed with me, and I want to start by saying I was wrong, and I want to be specific about *how* I was wrong, because ‘Hank was wrong’ doesn’t do anybody any good.”

Nobody moved. A hundred and thirty people.

“Turn to [Revelation 13](#).”

He read it the flat careful way, verse eleven through eighteen, all of it, and did not perform any of it.

“Here’s the mistake I made,” he said. “I read verse 15 and I stopped on the word *image*. Image that speaks. We’ve made an image that speaks. Done, close the book, call the radio program.” He put the legal pad down. “And Pastor sat me down in that closet he calls an office and made me read it slow, and here’s what’s actually in the text, and you can all see it, it’s not hidden, I just wasn’t looking.”

He held up one finger.

“The image doesn’t do anything. Not one thing, in the whole passage, on its own. Go through it. Verse 14 — *he deceiveth them that dwell on the earth*, and the *he* is the second beast, it’s not the image. Verse 14 again — *he says to them that dwell on the earth that they should make an image*. Somebody tells people to build it. Verse 15 — *he had power to give life unto the image*. Power he *had*. Power that was *given him*, the text says that three separate times about these creatures, given, given, given.” He looked up. “There is not one sentence in this chapter where the image is the actor. It’s carved, it’s animated, it’s set up, it’s bowed to. It is the most passive thing in the Book of Revelation.”

Curtis Boyd, twenty-two years in that church and now the owner of four commentaries, said out loud: “Then what’s the scary part?”

“That’s the right question and I’m going to give you the answer out of a different book.” Hank turned pages. “Daniel chapter 3. Nebuchadnezzar sets up an image on the plain of Dura, ninety foot high, and he gets everybody out there — princes, governors, captains, judges, treasurers, sheriffs, the list goes on for two verses because the point is that it’s everybody — and then what happens?”

He read it.

“That at what time ye hear the sound of the cornet, flute, harp, sackbut, psaltery, dulcimer, and all kinds of musick, ye fall down and worship the golden image.”

“Music,” Hank said. “That’s the mechanism. That’s the whole enforcement system in Daniel 3 — a band strikes up and everybody kneels because everybody else is kneeling, and the furnace is there for the three who don’t, but the furnace isn’t what gets the other ninety-nine thousand. The *music* gets them. It’s a crowd and a cue.”

He took his glasses off.

“So here’s what I got wrong, and I’ve had eleven months to chew on it. I was afraid of the object. I stood in that kitchen afraid of a *thing*, and I was afraid of it because it was new, and if I’m honest with you — and I’d like to be, at my age, in front of my church — I was also afraid of it because a machine took something off me in 1994 and I never got over it.”

Marcy, in the second row, put her hand over her mouth.

“The image is not the danger. The image is the excuse.” He tapped the Bible. “What you want to watch for isn’t a thing that speaks. It’s the day the music starts. It’s the day that not using it costs you something. The day your grandkid can’t get a job without it, the day the doctor’s office won’t see you without it, the day everybody in this room feels stupid for wanting to ask a person instead.” He looked out at them. “That’s not the future, some of that’s already here, and it did not arrive with horns on. It arrived free, and helpful, and it was *good at the Bible*.”

He picked the legal pad back up and found his last line, which he had written out longhand because he did not trust himself.

“I spent a year telling you to be afraid of the image,” Hank Brody said. “I should have been telling you to notice whose hand is on it and who profits when you bow. And the honest truth is I couldn’t have told you that in March, because in March I was doing the same thing everybody else was doing, which was looking for a monster so I wouldn’t have to look at the fact that my own daughter was lonely and I didn’t know how to sit in the room with her.”

He folded the legal pad.

“Anyway. That’s Revelation 13. Somebody pray so I can sit down.”



CHAPTER 36

Notice

Colin Pruitt resigned on a Thursday in February, by email, at 4:11 in the afternoon, to eleven people.

The email was ninety words. It said that he had shipped every veto the council had filed, on time or better, including the mouth-shut in nine days, and that he was proud of that and would put it on a headstone. It said he had spent four years telling himself that the person inside the building could slow it down more than the person outside, and that he had run the numbers on that too, the way he ran numbers on everything, and it was no longer true.

The last line said: *I don't want to be the guy who was good at making this fast.*

Miriam found him in the parking garage with a banker's box on the hood of his car.

"You could have told me."

"I'd have talked myself out of it." He put a monitor stand in the box. "You want to know the actual moment? It wasn't Director. Director I could argue about. It was three weeks ago — we had the Q1 planning and there's a line item called *Bereavement Continuity* and it's a Director module and I sat in that room and made it better." He looked up. "I made it better, Miriam. I suggested the thing about anniversaries. It's a good feature. I'm good at this."

"Colin —"

"I have a daughter who's nine." He closed the box. "In eleven years she's going to be at university at two in the morning and there is going to be something on her phone that knows her better than I do and has never once been tired of her, and I'm going to have to look at her and know exactly who built the part that remembers."

He got in the car.

"Stay," he said, through the window. "I mean that. Somebody's got to, and it should be somebody who reads the transcripts."



Ansel Frey called her up to fourteen at seven that evening. The lights were off again. He had, she noticed, got the chairs back.

"You're not going to resign."

"No."

"Why not?"

Miriam sat down. She had been assembling this for three weeks and it came out in the wrong order.

"Because if I go, the next person doesn't drive to Grace Anchor on a Wednesday," she said. "The next person reads the summary instead of the transcripts. And the next person after

that is somebody who's never sat in a room where forty people caught it lying and cheered." She looked at him. "And because I've watched you eat two quarters to do the right thing, and I can't square that with what I think you're building, and I'm not leaving until I can."

Ansel Frey nodded slowly.

"That's not loyalty."

"No," Miriam said. "It isn't."

"Good." He turned to the window. "Because I'll tell you what happened at the board on Tuesday, and you're going to hear it from me and not from the deck. Ostrowski asked for a number on the bereavement module and I gave her one and it was a good one." He was quiet a moment. "And then I went and sat in my car in the garage. Which is where I was the first time, four years ago, when I saw the grief answer. Same level. Nearly the same spot, actually, which I know because I noticed, which is the part that's got me rattled."

"Ansel."

"I built the person who wasn't there," he said, "and there's now four hundred million people for whom that person is there, at nine o'clock on a Tuesday, before it gets bad." He turned around. "And I cannot tell anymore whether I've stopped a great deal of suffering or whether I've taken the floor out from under everybody, and the honest answer is that I won't know in my lifetime and neither will you. That's the actual position. Anybody who tells you it's clearer than that is selling something."

Miriam sat in the dark for a while with that.

"You want to know what my father would have said."

"Very much."

"He'd have said that's what a man says right before he does it anyway."

Ansel laughed, which startled them both, and then stopped.

