

Where Grace Rests Softly

The church was full.

In Colbren, Sunday Mass wasn't just routine—it was breath. It was where farmers laid down their burdens, mothers gathered their children's hearts, and the aged came early just to sit in the silence of stained glass and prayer-soaked pews. The town's pace slowed as it neared St. Dunstan Catholic Church each Sunday morning, like everything sacred began and ended here.

The bells above the steeple called them in: long, bronze notes echoing over the golden fields and gravel roads, gathering the faithful from porches, pickups, and prayer.

And inside—kneeling in the fifth pew from the front—the Fogle family waited for Heaven.

Maggie Fogle, forty-five, carried herself with the quiet grace of a woman deeply rooted in both faith and place. Her light brown hair, touched now with a few strands of silver, framed a face that bore the beauty of devotion more than fashion—the kind of beauty time could not take away. Born Margaret Devore, she was the second youngest of seven children, raised on the wide fields of her family's farm just outside Colbren. The land had formed her as much as her faith: early mornings among rows of corn, evenings at the supper table, prayers said as naturally as breathing.

Her oldest brother, David, still worked the family farm, while most of her other siblings had settled nearby, keeping the Devore clan knitted close around the small town. For Maggie, Colbren was not just a place on the map but the soil of her entire story—its parish Church the anchor of her childhood, its rhythms the cadence of her motherhood. She had spent her whole life here, in this town, in this Church, shaping a family of her own with Joe, her husband, while quietly carrying the strength of her upbringing into every corner of her days.

Joseph Fogle, four years Maggie's senior, was as much a part of Colbren as its church steeple rising above the town square. The son of Mark and Anne Fogle, he had grown up in the pews of the same parish as Maggie, shaped by its sacraments and small-town rhythms. Now, in midlife, he carried forward his family's legacy as the owner and operator of Fogle Hardware, the shop his family had built long before Joe was born—a place where neighbors came not just for nails and lumber but for a listening ear and a word of encouragement.

Tall, dark, and still strikingly handsome, Joe bore himself with the natural authority of an eldest son. He was the first of six children, most of whom had planted roots nearby, their families circling back

around him and Maggie like planets around a steady sun. Nearly every Sunday after Mass, their home filled with the laughter, clatter, and warmth of kin—siblings, nieces, nephews, and friends from the parish table—all gathered for the long-standing tradition of Sunday dinner. For Joe, it wasn't just a meal. It was a continuation of faith, family, and fellowship, the very heartbeat of the life he cherished.

Maggie Fogle, kneeling, her hands folded, her head bowed and covered in veil, breathed in the stillness as if it were incense. She had always felt the bells of consecration before she heard them—She felt it—that hush inside her soul, the place where God whispered not with thunder, but with stillness. Her rosary was looped around her wrist like it often was, the beads worn from years of use. Her heart quieted. This moment, the lifting of the Host, was why she lived the life she did. Simmering pots and bedtime stories were only holy because of *this*.

Her husband, Joe, knelt beside her. He was still. Still in that way she had come to recognize over the years—like a man carrying something too heavy to name. His eyes were fixed on the altar, but not lifted. One hand rested on the pew, the other near the bent crucifix beneath his shirt.

Beside them, like a row of candles flickering in various stages of flame, their seven children knelt:

Daniel, twenty and home from college for the weekend, knelt with his eyes closed and jaw set. He looked almost like a soldier in prayer—stoic and still, yet burning within. He loved these moments with his family, kneeling together in their favorite Catholic church, a tradition that drew him back home every summer and almost every weekend throughout the school year. That—and his mother is kind enough to do his laundry.

Catherine, eighteen, her veil pinned with quiet care, gazed toward the altar as though beholding the throne of a King. Her rosary slipped silently through her fingers, her knees planted firmly in reverence. She whispered each response, yet her soul seemed to shout its praise. For years, she had dreamed of entering religious life, but after careful discernment, she realized that God was calling her instead to the sacred vocation of motherhood. She embraced a life of strict devotion, loving Jesus more than her own life. And in her heart, she sought a man who would lead their children closer to God, as her father had led her—a man who would love Jesus even more than he would love her.

