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FICTION

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## David Sherman, The Last Son of God

by Rion Amilcar Scott



*Thou shalt have no other God but the negro.*

—The Lincoln Catechism

God is from Cross River, everyone knows that. He was tall, lanky; wore dirty brown clothes and walked with a limp he tried to disguise as a bop. His chin held a messy salt-and-pepper beard that extended to his Adam's apple. Always clutching a mango in His hand. Used to live on the Southside, down under the bridge, near the water. Now there is a nice little sidewalk and flowers and a bike trail that leads into Port Yooga. Back then there was just mud and weeds, and He'd sit there barefooted, speaking softly, preaching His word. At one time He had one hundred, maybe two hundred—some say up to five hundred or even a thousand—people listening to Him. But the time I'm talking about, He'd sit with only one or two folks. Always with a mango, except during Easter time, when He'd pass out jellybeans to get people to stop and listen.

He lived on the banks of the Cross River until one day, He filled His pockets with stones and walked into the water and sank like a crazy poet. He wasn't insane. It was all part of God's plan. Last time He was crucified, this time drowned. Anyway, God can't drown. He'll come back, perhaps to oversee the writing of another Testament or to judge the living and the dead, whatever He feels.

This story, though, isn't about God. It's about one of His sons. Not His son in the metaphorical sense—well, he was, as we all are the children of God—but more so he was His son in the physical sense.

David Sherman was God's last son. The youngest child of thirteen by five different women who lined up to have children with the fleshy embodiment of All Things in Existence. They were all boys except for the fifth, a disappointment who, at the age of twenty-five, seduced her fifteen-year-old younger brother with her shapely behind and left Cross River, MD to build a sinful life with him. God could have had more children, but He got a message from Himself after David was born to stop spilling His seed into His servants. Who was He, or anyone else, to argue?

David lived with his mother, Violet, in a one-bedroom apartment on Sally Street that teemed with water bugs and mice but rarely any rats. God slept there sometimes, but not very often, and never after David was twelve. When God spent the night, He'd rise early, long before the sun and He'd tell His boy, God Morning to you, son.

David would reply, And God Morning to you, too.

To David, God was a disappointment. God told His son things from time to time, things about virtue and the coming Holy Ghost Testament, but never anything David could understand. He wondered if one day he'd lose his mind and be out on the streets speaking an incomprehensible Gospel like his Old Man. And when David was sixteen, God took His own life.

Even before God's death, David earned money by turning old pots and plastic barrels into drums and banging out intricate rhythms by the side of the road. After his Father died, David stole a guitar from the neighborhood nerd and inherited his Dad's harmonica. In the privacy of his boxy apartment, he taught himself how to play them and eventually worked the instruments into the act. It never took David long to learn an instrument. He was always teaching himself a new one, but he was best at the guitar.

Still, he loved the drums the most. Even if he could only afford old buckets and tin pans. David thought himself a percussionist until Randall, a slightly chubby kid from a few blocks away, challenged him to a battle. They sat before those plastic buckets going back and forth, drumsticks raised high above their heads, the great clapping of plastic-trashcan rhythms, sweat pooling at their armpits in the thick summer heat. Randall's precision—how he danced and rocked as he drummed—was almost too much for David to take. He slowed to watch his friend, letting the drumsticks slip from his sweaty hands. Soon he became just another spectator gazing at Randall as he played. After his whipping, David mostly played the guitar to Randall's drumming, and sometimes he'd sing. People from the neighborhood often joined in to jam with dented and tarnished saxophones and trumpets. It was a good time.

A little after David turned eighteen, his oldest brother, Delante, opened the Church of the Twice Risen Christ on the Southside and asked his brother to play guitar on Sunday mornings. Delante wanted to look out for his brother. David didn't believe what his older brother preached and wondered if Delante, who now called himself Jesus Jesuson (everyone, though, referred to him as Jeez), really believed, but he didn't ask. After all, he didn't know his brother well. All that flash and dazzle, all that talk of God coming back as a general, leading an army through the streets and bathing the concrete with the blood of the wicked—who could believe that?