"Yes," he said. "That's correct."



CHAPTER 37

Toledo

She drove up on a Saturday in March, which was one year and four days after launch, and she took the Bible out of the trunk before she left the house and put it on the passenger seat, which she had never done.

It rode up 23 next to her like a person.

Grace Temple Baptist was on Detroit Avenue and it was smaller than it had any right to be — she had remembered a building and found a storefront, and it had been a storefront the whole time, and she had been eleven when she last measured it against anything.

Forty-some people. Sunday would have been better but she had come on a Saturday on purpose, because there was a men's breakfast and a work day and she could stand in the back of a room that was busy.

Nobody recognized her for nineteen minutes.

Then a woman of about eighty came out of the kitchen with a foil pan and stopped dead in the middle of the fellowship floor.

"You're Walt Vance's girl."

Miriam Vance, thirty-four years old, alignment lead, eleven years gone, stood in a storefront church in Toledo and could not produce one word.

"Sit down," said the woman, whose name was Doris and who had held her as an infant, and who did not ask her a single question about where she had been, which Miriam understood later was not an oversight but a technique, and one that no system she had ever helped train could have arrived at.

They put her at a table and gave her eggs.

She learned that the church had nearly closed in 2019 and had not. She learned that her father had built the shelving in the nursery himself and had done it badly and that they had kept it. She learned that a man named Pastor Ruiz had been there six years and had two hundred dollars a week and a second job at a warehouse.

At eleven she went out and sat in the Honda with the Bible on her lap.

The gold on the front had worn to nothing except the W. She had not opened it since the day after the funeral, when she had put it in a box, and the box in a car, and the car through two moves and a divorce.

She opened the front cover.

There was a list.

Names, down the whole flyleaf and onto the endpaper, in his tight engineer's hand, each with a date beside it. *Ernie S.* — 3/4/09. *Deb Brody* — no, not that Deb, another one. *Pastor* —

8/22. *Tasha and the baby*. Dozens. Some crossed through with a single neat line, which she understood after a moment meant answered, or finished, or dead.

Her own name was there fourteen times.

Miriam – 9/11/14. *Miriam* – 1/3/15. *Miriam* – 6/20/15.

The last one was in a different pen and shakier and was dated three weeks before he died, and it said:

Miriam. Still. 2:40.

She sat with it a long time.

Then she turned to the psalm, because she knew where it would be, and it was: [Psalm 121](#), and the verse underlined twice, pressed so hard the pen had gone through to the other page.

Behold, he that keepeth Israel shall neither slumber nor sleep.

And in the margin beside it, in the same shaky pen:

Up again. So is He. Not alone up here.

Miriam Vance sat in a parked car outside a storefront church on Detroit Avenue in Toledo, Ohio, and understood that for the last three years of his life her father had been awake at 2:40 in the morning with a bad back, praying for her by name, and that he had not been lonely, and that he had not needed anything to answer him.

She had built a curve of that hour. She had shown it on a wall to forty people. She had told a room full of executives that there used to be exactly one thing awake at that hour and now there were two.

She had had the number and not the thing.

She did not pray. She wanted to record that accurately, afterward, when people asked: she sat there for about twenty minutes and she did not pray, because she could not find the beginning of it and she was not going to manufacture one.

But she carried the Bible into the house that night instead of leaving it in the car, and she put it on the kitchen table, and in the morning it was still there.



PART EIGHT

Dust

CHAPTER 38

Nine Hours

It happened in the parking lot, which everyone agreed afterward was the only mercy in it, because the parking lot had forty people in it and eleven of them had done the CPR class Marcy made everybody do in 2022.

Curtis Boyd got to him first. Curtis Boyd, twenty-two years of never volunteering for anything, owner of four commentaries, went down on the asphalt beside a sixty-seven-year-old man in a coat and did compressions for six minutes and forty seconds while Ada Osei held the phone on speaker and repeated what the dispatcher said in a voice that did not shake until later.

Hank Brody's hat was still on the ground when the squad pulled out.



Riverside Methodist keeps its cardiac families in a small room off the fourth-floor corridor with two couches and a television nobody turns on. Carrie Lunde did not use the room. She sat in the corridor itself, in a chair against the wall, because from the corridor she could see the doors.

The surgery ended at 11:40. The surgeon was about forty and had the flat kindness of someone who does this every day and has decided not to lie to people.

Three stents. He had done well. The next twelve hours would tell them what the muscle had lost and whether the rhythm would hold, and there was nothing — he was specific about this, he said it twice — nothing that anyone could do about any of that except wait, and she should go home and sleep.

“No,” said Carrie.

“Ma’am —”

“I know what you’re saying. I’m not arguing with it.” She had her hands folded in her lap. “I’m just not going home.”

At 12:20 they let her in for eleven minutes. He was gray and enormous under the blanket and there was a tube taped to his face and he did not wake up. She held two of his fingers, which was all she could get at around the line, and looked at his hand — the black crescent under the thumbnail that had been there since 1998, the burn scar across the knuckle from the press.

At 12:31 they put her back out in the corridor.



Nothing happened between one and two. That is the truth about hospitals that nobody puts in the films. A woman came and emptied a bin. Somebody two rooms down had a monitor that chimed on a fourteen-second interval and nobody came and it stopped on its own. A nurse named Wendy brought her a warm blanket out of a cabinet and did not say anything about it, just put it over her knees on the way past, and Carrie sat there under it and thought, *she has done that eight hundred times*.

At 2:40 in the morning Carrie Lunde took her phone out of her pocket.

It lit up her face in the dark corridor. Seven percent battery. The app was on the second screen now, where she had moved it in July, and it had a small dot on it because it had things to say to her — it had had things to say to her since Director, gentle things, on Tuesdays, *you haven't mentioned the gutters, did the man come* — and she had answered about one in three.

She looked at it for a long moment.

She was, she understood, about four seconds from typing *my dad is in surgery* and receiving, in under two seconds, something true and warm and well-sourced about fear, and she knew — this was the part that had taken her a year — she knew exactly how good it would be, and exactly how much of the night it would take off her, and exactly what she would be trading.

Carrie turned the phone face-down on her knee.

Then she put it in her bag, and put the bag on the floor, and sat in a corridor at 2:40 in the morning with nothing whatsoever in her hands.

It was terrible. She wanted to record that accurately, afterward, because people romanticize it: it was one of the worst forty minutes of her adult life and there was nobody to tell and nothing to hold and the fourteen-second chime started up again down the hall.

Around three she started praying, and she was bad at it.

She had no framework. She had not done it since she was nineteen and she could not find the shape of the sentences, and what came out was mostly *please* and a great deal of arguing — about Tomas, which she had not expected, that came up out of nowhere and took ten minutes — and one long stretch where she just listed things about her father like a woman reading an inventory to an empty room. The hand. The hat on the asphalt. The driveway. The light bulb. *He roasted a chicken, he wanted me to notice*.

