

PURGATORY - A PROGENY'S QUEST

by T. M. Brown

One

Wilson Edwards only invited a few close friends to the house following his grandfather's funeral, because his grandmother's recent passing still weighed heavy on so many folks in town. There would be no traditional church supper following the interment service at Shiloh Cemetery. However, Wilson anticipated the ladies of the church would still drop off casseroles, side dishes, and desserts. Inviting a few close friends over would both provide conversation and help Wilson consume the cornucopia born of Shiloh's good intentions that would undoubtedly fill his kitchen by the end of this sun-drenched afternoon.

Liddy's fresh-out-of-the-oven peach cobbler made the already hotter-than-usual late May afternoon even more uncomfortable by the time Judy Wright, the pastor's wife, greeted us at the front door of the Edwards home.

"Smells scrumptious," Judy said as she extended her hands. "Theo, please allow me to take that for you. Y'all head on into the living room. Wilson and Woogie are there."

Liddy peeked down the long hall into the kitchen. "Looks like the church ladies outdid themselves again."

Inside the living room, Wilson chatted with Zeb Adams, Hub Davis, Joe Ariens, and Arnie Wright. Catty-corner across the room, beneath the ornate built-in bookshelves, Woogie's light-hearted, youthful cackles and broad smile caught my attention. He and Coach John Priestly joked with each other about this past football season. Liddy accompanied me into the living room long enough to make our arrival known before her attention diverted to the high-pitched giggles reverberating from the kitchen and dining room.

Wilson interrupted Zeb's light-hearted story and greeted Liddy with a warm embrace and then extended his hand to me. "I'm so glad y'all made it. Woogie and I cannot tell you enough how—"

"Don't say another word, Wilson." Liddy took hold of Wilson's hand as she glanced at Woogie's laughter-filled face. "By the looks and sounds of it, Woogie appears to be handling the sudden loss of his great-grandfather fairly well."

"You'd think so at first glance, but he's like most teenagers putting on a good front while still reeling inside. That cozy armchair he's curled up in is where Grandpa slipped away while watching the Braves go extra-innings with Cincinnati. Woogie still feels somehow responsible because he followed me upstairs that night rather than hang out with Grandpa."

"I understand Wiley died from broken-heart syndrome," I said to Wilson as I glanced at Woogie.

“It’s likely Grandpa allowed himself to follow Grandma.” Wilson’s upper lip began to quiver. “He had no known heart issues, according to Doc Lucas. It appears he slipped away in the wee hours before Woogie came downstairs the next morning and found his Grandpa slumped in his chair with the TV still on.”

Liddy draped her arm across Wilson’s shoulders. “I hope you and Woogie realize that you couldn’t have prevented your grandfather’s departure. It sounds as though God beckoned him, and his heart and soul answered.”

Wilson glanced at Woogie. “Funny, by the looks of it, Woogie understands that better than I do.” He exchanged a tight smile with his son, who likewise raised a thumbs-up.

“Hey, I got another story on hold over here about ol’ Wiley,” Zeb barked with a jovial grin. Liddy walked over to Woogie, kissed him on his forehead before she disappeared into the kitchen. I didn’t hear what she said, but I saw Woogie mouth, “Thank you, ma’am.”

I joined Zeb, Arnie, Hub, and Joe as they swapped tales of Wiley Edwards’s more memorable antics and foibles. I felt like an outsider, since Liddy and I had moved to Shiloh less than three years ago. Wilson’s open-mouthed look mirrored my own as each story unfolded, and I remembered his years of self-inflicted exile from Shiloh, which had ended only a few months ago, after he and Wiley reconciled. Wiley then named him the sole heir of his and Malvinia’s estate and bequeathed his barber chair to him. That marked the first real opportunity for Wilson and Woogie to enjoy their life as father and son in over a decade. Before that, Wilson had struggled to remain a dutiful husband to his drug-dependent wife, but had faced legal and financial woes until she abandoned him and Woogie and wound up in prison. Now they had some measure of stability, and Wiley and Malvinia had even created a college trust fund for Woogie with some of the proceeds earned when Malvinia sold her gift and card shop.

An hour slipped past while Zeb, Joe, and Arnie continued to reminisce before John Priestly tapped my shoulder on his way into the dining room. By the time I managed to excuse myself from the conversation, earning a curious squint from Zeb, John had disappeared.

In the dining room, Phoebe Thatcher, Hillary Wright-Rutherford, and Missy, Joe Arians’s wife, giggled amongst themselves at the far end of the table. Phoebe nonchalantly pointed toward the kitchen where Liddy leaned against the countertop near the sink absorbed in conversation with Judy and Marie Masterson. Liddy winked at me as she bobbed her head toward the back porch before reverting her attention back to Judy and Marie.

John was hunched over on the weatherworn porch swing, appearing to be lost in his thoughts. His blank stare appeared aimed at the deep peach glow touching the horizon.

I stepped onto the porch, eyed the darkening, indigo sky. “You needed a break too?”

He clasped his hands behind his head and lounged back against the swing’s sun-faded and peeling green slats. A series of crackles and creaks in the rusted chain-links followed in the swing’s gentle sway. “Take a seat, my friend. You’re just the fella I needed to talk to.”

“Don’t mind if I do.” I plopped into the emerald metal patio chair adjacent the swing.

