

Pray

by Anton DiSclafani

Laura Stanley received the news via text message. BREEZEWAY BAPTIST WOULD LIKE TO INFORM YOU—

And then a link, which Laura, holding John on her hip, had tapped with her thumb. We're sorry to inform you that your child, John Furlow Stanley, has not been granted admittance into Breezeway Baptist's Ones Class. Please call our director, Stacey Heath, with questions. A cold panic spread over her, starting at her scalp; the panic no less terrifying given how familiar it had become as of late. She who had never been an anxious person anxious all the time, now. If Carter, her husband, was late coming home from the hospital; if she turned a corner in their vast, white house and thought she saw a shadow; if a car honked behind her. To quell the panic she prayed. She texted Amanda, her best friend. She called her mom. Before John's birth, she had been known among family and friends for being a calm, even-keeled person. A tether, Carter had once called her. Anchor, she'd countered. She was no longer that person. Before, she had thought everything would pass, because it always did. She had trusted in the Lord. Her church had been a sanctuary. Was still, until this very moment. John let out a gurgle, and Laura touched her lips to his smooth forehead. She had, somehow, forgotten to pray.

She'd been young, which the various doctors they were sent to after John's birth kept saying, over and over again until it turned into a terrible sort of mantra. So young! So young! That the mantra was true—Laura had just turned 26 when John was born—made her feel more like a failure, though that was not what the doctors had intended, and Laura knew that. She knew they were simply, if insensitively, expressing surprise. Her eggs were young; they were supposed to be perfect. But they had allowed what the doctors called a *de novo* mutation, a term Laura had been blessedly unaware of before her own child's entrance into the world. Welcome to the cold, hard world Amanda had texted her, in jest, just after John, whom they'd named after her father, was born. Furlow was a Stanley family name. Smiley face emojis followed, then hearts. It was before Laura had known anything was wrong. She had laughed, peered down at her sleeping baby, swaddled in a silky blue blanket. But now—well, now Laura's world was both cold and hard. Not John's. She took some comfort in that, more or less depending on the day. The less intelligent he turned out to be, the better, for him at least, because he would not know what it was he was missing. She'd been reading so much—so many forums on which she lurked but never contributed, so many articles, so many pictures—and it was clear there was a spectrum of intelligence. A spectrum of other health issues, too, though John seemed mainly healthy, at least so far. A healthy heart, at least. At least.

The propensity for obesity, for early-onset dementia—she tried not to think of those. The despair she'd felt when her obstetrician, a kind, older man named, funnily, Dr. Mann, entered the room, accompanied by a taller, younger man, whom she'd never seen before, with a thatch of honey-colored blond hair— "I'd like Dr. Nichols, our pediatrician on call, to take a look at our boy, here," he said, and held out his arms for the baby. She had given birth only hours before. Carter was gone, getting her sushi and champagne. The despair. The despair. She still could not finish the thought. The despair was vast but unformed. Of what was she so despairing? She could not say. Not exactly. Her life upended, her son not, after all, perfect. The disappointment threatened to swallow her whole in those early weeks. But there was something else, too, something she could not name. Something was wrong in the world—something rotten in the state of Denmark, a line she remembered from the one compulsory English class she'd taken in college— but she did not know what. When Dr. Mann held out his arms she shook her head, pressed John to her chest. A little whimper emerged from her mouth.