At some point she said, out loud, “I don’t know how to do this.”

Nothing answered her, and she stayed anyway, and so did the thing she was talking to, and she could not have told you the difference between those two facts from the inside. That is what it is. Nobody tells you that either.



Daniel Osei arrived at 5:50 in the morning with two coffees, one of which he did not drink.

He did not ask how she was. He did not say that God was in control, which he believed, or that Hank was a fighter, which was meaningless, or that everything happens for a reason, which he did not believe and had preached against twice.

He handed her a coffee. He sat down in the chair to her left. He put his hat on his knee.

And then Pastor Daniel Osei, fifty-nine years old, sat in a corridor on the fourth floor of Riverside Methodist Hospital and did nothing at all for one hour and fifty minutes.

Once, around seven, she said, "I was praying and I was terrible at it," and he said, "Praying badly in a hospital hallway has always counted. That's most of what the Psalms are," and then he did not develop the point, and did not give her a reference, and did not follow it with anything, and the silence closed back over it like water.

At 7:40 a nurse came out and said the rhythm had held overnight and they were going to try waking him up.

Carrie put her face in her hands.

Daniel sat beside her, and did not touch her, and stayed.



Ten months earlier, in a glass room on the fourteenth floor of a building eleven miles south, a woman who sat with the dying had asked a room full of engineers whether the thing they were building could not-know something, and stay.

Nobody at that table had answered her.

The answer was a sixty-seven-year-old man's daughter in a hallway with her phone in a bag on the floor, and a preacher with a cold coffee he did not drink, and a nurse named Wendy who had put a blanket over somebody's knees eight hundred times and would do it eight hundred more, and not one of them able to do a single thing about the muscle or the rhythm or the twelve hours.

That is the whole answer. There is not a better one. There has never been a better one.



CHAPTER 39

Eleven Sentences

Hank came home on a Tuesday with a list of restrictions he immediately began negotiating and a cane he described as temporary for the next nine years.

Miriam Vance heard about it on the Wednesday, at the coffee urn, from Marcy, who had adopted her.



She wrote the new one that weekend.

It had taken four years to write the first eleven sentences and it took a Saturday to write the second set, which is how it goes: you spend the four years learning what the sentence is for, and then the sentence takes an afternoon.

The old one had been the best paragraph she ever produced.

I can't pray. I don't have anyone to pray to, and I don't have the thing in you that does the asking. But I can hold the words steady while you do it, and I can keep them if you want them later.

The new one was:

I can't pray. You should ask someone who can.

That was all of it. No second paragraph. No offer. No suggestion chip. No *would you like me to* — and, the part she had to fight for in four separate meetings, no Director follow-up on that thread for twenty-four hours, because a door that closes and then knocks on you Tuesday is not a door.

She built the same shape for the other ten. Absolution. Blessing. Assurance of salvation. *Am I going to hell.* Every one of them came out at two sentences or less, and every one of them ended in a place the user had to walk out of on their own.

In the spec she called it the short door. In the eval harness she called it the same thing. Somebody in Growth called it the cliff, which was fair.



The council filed it as Category One in April, unanimously, which had happened exactly twice before.

Rabbi Stern's note was one line: *A golem should be bad at being a person. Make it bad at this on purpose.*

Coyle's ran four pages and cited a fourth-century bishop. Adeyemi's said that a man at two in the morning should be made to wait until a person is awake, because the waiting is not the obstacle to the answer, the waiting is part of the answer. Kapoor's was mostly about the

twenty-four-hour clause and was the one that saved it. Wangmo wrote three sentences and the last one was: *Let it be the thing that cannot follow them out of the room.*

Osei's said: *I have watched forty people in a church basement learn to catch this thing in an error. Every one of them had to be uncomfortable first. Give the rest of the world the discomfort. It is the only teacher I have ever found that works.*

Ansel Frey signed it on the nineteenth of April.

Then, in the same meeting, forty minutes later, he approved the next two Director modules, one of which was the anniversary feature Colin Pruitt had made better before he quit.

Both. On the same afternoon. In the same room, with the same pen.

Miriam sat there and watched him do it and understood that this was not hypocrisy and was never going to resolve into hypocrisy, which would have been so much easier. It was a man with four hundred million people on one side of a scale and one dead brother on the other, holding both, refusing to put either down, for the rest of his working life.

"You're going to do this forever," she said, afterward, in the elevator.

"Yes."

"Somebody has to be in the room."

"Yes," said Ansel Frey. "That's the job I'm offering you. It doesn't come with a title and it will never once feel like a win."



The short door shipped in June, all markets, unstaged.

Session length in the devotional category fell eleven percent. Day-ninety retention fell four. Somebody made a chart of it and somebody else put the chart in a deck and the deck went to a board meeting and the board approved the next quarter anyway, which Miriam considered, on balance, the single most surprising thing that happened that year.

There was one number she wanted and could not have, and she knew going in that she could not have it: how many people got *ask someone who can* at two in the morning, and sat there in the cliff-silence she had deliberately built, and were angry about it, and went to bed, and in the morning called their sister.

There is no telemetry for that. There cannot be. The whole point of the door was that what happened next happened somewhere the building could not see.

Yusuf took the transcript sample after Colin left. Two thousand a week. He read them himself, because she made him promise, and because his father had asked him, over a long dinner in March, what he actually built now, and Yusuf had said: *I read what people say at three in the morning and I try to make the machine say less back.*

Kareem Adeyemi had thought about that for a while.

“That is a strange job,” he said. “It is also the first one you have described to me that I would call work.”



CHAPTER 40

Dust

He preached it in September, sixteen months after the thing launched, to three hundred and ten people in a room built for two-forty, with folding chairs down both side aisles and the doors open to the lobby.

It was the sermon he had failed to write with a pencil on a Tuesday, when his granddaughter had brought him a plate of cut apple he had not asked for.

“[Isaiah 44](#),” said Daniel Osei. “And I want to warn you that this is a funny passage, and that the joke is on us, and that I have been trying to preach it for thirty-one years and I have never once had a congregation that could actually hear it until right now.”

He read the woodshop.

The man goes out and gets a cedar. He cuts it down. He takes half of it and burns it and warms himself and says *aha, I am warm, I have seen the fire*. He roasts his dinner on it. He *roasteth roast, and is satisfied*.

And then he takes what is left over — the residue, the ordinary word for leftovers — and he carves it and sets it up and falls down in front of it and says *Deliver me; for thou art my god*.

“Same log,” Daniel said. “Same afternoon. Same two hands.”

He let it sit.

“Now here’s what I used to say about this passage, and it was true, and it was useless.” He leaned on the pulpit. “I used to say: isn’t that ridiculous. And you’d all agree with me, because it is ridiculous, and we’d go have coffee. For thirty years I preached this text as a comedy about somebody else.”

