The Good Word

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It was a hot summer Saturday in Springfield, Mass. when the Messengers of the Bureaucratic Word of Donald Rumsfeld rang Margaret’s doorbell. Bruce was visiting the in-laws, a fate Margaret had narrowly escaped by pleading “woman’s troubles.” She would have to think of a new excuse soon. That one was rapidly losing its biological plausibility, only making it this far due to Bruce’s adolescent skittishness for all matters gynecological.

The Messengers first came as two clean-cut, careful-looking young men whose buttoned collars and short-sleeved plaid shirts made them look like teenage Mormons staging a quiet sartorial rebellion. It was early enough that the heat hadn’t become unbearable, and the only things between Margaret and the Messengers were a screen door and a light summer dress.

“Hello ma’am, we’re from the Bureaucratic Church of Donald Rumsfeld. Have you accepted Donald Rumsfeld as your personal lord and savior?”

The one on the left had some Anglo-Saxon name, Todd or Chad or something similarly WASPy. The one on the right was named Rick. He was the reason she didn’t send them on their way with a polite dismissal and a soft closing of the door despite the heat. Rick’s brown eyes, a little too large for his face, aborted a falsely regretful “No thank you,” in her throat. They were Steven’s eyes and she wanted them looking at her for longer. Todd or Chad or whatever had small blue eyes that appeared out of focus. Whenever he talked he looked just left and slightly behind her right ear, the sign of a true believer if ever there was one.

“I don’t… I mean, I’ve never actually heard of your church” breathed Margaret, unable to break Rick’s stare and steady smile. With that, the two young men dressed like
off-brand Jehovah’s Witnesses were seated on the floral chaise lounge Bruce’s mother had insisted adorn their living room, crowding out the couch that had graced their “sinful” pre-nuptial apartment. Margaret offered her visitors lemonade and soft cookies automatically, heading to the kitchen before their murmured assent.

Todd- it was Todd- sat ramrod straight on the right side of the chaise lounge, appearing not to blink as he began explaining Church’s intricacies. His voice seemed to dwindle as Margaret stared into Rick’s eyes, caught by her son’s ghost. Since November she had fought not to accept never seeing that brown depth again. She kept waiting for Rick’s eyes to lose their ghostly appeal. They didn’t.

“…the Church was founded in the late teens based on Rumsfeld’s various memoranda from his time as Secretary of Defense. The founding documents, poetically referred to as the ‘beginning of the avalanche’ of so-called ‘snow-flakes’ the Great Bureaucrat would add to in the Second Deluge following his conversion to the Pentecostal faith, were the seed from which the Church took root. However, his Great Works were not bound and declared complete until his ascension to the Trammeled Tower in Evanston, Illinois in late 2020. Are you familiar with His story?”

Todd hadn’t stopped talking since he sat down, managing to continue even while inhaling the lemonade and cookies years of training had left Margaret unable not to serve visitors before 5 p.m. on weekends. After five they were invited to dinner or, if their manners were lacking and they arrived late, coffee and cake.

“I’m familiar with the church. Y’all are basically Pentecostals, right?”

“Not quite.” Rick spoke his first words in a rich timber. His voice was nothing like Steven’s, whose adolescent squeak had a tenuous relationship with pitch when he killed himself.

“Donald the First found inspiration in the manner and teachings of the Pentecostal faith, specifically the charismatic interaction with God. However, He was the first to contemplate the ecstatic bureaucratic appreciation of that creation.”
“I’m sorry, what?”

“Think of it as the method by which one communes with a higher power. Are you familiar with the Talmud?”

“No.”

“Jews believe that one grows closer to God through close study and interpretation of holy texts. Interpretation as a form of prayer. Father Rumsfeld found that, through bureaucratic density, He could transcend this mortal coil and appreciate God in all His intricacy. The complexity of bureaucratic convulsion allowed him to commune with the complexity of the Lord. By trafficking in the mundane, by practicing the banal, He parted the Veil of Tears and stared upon the face of God. It’s a kind of literary ascetism. Privation of the body is replaced with privation of the mind.”

The longer Rick talked the more Margaret realized he wasn’t Steven. How did she become a silly old woman seeking her son in the eyes of strangers? She wanted them gone, quickly.

“Well… that certainly sounds like something. Only, see, while you’re both very passionate, I already have a church. Do y’all have a pamphlet or something you could leave?”

