

## Scripture: A Father After Death

By Jesse Begay

The youngest of three brothers, Sheradiin, a junior in high school, wears her house key on a strip of yarn that doubles as fuel for string games in the winter. One of her first date questions is, “Do you love your parents?” And until this past month, after they met the parents, she would ask, “Is your daddy anything like mine?”

And as her father Frank lay dying, Sheradiin offered up the prospect of hospice care, Frank said, “You’re no better than me if you do that. If you send me out to die like fucking cattle.”

His oldest son (affectionately) nicknamed Squishy smiled and answered, “That’s not true. I’m actually worse than you.”

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During Frank’s eulogies, the youngest son Seneca leaned over to whisper, “This is a load of barnacles,” as Frank’s now-widowed wife Maria lamented ‘the unmatched loss of life’ that had rocked their hobbled together family.

The entire service, he had kept a musty, moth-eaten tie wound over his forehead. He said it made him feel like, “a real Indian,” and the looks he got from Frank’s two (white) sons were only a bonus.

The second youngest brother Carl Jr (or, as his family calls him, Carl 2.0), paid for the funeral. The primary breadwinner since his father’s death, he had saved up a modest amount from his BIA job, which also meant the service was devoid of neighbors and friends. No one wanted to be caught dead rubbing elbows with, “that wanna-be white boy,” who worked for the detested and useless Bureau of Indian Affairs.

Even if they had Frank in their delivery rooms – the only white not-doctor in the Indian Health Services’ hospitals, he was dead now. Native funerals often have around forty to fifty people in attendance. It’s a tight-knit town and no one *else* got themselves all sweetly done up for Christmas dinners at the local church, playing Santa Claus, lett their beard get yanked on, gave such moving sermons, and let *anyone* clawing through the first few weeks of sobriety crash on *their* couch, did they?

Frank did. But only twelve people had shown up to his funeral. His wife, his children, and a few folks found at the very beginning of his address book, tugging at their collars and gone before the big meals were served.

And yet Maria dabbed at her eyes and shuffled around the room, murmuring to his two disowned biological children, and scolding his other children, who were not showing the *right* amount of grief.

Frank had three children of his own – two sons, who were in attendance and did not speak to anyone but Maria, and a daughter who he had not seen or spoken to in eight years and four foster children – Sheradiin, Seneca, Carl 2.0, and Squishy.

Sheradiin and Squishy spent most of the service bent over Squishy’s phone, sharing a pair of earbuds so they could watch Spongebob.

Then, they went home and got high.

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Before he died, Frank wrote letters to each child.

Squishy’s is a crumpled ball, tucked at the very back of his nightstand. Parts of it are stained with Dr. Pepper where Squishy had let it leak from the two liter bottles he keeps in his bedroom. Downright unreadable. In it, he explains that he wanted to adopt Squishy, that – “You’re not just like a son to me. You are more of a son than the ones I popped out before. You and your mother and your siblings kept me from a very bad place.”

In the next paragraph – “I never wanted to hurt any of you. But the only way you would ever listen is if I was screaming my goddam lungs out. You’re the only one of them who’s starting to get I did what I had to do to keep our family together.”

Squishy even offers to give it to me. Of it, he says only, “Why the hell would I want it?”

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Seneca’s is kept in a sheet protector, tucked in the binder he takes to school. Behind it, other important documents – birth certificate, Certificate of Indian Birth (exactly what it sounds like – “a dumbass piece of

paper sayin' congrats, you flunked the first test we ever got. You're fuckin' Indian."), and his social security card.

His is the shortest. Frank writes, "My daddy wasn't no better to me than I was to you. You got no idea what kinda shit he put me through. You had it easy. I scraped and slaved for yall and what the hell do I get??? Talk shit get hit."

Seneca keeps it for one reason only – "Bragging rights. Duh."

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Carl 2.0 set his on fire. He never read it.

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Sheradiin's is twenty-seven pages long. It's buried somewhere in her closet. She's never finished it but, "It probably says the word sorry in there *somewhere*."

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In the back of Sheradiin's closet, there is a pair of hot-pink cowboy boots. Christmas gifts, wrapped in My Little Pony paper, purchased at the Boot Barn in town. Ate up his whole paycheck in a single trip. He had been so proud when presenting them that she wore them until her feet couldn't get inside anymore.

For Squishy, a revolver, just like John Wayne's. He had been twelve. The first thing he ever purchased with his own money was a box of bullets. He slept with it tucked under his shoulder, unloaded, like a teddy bear.

Until he sold it to help pay for the funeral home.

For Seneca, a rainbow assortment of oil paint. The first thing Seneca painted with them was a portrait of Frank, with his deep frown still clear beneath his beard. He spent weeks practicing his eyes – "I didn't wanna fuck up the blue. He'd beat my ass so hard if I made 'im look mad."

After he died, Seneca took black and red Sharpies in the corner and drew a tiny stick figure yanking a knife out of his eyes.

For Carl 2.0, a Playstation 5. He holds a busted controller in his hands, wire guts spilling out of a crack in the plastic, up to Sheradiin's lamp and says, "He busted this up 'fore he kicked the bucket."

From the corner, Seneca says, “That was his parting gift.”

“Jesus wept, man,” Sheradiin says, swiping a finger underneath one of her eyes. “Scripture.”

“Oh, you’re so smart. Ol’ Ms. Thesaurus over here,” Seneca mutters sarcastically, raking his fingers through his newly-cut hair – according to tradition, you could only cut it when you underwent a great loss. (Of this *great loss*, Seneca said, “Man, I hope that motherfucker died covered in his own piss and shit.”)

Carl 2.0 – “I think that was the bible, but I could be wrong.”

“It’s actually from Star Wars,” Sheradiin says, brushing out more of the layers of crunchy hair-gel her mother had slathered over her in preparation for the funeral. “Yeah, at the end of the movie, Luke and the man upstairs hit it off and then they get into the Death Star and make-out.”

She still wears the key around her neck, though now a boyfriend’s promise ring has joined it. Her earrings are tiny hoops. Mismatched. One silver, one gold. They make a chain between the kids – tiny hoops from one Claire’s set. She says it links them together. Seneca thinks it’s stupid, though during service, he twisted it in his fingers. Something to do with his hands.

Squishy drops a trashcan in front of the closet for Sheradiin. Watching her haul things into it. He looks around at all of them and says, in a gravelly voice, “Luke, I am your father. Your old one got murked.”

The boys cheer.

Sheradiin waits until its quiet before she says, “You can quote the scripture so beautifully,” and tosses the boots into the trash. Spring cleaning.