David played dutifully every Sunday morning beneath a stained-glass window that portrayed his Father as a shepherd in a cream robe, staff in one hand, sword in the other. It was a gig. For his work, Jeez kicked David a hundred dollars from the offering plate, and when the plate came up short, Jeez would reach into his own pocket and make up the difference. God will always provide for you, little bro, Jeez said often.

Despite his brother's money, David's pockets still felt like two bottomless wells. God didn't always provide, and again he felt let down by Him. While taking a walk, David spotted a drum set in the window of a downtown music shop off Seventh Street. It was midnight blue and glossy. Proper bass, cymbals, high hats, and toms. The works. Everything he and Randall had to improvise without. David kept walking, but something stopped him from moving forward. It was a thumping in the center of his chest that wasn't his heart.

The drums are the sun, he heard a voice say.

He decided it was a stray thought, but still the drum set was what he needed to get his band going so he could make real money.

I can't get them drums with the money Delante's paying me, David told his mother one night over rice and peas. Violet, he said, let me hold something.

She laughed. I don't have no money. Go ask the preacher, she said scraping a metal spoon around a huge cast-iron pot.

Come on, Ma, he whined. You don't give me nothing no more.

I gave you life. You don't hear me demanding nothing from you for pushing you out and raising your ungrateful ass. As a matter of fact, give me that plate of rice and peas if it ain't nothing.

Violet made a playful snatch for her son's plate. He shielded it with his arm and looked off into the distance. David didn't much feel like joking around.

When David told his brother about the drums that Sunday morning, he too laughed. Save your wages, Jeez said. Then you can buy the drums.

Man, I can't hardly save nothing from them few dollars you give me. Between helping Violet with the rent and the electric, I don't hardly have twenty dollars to my name by Friday, and I got to eat too.

Get a job.

Then when am I gonna practice my craft?

Hit the streets, li'l bro, Jeez said. Find better places to play, like downtown by Riverhall. Go to Port Yooga, hit the crackers up.

David took his brother's advice and played one long night in downtown Port Yooga. He went alone, without Randall or anyone else, to avoid splitting the earnings. He would be the percussionist and the guitar player. He carefully set up his buckets as two teenagers heckled. One was tall and fat with the belly of a middle-aged beer drinker and the red pimples of a pubescent boy. The other had a bushy blond trapezoidal mustache that nearly reminded David of Hitler's. The latter screamed at David over and over. Told him his music was noise, and when he played louder, the beer-bellied one spit a thick glob of saliva into his tin cup. David shoved the mustached man. In the ensuing fight, the men smashed David's guitar and kicked his tin cup so his change scattered for passersby to snatch.

The night in jail gave David a lot to think about. Cross River had a rhythm—that much was clear, he didn't feel it in Port Yooga—and if he

presented it right, no one could tell him it was noise. It'd take time to learn to recreate that sound. By himself, it might be difficult, but Randall's playing opened up possibilities. The drums are the sun, he thought again and it made sense. The drums would be the music's center, the thing everything else revolved around.

After Jeez bailed his brother out, they drove to Cross River in silence. When they crossed the bridge, David said, Man, Delante, you got to give me that money, big bro. It's urgent. If I don't get them drums, I'm gonna keep getting in trouble.

You trying to blackmail me? his brother asked.

Naw, brother. You got a chance to be part of something big.

I am part of something big. I'm God's son. So are you. Why doesn't that satisfy you?

I'm only me when I'm playing the music I need to play; you know, that Cross River sound.

Look, I'll tell you what. You go home and pray real hard to God, and I'll think about it. And if He softens my heart, I'll give you the cash.

That night, David prayed for the first time since he was twelve, when he still believed his Father was the Almighty.

On Sunday, Jeez said nothing of the money. David played with impassioned fingers on a guitar donated to him by a member of the congregation. They were fingers made of flames or of the bluest lightning.

David sat with his brother in the front row after church let out, making small talk. When the conversation dipped, David said, You gonna do me that solid?

Well, Jeez said, I listened for God, and He spoke to me like He did when I was a kid and He used to take me to baseball games before you or any of our siblings were born.

What did He say?

God answers all prayers, he said. Sometimes, God's answer is no.

