

# Prologue

Mom stood beside her chair in the old apartment kitchen, her shadow cast against aging yellowed walls. She scoffed at their abused condition, marked by child's crayons and in need of a fresh coat of paint. The scratchy floorboards beneath her barren feet demanded she keep them scrubbed and clean, despite the relentless dark shadow of the hanging light switch on the floor's center.

She grew increasingly impatient, awaiting the arrival of her young children at the meal table, where an early-morning offering of sweetened breakfast cereal and crispy brown toast sat prepared for them. *They had better make haste*, she thought, lest they cause her to be late, once again, for the Sunday church services, disregarding the care she painstakingly took to ensure that they did not go hungry before the mass.

"Ma, what's Purgatory?" her youngest daughter questioned in her coy manner, claiming her favorite seat and joining her guardian at their feast of grains.

Bill and the older sister suddenly appeared, racing recklessly into the kitchen, pushing and shoving at each other in a noisy scuffle, competing for the fuller of the two remaining cereal settings, which their faster sibling had passed up.

Not allowing the distraction of the clatter of the older children, Mom paused for a moment, searching for the best explanation that she could offer her younger daughter's sudden interest in the afterlife. "It's a place God sends you when you die," she started into her calculated response, "before you can get into heaven."

"Is there such a place? How long do you have to stay there?" Bill asked. He needed to understand last week's Sunday sermon and ensure that it was not all just a way to make them behave.

Mom hesitated again, sensing her late husband's reluctant manner in Bill's questioning tone. "It all depends on how good you are on Earth," she explained, wondering what her son was attempting to hide in those evasive eyes perched behind his thick-rimmed, black-framed glasses.

"For example," she continued, "did you save any of your pennies for the church donation box?"

Bill broke from her resolute stare, feeling guilt over having stashed a few coins in his dresser, cheating the poor box at the church. *How much time would this add to his sentence*, he wondered.

"Do they have radio there?" Bill asked, finally returning to the discussion after a moment of deliberation for his sorry fate.

"Yeah, but they make you listen to moldy old music!" the older sister chimed in, seizing the opportunity to chide her wayward brother in a moment of weakness. "And they feed you nothing but liver and onions!"

Bill squinted as he scooped his first spoonful of sweetened grain into his mouth, savoring the flavor, thankful that they did not have to eat liver and onions for breakfast because of his sins.

"So is Dad in Purgatory?" The younger sister offered her real concern, not giving in to the atmosphere of distracting sarcasm that the others were attempting to promote.

Mom's smile faded as she pushed away the past emotions of sadness that were attempting to resurface in front of her children. "You know," she addressed her curious daughter, "I ask God that every night when I pray, and I ask God to make sure he has been allowed into heaven. I'm sure he has been. After all, he was good when he was with us."

Her expression morphed into an angry frown as she observed Bill carelessly slopping his cereal into his mouth, splashing milk all over his only clip-on tie and nice white shirt. His sisters retreated into their meals, becoming aware of the situation that he was creating, fearful of when this cheerful breakfast would degrade into angry confrontation.

“Look what you’re doing to your shirt and tie!” Mom shrieked. Bill abruptly dropped his spoon, sitting back, away from the table, in embarrassment. He knew that he was guilty of a capital infraction, for this could make them late for their mass.

Mom closed her eyes for an instant and then returned her attention to her children, allowing any feelings of anger to pass. “Come into the bedroom and let’s see what we have in the closet,” she calmly offered her clumsy son, rising from the old kitchen chair with the ripped front face, which she always sat at.

“You know, you don’t have to jam your food into your mouth all the time,” she lectured Bill, starting to search for the shirt of his absolution.

As Mom hastefully pulled through numerous hanging garments, Bill caught a glimpse of the long black leather belt that his father used to wear. It was hanging ominously from an old metal closet hook, the only clothing remnant of his life that she saved after they lost him to the world. The panic suddenly seared through him as he clenched his fists in fear, unseen to his mother. He trembled in both her presence and that of the dangling instrument of discipline.

“Ah!” she exclaimed in triumph, finding the substitute shirt. Bill sighed in relief, for this rectified his mistake without the rage of his sole parent’s most painfully suppressed emotions.

“Now you hurry up and change into that,” she issued the final morning’s order, abruptly handing him the clean top. “God does not like people who are late to church, you know!”

Bill gathered the shirt from her hands and scampered quickly into the next room.