John looked at the back door. “Do us a favor. Pull the kitchen door shut. I’d rather not compete with all their giggling.”

I got back up, pulled the screen door open, and gripped the doorknob. Liddy’s eyes met mine, and we exchanged curious looks as I pulled the back door shut.

“Thanks, Theo. You’re the only one I feel I can trust to give me the answers I need.”

Those words caused me to squirm in my seat. At once, I remembered how nervous I felt when we first met almost three years ago. Joe Arians had arranged for me to visit John in prison. Though Joe managed to gain John’s release and eventual exoneration, the initial chill I felt cut clean through me when John entered that stark concrete interview room. His first icy cold stare thankfully melted over time, but on that memorable afternoon, he minced no words about the lack of trust he harbored.

I double-checked the closed kitchen door and said, “Whatever’s on your mind must be important.”

John chuckled. “You might say that.” He released his firm grip on the back of the wooden swing and planted his feet square on the porch deck. The swing’s chains rattled and popped once more as he scooted to the edge of the swing’s seat and leaned forward. He motioned me to come closer and whispered, “Do you think it’s too late for me to become a father?”

John’s inquiry made me adjust my seat closer still. A look of uncertainty had swept across his more familiar stoic confidence. I stuttered almost inaudibly as a wrinkle or two creased my brow. “You and Phoebe aren’t—?”

“Oh, hell no!” John’s unmuffled retort spurred him to glimpse over his shoulder at the kitchen window. John inched closer, placed his hand on my shoulder. “Theo, Phoebe’s more than just a close friend to me.” He stammered. “I don’t need to tell you, the last six years wreaked havoc on any notion I held about getting hitched and starting a family. And those three years stuck in prison scarred me.” John pounded his heart.

“But, John—”

“Hold on, Theo. Let me finish what I gotta say.”

I sat back a bit in my chair and slapped his knee cap.

“It’s no use. I’ve tried my best to live up to all sorts of expectations I just can’t deliver, no matter how hard I try.”

“What expectations? I don’t understand,” I said as I leaned forward again and tried to lock eye contact with him.

“The kind of expectations that haven’t allowed me to consider the prospect of marriage or starting a family.”

“John, you can’t get back those lost years, but let me answer your original question. No, it’s not too late. Have you considered Phoebe may be asking herself the same question?”

John shook his head, but his eyes stared into mine. "I've been afraid it may be too late for both of us. I'll turn forty-four this year, and well, Phoebe ain't much younger."

"Stop and listen to me. More than anyone I know, you deserve to be a father and not just a father figure." I eased back into my chair.

John's eyes pleaded as he wiped his cheeks with his fingers. This feeling had him in an unfamiliar place. Rather than having the answers, he was searching for them.

"You really want my advice? Quit dilly-dallying around and sit down with Phoebe. She's the only one who can give you the answers you deserve to hear. She's been on this merry-go-round with you far too long."

John looked up. "I reckon you're right. I've almost mustered the courage to ask her a couple of times, but the thought I'd let down everyone who put their faith back in me as their coach has been a huge stumbling block."

"The only stumbling block is you."

"I know, but I couldn't forgive myself without considering the faith they placed back in me. For that one reason, I've finally realized something that has been hard to admit. After last season fell short of the playoffs again, I did some deep soul searching and dissected my coaching. I'm not the coach the school deserves any longer."

"Now hold on! You're the best dang coach I've been around, and there's a host of others more knowledgeable than me who will attest to that fact."

John rose to his feet. "I appreciate that, but Shiloh's glory days were not all my doing. Those back-to-back state championships happened after Jessie Masterson came on board. After I lost my job, Jessie even had the team headed there again before he died in that damned courthouse fire."

His confession rattled me. I felt at a loss for words.

"No matter how hard I might try," John said, pounding his chest, "I can't fill the gap he left after he died."

"What? Or, should I say who, can—"

"Andy Simmons can. He and I talked on the phone last week. He's added two commendable years on Georgia Christian's staff, but he and Megan are ready to come home." John leaned back with a satisfied smile.

"Why would Andy give up all he has going for him at GCU to come back to Shiloh?"

"Andy's head coach is about to announce that he will be the next head coach at Nebraska, and he asked some on his staff to come with him. Andy's one of them, but he doesn't want to go all the way out to Nebraska. It's much too far from family."

"Why not stay at GCU?"

“He’s not sure the new coach will ask him to remain on staff. Besides, he told me Megan finished her degree work and wanted to find a high school where she can teach and coach cheerleading.”

“Do you think Andy can fill Jessie Masterson’s shoes?” I asked, looking down at John’s boots.

“No one can fill Jessie’s shoes, but I believe Andy’s the right person to take over. He played under Jessie and experienced the consecutive state championships this town idolizes.”

“Did you offer Andy a position?”

John smiled. “Not yet. I’ll be meeting the school board later his week.”

“Let’s get back to Phoebe?”

Before John could answer, Zeb opened the kitchen door and yelled back inside, “They’s still out here.” He stepped onto the porch. “Speaking of Phoebe, that young lady’s looking for you. You two got school in the morning, and Theo, I’m pretty certain Liddy’s ready to go home too.”

John slapped me on the back as we followed Zeb inside. “Thanks,” John whispered. “You’re a good friend. Please keep this between us for the time being.”