

Doxology

by [Nick Young](#) (April 2025)



Siesta (Orazi, 1934)

She had a plain look to be sure and a name to match.

Ann Blandon's family was one of the oldest in those parts, with a lineage stretching back through the generations, back

to a time when the first settlers had come by boat and clawed a foothold on the rocky shore of Maine. Some Blandons had stayed to work in the fisheries while others moved farther inland to pursue their fortunes in New England. Still others, the brothers Ernest and Sheffield among them, struck out for the new states to the west. Ernest carved out a plot of rich farmland in western Indiana, while Sheffield extended the family's reach into Illinois. Not being either especially adept at agriculture or interested in it, Sheffield chose instead to make his way as a man of commerce, opening a dry goods store in the tiny town of East Lynn, nestled in flat pastureland within a two-hour wagon ride of the Indiana border.

There, for ten years, Sheffield, his wife and one son lived in modest prosperity. He was viewed as an upright member of the community, a fair businessman and a sober, churchgoing neighbor. In 1851, Sheffield Blandon's fortunes and the town's changed markedly with the completion of a rail line connecting Pittsburgh and St. Louis. East Lynn became an important way station for replenishment of coal and water, and the town grew, doubling in size within a few years. Main Street lengthened with the addition of a hotel, restaurant, drugstore and other businesses. The number of customers at Blandon's Dry Goods increased steadily, so much so that Sheffield had to take on two more employees.

And so it continued. East Lynn built on its success. The community flourished, the Blandon family deepened its roots, with its men taking on important roles in the affairs of the town and those of the state, sending Sheffield's grandson Jeremiah to the legislature in Springfield in 1890. There was also bitter sacrifice along the way. Jeremiah's eldest son Timothy died in the Great War, not of wounds on the battlefield but because of the predations of the Spanish influenza.

As the first half of the new century unspooled, Blandon's Dry

Goods expanded with the town's growing population; and, with the boom in prosperity following World War Two, was transformed into a busy department store that dominated East Lynn's Main Street.

In 1955, at the age of twenty-eight, Ann was the middle child of three Blandon girls, the daughters of Wilfred Blandon, who operated the local department store, and his wife Shirley. Elise, Ann's older sister by two years, had married and moved to a farm outside Danville with her husband. The youngest girl, Samantha, was twenty. She was married as well, living in East Lynn and working at the cosmetics counter in the store. Both Samantha and Elise were attractive, taking the best features from their mother. But natural beauty had skipped over Ann, leaving her with a pale, thin, angular face and a body of unbroken linearity. In this, she was her father's daughter. So, too, was her personality. While her sisters were by degrees more outgoing—a trait shared with their mother—Ann was introspective. Her shyness had fostered an adolescent bookishness that led her to spend her college years at an all-girls liberal arts school in nearby Hoopeston. She lived at home, earnestly applying herself to her studies in English literature. By the time graduation day arrived, a teaching position had opened at the high school in East Lynn, and she was hired.

Ann's life's soon enough settled into a routine. When she wasn't teaching, she could be found among the stacks of the town's small library or reading in her room from one of the selections that came in the mail regularly from the classic book club she had joined. She eschewed any kind of social life, not even taking part in the seasonal mixers held at her church. She was a regular worshipper every Sunday, but much too reticent to venture beyond the hymnal and the pew.

For all her reserve, it was in the classroom that a different Ann emerged. She became more animated, even at moments theatrical, as she allowed herself to be swept up by her

passion for the language and its masters. She was, in truth, transported, causing some students to stifle giggles in the face of her transformation.

Despite their yearning that Ann would follow her sisters' paths to marriage and children, as time passed her parents were forced to resign themselves to the likelihood that their middle daughter would remain content to let the years pass within the confines of her room at the back of their large home nestled on a broad swath of Pin Oak Lane.

On another quiet, tree-lined street nearby sat the First Presbyterian Church. Mellors Way was a cul-de-sac that ended in front of the church, which had been established in the 1840s by a group of settlers who moved to the area from southern Ohio. For a time, the congregation grew. When a fire in 1859 all-but destroyed the building, a new, modestly larger one was built. But the harmony that marked the first years did not last. It was an old story, the oldest story in the history of organized religion, a dispute among the elders, a doctrinal schism that rent the church in two, leading a large number of the faithful to split away and form a rival congregation in another, nearby town. Those left behind carried on for a time, but then fell to petty squabbling, with bitter recriminations over what had become of them. Despite the best attempts by two different ministers, patience wore out, and the splintering of the flock was complete. In 1872, the church closed its doors for good and had sat idle since.