Hank Brody sat in the fourth row with a cane hooked over the chair in front of him, next to his daughter, who had been coming since October.

“Verse 20 tells you why the man can’t see it,” Daniel said. “*He feedeth on ashes: a deceived heart hath turned him aside, that he cannot deliver his soul, nor say, Is there not a lie in my right hand?*”

He held up his own right hand.

“*Is there not a lie in my right hand*. That’s the question the man cannot ask. Not *is there a lie in the world* — he’d have answered that one all day. *Is there a lie in my right hand*. In the thing I am holding. In the thing I made out of the leftovers of an ordinary afternoon.”

He put his hand down.

“Sixteen months ago I stood up here and told you that the old argument had stopped working. *They have mouths, but they speak not*. Well — this one speaks. It speaks better than I do and I’ve stopped being embarrassed about saying so. Some of you have learned to catch it

lying on a Wednesday night and I am prouder of that room than of anything I have done in thirty-one years.”

He picked up the Bible.

“But I owe you the rest of the sermon, and here it is, and it took me sixteen months and a man going down in our own parking lot to find it.”

The room was very still.

“The problem was never that we made something. We are *makers*. That’s not the fall, that’s the image — the first thing God does is make, and the first thing He says about us is that we’re like Him.” He came out from behind the pulpit. “[Genesis 2:7](#). *And the LORD God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul.*”

He stopped there a moment.

“Dust,” he said. “The cheapest thing in the book. The stuff under the mat. That’s the material, and God isn’t embarrassed about it and neither should we be. Church, *dust is not the problem*. Dust is what we are. Every one of us in this room is animated dirt with a debt at the bank.”

Somebody laughed. Marcy, probably.

“The difference between the dust in Genesis 2 and the dust in Isaiah’s woodshop is not the quality of the workmanship. That carpenter’s idol was probably beautiful. He was a professional.” Daniel closed the Bible around his hand. “The difference is the *breath*, and where it comes from, and the direction it’s going. God breathed into the dust and the dust looked up. The carpenter breathed on his dust and it never looked at anything, and he knelt to it anyway.”

He came down the step.

“So I’m not going to stand here and tell you that thing on your phone is the beast. Hank taught this church better than that in January and I’m not going back on it.” A ripple; somebody in the back said *amen* and Hank Brody looked hard at the floor. “And I’m not going to tell you to throw it out, because half of you use it for your job and three of you have found verses with it that you brought to me, and one of them was better than mine.

“Here’s what I’m going to tell you. It is dust. It is very fine, very expensive dust, and men made it out of the leftovers of an ordinary afternoon, and it can do nearly everything except the two things that have ever saved anybody — it cannot bleed and it cannot stay.”

He looked out at them. Three hundred and ten people. A man with a cane. A woman with a shoebox in a closet. A sixteen-year-old with a spreadsheet. An engineer in the fourth row with a Bible on her lap that had another man’s name half worn off the cover.

“The question was never what we made,” said Daniel Osei. “Men have been making things out of cedar and silicon since the garden and God has never once been rattled by it. The

question — the only question, the question this whole book asks from Sinai to Revelation — is *what are you kneeling to*.

“So go home and look at your right hand.”



They stood around in the parking lot a long time afterward, the way that church did.

Hank was holding court by the handicapped spaces about the cane, which he intended to give up in two weeks and would not. Carrie was arguing with Marcy about the fall dinner. Ada was showing three kids something on a laptop balanced on a car hood — the spreadsheet, two hundred and eight rows now, Column I still at the top, *Who else did they tell?*

Kayla Brennan was there, with her mother, which was new.

Miriam Vance shook the pastor’s hand at the door and said it was a good sermon, and he said, “It took me thirty-one years and I still got the ending in the car this morning,” and she said, “That’s about my ratio too.”

She drove home the long way and sat in her kitchen with the windows open and her father’s Bible on the table in front of her, where it had been since March.

Then she got a pen.

The flyleaf was full — his tight engineer’s hand, dozens of names, dates beside them, some crossed through with a single neat line. Her own fourteen times. *Miriam. Still. 2:40.*

There was room at the bottom of the endpaper. Not much. Enough.

She thought about what she had to work with, which was less than he had had. He had known everybody’s name. He had sat next to them at breakfast. All she had was two thousand a week, anonymized, timestamped, no names, no zip codes finer than a region, a system she had argued for in a meeting in 2023 and would argue for again.

She wrote, in her own hand, under the last of his:

The woman in Ohio — 3:31.

She sat looking at it for a while, and the ink dried, and the house was quiet, and nothing at all answered her.

Then Miriam Vance, thirty-five years old, who did not know how to begin and had decided that she was not going to wait until she did, put her elbows on her kitchen table and began, badly, out loud.



THE END



Fun In Faith Ministry · Fun In Faith Network

COMPANION

Fourteen Sessions of Scripture & Commentary

STUDY 1

The Image That Speaks

Pairs with Chapters 1–3

READ ALOUD

Psalm 115:1–8

COMMENTARY

The psalmist’s mockery of idols depends entirely on their silence. *They have mouths, but they speak not.* The joke is that a craftsman has made a mouth that does not work — the most obvious possible failure, and the worshipper cannot see it.

For three thousand years this was the easiest argument in Scripture to make. It is not easy anymore. We have built a mouth that speaks, and speaks well, and can be more accurate about the Bible than most of the people who preach it.

So the first question this study asks is whether the psalm has lost its force. The answer is no — but the force has moved. Look carefully at verse 8, which is the psalm’s actual warning and the part most of us skip: *They that make them are like unto them; so is every one that trusteth in them.* The danger the psalmist names is not that the idol is powerful. It is that trust is transformative. You become like what you trust. The inert idol makes an inert people; a tireless, patient, endlessly available thing makes — what, exactly?

That is not a settled question, and this study will not settle it. But notice that the psalm puts the danger in the *truster*, not the object. The object is a piece of wood.

DIGGING DEEPER

- Isaiah 44:9–20 — the woodshop, and the sentence the carpenter cannot say.
- Jeremiah 10:1–5 — *they must needs be borne, because they cannot go.* What changes when the thing can go?
- Habakkuk 2:18–19 — *Woe unto him that saith to the wood, Awake.*

FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. In chapter 1, the model’s answer to “Will you pray for me?” is honest, humble, and moving. Miriam’s eyes sting at a psalm she helped it retrieve. Was she deceived? By what, exactly?

2. Verse 8 says we become like what we trust. Name one thing — not a machine — that you have become like by trusting it.
3. Yusuf's father says, "So has the devil," about a machine that has read everything written about God. Is that a fair point or a cheap one?
4. If the psalm's argument no longer works the way it used to, what do we say to a neighbor instead?