Rick had lapsed back into silence, his smile dangling like a cruel ornament beneath grief’s twin totems. As Margaret’s resentment of his resemblance to her lost son grew, Todd broke back in: “Funny you should ask. Before one attends a service, it is recommended that you review one of the holy texts to see if the Church of the Bureaucratic Word is a good fit. Complimentary of course!”

“Fine. That sounds wonderful. Just leave it on the coffee table on your way out.”

“Ah. Well, we don’t actually carry physical copies. Following the submission of several forms by apostolic members of the early Church, duly filled and filed, Messengers are no longer permitted to carry the texts for fear of compromised lumbar integrity. However, there is a brief form we can leave with you. It’s a straightforward process. Mail order!”
“Great. I really must be getting along. Thank you for time.”

Margaret spoke as she made her way to the door, standing with her hand pushing the screen out, ensuring all roads led to egress. Todd shuffled in his bag continuing to preach about the Good Word of Donald Rumsfeld as Margaret’s eyes remained fixed on Rick’s. The Messengers left. Her memories followed.

Night had fallen by the time Margaret rose again. The Messengers’ departure had left her drained. She spent the day in bed for the first time in a long time, roused only by a draft coming beneath the bedroom door, reaching under the too-heavy comforter, reminding her that all that stood between her and the denizens of Springfield was a screen door and flimsy notions of neighborliness. She ventured forth for the second time that day and, on her way to the door, saw the “pamphlet.” Laying oppressively next to the glasses, whose ice cubes had long ago ceased to cool and now diluted the supermarket lemonade carefully poured into a pitcher, it exerted a palpable weight. The text’s incongruous mass lay like a lead pellet on a sheet of gossamer, warping the room around its bulk. The “form” Todd had mentioned was bound neatly in an institutional grey with a black spine comfortably two inches thick. Shutting and locking the door behind her, Margaret crossed the room and picked up the book which read “Form 274(b): Request for Inaugural Materials for the Church of the Good Bureaucratic Word of Donald Rumsfeld”. A neat subscript in small print stated, “ALL MATERIALS FOR PROSPECTIVE INITIATES ONLY. MATERIAL NOT INTENDED FOR PUBLICATION, DISTRIBUTION, OR REPRODUCTION. VIOLATORS WILL BE PROSECUTED TO THE FULLEST EXTENT OF THE LAW (CORPOREAL AND OTHERWISE).”

Unable to heft the Messenger’s form, lemonade, and plate of abandoned cookies, Margaret left the book and returned to bed.
Unroused by proselytization, Margaret slept late into the morning. When she finally left her room, shutting the door to Bruce’s study/bedroom on her way to the kitchen, the summer Sunday was breathing on noon’s neck. Returning to the living room with a cup of freshly-brewed coffee her eyes caught on the Messenger’s form. In the light of day its bulk seemed less oppressive, more silly than intimidating, a demon’s umbra made a tree’s shadow by the day’s clean light.

Sipping her coffee, Margaret turned to the first page. The type was small and close, the pages thin to the point of translucency. In form it was reminiscent of a bible- no surprises there- but the content was different. The heading on the first page bore the legend “INSTRUCTIONS.” Flipping through the next twenty some-odd pages, Margaret realized they were comprised solely of small, dense text explaining how to complete the remainder of foreboding text. Margaret marveled at the chutzpah of a religious group luring converts in with bureaucrat-ese. She hadn’t been in a church since Steven’s funeral, but, if memory served, the more mainstream religions seemed to stick with baked goods and lemonade, the saccharine sweetness of which was met or exceeded only by the prim old ladies and starched young men who pressed it on potential converts. The Messengers, in contrast, seemed to be actively trying to scare her off.

Margaret rinsed her empty cup in the sink. The drowsy Sunday morning was rapidly approaching a lazy afternoon. She felt a twinge of guilt. Margaret tried not to stay in bed too long when Bruce was in the house. She knew if she did it reminded him of the dark times, and his brow seemed perpetually furled as it was. She didn’t know if she could stand to add another line to that roadmap of a life lived on anxiety’s uneasy terrain. With him left the need to maintain the fragile façade of normalcy cultivated carefully these past ten months.

Margaret had promised Doctor Staufus she would face each day as if nothing had changed. “Fake it ‘til you make it, Maggie!” She had always hated being called Maggie, and something about Staufus’ cheer seemed an affront to his profession. I mean, who the fuck told him cheerful was an appropriate default setting for a grief counselor? It was like a
cheerful mortician. In context, it was borderline creepy. Still, a promise was a promise, so each and every morning after her coffee Margaret took a shower and put on clothes “she could go to the grocery store in.”