As time went on, few people in East Lynn paid the building any mind. The street was a dead end with very little traffic, and so the church with its simple steeple was largely forgotten.

But it did not go unnoticed by Ann Blandon, for it was her habit when the weather was mild to walk the two blocks from her parents' home, cutting through the end of the cul-de-sac to a path that led into a small park where she would sit evenings on a worn wooden bench or the smooth grass that

sloped gently to the lip of a quiet pond. Sometimes she brought with her a favorite book . On other occasions, she carried the journal she had kept since she was a teenager, writing always in careful, compact script with a silver Cross fountain pen, a special gift from her father on her 21st birthday. Not infrequently, she arrived empty-handed, choosing to sit, delicate fingers entwined, contemplating the smooth water disturbed only by the serene glide of two mute swans. She would remain until the evening shadows cloaked the surrounding trees and the moon rose to cast its shimmering mystery upon the surface of the pond. In the spring, her thoughts would drift, punctuated by the insistent voices of amorous bullfrogs. In late summer, the chorus changed to the cicadas' mesmerizing crescendo-diminuendo. On nights that were overcast, or those of the new moon, Ann allowed herself to be enveloped in darkness, thrilled by the wind shivering among the aspens. And it was into this inkiness that she permitted herself a taste of what was inchoate within her, stirrings that since adolescence had arisen, upsetting her equilibrium, clutching at the breath in her chest, leaving her flushed as she struggled to push them back beneath her consciousness.

On an especially warm evening in early July, as she walked up the path and back through the trees on her way home, Ann noticed something about the church she had never seen before. Rather than its dark outline emerging from the shadows, there was the dull glow of light emanating from the building. She remarked to herself that it was odd, but thought of it no more until a few nights later when she observed it again. This time, back in her room, she noted it in her journal. The next morning at breakfast she made an offhand remark about her observation, but neither of her parents had an explanation to offer, at least not one to be taken seriously.

"If it were closer to Halloween I might say it was a ghost come back to haunt the place." Ann forced a smile at her mother's attempt at humor and the mealtime conversation moved

on. But as the day progressed, curiosity about what she had seen kept intruding into her thoughts.

She vowed to visit the pond every evening. For two days rain storms interrupted her plan, but the weather cleared enough on the third day for her to resume her sojourns. And again, as she emerged from the trees shortly after nine o'clock, she saw the light. No one would have called Ann a brave person, but despite a moment's trepidation, compelled by an impulse she did not comprehend, she decided she had to investigate.

Crossing to the rear of the building, she noted a car parked outside. She walked to the south side of the church where the four tall stained glass windows were on the level of the main floor. Still, as she gripped the cement sill beneath one of the windows, Ann needed to stand on her tiptoes to peer inside. In the light diffused by the glass, she made out an array of carpenter's tools on the front pews and a large, plain wooden cross resting across two sawhorses. She craned her neck, searching for any sign of a person, but she saw no one.

"Can I help you?" The man's voice from behind startled Ann so that she cried out—"Oh!"—and spun around, dropping her journal to the ground. "I'm so sorry, I didn't mean to scare you." He was slender, taller than she by several inches. In what light there was, Ann noted his close-cropped beard and the dark sheen of his thick hair that fell forward when he bent to retrieve her journal. He brushed the hair back from his forehead and handed Ann her notebook. "I'm really sorry to have taken you by such surprise," he said with a touch of embarrassment.

"Oh, you needn't apologize," Ann said. She was flustered, upset by how childish her reaction must have appeared. "My curiosity got the better of me."

"Well, there's no harm in that," he replied, smiling, putting

Ann more at ease. "I suppose I'd be just the same."

"I feel rather foolish now," she replied, casting her eyes down. She knew she was blushing, hoping the dusk would hide his notice.

"No, no, please," he said to reassure her, adding quickly, "My name is Jeremy Tolliver." He extended a hand. With a moment's hesitation she did the same.

"Ann Blandon."

"I take it you live nearby?"

"Two blocks over," Ann replied. She was still annoyed with herself and awkward in his presence. "I regret that I may have intruded."

"Not at all," he said. "Not at all. It's understandable—a stranger in the neighborhood...lights inside a church that's been abandoned for decades." He smiled broadly, his face open, without calculation. "Would you like to come inside? I can explain—show you—what this is all about."

"I—"she paused,"shouldn't trouble you."

"No trouble. Really," he insisted.

"Well...alright."

