

Invitation

written by

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INT. CHURCH OFFICE - DAY

A middle-aged man with gray streaks through his hair sits at a desk overflowing with papers and books. He is steadfastly and with frustration flipping through several pages of notes - his sermon notes. He holds a lit cigarette out of the nearby open window as he mouths some words to himself - rehearsing. This is PASTOR PAUL.

He pulls the cigarette back inside to meet his lips, taking a long drag. He mouths some more words from his notes before pausing. He reads the words:
"PLANS TO GIVE YOU HOPE..."

PASTOR PAUL

Bullshit.

Ash from the end of the cigarette falls onto the open bible in front of him.

PASTOR PAUL (CONT'D)

(hushed)

Gah!

He hurries to brush it away in a frenzy, picking it up. A folded up paper falls out of the back. He blows on the page, inspecting it. There's a small, charred hole where the ash fell, with the char bleeding onto the page behind it.

PASTOR PAUL (CONT'D)

(beleagured)

Ay-ay-ay...

He drops the bible back down, then flicks his cigarette out the window. He looks at the sheet that fell onto the desk, reading at the top:
LETTER OF RESIGNATION

He looks back up, stares off in the distance for a beat, a discontented grimace on his face. Seemingly to no one but himself, or God, he says:

PASTOR PAUL (CONT'D)

Just get me through one more
Sunday.

Pastor Paul stands, looking at his watch.

PASTOR PAUL (CONT'D)

(huff, mumbling)

Late again...overpreparing for the
same...

He sprays himself down with a can of air freshener, before doing the same with his blazer. He's just donned the blazer when:

Knock knock

PASTOR PAUL (CONT'D)

Yes?

AMY

Pastor Paul? I'm sorry to interrupt but...there's a man here, in the foyer. He's very upset. He asked to speak with someone...

Pastor Paul nods, but waves it away.

PASTOR PAUL

I would, but my office hours are over for the day, and the service is about to start.

AMY

But Pastor, he doesn't seem like he can wai-

PASTOR PAUL

If he wants, he can stick around for the service. Otherwise, tell him I'll see him next Sunday.

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INT. CHURCH SANCTUARY - DAY

Sunday morning. The sanctuary of the church is just more than half full. Pastor Paul stands on stage, waving his bible around as he preaches, a commanding, confident smile on his face. He is dressed smartly, though not too formally, wearing a button down shirt tucked neatly into his freshly ironed pants with no tie and a blazer jacket. His sermon is winding down.

PASTOR PAUL

But if you suddenly decide to move *outside* of God's protection, outside of God's will...if you find yourself caught up in sin, how can you grow? Are you truly living? God wants to you to *thrive*. Don't believe me? Jeremiah 29.

(MORE)

PASTOR PAUL (CONT'D)

"'For I know the plans I have for you,' declares the LORD, 'plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.'"

The crowd nods in agreement. A scattered handful of women utter "Yes" just loudly enough to be heard from the pulpit.

PASTOR PAUL (CONT'D)

Doesn't that give you so much more comfort, can I get an Amen?

CROWD

AMEN!

Pastor Paul smiles. Despite his earlier doubts, he is in his element, totally in control. He enjoys the attention.

PASTOR PAUL

Now my hope here today is that you would know in your heart that you are loved by Jesus...

(dramatic pause)

And that because of that love, He died so that YOU may live. So that YOU may have that future.

Soft guitar and piano begin to back up the words as the worship band begins playing, meant to tug hard at the heart. We see the faces of the churchgoers, many nodding along in approval, a few whispering 'amen' quietly to themselves. ONE MAN, about 4 rows from the front, sitting alone, looks on the verge of tears, his lips contorted as if keeping something trapped deep in his gut from escaping.

As he speaks, Pastor Paul scans the audience, not looking at any one person in particular. But he very briefly notices the MAN, who is looking down at his hands, sniffing, emotional. The man sitting in front of him, while still looking to the front, turns his head just slightly towards him in annoyance.

PASTOR PAUL (CONT'D)

Would you pray with me?

All of the churchgoers bow their heads and close their eyes. The music continues.

PASTOR PAUL (CONT'D)

Father, I know there are those here today who do not know You...

He leaves the podium and begins slowly descending the steps from the stage.

PASTOR PAUL (CONT'D)

And at this time I would pray that you would reveal Yourself to them. Lord, heal them and bind your spirit to them, that they may know your peace, and they would leave here today forever changed.

During this prayer, the MAN begins loudly sobbing. Some of the churchgoers nearby squint their eyes open and carefully look his way, shifting uncomfortably in their seats.

PASTOR PAUL (CONT'D)

In Jesus' name, Amen.

Everyone raises their heads, eyes open.