They'd gone ahead with most of it. The baby photographer who came to their home and pretended nothing was wrong, though John's features—the almond-shaped eyes, the flat face, the tiny ears—were impossible to ignore (how had she ignored them, for those few hours in the hospital?). The visits from Carter's family, who lived nearby, who were known in the sense that old, wealthy families in small, Southern towns were known. Her family, from Southaven. Their church family, who supplied an endless rotation of meals. Word had gotten out quickly, but Laura was grateful for that. It seemed like a mercy, not to have to explain John to everyone. But the Sip'n'See, for which John had been supposed to wear the smocked blue romper Carter and his brothers had worn, for their own Sip'n'See's, which Laura's mother-in-law, Nancy, had saved in acid-free tissue paper for all these years (John was the first male grandchild)—Laura had her limits. She'd prayed one night for hours, longer than she'd ever prayed before. Crumpled in the rocking chair in John's room, John himself absent, in the bassinet by her side of the bed. She prayed and cried and at first it was about the Sip'n'See, and how she did not want to play host to the dozens of women who would come to her house and circle her baby and pity her. And then the prayer turned to something else, something darker. She prayed about her own shame, about how it had colonized her heart, her mind. What kind of mother was she, to be ashamed of her own child— The next day she'd told Carter she was cancelling the Sip'n'See. It's not a compulsory event, she'd said, trying to make light of the matter. And Carter had tilted his head in his wry way. It is here, he'd said. And that much was true. She was from the South, but Southaven was close enough to Memphis, and anyway, her family had not had money, not like the Stanleys, who owned real estate and restaurants and car washes and other vague enterprises. Where Laura lived now had its own rules, its own way of doing things, ways which Carter understood and she was learning. Bows the size of Christmas tree toppers on girls' heads. Smocked shirts with Peter Pan collars for boys. Everyone a ma'am or a sir. The men so nice they seemed effeminate, Carter no exception to this rule. Everyone aligned with the Tigers or the Tide, though they lived in between those two towns. Everyone a member of a church family, but that was the one way Laura felt at home here,

in this small town in Alabama, a state she'd never managed to visit though she'd grown up barely two hours from the northwest corner of it—Laura had always been a member of a church family. She'd grown up attending the First Baptist church. Since adolescence, she'd begun her mornings reading devotionals, journaling. It was her therapy, she felt. Her way of feeling at home in the world. Of finding peace. She'd gotten her way about the Sip'n'See. Her mother-in-law had, surprisingly, not been astonished, the absence of which had slammed into Laura like a tidal wave. She understood why Laura would not want to show John to the world.

She texted Amanda, first. John didn't get in. Calling now. Laura would have preferred to email—she didn't like confrontation—but she knew a phone call was best in this situation. Faster, at least. She felt a buzz against her ear, then another. Amanda, responding. The buzz was a comfort. "Hello," a woman said, "Stacey Heath." She had a leisurely voice, which Laura instantly disliked. She was one of those Southern women for whom her mother had a phrase—butter wouldn't melt in her mouth. "Hi, this is Laura Stanley. John Stanley's mother—" Stacey cut her off, midsentence. Her voice, when she spoke, was completely different. "Oh, yes," she said. It was not a good sign. John's denial of admission had not been a mistake, even though she and Carter and the entire Stanley family were members of Breezeway. Carter had attended preschool there, along with his two brothers and one sister. They were a legacy family, not like the families that started coming on Sundays when they found out they were pregnant, since attending Breezeway gave you preference for admission to its preschool. Its preschool that met twice a week, for half a day, and was staffed by women like Laura, except older, women whose own children were grown. "I'm sorry, Mrs. Stanley, I truly am, but your son—" "John," Laura supplied. "Yes, John. Well, we just don't have the resources to serve him." Laura's chest grew tight. Her breathing quickened. She had no hands left—the left cradled John, the right held her hot phone to her sweaty ear—and so she leaned on the counter with her elbow. "I . . ." she said. She was at a loss for words. Stacey Heath didn't sound sorry, did she? She sounded . . . she sounded firm. She sounded as if John had been the subject of much discussion at Breezeway Baptist, and that the conclusion they—she and the other teachers, Laura assumed—had reached was final and absolute. A buzz brought her back to reality. Amanda, returning her text. Another buzz, another text. "But he doesn't need any resources," Laura said, finding her voice. "He's like all the other babies." That wasn't really true, even at this early stage, but Laura did not want to explain to Stacey Heath that John's current deficits were mild. He likely wouldn't be walking or talking by the time he entered the Ones Classroom, but what did that matter? "Our preschool isn't equipped to serve special needs children." Laura's eyes glazed with tears. "He's not!" she cried, though he was. But not in any way that should matter to a preschool class. "You wrote on the form that your son has Down Syndrome?" The fake uncertainty in her voice made Laura want to hurl the phone across the room. But that would hurt only herself. "Yes," Laura said, surprised by the iciness in her voice.