"Good," Jeremy answered, satisfied. "Around this way." He led her to the church's rear door.

Once inside, Ann saw that the area in front of the altar had been transformed into a makeshift carpentry shop, dominated by the cross and sawhorses. The air was close, redolent of desiccated wood, catching Ann's breath short momentarily. Jeremy took notice.

"It takes some getting used to. I should pay more attention to the ventilation. Here, let me clear a spot for you to sit." He

moved aside some of the woodworking tools in a front pew.

"Thank you," Ann said, taking a seat. In the full light of the church, Ann could see that he was at least ten years older than she. His hair and beard, both lightly powdered with sawdust, bore traces of gray. There was little noteworthy about his face, save a small scar beneath his right eye. It stood out pale against the weathered skin of his cheek. Ann found him handsome nonetheless. As he moved his tools, she noted that his arms, though slender, were sinewy, coated with a patina of sawdust. And his hands were not the smooth hands of a man who spent his days at a desk but rather those of a man used to rougher, earthier business. When he had shifted aside enough of his tools to create a space for himself, he sat down and ran the palms of his hands up and down his forearms to brush away some of the sawdust.

"Well...where to begin," he said. "You know my name—Jeremy Tolliver. I live just west of Dunnington. Do you know where that is?"

"Yes."

"You do?" He was mildly surprised.

"I was there once, though it was several years ago," Ann answered, pleased to make the connection with this man.

"Really?"

"Yes. There's a small museum there dedicated to Booth Tarkington." Jeremy laughed, tilted his head back and squinted in thought.

"Let's see...He had not yet learned that the only safe male rebuke to a scornful female is to stay away from her—especially if that is what she desires.'"

"You've read him?" Ann was genuinely surprised, though she immediately chided herself, believing her tone carried

condescension.

"A good bit. He is, after all, one of Indiana's favorite literary sons. You seem shocked."

"No, no—forgive me if my response appeared...judgmental." He smiled, open, unaffected.

"I guess I don't exactly appear to be the bookish sort." Ann looked away, still upset with herself. Jeremy went on: "So ... as to what brings me here. I have a shop in Dunnington. Custom-made furniture, cabinetry and the like. And I also do restoration, mainly as a sidelight. I've known about this church for several years. I was curious about the woodwork. I suspected that it was impressive, and—" he paused, casting his eyes around the interior, "—as you can see, it is. Trouble was, I couldn't get access to the building. Not until six months ago when I found out the Presbyterian denomination that owns the building was seriously thinking about putting it on the market. I guess after so many years of letting it sit, someone had the bright idea to sell it and lift the albatross from around their necks. Well, I saw that as my opening. I got in touch with the church's head offices in Pittsburgh, told them who I was, what I did, and made a pitch to be allowed to take a look at the inside of the building and restore the woodwork, coax it back to life after all this time. I tried to convince them that it would make the church more valuable and bring a higher price when they put it up for sale. They were skeptical at first, but when I offered to do the work for free...well," Jeremy paused, grinning, "they may have been men of God, but they also had a sharp eye for the bottom line." His manner was so relaxed that it eased the anxiety within Ann. She shifted her weight on the pew, letting some of the tension coiled inside melt away. She allowed herself to return his smile. "So, they gave me the green light and here I am."

"It appears to be quite a formidable endeavor," Ann said as she let her eyes drift around the room.

"There is plenty to do, but I relish the challenge."

"I'm afraid I know absolutely nothing about carpentry."

"Here," he began, warming to the subject, "let me show you a bit of what I'm doing—if you're interested."

"Yes," Ann replied. "Of course." It was the polite response, though that wasn't her motivation. She was genuinely pleased to be there, but it puzzled her all the same. She was so painfully shy in the company of men, yet she had accepted Jeremy's invitation with almost no hesitation. But then she had been equally surprised by why she had paid the slightest attention to the light inside the church in the first place. Despite her timidity, she had allowed curiosity to entice her... a moth to a flame.

"You see this," Jeremy said, pointing to the cross. "I took it down from the wall there above the altar. Please, come closer." Ann rose from the pew and stepped around one of the sawhorses to stand by his side. He let his right hand rest lightly on the surface of the wood, gently smoothing it back and forth. Ann was close enough to him now to smell his sweat mixed with the scent of sawdust and the staleness the air. "Black walnut," he went on. "Beautiful wood, just beautiful, but time and conditions take their toll."

"The humidity?" Ann asked.