Bruce’s door was ajar. Hadn’t she just closed it? She was sure she had. She pulled hard, listening carefully for the “click” as the latch slid into place. Turning around, her eyes caught on Steven’s door. She wished it wasn’t closed. She hadn’t been in there in months. Too painful. After she found him she refused to let Bruce move anything, but couldn’t scrub the gentle bump of his weight against the door. He had grown so much it had been a struggle to force it open.

Before she could think, she crossed the hall to Steven’s door, grasped the handle, and flung open the door. The meaty “thunk” she half expected failed to materialize. Instead she was met by the room of what appeared to be a bibliophilic necromancer, gothic editor, or depressive poet with a severely limited vocabulary.

Steven had insisted his room be painted black when he was fourteen saying it “helped him think.” Thesauri, dictionaries, usage guides, and formatting guides occupied the large bookshelf to the left, spilling over to the (black of course) night stand next to the twin bed facing the bookshelf. The only surface spared the heaps of books was the desk dominating the far side of the room. Steven’s most prized possession was the great walnut monstrosity that had belonged to Margaret’s father, an accountant. In his old age her father had succumbed to dementia and, in the ether of his last days, had taken to scoring the surface of the desk with a letter opener Margaret’s mother had given him many Christmases ago. When her father died, chasing her mother to the last, they had been planning to throw it away, its top scored by the wake of her father’s fleeing memories, more totems to loss.

Steven, just seven then, insisted he have it. “I need a place for my homework,” he said. She remembered laughing with Bruce that his homework at the time consisted of fifteen minutes of color identification, but his persistence had seemed harmless. They let
him keep it with the quiet expectation that his childish fascination would wane and the desk would be kindling by his eight birthday.

They never expected it to consume him the way it did. Not the desk. That was just the vehicle. Even now it bore stacks of paper, looming, shifting mountains of pulp, each filled with Steven’s cramped, anachronistically beautiful handwriting. She knew without looking that each of the desk’s eight massive drawers were similarly filled with failed attempts, each neatly filed by date and with a small index card detailing its particular shortcomings.

“I need more paper Mom.”

“What happened to the notebooks we just bought you for school?”

“I used them.”

“Already? It’s not even Christmas!”

“Sorry.”

“I guess fifth grade is no joke, huh?”

“I guess.”

Margaret felt she was breathing treacle. The air in Steven’s room was always thick, but she could feel it choking her, the desk’s oppressive contents filling her lungs. She fled the way she came, hearing the door slam on her heels as she pulled it behind her mad departure. Collapsing on the couch she realized she was hyperventilating, her breath coming fast and hot. She could feel her heart constricting, feel a quiet doom gathering. She hadn’t had a panic attack in months.

As she fought for breath, her gaze fell on the book the Messengers had left opened to the first page. It read: “STEP 1: ACQUIRE A WRITING UTENSIL.” Margaret was seldom prone to belief in serendipity or divine providence, but the directive’s lack of ambiguity appealed. Battling her rabbiting heart and galloping breath, Margaret grabbed a pen from the end table. The next line read “STEP 1(a): CHECK EFFICACY OF THE AFOREMENTIONED WRITING UTENSIL IN THE BOX PROVIDED BELOW”
Margaret drew and continued reading.

Two weeks had passed since the Messengers came. Bruce had left to his parents again. He hadn’t even asked for an excuse this time. Margaret appreciated him sparing them the awkwardness of her fumbling for a reason to avoid leaving the house. She wondered if his tacit awareness of her apathy boded well or ill for their domestic, if not bliss, homeostasis.

She had made her way through almost a third of the Instructions. Most of the sections consisted of arcane trivia (“IN BOX 243(c) WRITE THE LATIN NAME FOR THE COMMON CUTTLEFISH”) and an odd mix of bureaucratic and religious erratica (“STEP 647: IF A CITIZEN OF THE UNITED STATES FIND THE SUM OF YOUR SOCIAL SECURITY NUMBER. IF YOU ARE NOT A CITIZEN, SKIP TO STEP 650. IF YOU ARE A CITIZEN AND THE SUM IS EVEN RECITE THE LORD’S PRAYER 15 TIMES AND WRITE THE EMOTION YOU ARE LEFT WITH ON THE LINE PROVIDED. IF THE SUM IS ODD READ A CHAPTER OF LEVITICUS AND WRITE THE THIRD WORD FROM THE SECOND LINE FROM THE BOTTOM ON THE LINE PROVIDED.”) She didn’t know why she kept writing. It was soothing, like meditation. She tried not to think about her motivations too much. Doing so made the air thicken in an all-too-familiar manner.