"Well . . ." She let the word trail off. "But this is for socialization, right? It's for letting kids be around other kids?" "Among other things. Other skills." "Calculus? Are you teaching calculus?" A sigh. A deep, disappointed sigh. "Mrs. Stanley, this is not a decision we take lightly. You are very much a valued member of our church family, but we want to make the right decision for everyone." Laura's cheeks burned. She knew who the Stanleys were, and it hadn't helped. Laura searched her memory, but she couldn't place Stacy Heath. She sounded older than Laura, but still young. She sounded thin and hard and mean. "It's illegal," Laura whispered. The thought had just occurred to her. A flare of hope. They couldn't do this. They thought they could, but they could not. "It's not, unfortunately," and Laura wanted to laugh at the unfortunately. "As a religious institution, we're free to make our own judgement about what we can and cannot handle. We're guided by God, not the state." Laura curled over, as if she'd been punched in the gut. John squirmed, and when she looked at him she was met by a wide, toothless grin. He was so happy, her baby. So delighted by, of all things, her. Laura thought of her mother-in-law, of how this conversation would surely get back to her in some way or another. She was a mild, sweet woman with whom Laura found conversation difficult. She loved John. She would accept the preschool's decision. She would not find these two feelings contradictory. "Mrs. Stanley, I hope you'll agree this is the best decision for all of us." She was still looking at John, at his clear blue eyes, which he'd inherited from Carter. At the swoop of light brown hair that fell across his forehead, that she could not bring herself to cut. She looked at her baby and thought, He is who he is. He's himself. "But where is he supposed to go?" she asked.

Whaaa????? Amanda's text read. Must be a mistake. Breezeway could not reject world's cutest baby! Not a mistake, Laura typed back. Will explain later.

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Then, an hour later, when Laura did not reply: Are you okay?

Laura was not okay, but her not okayness was larger than a preschool rejection. Her not okayness related to lying awake at night and wondering if John's future brother or sister, as yet just an idea, a plan—would be kind, would be willing to shoulder the burden of John after Laura and Carter's deaths. If John did not die first, which was a possibility, given the host of health problems that accompanied his diagnosis. Then she wondered, as she did tonight, John's rejection accepted without complaint by Carter—they don't know what they're talking about, but who cares?—if they should have three children, as they had talked about before John was born. Four. The better the chance that one of them would take care of John; or, that they could share him. He could live two months in one house, two in another, etc. Carter stirred. An unfairness to her future children, to shoulder them with this responsibility before they had even been conceived, but there was no other option. John couldn't live in an institution—the thought of her child, being cared for by strangers, undid something inside her. They hadn't found out the sex. There are so few surprises in life, Carter had said. Laura had

secretly wanted a girl, and now she was so, so grateful John was a boy. He was less likely to be abused that way. Sexually and otherwise. There were so many stories of caretakers raping women. They found her, when she was online paying a bill or scrolling through Facebook. And he would never live by himself. Carter stirred, and Laura bit the inside of her cheek, which had become a habit since John's birth. The ridge of skin, puckered, and raw, familiar between her teeth. She hadn't yet texted Amanda back. She'd been disappointed by Carter's reaction, even though she'd expected it. His main purpose in life, now, to soothe her. It wasn't really about the preschool, of course, but then again, it was. The carpeted rooms, lined with perfectly organized, brightly colored toys; the walls decorated with foam cutouts of shapes and letters and numbers. We are all God's children here, the sign above the entrance read. There were other preschools in the area, but Breezeway was where everyone Laura knew went. Where John would not go. She probed the line of damaged cheek with her tongue and prayed, her praying too private to put into words, even too herself. She read the Scriptures, did devotionals—What acts of selflessness have you completed today, with an open and forgiving heart?—or had, before John was born. But Laura's praying did not involve language, as such. It was more a feeling. A connection. A connection John's birth had interrupted. Right now, for instance, in the room that she had so carefully decorated with the help of a designer from Birmingham—pleated curtains from antique French fabric; a velvet chaise lounge; a gigantic sterling silver frame that held a picture of her in her wedding dress, beaming at Carter, who stood beyond the camera—the room felt like a strange country, not the place she had loved, been loved. The man beside her—also unfamiliar. She put a hand on Carter's cool back and tried to summon the feeling of peace. But she could only think of Amanda, Amanda who'd had her second child a month after John had been born, a little girl named Genevieve. John and Genevieve were supposed to enter the Ones class together.