PASTOR PAUL (CONT'D)

If you just gave your life to Christ, or if you would like to today, I'd invite you to come to the front so we can walk you through it as we sing.

Pastor Paul reaches the bottom of the steps, centering himself in front of the podium. The worship leader takes center stage with his guitar.

WORSHIP LEADER

Would you stand.

The whole congregation stands up as the band begins badly playing an earnest, cheesy song. The MAN remains seated at first, wiping tears from his face. After a few seconds seeming to debate with himself, he stands up, clumsily leaving the row where he's seated, and walks up to the front of the stage. He meets Pastor Paul, shaking his hand. Pastor Paul flashes a big, warm smile without showing his teeth.

PASTOR PAUL

Good morning.

MAN

(teary)

Hey.

PASTOR PAUL

What's your name, sir?

MAN

Ambrose.

PASTOR PAUL
 It's great to meet you, Ambrose.
 And have you made a decision to
 accept Jesus as your Lord and
 Savior?

AMBROSE
 No sir...but I want to.

Pastor Paul smiles again.

PASTOR PAUL
 Wonderful. Repeat after me.

He places his hand on Ambrose's shoulder. They both bow their
 heads and close their eyes as they quietly pray together.

PASTOR PAUL (CONT'D)
 Jesus, I am a sinner.

AMBROSE
 (crying)
 Jesus, I am a sinner.

PASTOR PAUL
 Up to this point I have lived my
 life for myself, and I admit that I
 am lost.

AMBROSE
 God, I'm so lost.

PASTOR PAUL
 But I do not wa-

AMBROSE
 I've been so messed up, God. I
 have.

Pastor Paul looks at him, then smiles bemusedly. He takes
 Ambrose's hand in his free hand.

PASTOR PAUL
 Yes. But I do not want that for my
 life anymore.

AMBROSE
 I done some bad shit, God.

Pastor Paul grimaces. His eyes dart around to see if anyone
 else heard the expletive. But the music is loud enough to
 mask it for anyone not standing immediately next to them.

AMBROSE (CONT'D)

I've lied and cheated my whole life, God. I've been jealous of my neighbor. He's got a better house than me. When he got his new Chevy Impala, he parked it out front of my house. And I keyed it all to hell.

PASTOR PAUL

(nervously laughing)

The Lord has forgiven you for that.

AMBROSE

He's got an annoying dog too. That thing would bark all day long for no reason. And I work nights sometimes, so it makes it harder to sleep during the day. I chased it away from my backyard with a water hose once.

(sniffling, big sob)

He never came back home.

Pastor Paul breathes a deep sigh, patting Ambrose on the shoulder.

AMBROSE (CONT'D)

I think I saw him on the side of the road last week, a few blocks away. He was flatter than a tortilla.

(beat. upset)

You could peel him up and make a taco with him.

PASTOR PAUL

Okay, the Lord has forgiven all of your sins, son. Why don't we focus a litt-

AMBROSE

I masturbate all the time.

Pastor Paul's eyes widen.

AMBROSE (CONT'D)

I did it in the car, before I came in here today.

Pastor Paul hastily releases Ambrose's hand.

AMBROSE (CONT'D)

I remember someone told me God
watches that shit, when you do it?
Is that true?

PASTOR PAUL

Son, this isn't exactly the place
for confession. You really don't
have to do this. Whatever it is
you've done, you're forgiven. Now
do you accept Jesus into your heart
today?

AMBROSE

I'm sorry, Pastor. I'm tryin'.
(loudly crying)
It's just been so hard since my
wife left me.

PASTOR PAUL

(pause)
I know. That's very difficult.

AMBROSE

(loudly)
That FUCKING BI-

He can't finish the sentence from the tears. Some churchgoers
in near the front of the sanctuary hear and gasp. The worship
leader skips a few words in shock, quickly picking up the
song again, playing and singing a little bit louder.

Pastor Paul sighs again, turns away for a second.

PASTOR PAUL

(muttering, quietly to
self)
God, two nursing home visits and
three funerals to officiate last
week and now this shit...

AMBROSE

What's that?

He turns back to Ambrose, composing himself.

PASTOR PAUL

I'm gonna have to ask you to not
use that language in here.

AMBROSE

I know, I know, I'm sorry.

PASTOR PAUL

I know you're upset. It sounds like you've had a hard go of things.

AMBROSE

She said we weren't compatible anymore. That I wasn't a good lover. I didn't believe in her enough.

PASTOR PAUL

That's hard.

AMBROSE

12 years, we were married. 12 good years!

Pastor Paul nods his head, looking at the ground. The song the band is playing is coming to an end, the music getting quieter. Pastor Paul raises a hand and swirls it in a circular motion to the worship leader, telling him to keep going. The music awkwardly picks back up.