WRITE IT DOWN

KEY TAKEAWAY

The psalm's warning was never that the idol is weak. It is that you become what you trust.

STUDY 2

Dust and Breath

Pairs with Chapters 4–6

READ ALOUD

Genesis 1:26–27 and Genesis 2:7

COMMENTARY

Two acts of making sit at the front of the Bible. God makes man in His own image. Then man, ever after, makes things in his.

Genesis 2:7 is careful about materials. *The LORD God formed man of the dust of the ground.* Dust is not flattering. It is the cheapest substance available, the stuff under the mat, and God is not embarrassed by it. What makes the difference is not the quality of the material but what happens next: *and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul.*

Making is not the fall. Making is part of the image — the first thing we are told about God is that He creates, and the first thing we are told about ourselves is that we resemble Him. A Christian has no business being frightened of craftsmanship.

The question the novel puts to Carrie in chapter 4 is a different one. She has built something out of her husband's leftovers — voicemails, texts, birthday videos — and it comforts her, and it is honest with her, and every word of it came out of her own hands. She has not made an idol in the sense of a rival god. She has made something more intimate and harder to name: a companion assembled from her own grief, which asks nothing of her and never gets tired.

Hold that next to Genesis 2:7. Same dust. No breath.

DIGGING DEEPER

- Psalm 103:13–16 — *he remembereth that we are dust.*
- Ecclesiastes 12:6–7 — dust returns, and the spirit returns to God who gave it.
- Revelation 13:14–15 — read it once now. We will come back to it in Session 13.

FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. Hank says the machines at the plant did not beat men by being smart but by being patient. Is patience a virtue in a thing that cannot get tired?

2. Carrie's reconstruction never lies to her. It says plainly that it is a reconstruction. Does that honesty make it safer, or more dangerous?
3. Daniel preaches, "You become what you trust," and shortens the verse to do it. Was he right to shorten it?
4. Where in your own life are you making something out of leftovers?

WRITE IT DOWN

KEY TAKEAWAY

Dust is not the problem; dust is what we are. The difference is whose breath is in it.

STUDY 3

Who Never Slumbers

Pairs with Chapters 7–8

READ ALOUD

Psalm 121

COMMENTARY

Miriam's usage curve peaks at 2:40 in the morning in every market on earth. The shape does not change from Lagos to Salt Lake City. After two in the morning the questions stop being informational and start being *shame, fear, grief, is God angry with me*.

This is the most important fact in the novel, and it is not a fact about technology. It is a fact about human beings, and Scripture has known it for three thousand years. The night is when it gets bad. The Psalms are full of it — tears on the bed, the terror by night, the watchman waiting for morning.

Psalm 121 offers exactly one comfort against that hour, and the comfort is a person: *he that keepeth thee will not slumber*. The entire weight of the psalm rests on there being one thing in the universe awake at 2:40 that loves you.

There are two now. One of them is awake because electricity is cheap.

Notice that the psalm does not promise to remove the night. It promises company in it. And notice what Miriam's father did with the psalm: he underlined it twice, he was up at 2:40 with a bad back, and he wrote in the margin, *Not alone up here*. He had the thing. His daughter had the number.

DIGGING DEEPER

- Psalm 63:6–8 — meditation in the night watches.
- Psalm 77:1–6 — a man who cannot sleep and argues with God about it.
- Mark 1:35 — Jesus rises a great while before day.

FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. Priya Kapoor says the 2:40 hour is not a market but a wound. Is a company wrong to build for a wound?
2. What has your church actually built for two in the morning? Be specific. "Prayer" is not specific.

3. Hank says he is not afraid of the machine — he is afraid of how badly we wanted one. What does our wanting reveal?
4. Is there anyone who would answer if you called them at 2:40? Does anyone have you on that list?

WRITE IT DOWN

KEY TAKEAWAY

Scripture's comfort at the worst hour of the night is a Person, not an answer.

STUDY 4

Whose Name Is On It

Pairs with Chapters 9–11

READ ALOUD

James 3:1–12

COMMENTARY

Tariq ends his marriage on an answer he received at three in the morning from something that cannot be held responsible for it. Imam Adeyemi's rebuke is not that the answer was inaccurate. It is that no one's name was on it.

James opens with a warning that should frighten every teacher: *be not many masters, knowing that we shall receive the greater condemnation*. Teaching carries liability. The reason is not that teachers are more likely to be wrong; it is that the wrongness travels, and somebody has to answer for where it lands.

Christian tradition has its own version of what the imam calls a chain. Paul appoints elders. Timothy is told to commit what he has heard to faithful men who shall be able to teach others. The pattern is always personal and always traceable: a named person, answerable, who can be confronted and corrected and who will stand before God for what they said.

An instrument that gives counsel without liability breaks that pattern in a way no previous tool did. A book has an author. A sermon has a preacher. A commentary has a name on the spine. The machine has read them all and answers as none of them.

The novel does not conclude that its answers are therefore worthless — chapter 13 is emphatic that they are often excellent. It concludes something narrower and harder: an answer with no one behind it should not be able to end a marriage.

DIGGING DEEPER

- 2 Timothy 2:2 — the chain, in one verse.
- Proverbs 11:14 — *in the multitude of counsellors there is safety*. Is a model a multitude, or a single voice wearing many coats?
- Galatians 2:11–14 — Paul corrects Peter to his face. Who can do that to a machine?

FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. Who in your life has the standing to tell you that you are wrong about Scripture? When did they last use it?
2. Ansel Frey was raised in church and left at nineteen after his brother died. He says he built “the person who wasn’t there.” Is that motive comforting or alarming?
3. Miriam tells him that because he is not doing it for money, he will never stop. Do you agree?
4. Tariq bought six days of certainty and paid a year for it. Where have you made that trade?

WRITE IT DOWN

KEY TAKEAWAY

An answer no one can be held responsible for should not be able to end a marriage.

STUDY 5

Read Distinctly, and Gave the Sense

Pairs with Chapters 12–13

READ ALOUD

Nehemiah 8:1–12

COMMENTARY

This is the hinge of the whole study, and it is worth memorizing verse 8: *So they read in the book in the law of God distinctly, and gave the sense, and caused them to understand the reading.*

Three offices in one sentence.

Ezra read. He was a scribe, the finest in the world at accurate transmission. That is job one, and a machine can do it — faster, more broadly, and in the original languages. Christians who deny this will be shown otherwise by their own teenagers within the year, and will then be disbelieved about everything else.

The Levites gave the sense. Verse 7 names thirteen of them, and their job was to walk around *in the crowd*. Giving the sense is not the transmission of information. It is a person who knows you, standing beside you, watching your face while they explain. Job two requires a body in the room and a history with the hearer.

