

I AM THE ONLY ONE IN TOWN WHO DOESN'T ATTEND CHURCH.

The Gaze
PATRICIA
MCCAMBRIDGE

I had been raised a casual but genuine Baptist, but my wife was a devout atheist. She was blonde with a knack for condescension despite her public appearance as an open-minded woman. In the first few years of our marriage, I had insisted on attending church, and at times invited her to join me. She always refused. A few debates and countless snarky, patronizing remarks later, I stopped attending.

Eight months ago she—teary eyed—had told me that it wasn't working, blubbered out a nebula of reasons why we wouldn't ever be able to make it work, and politely forced me to leave.

I spent the next few months between homes and couches and phone calls, but no one was able to house me for long. Men my age have their own lives, and adding another person, even an old friend, into the mix can only last so long before the welcome wears thin.

Finally, while running out my final acceptable days at the house of the last friend I could think of—“Yeah, Bill, remember? I lent you a couple bucks at that game senior year?”—my ex's brother and former best man, merciful man that he was, called and offered to let me stay for a time in his great-uncle's house, currently unoccupied, a few towns away.

“Did he pass?” I asked.

“No, he just up and left. Something about travelling across Europe? Personally I think he's too old. I dunno. I just got a call from the bank.”

And so I came to reside in Pancoastburg, Kentucky. The town had been smaller and much more isolated than I had anticipated, located deep within a valley that I would surely be trapped in come winter. The population was small. Many of the residents lived outside of town's borders, up in the hills. A few stores dotted the blocks of the town, a large portion shut down years ago. This didn't stop the town from having a quaint, homey feeling though.

One of the first things I had noticed about the town was the presence of only one church, right in the middle of town. It was relatively small, white. Exactly how you would imagine a small town church. I vaguely noted that the sign outside labelled it as Baptist. At first I had been tempted to check it out, but had

quickly changed my mind.

My former brother-in-law had offered to let me stay in the house until his great-uncle returned from Europe. However, as the months dragged on, I was beginning to forget that the house belonged to someone else.

The townspeople were friendly. Beside a few drifters, they hadn't had any long-lasting newcomers in years. Except, shortly before I moved into the house, a new preacher took up residence in the small, white church. The previous pastor had left abruptly, muttering something about "official business" to the locals who had had the chance to ask.

The new Preacher, from what I was told, was a lively, kind man, with the biggest smile you had ever seen. I say from what I was told because I had never actually seen him. He never seemed to leave the church. In fact, no one had seen him come in to town. The Sunday following the departure of the previous preacher, the townspeople had gone into the church, feeling it was the right thing to do, fully prepared to do their own Bible readings. They were surprised to find the Preacher, dressed up, standing at the center, and fully ready to give a complete sermon. And he never left—not that anyone ever witnessed, anyway.

Which, of course, meant I never saw him.

In my first few months of my residence, the townspeople that I would meet, kind as ever, would ask me to join them at church. The Preacher was offering two sermons a week now. He was the best they had ever seen. They talked about how his eyes alone seemed to wipe away all their troubles.

"We're all Baptist," they would always be sure to add, with big smiles,

though I was fairly certain I had never informed anyone of my former denomination.

I slowly began to realize that "all" did indeed seem to be the case. It truly seemed as though everyone in that town was crammed into that church on Sunday—and Wednesday.

I would always return the smile, though I could never match the intensity, and politely reject the offer with as vague an explanation as I could.

"I have a lot going on right now," I said before I returned to the empty house to continue my job and house search.

Things went on this way for a while. Conversation would always drift toward the church and the Preacher, but the people were kind toward my rejections, at times excessively so, smiles ever growing.

A couple of months later a teenage boy went missing. I had seen him arguing with his mother—a gray-ing blonde—through my window one Sunday morning. I, naturally, had decided to mind my own business, and walked away. I saw him later that night outside of his home and then never again. When I mentioned it to my neighbor later on, he laughed and smiled at me.

"He's travelling abroad," he said.

Strange, I thought, but I was glad to hear of the opportunity for adventure the boy had been offered.

Smiling faces continued to ask me to come to church. Sermons were being offered four days a week now. "The Preacher's gaze alone can save lives." It was beginning to become a bit tiresome.

"I can't this week," I would reply,

increasingly curtly. The smiles never wavered.

I'm not going on principle alone, I would think as I stormed into the house.

One smile though, began to wear at this resolve. A pretty young woman, hair the deepest brown I could imagine, named Lyla. We began taking walks around town, and I was eager to get a little more serious. I told her as much.

"I'm not sure I'm comfortable with that," she said, playing with her dark, dark hair.

"Well, how can I make you comfortable?" I asked, certain I already knew the answer.

"Come with me to church." Of course.

I fought the urge to roll my eyes and barely repressed a sigh, but then I caught myself. This was exactly how my ex-wife would have responded. I scowled as I remembered the effect she had had on me. Hadn't I loved attending church before she had shamed me into avoiding it? And here a pretty brunette was practically begging me to attend with her.

"All right, I'll go," I said with a confidence I had forgotten I had. She merely giggled and shot me that huge smile, bigger than ever.

The next day—church seemed to be offered every day now—I walked in, debating whether I wanted to grab Lyla's hand, right next to mine. Before I could, she stopped to speak with a woman just outside the door. I looked up to see that it was the mother of the boy who was off travelling.

I joined in their conversation briefly, and when the talk began to lull a bit, I asked her if she missed her son.

"Sometimes, but at least I

don't have a son who fights me on the way to church anymore. If the Preacher can't reach him, he cannot be saved."

Her words struck me as odd, especially as that wild smile never faltered. I looked to Lyla, who seemed unfazed as she returned the smile. I shrugged it off and followed them inside to the pews, and took a seat in the front row. The Preacher was standing there, still-faced, but with an impossibly large grin. Even in the close proximity, he looked as though he wasn't even breathing.

When the clock struck 9:30 exactly, he came alive with exaggerated movement and over-the-top greetings to the entire town. His motions looked like a parody of human motion.

"Before we get started," he said with a dramatic flourish, "I'd like to welcome our newest member."

I began to rise to explain that I was visiting with Lyla when I looked directly into his eyes and saw—

I felt a smile cut across my face, so big I thought my head might split.

Everyone in my town attends church.