Rachel, seventeen, carried a new stillness about her—one that felt more like hiding than peace. She fixed her gaze on the crucifix above the tabernacle, lips unmoving, eyes searching for something she had not yet found. Though raised and formed in deep Catholic values, and loving God with all her heart, there had always been a little wild streak in her—a restless spark that both troubled and defined her.

Natalie, fifteen, wore her veil with a simple grace. Her eyes shimmered with tears—not of sorrow, but of longing. She had been speaking often of the convent, and Maggie suspected she would not be home much longer. During the elevation of the chalice, Natalie’s hands folded like wings about to lift, her gaze flooded with tears of sorrow and joy. Jesus was here. And when she entered the depths of prayer, her eyes grew hollow, as though she were caught in the highest union—face to face with Christ Himself.

Peter and Paul, ten-year-old twins, smart beyond their years and for the most part, well behaved boys, but boys will be boys. Both knelt with the tension of boys trying very hard to be holy. Paul squeezed his eyes shut during the consecration. Peter peeked, giggling until Maggie gave him the look. Seven children, and not one of them had escaped her maternal stare—part steel, part mercy.

Lucy, six, knelt next to her mother, concentrating intently on the holy actions of the priest. Her blue eyes were wide as Father Bannon elevated the Host above his head. “Jesus is here now,” she whispered softly to her mother, as though announcing a miracle.

Maggie smiled and nodded in agreement without saying a word.

The bells rang—those high, piercing altar bells—and in that moment, it was as though all of Colbren bowed. A thousand quiet prayers rising with the lifted Body and Blood.

Joe didn’t move. But Maggie saw it: the way his fingers curled into his palm, the slight press of his shoulders. As if something in him wanted to vanish. She didn’t ask. Not yet.

After Mass, the church spilled out into a Kansas morning, bright with summer. Children, still dressed in their Sunday best, darted across the churchyard, their laughter trailing through the air like bells.

Beneath the shade trees, old friends embraced, lingering in the comfort of familiar faces, catching up on last weeks events. At the front doors, Father Bannon stood with a warm smile, offering handshakes and blessings to each soul as they passed.

By two o’clock, the house smelled like rosemary and garlic, warm bread, and cinnamon cake cooling on the counter. Maggie moved through the kitchen like a conductor, sleeves rolled, hair pinned up, rosary hanging from a hook by the window above the sink. Joe had offered to order takeout, as he did every Sunday. Maggie had, as always, waved him off.

“This is how I pray,” she’d said.

She didn't mean it poetically. Cooking was her liturgy. Chopping, stirring, seasoning—it was a way to

love. She didn't need to be noticed. She only needed to feed them.

Within the hour the house was brimming. The table was covered in roast chicken, mashed potatoes, fried okra, fresh bread still steaming from the oven, and pies that seemed to carry the scent of Heaven.

Joe manned the grill with the quiet confidence of a man accustomed to providing, carving and turning the meat with practiced ease. The savory aroma of summer smoke drew a crowd of children, their faces lit with anticipation as they hovered nearby. Between careful glances at the sizzling grill, Joe exchanged easy conversation with other dads while pouring lemonade into old mason jars he lit the citronella candles before Maggie could remind him.

Mark Fogle, Joe's father, was a man with a weathered face and quick wit, known around Colbren as much for his booming laugh as for his opinions on nearly every matter under the sun. Retirement hadn't slowed him; instead, it gave him more hours to spend at the corner coffee shop, where the same circle of men gathered every morning like monks of their own kind of fraternity. Over steaming cups, they debated world problems, township gossip, and the state of the Church, all while pretending they were just killing time. Mark enjoyed it—the ritual, the brotherhood, the sense that words could still matter in a town where everyone knew everyone else. He had a gift for storytelling, a way of making people lean in, and though he had never written a book, his family often said he'd lived enough to fill volumes.