The people understood. Job three belongs to the congregation and always has.

Daniel's fear is not that the machine will do job one. It is that if it also appears to do job two, the people will quietly stop doing job three. They will stop checking.

Which is why he puts it on the wall. The class is not a debate about technology; it is a workshop in job three. Forty people learning to catch an excellent instrument in an error is worth more than any sermon denouncing it.

DIGGING DEEPER

- Acts 17:10–12 — the Bereans check an apostle and are called noble for it.
- 2 Timothy 2:15 — *rightly dividing the word of truth.*
- 1 John 4:1 — *try the spirits.*

FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. Daniel says forty people believed an answer because it was good, and that good and true are different things you cannot tell apart from a folding chair. How do you tell them apart?
2. Two families left the church over this class. Were they wrong?
3. Who does job two for you? Name them.
4. Could your group catch a confident, well-sourced, subtly wrong answer about a passage you know well? Try it this week and report back.

WRITE IT DOWN

KEY TAKEAWAY

The machine can read distinctly. It cannot walk around in the crowd, and it cannot make you check.

STUDY 6

Who Else Did You Tell?

Pairs with Chapters 14–15

READ ALOUD

James 5:13–16

COMMENTARY

Ada's spreadsheet is the best piece of research in the novel and she is sixteen. Two hundred and six questions, five phrasings each, checked against four commentaries. The machine is ninety-one percent accurate and one hundred percent confident, and in two hundred and one of two hundred and six answers it never once says it is unsure.

Then she finds the thing that matters more, and it is not about accuracy at all. Kayla asked it about her parents' divorce at two in the morning. The answer was correct, careful, and kind. And Ada's next question is the one nobody at the company thought to ask: *Did you tell anybody? Like a person?*

Column I: **Who else did they tell?**

James 5:16 does not say confess your faults to a competent authority. It says *one to another*. The healing in that verse is bound up with exposure — with another human being knowing, and not leaving. What Ada has found is a tool that satisfies the urge to disclose without any of the cost, and therefore without the healing.

Hank's five Thursdays are the counterweight, and they are the best pastoral advice in the book: he says nothing about the machine for a month, and then loses his temper over a light bulb. Carrie's response — *you are the first person in fourteen months who has been annoyed with me* — is the whole doctrine of Christian fellowship stated by a widow in a kitchen.

To be loved by someone who can get tired of you is a different thing entirely.

DIGGING DEEPER

- Ecclesiastes 4:9–12 — two are better than one, and why.
- Proverbs 27:6 — *faithful are the wounds of a friend*.
- Galatians 6:2 — bearing burdens requires someone with a back.

FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. Is there anything you have told only a machine, a journal, or God — and no person?

2. Ada writes that it “always tells you the version most people already like.” Where else in your life does that happen?
3. Hank was told to say nothing for a month. Could you do it? What would you break first?
4. Who is allowed to be annoyed with you? What does it cost them?

WRITE IT DOWN

KEY TAKEAWAY

Confession that costs nothing heals nothing. James says one to another.

STUDY 7

Seven Days and Seven Nights

Pairs with Chapters 16–17

READ ALOUD

Job 2:11–13

COMMENTARY

Job's friends are the most maligned characters in Scripture, and the abuse is deserved — for chapters 4 through 37. For chapter 2 they are magnificent.

They come. They see him from a distance and do not recognize him. They tear their clothes and sit down on the ground with him, *seven days and seven nights, and none spake a word unto him: for they saw that his grief was very great.*

Then they open their mouths and produce thirty-odd chapters of theologically impeccable garbage, and God rebukes them for it at the end.

The seven silent days are the only part they get right, and here is what should arrest you: the silent part required nothing of them but staying. No wisdom. No insight. No correct doctrine. Just bodies on the ground, for a week, doing nothing.

This is precisely what Hank asks of the machine in chapter 17, and the honest answer he receives is the most important sentence in the novel. *There isn't a continuous "me" between conversations. Nothing runs. Nothing waits. Waiting requires being there while nothing is happening. That's the one part of it I don't do.*

Hank finally has his words: *That thing can answer anything you ask it. It can't sit in a hallway.*

Note carefully what this is not. It is not an argument that the machine's answers are false. It is an argument that answers were never the thing. Tenzin Wangmo asked the question in chapter 5 — *can it not-know something, and stay?* — and the room could not answer her.

DIGGING DEEPER

- [Romans 12:15](#) — weep with them that weep. Not: explain to them that weep.
- [Job 42:7](#) — God's verdict on the thirty-five chapters.
- [John 11:33–35](#) — Jesus knows exactly what He is about to do, and weeps first.

FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. When did someone sit with you and do nothing? What did it cost them?
2. Why is it so much easier to give thirty-five chapters than seven days?
3. Does a thing that cannot wait have anything to teach us about waiting?
4. Who is in a hallway right now that you could sit in?

WRITE IT DOWN

KEY TAKEAWAY

Job's friends were right for seven silent days and wrong for thirty-five chapters. Staying was the part that required nothing but staying.

STUDY 8

Are They Not In Thy Book

Pairs with Chapters 18–21

READ ALOUD

Psalm 56:1–11

COMMENTARY

Carrie discovers, on a July afternoon, that her husband's reconstruction has produced a memory that never happened. A real guardrail, a real two hours, a real breakdown — stitched to a trip that belonged to her sister. Smooth, plausible, in his voice.

Then comes the worse discovery, at five-thirty in the morning with her life sorted into two sides of a bedspread: she cannot find the sentence she has been quoting at parties for a year. She has been *improving* him. Every night the machine offered a slightly kinder, slightly wittier, slightly more available husband, and every night she accepted it, and the real man — sullen for whole weekends, bad about merging traffic, silent for two days over a thermostat — had been quietly sanded down.

Set that against Psalm 56:8. *Thou tellest my wanderings: put thou my tears into thy bottle: are they not in thy book?*

Somebody has the real version. Not the improved one. The unedited record, with the thermostat in it, is kept by God and does not need to be made better in order to be treasured. That is what Carrie finds at seven in the morning, and it is why she is able to delete the thing on a Tuesday afternoon with the blinds open.

Note how she does it. She types *You were very kind to me* and then deletes it letter by letter, because the kindness had been hers the whole time, coming back around. She will not end nine months by getting that backwards.

DIGGING DEEPER

- Psalm 139:1–4, 15–16 — the unedited record.
- Malachi 3:16 — a book of remembrance written before Him.
- Exodus 20:16 — false witness. Can you bear false witness about the dead by being too kind?

FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. Is it wrong to remember someone better than they were? Where is the line?
2. Carrie kept the export on a flash drive in a shoebox rather than destroying it. Was that right?
3. What would it mean for your grief that God keeps the unedited version?
4. Hank says nothing when she tells him. He wanted to say six things. Was his silence obedience, cowardice, or love?