Steven was diagnosed with Hypergraphic Schizophrenia with compulsive tendencies two weeks after his eleventh birthday. They found the notebooks in his closet. He had already filled one large box and was well into a second. He was initially kept for observation due to the “suicidal nature of his writing,” but they released him after 72 hours. Margaret and Rick’s gentle, then firm, then frantic, questions yielded nothing. He said he didn’t know
why he wrote until they pressed him, and then he just said he was just trying to get the phrasing “perfect.” They kept a close watch on him for months, never left him alone. Despite Bruce’s complaints, Margaret took to having him sleep in bed with her. The bi-weekly therapist visits yielded no insight.

Eventually their vigilance faltered. How could it not? The years passed and Steven made no attempt to harm himself. Even Dr. Staufus concluded his writing was a compulsive manifestation of anxiety, not an expression of suicidal intent. Steven remained a seemingly happy, healthy boy. By the time he became an apparently happy, healthy teenager the notebooks seemed like a loveable eccentricity, a quirk of vulnerability to fixate Margaret’s love on, a beauty mark on an otherwise unmarred existence. The years passed and the boxes and drawers filled with letters, a slow accumulation of promises unkept.

Bruce and I haven’t slept together in three years. I’m not sure why. One day we just stopped. We stopped somewhere in the blissful period between finding the notebooks and their ceasing. Odd that the ceaseless production of Steven’s letters now seemed blissful. I was happy then. If only someone had told me.

Margaret hadn’t seen Bruce in two weeks. He said he was staying with his parents but she suspected he had left her and was postponing the inevitable. He always was a coward.

She was almost done with the instructions. Just 50 more pages and she would be able to join the Church, become a Messenger, leave the house, Bruce, the letters, all of it. The tests would be over and she could find peace.

She had never opened the last note. In the years since Steven started the notebooks she read hundreds, thousands of suicide notes. Every manner of introduction, “Dear World…” “Dear Mom…” “My time has come…” “I leave this mortal coil…” every manner, method and form twisted to express a desire to die. He insisted they were all wrong, weren’t perfect. She begin to think of him as an artist pursuing a maligned beauty, a sensitive soul, misunderstood. Like painters in medieval times accused of obscenity for making nude women the objects of their art. He was just searching for perfection in odd
places. She believed that right up to when the door bumped against his body. It was still warm, but his lips had cooled.

Her fingers were cramping from the frantic writing of the past hours and the sun had gone down. She didn’t care. Ten more pages.

Margaret never told Bruce about the last note. Just put it in the top drawer of the desk in its sealed envelope. She hadn’t read it. None of the others had envelopes.

She finished. The last page had instructions for submission. She resolved to send it via next-day mail first thing in the morning and collapsed in bed, her sun dress crinkling. She laughed as she drifted off. How pleased Dr. Staufus would be she slept in clothes she could go to the grocery store in.

It had been a week since she had sent in the form. Margaret spent most of her time staring at the door with a hungry look. By the third day the mailman had ceased jumping at her silent stare. After, he never found out what she was waiting for.

The second book arrived without fanfare or acclaim. The package was large, bulky. Margaret crossed quickly to the door, flinging open the screen door, and ripped the package from the unresisting postman’s hands, the other letters falling like ashes. Seated on the couch Margaret tore at the package, desperation realized. She didn’t know how she knew but she knew that the quiet boys, their plaid, muttered inanities, soft eyes, would bring her the truth about Rick. Freed from its packaging, the book fell to the table with a ponderous “thunk.” The cover read “Form 274(d): Instructions for Collecting Initial Materials for the Bureaucratic Church of Donald Rumsfeld.” Margaret frantically turned the first page, then the second. The pages held the same cramped type, the same cribbed instructions, layer upon layer, page upon page of dense, dry prose. Margaret sat and stared at the book for several minutes then, raising in one motion, smoothed her crumpled dress across her hips, and went to Rick’s door. Opening the door, she went to the desk and pulled open the top drawer. There lay a plain white envelope, the seal unbroken.
She carefully tore the envelopes top edge and peered into its jagged maw. There was a single sheet of paper. She removed it and, slowly unfolding it, saw Rick’s final note. Sinking to her knees, Margaret began laughing hysterically. She was still laughing when they came.