Amanda had come to the hospital to meet John. All of it felt like a fraud, now. The giant floral arrangement, topped with pearlescent blue balloons, which their night nurse, a Black woman with a Caribbean accent, had exclaimed over, right before exclaiming over John. The ivory baby gown, meant for a different child. His name. She wanted it all back. "Hey," Amanda said, just inside the door. It was their third full day in the hospital. John was staying longer, for tests, and Dr. Nichols had told her she could stay, too, which she knew was supposed to be a kindness, but nothing felt kind, right now. Laura tried to smile. John lay beside her in the clear bassinet. He had cried for so long and so hard after his circumcision earlier that day that the day nurse, a white woman with dry lips and thinning hair, had come into the room. So far the night nurses were all Black; the day nurses white. "Oh," she'd said. "You have to pick him up, sweetie." And then, the same thing they all said, every nurse and doctor and relative who had entered the room: "He's perfect." If he had been perfect, they would have been discharged a day ago she thought. But did not say. Amanda wore yoga pants and a turtleneck, her pregnant belly asserting itself before Amanda had even fully entered the room. She was a small woman, unlike Laura, whom everyone had complimented on carrying her pregnancy so well. It was a virtue, Laura understood, to look less pregnant than one actually was. She should not have

been surprised, but she was. "Honey," Amanda said, and came to Laura, not John. Put her small, warm hand on Laura's forehead. She hadn't even glanced at John for the longest second. Laura moaned. She felt like a monster. A swollen, bleeding monster with thoughts so terrible she knew she could never tell another soul about them. She had been a nice, good person because everything in the world had gone her way. That's all it was. It wasn't her. It was circumstance. Amanda leaned over the hospital bed and pressed her forehead to Laura's. Laura tried to say something. "I . . . it's . . ." but Amanda shushed her. Laura felt Amanda's warmth. Pushing out her grotesque imaginings. If John had been born a century ago, for instance, or in another country— And then Amanda was beside John, so quickly Laura thought she felt a rush of air as Amanda moved from one side of the bed to the other. She stood over John's clear bassinet for a long moment, murmuring. Laura did not think she could stand it, if the word perfect left Amanda's mouth. She watched her friend, who watched her child, who until a few days ago had lived inside her, whose subterranean presence Laura found she missed, now. The weight of him, pressing, ever downward, against her hips. The movement, which was constant and soothing. How foolish, to be comforted by the very infant you carried in your womb. And yet she had been. "He is who he is," Amanda said, finally, tears in her eyes, her voice thick with emotion. She smoothed one of John's inky eyebrows with her finger, then placed her palm on his tiny chest. She looked up at Laura. "And you're his mother."

She'd fallen in love with John in the weeks that followed his birth, after the shock of him gradually departed. Sometimes, when she prayed, she tried to picture it that way: The shock lifting from her in plumes of smoke. The way he opened and closed his fists while he slept. The sheen of fur that covered his shoulders. Epaulettes, Carter had said. The way he rooted around for her breast. The sighs he made when he slept. She was delighted by all of it, but more than that, relieved. He was like any other child in these ways. She tried to prepare herself for all the things he would not do. He would crawl, and walk, and talk, just later than everyone else. Then it became less clear. He would kick a ball, but he would never play soccer on a team. He would attend school, but he would not complete the same homework as the other children in his grade. He would have friends, maybe, but as they grew older they would tolerate John, not come to him for advice. Would he fall in love? He would have those impulses, she knew. She understood adolescence to be a particularly thorny time with special needs children. Laura did not know how John would express those impulses. How he would date, or spend his free time, which he would have more and more of as he grew older. There were so many things she did not know, so few she did. She tried to prepare herself for the daily difficulties as well. The double-takes people did, then tried to hide, when she took him to a new place. The way she'd watched some stupid sitcom and had been brought to tears by the word "retarded." The jealousy that had nearly knocked her from her feet when she'd seen Amanda, Amanda who already had a perfect child at home, nursing Genevieve in her hospital bed only a month after John's birth. If there had