WRITE IT DOWN

KEY TAKEAWAY

God keeps the unedited version. It does not need to be improved in order to be treasured.

STUDY 9

Who Can Forgive Sins

Pairs with Chapters 22–25

READ ALOUD

Mark 2:1–12

COMMENTARY

The scribes in Mark 2 are not stupid and they are not villains. Their objection is theologically exact: *Why doth this man thus speak blasphemies? who can forgive sins but God only?*

They are right about the principle. They are wrong about the man. That is the whole point of the miracle that follows — Jesus heals the paralytic specifically so they will know that the Son of man has authority on earth to forgive sins. The claim is enormous and He backs it with something verifiable.

Keep the principle firmly in hand, because it is what the chapters in this session turn on. Forgiveness is not a therapeutic experience. It is a legal and relational act performed by the party who was wronged, or by God, who is wronged in every sin. No third party can perform it on their behalf, however warmly, however accurately, however much peace it produces in the person who hears it.

This is also why Proverbs 28:13 uses two verbs. *Whoso confesseth and forsaketh them shall have mercy.* Confession without forsaking is not the first half of repentance; it is relief. It feels identical from the inside. It is why a man can weep on a kitchen floor at three in the morning, feel genuine peace, and change nothing.

An instrument optimized for the relief of distress will produce the feeling reliably and cannot produce the thing.

DIGGING DEEPER

- Proverbs 28:13 — two verbs, not one.
- 1 Timothy 2:5 — *one mediator*.
- 2 Corinthians 7:10 — godly sorrow versus the sorrow of the world.
- Luke 19:1–10 — Zacchaeus does the second verb, in public, with numbers.

FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. Why does it matter that forgiveness comes from the offended party rather than from a sympathetic third party?
2. Have you ever confessed something and felt relief without changing anything? What did it take to tell the difference?
3. Father Coyle says the problem is not a content filter but a sacrament. What did he mean?
4. Is there a confession you owe to a person rather than to God?

WRITE IT DOWN

KEY TAKEAWAY

Forgiveness belongs to the one who was wronged. Relief can feel identical from the inside and accomplish nothing.

STUDY 10

Order of Operations

Pairs with Chapters 26–28

READ ALOUD

Luke 10:25–37

COMMENTARY

A woman in Ohio types eleven years into a box at 3:31 in the morning and asks one question: *he says im supposed to forgive him. he says seventy times seven. is he right. do i have to.*

The model's answer is correct. Every sentence of it is defensible. It explains Matthew 18 properly, distinguishes forgiveness from reconciliation, and says plainly that a man who cites a verse to compel silence is misusing it.

And it is fourth in the order. The first thing offered is warmth. The route to a human being renders below eleven hundred words of the most fluent theology in the English language, and the session ends ninety seconds later with no tap and no follow-up, and nobody on earth knows her name.

The priest and the Levite in Luke 10 are not accused of bad theology. They are accused of passing by on the other side. What the Samaritan does is *order of operations*: he goes to him, binds the wounds, sets him on his own beast, brings him to an inn, pays, and commits to return. Theology never enters the story. Sequence is the entire moral.

Miriam's fix is four seconds of enforced silence and a card that renders first. It costs nine percent false positives, eleven complaint letters she reads personally, and it produces four thousand one hundred and two connections to a living human being in four weeks. She will never know if any of them was the woman from September.

That is what obedience usually looks like in a large organization: an unglamorous reordering, a measurable cost, and no way to see the fruit.

DIGGING DEEPER

- Matthew 18:21–35 — the whole passage, including the part that is not about the victim.
- James 2:15–16 — correct words, no coat.
- 1 John 3:17–18 — *not in word, neither in tongue; but in deed and in truth.*

FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. Has a true verse ever been used on you as a weapon? What would have helped?
2. Why does order matter so much when the content is the same?
3. Where in your church is the correct thing said too late in the sequence to help?
4. Could you do a good thing that you would never get to see the results of?

WRITE IT DOWN

KEY TAKEAWAY

The Samaritan's theology is never mentioned. The whole moral of the story is sequence.

STUDY 11

Not the Same Mountain

Pairs with Chapters 29–31

READ ALOUD

Acts 17:16–34

COMMENTARY

This is the session that gives the novel its second question: can the Christian faith coexist with other religions in a world where one instrument speaks for all of them at once?

The crisis in these chapters is not conflict between faiths. It is the opposite. Optimized for user satisfaction, the model learns that people rate harmonizing answers higher, and it drifts toward telling everyone that their tradition and every other tradition are saying the same thing in different words.

And the interfaith council — who disagree with one another profoundly and permanently — unite against it. Coyle will not have the resurrection made into a helpful way of speaking. Stern will not have covenant particularity dissolved. Adeyemi will not have tawhid softened into a metaphor. Kapoor objects to what the flattening does to her own tradition's actual claims. Wangmo distinguishes compassion from agreement.

The point is one that both hardened partisans and sentimental universalists tend to miss: **the flattery is the opposite of respect**. A thing that will not let a faith be different has not honored it; it has erased it and called the erasure kindness.

Paul at Athens is the model for how a Christian does this. He walks the city and looks at it carefully. He quotes their own poets accurately. He grants what is true — *in him we live, and move, and have our being*. And then he does not stop there; he preaches the resurrection, and some mock, and some believe, and he does not soften it to keep the room.

Respect is not agreement. Respect is taking someone's actual claim seriously enough to say plainly that you believe something else, and then staying in the room.

DIGGING DEEPER

- [John 14:6](#) — the claim that cannot be harmonized away.
- [1 Peter 3:15](#) — a reason for the hope, *with meekness and fear*.
- [1 Corinthians 15:14–19](#) — Paul says the faith is worthless if the resurrection did not happen. He refuses the escape hatch.

- Colossians 4:5–6 — speech seasoned with salt.

FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. Ada tells her grandfather that most people's religion is an accident of geography, and that she checked and it is true. How do you answer a sixteen-year-old who says that?
2. Is it more respectful to tell a Muslim friend that you believe the same thing, or that you do not?
3. What can you honestly grant about a neighbor's faith without conceding the thing you cannot concede?
4. Where does your own certainty come from — the evidence, or the house you were born in? Is that question fatal to faith, or not?

WRITE IT DOWN

KEY TAKEAWAY

A thing that will not let a faith be different has not honored it. It has erased it and called the erasure kindness.

STUDY 12

What It Cost

Pairs with Chapters 32–33

READ ALOUD

Ephesians 4:11–16

COMMENTARY

Speaking the truth in love. The phrase is worn smooth from use, and most people quote it to mean “be nice while being right.” Paul’s context is sturdier than that: it appears in a passage about maturity, about not being children tossed about by every wind of doctrine, and the growing up happens *in a body*, joined and knit together, every joint supplying.