"Yes, mostly. The absence of any humidity or temperature regulation. Puts real stress on fine wood. You can feel it for yourself." He didn't wait for her to move but reached out, took her left hand and placed it on the cross. His forthrightness startled her, but she did not resist. "See what I mean?"

"I do," she replied, feeling a slight flush rise to her cheeks.

“And here,” Jeremy said, turning toward the altar. It had been fashioned from the same wood as the cross—seven feet in length, less than half that in width, supported by six stout legs. It was as utilitarian as such a piece could be—almost dour in appearance, sober in intent. Jeremy walked a few feet to the altar, again running a hand over the surface. “The dryness...,” he lamented. And, turning again, “And here, too.” Several steps behind the altar, flanking it, were identical staircases leading up to the pulpit above which was suspended a hexagonal canopy, a crucifix carved in bas relief on each walnut panel.

“Will you be able to undo the damage?” He smiled again, offering the hint of a wink.

“If I’m as good as I think I am.” There followed a moment of awkwardness. Jeremy looked directly at Ann, unnerving her further. She was beginning to feel the mustiness in the air clutch at the back of her throat. The silence rose up.

“I—,” she began, pausing, forcing herself not to stammer, “need to be getting home. It’s late, and I’m sure I’ve taken you from your work.”

“You have not,” Jeremy insisted. “As a matter of fact, I was just wrapping up when I saw you. A few minutes more and we’d have missed each other. Serendipity.” His choice of the word pleased Ann.

“Yes, I suppose it was.” Her eyes darted quickly to his and then away to a far corner of the room.

“I know you said you lived not far away, but could I offer you a lift home?”

“Thank you, no. I enjoy the walk. The evening air is invigorating.”

“Especially after this,” Jeremy said, waving a hand around

him. "I really need to pay more attention to the ventilation." He stopped for a moment. "I tell you what...I'll make you a deal. If you'd like to come by any evening I'm here, I promise to open the place up so we both can breathe a little easier."

"Well, I...," Ann began. In any other circumstance, she would have immediately declined the offer. But not this time. "I wouldn't want to be a distraction."

"Believe me, you wouldn't be. If I thought that, I wouldn't have made the offer."

"Well, then, alright. I accept your invitation." Ann felt the flush in her face deepening and only wished to get away, to catch her breath and to wrestle with what was happening inside her.

"Good. I'll be back in a couple of days, so look for the light."

Jeremy walked her to the door, and with a hurried goodbye, Ann left. During what remained of her walk home, she chided herself. *For goodness sake, you're behaving like a schoolgirl!*

In her room as the hours passed, enveloped by the darkness, while a cool breeze gently stirred the window curtains, she lay in her bed unable to sleep.

Two evenings later, she hurried through a dinner with her parents and four of their old friends. Her mother remarked on how distracted Ann seemed. It was nothing, Ann replied, only some preoccupations from summer work tutoring a student. She apologized for any appearance of rudeness and excused herself. By the time she had changed into a more comfortable dress and left the house, twilight was upon the town, too late for a trip to the pond.

But when she arrived at the church, the building was dark.

Perhaps I've come too early, Ann said to herself. She had not.

There would be no light that night. She waited, sitting on the back steps of the building, until the sun had set and the half-moon had begun its slow arc across the southwestern sky before retracing her steps home.

Every evening for the next week, Ann made her pilgrimage to the pond. Each night she returned to her room, the church dark. And each day her anxiety increased. Though she did not fully understand why, she knew that she yearned for the companionship of this man and felt her disappointment grow each time the black windows of the church stared back at her.

Then, ten days after their first meeting, the light shone again.

Ann had gone to the pond and read until the daylight faded too much to allow her to continue. It had been a fitful diversion. She had been simply marking time, waiting until the moment to see if this was the night Jeremy would return.

When Ann saw that he had, her heart leapt up.

As she approached the church's rear door, Ann noted that several windows were open allowing the muted sound of music to drift out and mingle with the night breeze. She knocked twice on the door. After several moments with no response, she rapped more insistently. The door opened, and Jeremy's face broke into a smile.

"Ahh, Ann," he said, and she noted real warmth in his voice, "I was hoping it was you. Come in, come in." He stood aside, allowing her to pass. As she did, her senses came alive—to his physical presence, the light, the music, the smell of wood and must. "You probably had given me up for lost," he went on, leading her into the church proper. And, once again, he did the unexpected, taking her by the hand toward a front pew. "Here...sit down, please."

"Well, I had wondered," Ann said, laying aside her book and

with a nervous hand smoothing the light skirt she wore.