been any note of apology in Amanda's eyes when she looked up Laura would have turned and fled. But there was not. She was accosted and then she steeled herself for future hurt. She learned to gaze steadily at people in restaurants or stores when they approached; she'd found this made them less likely to do a double-take, if they knew they were being watched. She repeated the word "retarded" to herself, over and over again in her head, to take away the sting of it. She told herself it was a meaningless word, though she cringed to remember that she herself had gone through a phrase of saying it, in middle school, before her mother told her it was bathroom word, a category that covered all manner of inappropriate language. And Genevieve—well, she learned to love the child, who was so blonde she looked creaturely. She found it was more difficult to be jealous of those whom you loved. But the shock of a church preschool denying admission to her child on grounds that were utterly ridiculous—this was a surprise for which she was not prepared. A surprise that seemed to foretell the rest of Laura's life. So she was prepared now, for Amanda's rejection. She would send Genevieve to Breezeway. Why wouldn't she? She should. Her child shouldn't suffer because her best friend's child did. It was a simple equation. You did what was best for yours. It was Laura against the world.

In the days following the text from Breezeway Baptist, while she ignored Amanda's text messages, she found she missed her friend. But she missed so much, now. She was still comforted by the routine of church, but gone was the feeling of solace that had always blanketed her when she'd entered its vast atrium, slid into a smooth, blonde wood pew. Let the light of the stained-glass windows, recently installed, bathe her in gem tones. That would be gone now, too, for she would never return to Breezeway Baptist, even though Carter had told her several times that the preschool had nothing to do with the church. She didn't care. "Honey," Carter had said, coming up behind her at the kitchen counter, where she was stirring milk into John's oatmeal to cool it down—"We'll go somewhere else." Laura stiffened, then released the tension. It wasn't Carter's fault. She did the things she always did, but without the pleasure of anticipation of talking or seeing or texting with Amanda. Honey, her last message read. What's going on? Carter and Amanda the only two people in Laura's life who called her that, and she knew they meant different things by it, but she also knew that they both loved her. She missed Amanda, but the longing she felt for her best friend was tolerable. She missed so much and yet so much was newly tolerable, her thermostat for what she could and could not endure having been reset with John's birth. She was on the floor with John, playing with him. Giving him one toy, taking it away, teasing him, giving it back. John laughed. Clapped his fat hands together. Sometimes Laura disappeared. Before John, but more frequently since his birth. Amanda must assume she was doing that. Going just beneath the surface of her life for a little while.

She'd met Amanda at her spin class. Amanda, tiny and extremely pregnant with her first child, leading the class, shouting into her headset, asking them to imagine they were scaling a mountain. Asking them to give themselves over to the feeling of pain. "Everybody's gotta mountain," she'd

shouted. Then laughed. "Everybody wants a glass of wine and a piece of chocolate at the end of the day, amirite?" It didn't even make sense, not really, but Laura liked Amanda's latent cynicism, the way she cut her platitudes with further clichés. They were fast friends. They both stayed home with children, or planned to, in Laura's case, as soon as she had one. They lived in the same, brand-new, treeless subdivision. They attended the same church. Amanda's husband was a malpractice attorney for the hospital; it seemed too perfect that Carter was a general surgeon. Laura had the sense that she was more religious than Amanda, but that was fine. Laura was private in that way. In all ways, but especially that one. "I don't know why God would do this," she'd said in that hospital room, Amanda holding John, now, as Laura herself could not bring herself to do. She held him, yes, but not like Amanda did. Not with that kind of love. Her voice was jagged. It sounded unfamiliar even, or especially, to herself. "Honey," Amanda said. "It's not God. It's just what happened. Random. God had nothing to do with it." And for the first time in her life, Laura was comforted by the idea of God's absence.

The doorbell rang. John startled, sought out Laura's gaze, relaxed when he found it. Grinned. She put him on her hip and went to the door, making sure to stay hidden on the off-chance it was someone other than the Fedex guy dropping off a package. She recognized the white patch of Genevieve's scalp. Then the reddish sheen of Amanda's thick hair, which never seemed to be depleted by postpartum hair loss. Laura opened the door a crack. She was so nervous she might as well have been being chased by a pack of wild dogs. Her breathing that quick, her heartbeat that rapid. "Honey," Amanda said. Her face was worried, worried. "Let me in."

Revision #4

Created 2026-08-10 13:04:39 UTC by Michael Moore

Updated 2026-08-10 20:45:48 UTC by Michael Moore