Joe's mother **Anne Fogle**, was the opposite—quiet, steady, with a strength that didn't need to be heard to be felt. If Mark's kingdom was the coffee shop, Anne's sanctuary was the Church. For decades, she had been part of its very fabric: the soprano voice lifting hymns on Sunday, the steady hands on the piano for weddings, the reverent organ chords for funerals. More than that, she was its hidden heart, often found wiping down pews when no one else noticed, refilling holy water fonts, or simply kneeling in prayer long after Mass had ended.

Anne's prayers were not vague petitions; they were names—her children, her grandchildren, her husband. Each lifted up with the tenderness of a mother who carried them still in her soul. Sometimes she would sit before the tabernacle for hours, saying nothing at all, just gazing at the Presence within the golden doors, as if to anchor her entire family in the stillness of Christ.

Together, Mark and Anne were a study in contrast yet deeply united. He kept his pulse on the chatter of the town; she kept her heart pressed to heaven. Between them, they gave Joe both the laughter of community and the weight of prayer, the kind of inheritance no hardware store or land deed could ever equal.

David Devore, Maggie's oldest brother and something of a legend in their small town, arrived carrying a bushel of tomatoes and a jar of his wife's pickled beets. He ran the family farm with six of their cousins and still made time to bring Maggie bushels of produce every week. He was tall, broad-shouldered, and rarely said more than necessary—but when he did, people listened. He clapped Joe on the back with that same strength that had once pulled him from a wreck. “Love you brother” he bellowed passing by.

Lucy Meyer, radiant as ever, stood at the edge of the porch, her eyes scanning the lively scene. Her journey from the rebellious beauty of her late teens to the devoted wife and mother of eight was a testament to transformation. Back then, her allure was legendary in Colbran, turning heads and breaking hearts with ease. Joe Fogle had been among those ensnared during his wilder days, a time marked by late-night escapades and reckless decisions.

But life had a way of redirecting paths. Before Joe and Maggie's union, they had extended a guiding hand to Lucy, introducing her to spiritual solace and the teachings that would eventually lead her to Catholicism. Their bond deepened, culminating in Lucy standing beside Maggie on her wedding day, a symbol of enduring friendship.

Determined to reshape her narrative, Lucy pursued beautician school, channeling her flair into the establishment of the "Country Clipper," a quaint salon that became a local favorite. It was there she met Jim Meyer, a reserved man with kind eyes, who had recently moved to Colbran to work at the cabinet factory. Their connection was immediate, blossoming into a marriage just six months later. Together, they embraced the joys and challenges of raising children, choosing to homeschool, mirroring the Fogles' commitment to faith-based education.

Kyle Seaward and his ever-gracious wife, Jennifer, moseyed across the yard, carrying something carefully wrapped in foil. Kyle and his wife own a lawn service in the area. Kyle wasn't Catholic—his grandmother had been, and most of his friends still were—but for reasons even he couldn't quite explain, he remained Protestant. That didn't stop him from loving his long talks with Joe, always ready to bring up Scripture and question Catholic tradition, as if trying, in his own friendly way, to tug Joe a little closer to the Protestant side. He never succeeded.

Neighbors poured in after them—**the Schultzes**, bringing corn pudding; **the Hammils**, trying to keep their youngest from knocking over the lemonade pitcher; **Maher family**, pillars in the local Church, a beautiful Catholic family of 11 children, 2 of which are Nuns; **Father Bannon**, in rolled-up sleeves and his usual empty casserole dish, just in case. Just in case someone wanted to fill it for him. Someone

always did.

Among the guests, **Jim Johnson** stood tall, his once wild demeanor replaced by a calm confidence. A former high school football star and one of Joe's old drinking companions, Jim had traded late nights for early mornings, now working diligently at a local tree-trimming company. His transformation was evident, a reflection of the town's capacity for redemption and growth.

Maggie moved through them like grace in motion. She laughed easily, passed out plates, and took babies onto her hip like it was second nature. She wasn't just the host—she was the quiet center of it all. The Fogle house, full of faith and food and laughter, pulsed like a second altar.