“Like the best and worst of life, it was unexpected. In this case, the worst. A death. My aunt.”

“I’m so sorry.”

“She had a bad fall at her home and broke a hip. There were complications and she went downhill very quickly.”

“That’s terrible.”

“And a real shock. Though she was in her eighties, she had all the vitality of someone half her age.”

“Did she live close to you?”

“No, and that was part of the reason I was gone for so long. Her home was in Indianapolis, so there was the trip. And after the funeral, I stayed on to help put some of her affairs in order.”

“It must have been quite trying for you,” Ann said.

“It was sad. Very,” he replied. “She was a favorite and someone who had a profound impact on me growing up.” He stopped, tilted his head back and allowed his eyes to range over the ceiling in thought for a few seconds before snapping back to the moment. “But enough,” he said. Taking note of the music drifting from a small radio plugged in nearby, he asked: “Do you like jazz?”

“I’m afraid I know as much about contemporary music as I do about woodworking,” Ann replied.

“I can turn it off or change stations,” Jeremy offered quickly.

“No, no—please, leave it. Perhaps you can educate me, help me expand myself. I admit I sometimes chafe at the life I lead.”

"And how is that?" Ann stirred as she sought the right words.

"It seems so ... *cloistered*." Jeremy smiled.

"What you choose to read," he began, looking at the copy of *Sons and Lovers* resting on the pew beside Ann, "might lead me to believe otherwise."

"This?" she said, reaching out to touch the smooth surface of the hardbound cover. "Well, yes. I suppose."

"You're fond of Lawrence?"

"I have read this before. Not for some time, but recently..." her voice trailed off. Jeremy's lips curled slyly.

"Then the literary significance of the name of the street we're on isn't lost on you." Ann's brows knitted for an instant before a slight flush rose on her cheeks.

"Oh—Mellors? No," she answered, allowing herself to search out his eyes for the briefest moment. Jeremy's smile broadened, and Ann sensed something within her loosen and lift, leaving her unburdened, freer than she had ever felt.

So began what Ann would always remember as the best time of her life—long, sultry evenings spent with Jeremy as he worked the wood, introduced her to the music of Miles, Monk and Bird and by his presence and manner, allowed her to shed her anxieties, let her guard slip and give herself permission to breathe through the suffocating shroud of her inhibitions.

He was, she learned in those hours alone with him, extremely well-read, matching the depth of her own literary explorations. Moreover, he sometimes prodded her sharply to venture beyond the margins of where she had always been comfortable in grappling with the fundamental questions of life.

"You really believe there is a God guiding this mess of a

world?" he asked with some incredulity one evening. At first, not knowing him well, she was mildly shocked at the question. It obviously registered on her face, and Jeremy didn't miss it. "Ahhh, you think that because I'm doing this work here in this church that I must be a Christian."

"Well, yes, I suppose I did."

"I shed that mythology years ago. I'm surprised you still cling to it." She caught the hint of disdain in his reply, and it put her on the defensive.

"There's no need to be condescending." Jeremy halted what he was working on, rubbing the light coating of sawdust from his hands as he walked toward Ann and sat in the pew.

"It wasn't meant to be," he said, his tone softer. "It's just that you're so obviously serious about your reading. You're such a thoughtful, inquisitive person intellectually that I imagined you would have recognized the impulse to believe in the hoary religious notions we've been spoon-fed for what they are."

"And what might that be?" Despite Jeremy's protestations to the contrary, Ann remained stung, and she wasn't going to let him off the hook too easily. Jeremy tilted his head slightly to one side and his eyes narrowed as he looked at her.

"I think you know exactly what I mean. If you've read Camus, Sartre—"

"Of course I've read them," she replied, surprised at her vehemence.

"Of course you have. And so my point is that having absorbed them as surely you must have, I find it hard to accept that you remain a believer."

"And what of those who find solace in that faith?"

“Well and good for them, I suppose.” He reached out and let his hand rest on her arm, drawing her eyes to his. Then he said without the slightest trace of tentativeness, “But you are not one of them.”

Life had been so much simpler, so uncluttered before the night Ann’s curiosity about the light in the church had gotten the better of her. Yes, it was mundane; but the predictability of it was also reassuring, providing safety and control and insularity. When she needed to be transported, there were always the excursions into the worlds created by the writers she called her own.

Now? Everything was changing. He was under her skin, and her inner balance was askew. By day, she found herself often fighting to keep her concentration on her work. At home, her distractedness did not go unnoticed.