Jeez stood and walked to the door. David, Jeez said turning toward his brother. The money I paid for bail comes out of your pay.

David spit on the door of the church when he stepped outside, right in his father's face. He snatched a rock and looked up, frowning at the stained-glass image of his warrior father. David cocked back his arm until pain filled his joints. He stood like that for a minute, then dropped the stone, still imagining it smashing God's face.

That afternoon, he and Randall wandered downtown. David showed his friend the drum set.

Hearing those damn buckets is gonna be painful from now on, David said, leaving smudges on the window with his grubby hands.

Um hmm, Randall replied and pressed his nose to the glass.

The next week, Randall and David stood near Main Street with their buckets and pans on a chilly spring day. The sound did indeed hurt their ears. Randall banged out a rhythm, but stopped mid-jam and told David his palms itched for the drum set.

Man, Randall said. What we doing ain't really music. If we get them drums, that'll be music. Remember what you said about finding the rhythm of this town? How we gonna do that with some fucking buckets and trash cans?

How much you about to put toward the drum set, Randall?

David, man, I got less money than you.

Randall and David became quiet. David knew his friend had more to say.

There's got to be something we can do, Randall said. Something drastic.

God had left a sawed-off lever-action shotgun with Violet and rarely even touched it after placing it on the bedroom shelf several years before David's birth. David had taken it down and played with it many times over the years. It was something he never got tired of and something Violet never knew about. Once, when he and Randall were in high school, David trained it on his friend and yelled Bang! When he stashed the gun, Randall kicked his ass all up and down that tiny apartment.

Still, though he held the loaded gun toward his friends when he was younger, toward a mirror when he was a bit older, and toward a wall a week previous, he really didn't know how to use it. Somehow, he came to think yelling Bang! Bang! and looking menacing was a substitute for learning to shoot the thing. Neither had Randall ever held it or any gun. Randall just had more heart. That's why he volunteered to wield the weapon during the job. Besides, it was all his idea.

It don't matter if I can't work it, Randall said, any fool can work a gun. And I won't need to work it. I ain't intending to shoot nobody, no way. Seeing the thing is enough to make that punk-ass clerk shit his pants.

The clerk at the liquor store on Franklin Boulevard eyed David and Randall with little fear when Randall stood in front of the counter with the shotgun aimed at him. David was by the door on lookout, trembling. The clerk stood expressionless while Randall ordered him to empty the register. The clerk's eyes and the fragments of light that sparkled from them like two steel drums made David and his friend nervous.

Perhaps it was the awkward way Randall clasped the weapon in his shaky hands. He held most of his body firm, but his hands told the truth. Or perhaps it was that neither he nor David had a killer's face. Both looked soft and sweet, even when frowning.

Either way, the man had been robbed before. Randall and David knew this. His nonchalant eyes seemed to say that in the past, he had been robbed by more competent crooks.

The clerk bent quickly behind the counter and pulled out a slim black handgun of his own, a revolver, much less powerful than the shotgun,



had the shotgun been in steady hands. He shot once, striking Randall in the chest, then fired two more times. One bullet hit the wall; the other struck Randall through his hand as he covered his head with it. Randall lay on the floor, a fine mist of sticky blood, bone, and brain matter covering bags of potato chips, sugar cookies, and donuts.

David paused—as still as a scarecrow above a cornfield—and then turned to run. The clerk shot once more. For his trouble, David caught a bullet in his backside—a fragment rested in the meaty flesh of his right butt cheek until he grew old and passed away. The whole affair made page B2 of the Days & Times under the headline: Son of ‘God,’ Brother of ‘Prophet’ Sentenced in Armed Robbery.

He received five years for armed robbery, of which he served three and a half. David spent half a year in prison regretting his decisions. Often, he’d think of his mother bawling at his sentencing hearing—hands up high in the air, eyes crimson, face streaked. He smelled the sweet wood of the courtroom benches. Heard his mother’s guttural yelp. Even felt that sinking heavy feeling at the bottom of his stomach.

He saw Randall’s face often. Heard his voice too. It never said anything profound or meaningful. Never pointed him toward a path or a way. It sat at his ear, making small talk, occasionally mentioning the Cross River sound.