As the evening progressed, stories flowed as freely as the lemonade. Tales of youthful misadventures elicited hearty laughs, while shared memories reinforced the bonds that held this community together. Maggie, ever the gracious host, moved among her guests with a serene smile.

In the fading light, with the aroma of sourdough bread lingering in the air and the gentle hum of conversations filling the space, the Fogles' backyard stood as a testament to love, faith, and the enduring strength of community.

Joe watched her from the porch—it all should have felt like peace.

But he could feel the divide.

It was thin, like the space between breath and confession. Like the moment before the bells.

Everyone was here. Everyone was welcome. And yet...

He looked down at his hands.

Why do I feel like I don't belong here?

The Shortcut

Joe Fogle woke earlier than usual. The house was quiet, the kind of quiet that made prayers feel sharper, more necessary. He whispered the words of his morning devotion, lingering longer than normal before reaching for the coffee pot. Steam rose into the dim light of the kitchen, mingling with another round of prayers that slipped from his lips almost unconsciously.

Coffee, prayers, more prayers. It was his rhythm—his armor.

By the time he stepped out into the fresh air, the sun was stretching its fingers over Colbren. The truck engine rumbled beneath him as he headed into town. His route was familiar, yet his mind wandered.

Passing the Hammil house, he slowed, his eyes drawn as always to its peeling paint and sagging porch. There was Jimmy Hammil, stepping out into the yard with that careless stride of his, a cigarette dangling from his lips. Joe noticed the wrecked truck laying crookedly in the weeds among the collection of broken-down cars in the back yard. His old truck. The one that he nearly died in. The one that David Devore pulled him from after that horrific crash. He reached for his bent Crucifix around his neck. “Thank you, Jesus.” He whispered.

A strange pang went through him—not regret, exactly, but something close. That truck had served him well for years, now rusting, crumpled among relics that would likely never see the road again.

“Poor kid,” Joe muttered under his breath. Jimmy was a good enough soul, though rough around the edges. Not Catholic. Wild sometimes. Reminded Joe of himself years ago—before marriage, before taking over the store, before the weight of responsibility had settled on his shoulders. Wild, yes. But not broke. Not hopeless.

Joe thought of Rachael. His daughter and Jimmy had been friends since childhood, their bond obvious, unshaken. He hoped it stayed that way—just friends. Jimmy was helpful enough, showing up on delivery days to lend a hand at the hardware store. Pleasant, eager. But immature. Not the sort of man Joe would ever choose for his daughter. Still, their friendship was innocent, he hoped, and that counted for something.

Joe turned the corner and soon pulled up to the hardware store. He arrived early, as usual, unlocking the quiet delivery door that smelled faintly of sawdust, paint, and metal. He settled into his office, the familiar glow of the computer screen flickering to life. His hand rested on the mouse, hovering over a shortcut.

Not today.

But he hesitated. Just long enough for the old hunger to whisper.

No. Not today.

Bang. Bang.

The sharp rapping on the front window jolted him back. Joe blinked and looked up. Pat Maher, a local truck driver, stood there, waving sheepishly.

Joe grabbed his keys and headed to the door. “Morning, Pat,” he called, forcing cheer into his voice. “What can I do for you?”

“Plumbing issue at the house,” Pat said, stepping inside as Joe flipped the sign to *Open*. “Need to grab a couple things.”

They exchanged small talk—weather, crops, the rising gas prices—before Pat paid and headed out with a wave. Joe locked the conversation away as quickly as it ended, already feeling that other weight pressing against him.

A short while later, the bell above the door chimed again. Kyle Seaward stepped in, his boots dusted from another early morning with the lawn service. His face carried that familiar look—the half-smile, half-question that Joe knew so well.

“Morning, Kyle,” Joe said.

“Morning. Busy?”

“Not yet. What’s on your mind?”

Kyle leaned on the counter, his arms folded. “Joe, here’s what I’ve been thinking. If God gave us the Bible, why do you Catholics always say the Church has to interpret it for you? Doesn’t that take away the very gift God gave us? I mean, *Sola Scriptura* is pretty clear—the Bible alone is enough.”