PASTOR PAUL

Son, you can talk to someone about all this stuff as long as you need to after, but right now we need to get you saved. Is that okay?

Ambrose nods, blinking back tears.

AMBROSE

(softly)
Okay.

PASTOR PAUL

Good.

Ambrose grabs a bible off the first pew nearby and begins flipping through.

AMBROSE

It might be easier if I had an outline, or somethin'...to follow.

PASTOR PAUL

It ain't in there.

Pastor Paul grabs the bible and tosses it aside, flippantly.

PASTOR PAUL (CONT'D)

Just let me do the talkin' and you agree.

He grabs both of Ambrose's shoulders, bowing his head.

PASTOR PAUL (CONT'D)
Father, I know you know this man
better than I. You know his sins.

AMBROSE
Yes...

PASTOR PAUL
You already know his life, you know
what he's done.

AMBROSE
Yes...

PASTOR PAUL
I also believe you know that he
doesn't want it anymore.

AMBROSE
No sir...

PASTOR PAUL
I ask you to be in this place now
Lord. Let him feel your grace and
your mercy.

AMBROSE
(tearfully)
Yes!

PASTOR PAUL
Lord, allow him to commit his life
to you now!

AMBROSE
(crying)
YES!

PASTOR PAUL
FREE HIM FROM HIS CHAINS, JESUS.

AMBROSE
(crying)
I WANT TO BE FREE!

PASTOR PAUL
GIVE HIM LIFE NOW LORD!

AMBROSE
(sobbing)
TAKE IT JESUS! I DON'T WANT TO BE
SCARED ANYMORE!

Ambrose embraces Pastor Paul, convulsing, sobbing loudly. The sound of it fills the air of the sanctuary. Pastor Paul is startled. The music stops altogether. Everyone is staring at them

Pastor Paul thinks for a minute, more confused than frustrated now.

PASTOR PAUL

Son, what are you scared of?

A heavy pause, Ambrose trying to calm himself.

AMBROSE

(crying)

I don't like myself, Pastor. Don't reckon have much of a reason to.

This resonates with Pastor Paul.

PASTOR PAUL

What're you talkin' about? Sure you've got reasons. You're uhh...obviously very...forthcoming, generous...with details...authentic.

AMBROSE

Oh no, I'm a fuckin' fraud, pastor. At my job, my marriage...my wife saw it. Her boyfriend at the time saw it. It drove her...and everybody away from me.

(beat)

I don't know how to make sense of it. What does any of it mean?

(beat)

If I died today, what would any of it mean? Would it mean anything to anyone?

Pastor Paul thinks for a long minute. His eyes are full of compassion. He sees the man in front of him.

He disengages from the hug to look at Ambrose.

PASTOR PAUL

Sometimes things don't feel like they have meaning. Feels...unreal. And we do things that make us feel more real. We hurt people. We...pleasure...ourselves.

(beat)

I understand your despair. But-

He looks Ambrose in the eyes.

PASTOR PAUL (CONT'D)
 What's always real is that you're here. And I'm here. And as long as that's the case, I'm not gonna let either one of us feel that way about ourselves.

Ambrose nods, face wet with tears. Pastor Paul nods too.

PASTOR PAUL (CONT'D)
 There is love and grace for you. More than you can imagine. And I'm gonna help you find it.

AMBROSE
 (tearfully; gratefully)
 Thank you, pastor.

PASTOR PAUL
 Call me Paul.

They let go of each other. Ambrose dries his face.

AMBROSE
 You know, my dad smoked menthols too.

Pastor Paul's brow wrinkles in surprise, then embarrassment, then loosens in realization. He gives a short chuckle.

PASTOR PAUL
 Go with God. I'll see you next Sunday.

Pastor Paul extends a hand without thought. Ambrose shakes it enthusiastically as Pastor Paul looks kinda sideways at it, almost reconsidering his choice based on Ambrose's confession but deciding it's fine.

Pastor Paul looks around, noticing for the first time all the eyes on them. Most are confused. Some heard some of the conversation and clearly disapprove. Not knowing what to do, he turns to the worship leader and motions him to wrap it up.

The worship leader snaps out of a daze and hastily steps up to the mic.

WORSHIP LEADER
 Now wasn't that a great message Pastor Paul gave today.
 (MORE)

WORSHIP LEADER (CONT'D)

I'm sure we're all gonna have a lot
to talk about at the Golden Corral
after this. God bless, you're
dismissed.

Confused murmuring erupts as everyone begins collecting their things and filing out of the church. As the worship leader speaks, Ambrose walks down the aisle toward the exit. Pastor Paul stands where he is, hands on his hips, a faint smile on his face.

THE END