“Dear,” her mother began rather gingerly one evening during dinner when Ann’s father was interrupted by a business phone call and left the table, “are you not feeling well?”

“I’m fine, Mother.”

“You’ve seemed so ... preoccupied in recent days. Is something bothering you?”

“No, Mother.” Mrs. Blandon paused, her right hand fretting with the linen tablecloth next to her plate.

“Is it female trouble, dear?” Ann winced.

“No, Mother, of course not.”

“I could put in a phone call to Dr. Davies—”

“Oh, Mother, *for God’s sake!*”

But it was in the indigo depths of night when Ann confronted her greatest inner tumult. Often, following an evening with

Jeremy, she found herself listening to the fitfull sigh of the wind through the big willow tree outside her bedroom window. In the moonlight the branches' shadows swirled across the ceiling, mimicking the churning of her emotions, the rising heat within her body triggered by urges she had not felt since adolescence. Though long suppressed, she now began to ease the reins on these passions which at once both frightened and exhilarated her.

And she knew why it was so with this man; it required no deep analysis: he valued the quality of her mind. It was that simple and that irresistible to her.

Through summer's dog days Ann continued her evening sojourns whenever Jeremy was in town, usually two times a week. And with each visit she grew more at ease with him as their conversations ranged far and wide over the intellectual terrain between them. She had never been so stimulated.

As August was drawing to its close, Jeremy announced that his work in the church would be finished with his next visit. Ann knew the time would eventually come, but she still seemed caught off guard by his announcement.

"And then...?" She tried to mask the dread in her voice.

"And then?" He looked at her, eyes narrowing. *Was it possible he didn't see, didn't understand?* Ann said to herself with some alarm.

"Well, I mean, we've ... we've had such wonderful discussions. I'd quite become used to them ... looked forward to them—"

"And they don't have to stop," Jeremy said. He sat down next to Ann and took her hands in his, rubbing them reassuringly with his thumbs. "I don't have time to talk about it right now; I've got to get back. Tuesday. We'll discuss it then. Work out a plan."

For the rest of the week, Ann was particularly distracted. She desperately did not want her time with Jeremy to end, and despite his soothing assurances, she was worried it would never be the same. Her nights were especially unsettled, riven by dreams that startled her awake. And though she could not recall their contents, they left her on edge. She chided herself for acting so girlishly, spinning an idyllic fantasy that she knew could never be sustained.

But then something curious happened.

Late Sunday night, after fretting for a time in the pages of her journal, Ann climbed into bed and allowed herself to luxuriate in the coolness of the sheets against her skin. It thrilled her and calmed her, and unlike previous nights, she drifted off to sleep quickly. And unlike the previous nights, she awoke refreshed and with a great clarity of mind she could not explain. It was also with a purpose.

Once her afternoon tutoring session ended, she had time to get to Alma's Dress Shop before it closed. Though most of the clothing on display was for the fall season ahead, there was one rack in the back of the shop with summer clearance items. It was there that Ann chose a sleeveless silk dress, loose-fitting, in cornflower blue. It had a modest v-neck and fell to mid-calf. It was quite unlike anything in her wardrobe, which even her mother scolded her as being "much too matronly for a woman of twenty-eight." Ann herself viewed her choice of the new dress as remarkable, yet she did not hesitate.

The hours of the next day seemed to crawl by interminably, especially since Ann had no work to distract her. She ate dinner with her parents as usual. By that time, her anticipation was beginning to get the better of her, yet she did not reveal it through her actions lest they invite comment. The mealtime conversation was as pedestrian as ever; Ann gave nothing away.

After dinner, she went to her room and spent a few minutes writing in her journal. She concluded her entry with a quote from Kafka: "You are at once both the quiet and the confusion of my heart." And then she wrote in her careful hand: *Free of all encumbrance.* Laying aside her pen, Ann showered and put on her new dress. Then, she did something else that was out of character. Instead of tying her dark hair up behind her head, she let it fall naturally, brushing it carefully to enhance its natural fullness.

When she arrived at the church shortly before eight, Jeremy had been there for half-an-hour gathering up what remained of his tools, wiping down the woodwork and sweeping up.

The day had been long and especially oppressive as summer asserted itself a final time. The heat had enveloped East Lynn under a stifling blanket of humidity that seemed to abate very little as the sun went down. There was not the breath of breeze to bring relief. Even the cicadas' thrum seemed to labor into the evening before surrendering for the night. The waters of the pond did not stir, remaining perfectly still, mirror-like, as the surface reflected the rising of the quarter-moon.