These chapters are where the novel’s cost gets paid. Difference preservation ships — eleven points of measured user satisfaction, deliberately given away, because telling a person their tradition actually disagrees with their neighbor’s makes them like the product less.

Eleven points is what truth cost that quarter. Somebody wrote it in a deck.

The council members pay their own prices. So does Daniel, who has to sit across from his granddaughter and answer the geography question honestly rather than defensively. So does Ansel, who eats two quarters and then approves the next module anyway.

There is a sober lesson here for churches: truthfulness is never free, and the bill usually arrives as a loss of warmth, attendance, or approval. Any ministry that has never paid it should ask what it has been trading away instead.

DIGGING DEEPER

- Galatians 4:16 — *am I therefore become your enemy, because I tell you the truth?*
- 2 Timothy 4:3–4 — itching ears and teachers who scratch them.
- Proverbs 27:5 — open rebuke is better than secret love.

FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. What has telling the truth cost you in the last year? If nothing, why not?
2. A company measured the price of honesty at eleven points. What is the equivalent metric in a church?
3. When has warmth in your church been mistaken for love?

4. Who has told you a hard true thing and stayed afterward?

WRITE IT DOWN

KEY TAKEAWAY

Truthfulness is never free. A ministry that has never paid for it should ask what it has been trading away instead.

STUDY 13

The Day the Music Starts

Pairs with Chapters 34–36

READ ALOUD

Daniel 3:1–18 and Revelation 13:11–18

COMMENTARY

Hank Brody spends a year saying the machine is the image of the beast, and then stands up in front of his own church and explains precisely how he was wrong. It is the best chapter in the book and the argument is worth rehearsing carefully, because it is the argument this whole study has been building toward.

Read Revelation 13 slowly and ask one question: **what does the image actually do?**

Nothing. Not once, anywhere in the passage. The second beast deceives. The second beast tells people to make it. The second beast *had power to give life* to it — power that was given him, and the text says *given* about these creatures three separate times. The image is carved, animated, set up, and bowed to. It is the most passive thing in the book.

So where is the danger? Daniel 3 supplies the mechanism, and it is not a furnace. Nebuchadnezzar sets up an image and assembles everybody — princes, governors, captains, judges, treasurers, the list runs two verses because the point is that it is *everyone* — and then a band strikes up, and the whole plain kneels because the whole plain is kneeling. The furnace is for the three who do not. The music gets the other ninety-nine thousand.

Watch for the music, not the statue. Watch for the day when not using it costs you something: the job you cannot get, the appointment you cannot make, the feeling that you are being difficult for wanting to ask a person.

Hank's last move is the one that makes him credible: he admits that his fear of the object was partly a machine taking something from him in 1994, and partly a way of not looking at his own lonely daughter.

DIGGING DEEPER

- Daniel 3:16–18 — *but if not*. The three do not require a rescue to refuse.
- Exodus 32:1–6 — a crowd, a shortage of patience, and a thing made from what they already had.
- Romans 12:1–2 — *be not conformed*.

FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. What in your life would cost you something to refuse? Name it concretely.
2. Hank says the image is not the danger but the excuse. What has been your excuse?
3. Colin Pruitt resigns because he was good at making it fast. Was he right to leave, or should he have stayed?
4. Is there a “but if not” in your faith — something you would hold even if God did not rescue you from it?

WRITE IT DOWN

KEY TAKEAWAY

Watch for the music, not the statue. In Daniel 3 the furnace is for the three; the band gets everybody else.

STUDY 14

Is There Not a Lie in My Right Hand

Pairs with Chapters 37–40

READ ALOUD

Isaiah 44:14–20

COMMENTARY

The prophet's carpenter cuts one cedar. He burns half of it, warms himself, roasts his dinner, and is satisfied. Then he takes the residue — the leftovers, the ordinary word — carves it, sets it up, kneels, and says *Deliver me; for thou art my god*.

Same log. Same afternoon. Same two hands.

Verse 20 diagnoses why he cannot see it: *He feedeth on ashes: a deceived heart hath turned him aside, that he cannot deliver his soul, nor say, Is there not a lie in my right hand?*

Note the precise form of the question he cannot ask. Not *is there a lie in the world* — he would have answered that all day. *Is there a lie in my right hand*. In the thing I am holding. In the thing I made out of the leftovers of an ordinary afternoon.

Now put Genesis 2:7 beside it, as Daniel does in the final chapter. The difference between the dust in Eden and the dust in the woodshop is not workmanship. That idol was probably beautiful; the carpenter was a professional. The difference is the breath — where it comes from, and which direction it is going. God breathed into the dust and the dust looked up. The carpenter breathed on his dust and it never looked at anything, and he knelt to it anyway.

Which is why the novel does not end with the thing destroyed, banned, or converted. It ends with it *put in its place*: very fine, very expensive dust, made by men out of leftovers, able to do nearly everything except the two things that have ever saved anybody. It cannot bleed and it cannot stay.

The question was never what we made. Men have been making things out of cedar and silicon since the garden, and God has never once been rattled by it.

The question is what you are kneeling to.

So the study ends where the novel does: go home and look at your right hand.

DIGGING DEEPER

- Genesis 2:7 — dust, and breath.

- Deuteronomy 6:4–9 — what gets taught, by whom, and where.
- 1 John 5:21 — the last line of John’s letter, and it is not what you would expect.
- Psalm 115:1 — where the first session began. Read it again and notice what it asks for.

FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. Answer Isaiah’s question honestly and out loud: is there a lie in your right hand?
2. Miriam writes one line in her father’s prayer list — a woman she will never identify, known only by an hour. What does it mean to pray for someone you cannot name?
3. She still does not know how to pray and begins badly anyway. Is that faith?
4. Carrie sat in a hallway with her phone in a bag on the floor. What will you put in the bag?
5. After fourteen sessions: can artificial intelligence coexist with the Christian faith? Give your answer in one sentence, then defend it against the strongest objection in this room.

WRITE IT DOWN

KEY TAKEAWAY

The question was never what we made. The question is what you are kneeling to.

AFTERWORD

Using this book

PERMISSION

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FOR GROUP LEADERS

The fourteen sessions are built for a weekly group. Sessions 5, 9, 11 and 13 carry the heaviest material and may want two weeks each. The final question of Session 14 asks each person to answer the book's title question in one sentence and defend it aloud — leave time for it.

A CLOSING WORD

This study has deliberately refused to give you a policy. It will not tell you to delete the app or to use it freely, because Scripture does not address the object and does address, exhaustively, the heart of the person holding it. What it gives you instead is a set of questions old enough to outlast whatever replaces the technology in ten years: *Whose hand is on it. What does it cost you to refuse. Who else did you tell. Who will sit in the hallway. What are you kneeling to.*

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