Joe wiped his hands on a rag and smiled gently. “I get where you’re coming from, Kyle. And honestly, that’s a good question. Let me tell you how we look at it. The Bible is absolutely the Word of God—we love it, we study it, we pray with it. But here’s the thing: the Bible didn’t just drop out of the sky. It was written, copied, and handed down by the early Church. And for the first few hundred years, most Christians didn’t even *have* a Bible—they had the teaching of the Apostles.

“So when you say, ‘Just the Bible,’ I have to ask—whose interpretation of the Bible? Because if it’s just me, I could come up with one idea. You could come up with another. The guy down the street could come up with something different. And if we’re all going by ‘Bible alone,’ who’s to say who’s right?”

That's why there are thousands of different denominations, each teaching different things from the same book.

"Here's how Catholics see it: God didn't just give us a book, He gave us a Church. The Apostles were told by Jesus, 'He who hears you hears Me.' They were given authority to teach, and the Church has carried that authority down through the centuries. So when the Church explains Scripture, it's not taking something away from me—it's protecting me. It's keeping me from twisting God's Word into my own opinion.

"To me, it's like this. Imagine getting an instruction manual for a tractor—pretty complicated one. You could try to figure it out on your own, but wouldn't it make sense to also listen to the folks who built the tractor in the first place? Same with the Bible. God gave His Word, and He also gave us the Church He founded to help us understand it the way He intended. The two go together—Scripture and the Church—like the map and the guide. One without the other can get you lost pretty fast."

Joe leaned on the counter, looking Kyle in the eye. "So no, Kyle, I don't feel like I'm giving up God's gift by trusting the Church. I'm actually receiving the gift the way He wanted it given—through the Word *and* the living voice of the Church that's been there since the start."

"You always seem to have good answers, Joe, ones I have to put some thought into, and I always take notes. By the way, I need a rake, last one is broken already." Joe points him in the right direction.

"You can always join us next Sunday at the Catholic Church." Joe said sternly. A smile and grunt is all he got.

By midday, Joe sat at the counter, nursing a second cup of coffee when the bell above the door jingled again.

It was his mother.

Anne Fogle entered with the quiet authority only a mother carried. Her eyes swept the store, then landed on Joe with that knowing softness. She walked up, leaned against the counter, and folded her hands.

"You seem quiet today, son."

Joe gave a faint smile. "Long morning, that's all."

"Mm." She studied him a moment longer. "Is there something bothering you, Joe? I have noticed something different about you lately. At Church last couple of Sunday's you appear to be out of touch with the rest of us. What's bothering you?"

“Nothing, Mom. Just tired.”

“Joseph.” She used his full name, her voice tender but firm. “A mother knows when something’s weighing on her son.”

He shifted uncomfortably. “I’m fine. Really.”

Her gaze didn’t waver. She didn’t push with force, only with love. “You can carry the store, Joe. You can carry your family. But don’t try to carry your soul’s burdens alone.”

He forced another smile. “I’m fine, Mom. Honestly.”

Anne held his eyes a moment longer, then finally nodded. She didn’t argue. Instead, she reached over, touched his hand briefly, and turned toward the door.

Joe watched her go, his chest tightening.

Anne stepped out into the sunlight and walked down the street, her pace slow but purposeful. She didn’t head toward the café where Mark, Joe’s father, was surely holding court and solving world problems over a cup of coffee. Instead, she turned toward the stone steeple of the Catholic church.

She slipped inside, genuflected, and sank into a pew. Folding her hands, she prayed—not only for Joe, but for all her children, for her husband, for her grandchildren. But her heart lingered on Joe, because a mother knows.

Somewhere inside, beneath Joe’s careful routine of prayers and work and laughter, something wasn’t right. And Anne, on her knees before the tabernacle, begged heaven to help her son.

Meanwhile, back at the store, Joe sat alone behind the counter, staring at the quiet computer screen. The shortcut still waited in the corner of the desktop. Just one click, a secret password and it’s done. No one is here.

Not today, he told himself.

But the hesitation was longer this time.

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