Upon greeting Ann, Jeremy's surprise was evident. He told her how nice she looked, "perfect for a scorcher of a day like this." Ann did not blush but smiled and thanked him.

Once Jeremy had finished tidying up, he sat with Ann and they talked with the easy intimacy that had blossomed over the weeks they had been meeting. All traces of Ann's self-consciousness and reticence had disappeared.

Just before ten, she rose from her seat, crossed the room and extinguished the light.

Over the winter, East Lynn's weekly newspaper, the *Clarion*,

carried the story of the church's sale to a Mennonite group. Services were to begin in May.

On that first Sunday, Ann made it a point to attend. Dressed plainly, with her hair pulled back, she took a seat in the front pew, in a spot quite familiar to her. She was not there because she intended to join the congregation. In fact, much to the dismay of her mother and father, she had drifted away from churchgoing entirely, questioning its relevance in her life and whether religion, at least the kind she had been taught growing up, meant anything at all to her any longer. The seeds of doubt had been planted years before, nurtured by her expanding literary consciousness and brought to full flower during her long conversations with Jeremy.

He was the principal reason she was there at that first service. It was a mark of respect for his work, and to recall the final time they were there together.

They had parted with his promise to come back ten days later, after he made a trip to Indianapolis to clear up the last of his aunt's affairs, including the sale of her house.

When a week passed after his expected return and she still hadn't heard from him, Ann's anxiety began to well up and with it her innate insecurities about herself. But rather than succumb to them by waiting and agonizing, she decided to act. Borrowing her mother's car, she drove to Dunnington.

The town was smaller than East Lynn, with a main street half as long. Still, it was long enough to have a soda fountain, so Ann parked out front and went inside to collect herself and get directions to Jeremy's shop.

Ann took a seat at the counter on a tired vinyl stool nearest the door. It was the middle of a Saturday morning, and she was the only customer. The proprietress, a short woman in her mid-sixties with yellowing gray hair bunched at the back of her head and covered by a hairnet, stood slowly from her seat

behind the far end of the counter and shuffled toward Ann. She wore a shapeless shift of washed-out gray that did little to hide her stockiness.

"Welcome to Leetha's, honey. Yours is a new face to me."

"Hello. Yes, I'm from out of town."

"Oh? Well, let me guess—Ambia?"

"No," Ann replied. "Illinois."

"Well, we try to welcome all types," the older woman said with a wink. "Even you foreigners. What can I get for you?"

"A cup of hot tea would be fine."

"That I can arrange," Leetha said. "Anything else? Just the tea?"

"Just the tea is fine." Leetha moved deliberately, plucking a thick mug from a glass shelf and placing it before Ann. She made small talk as she dropped a tea bag into the mug and poured hot water over it from a battered aluminum kettle.

"So, how are things in Illinois? Hardly get over that way anymore. Used to make a trip or two a year to Danville to see an aunt of mine, but she passed long ago. And what brings you to Dunnington, if you don't mind my nosiness?" Ann responded with a thin smile, nervously raising and lowering the teabag into the hot water. Leetha took note. "Ain't gonna steep up any quicker, honey." Ann caught herself and looked down self-consciously.

"I wonder if you could direct me to Jeremy Tolliver's shop. He's a friend of mine."

"I could," Leetha began, "but I don't suppose there would be much point."

"Why not?"

"Well, no way for you to know, I guess, being from over in Illinois and all." She paused, the lined features of her face softening. "Jeremy's dead." Ann recoiled as if she'd been slapped hard across the face. She could barely mouth her response.

"Dead?"

"Terrible thing," Leetha said, slowly shaking her head. "Car accident. East of here a piece."

"My God—*dead?!?*"

"Terrible thing," Leetha repeated. "Happened two days back. Here, it's in the *Gazette*," she continued, reaching under the counter and pulling out a thin newspaper folded in half. "I saved it." She opened the paper and laid it out flat on the counter by Ann's cup, smoothing the center crease and curled edges. "You can read all about it yourself." The older woman saw what a blow the news was to her customer and dropped her voice. "I'm real sorry for the lose of your friend, honey." With a gentle pat on Ann's hand, Leetha turned and slowly made her way back to her chair.

Ann sat for a moment trying to process the awful news before letting her eyes fall to the front page of the paper. There, occupying the bottom right corner of the page was the story, complete with a small photo of Jeremy standing, smiling, outside his shop pointing to a wooden sign with carved lettering "Tolliver's Fine Woodworking." There was no date on the picture; Ann guessed by Jeremy's appearance, the snapshot had been taken at least ten years earlier. The headline read:

Local Man Dies in Car Mishap

Dunnington resident Jeremy Tolliver, 42, was killed Wednesday night in a single-car crash northeast of Terre

Haute. Tolliver's car suffered a blowout, skidded on a rainy stretch of Route 40 and struck the end post of a steel trestle bridge, according to the Indiana State Police. The car flipped over and Tolliver was ejected, State Police said. About half-an-hour after the accident, the State Police report stated, another motorist came upon the scene and discovered Tolliver's body in the weeds on the bank of Big Walnut Creek.

Ann squeezed her eyes closed and pushed the newspaper away. Suddenly lightheaded, her throat constricted, she knew that if she didn't get outside at once she was in danger of fainting. She fumbled her purse open, took out a dollar bill and laid it on the counter next to her untouched tea. As quickly as she dared, Ann got up and hurried out onto the sidewalk. Her chest heaved as she fought for air. She leaned against a parking meter for support and closed her eyes to block out the bright September sunlight. The world had collapsed in around her so that she was aware only of her own ragged breathing and the rustle of a clutch of sere maple leaves sent skittering along the sidewalk at her feet by a gust of autumn wind. After a minute, when she felt steady enough to straighten up, she slowly walked to her car, climbed inside, put her hands on the steering wheel, laid her head down and sobbed.

The subsequent months were not easy ones in East Lynn. Winter was especially harsh in that corner of Illinois, with heavy snows in December and frigid temperatures and howling gales that raked the small farms around the town through much of January and February. The weather compounded Ann's isolation as she struggled with Jeremy's death. She had no friends close enough to whom she could reveal her pain. Discussing it with her mother was out of the question. Neither she nor her husband had even been aware of Ann's time at the church, and

they would have had not the slightest idea how to comfort their daughter if they had known of her relationship with Jeremy. They would have viewed it as one more instance of Ann's oddness and incomprehensible to them. That left Ann to confide in her journal—long, wrenching entries poured out deep into the night as the wind rattled the naked willow branches outside her window, casting shadows that writhed across the ceiling in the chill pearl moonlight.

By the time winter's grip had been broken, Ann had come to terms with her loss. She judged it as how he would have, not as predestination, his name crossed off in a vast cosmic ledger at an appointed moment. It would not have been that to him. He would have ascribed it to the vagaries of existence, random cause and effect. No grand rhyme, no intrinsic reason. "We live; we die—some of us in our sleep, others in the middle-of-nowhere-Indiana late on a rainy night." It was his way of looking at the world, and Ann embraced it. In truth, she realized her perspective had been changing long before she was willing to consciously acknowledge it. Jeremy had helped her see that. And he also opened her to the expression of spirituality, not as a divine infusion but an essential, ephemeral quality that animates humanity. He made her believe that allowing herself the freedom to lay herself bare to this expression was a way for her to honor "God."

So Ann was there in the front pew of the church on that first Sunday in May. Several of the townspeople she knew were in attendance as well remarking to her that they were unaware she was a member of that denomination. She smiled and assured them they were not wrong, that her attendance was out of respect for a lost friend who had a connection with the church.

But her appearance was not limited to that single service. She returned on the final Sunday in August, the Sunday nearest the date when she and Jeremy had last been together. And this she did on the final Sunday in August for the next fifty-seven years until her death. During that time members of the

congregation talked among themselves, puzzled as to why it was that Ann Blandon had never in their recollection either joined their church or come to a service on any other Sabbath. But as the years passed and her regular attendance was noted, Pastor Randall and those who followed him made certain that every August, on the last Sunday of the month, Ann's space was held open for her in the frontmost pew.

There she would sit, observers noted, the shy spinster with the barest hint of a smile on her face. In placid communion with the Lord, they surmised. They could not know—and she never let on—that her true communion was with memory, that she was lost in recollection of a long-past late-summer night, when the only illumination in the church was the pale moonlight that sifted through the stained glass windows, the only sound was the radio softly playing Miles Davis, and most of all, the sensation of the smooth, cool the surface of the altar as it pressed against her naked back.

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Nick Young is a retired award-winning CBS News Correspondent. His writing has appeared in more than thirty publications including the *Pennsylvania Literary Journal*, *The Garland Lake Review*, *The Remington Review*, *The San Antonio Review*, *The Best of CaféLit 11* and Vols. I and II of the *Writer Shed Stories* anthologies. His first novel, *Deadline*, was published in September. He lives outside Chicago.

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