One morning after the prisoners had eaten their breakfast, David pushed a broom through the mess hall. He spied a stack of plastic buckets turned upside down in the corner.

After the lunchtime trays had been stacked and the tables wiped down, he slipped away and returned with some nicked drumsticks he had stolen from his music class and kept hidden in his cell. He was supposed to be cleaning, but instead David lovingly rearranged the buckets how Randall might have. A smattering of people around the mess hall watched him quizzically. David slammed a drumstick squarely against the flat bottom of a hard plastic bucket. It made a noise that echoed through the mess hall. He was rusty and he knew it, but playing felt so damn good. It didn’t matter much that Randall’s favorite rhythm

sounded not like music but like random thumps against plastic barrels.

A CO slapped a table with his baton and ordered David to stop. David played and the CO slapped the table again harder. David tapped on and on like he hadn't heard the CO's screaming and banging, or as if the CO's screams were song and his hard baton slaps accompaniment. There was a feeling swelling in his chest, something he had never felt before. David decided it was Randall, and he tapped on, closing his eyes and seeing his friend's face. He only stopped when he opened his eyes and saw the tall, skinny, black-as-licorice CO standing in front of him holding the baton, ready to strike. David dropped the sticks and threw his hands in the air, and the gesture felt nothing at all like surrender.

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While David was away, Jeez grew his hair long and prayed tearfully during his sermons for God to give his youngest brother some direction. God smiled from the newly installed stained-glass windows in Jeez's new church on the Southside as if to say, Maybe I will help, My son. Jeez rarely visited his brother in prison.

Shortly after David's incarceration, the second eldest son of God left the Church of the Twice Risen Christ to form his own church on the Northside, The Church of the Ever-Loving Christ. That brother became Christopher Christson, or just Christ III. He favored a short hairstyle, and his church was white like a shining temple on a hill. Christ III wore sparkling zoot suits made of linen and silk and an assortment of alligator-hide shoes. God, he said, never wanted anyone to be poor. This he argued despite the fact that his Father was homeless for much of His life. God was an entrepreneur, a failed entrepreneur, admittedly. He only failed because He wanted to teach Himself humility and suffering. He failed, in other words, Christ III said, so we could succeed. As time went on, Christ III referred to his Father less and less, and then stopped claiming His divinity. Officially, in the Church of the Ever-Loving Christ, God was no longer God, but simply a prophet. In practice, though, most still referred to David Sherman's Father as divine.

David Sherman hit the streets with a clear plastic bag filled with a few clothes and a handcrafted guitar. His mother had joined his Father, God, in the sky by the time of David's release. He had eleven brothers and one sister, but they didn't seem real. To David they were all just storybook characters, except for Jeez, whose face he never wanted to see again. He knew the hate he held for Jeez was irrational; it burned in his chest like a heart attack. He imagined one day he'd wake and find that it had eaten through his back like the most corrosive acid, and the hole within him would be made visible for all to see. How does one let go of all that hate? Why would someone let go of the hate if it is all he has?

After two nights of sleeping on the ground, clutching the guitar like a lover, David found his way to Christ III's church on a Sunday morning. He sat on the stairs strumming and singing a sad hymn while brown people in suits and fancy hats streamed by.

Just before the service was to begin, Christ III put his hand on David's shoulder. Brother, he said. This is Dad's house, so you better come in. Our oldest brother—or should I say, our coldest brother—would leave you out in the world, but our Father told me He wants you to play for the people. Come in, won't you?

Christ III's kindness could never make David love the Father whose madness had created such a broken world, but that day, he found a job and some human kindness and that, for a time, was quite enough.

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Christ III told his brother, Go out into the world and bring me a band.

David hired a bass player named Carter and a sax player named Case. Later, he hired a drummer named Webs, but fired him for playing too slow. He fired the next one for sloppiness. The next one came to practice late and laughed too much. He didn't stand a chance, really. David could fire a drummer in a minute.

He settled on a drummer named Nat who played sort of like Randall. At

least he held the drumsticks the same way. At a certain angle, he even looked like Randall. Cracked jokes like him. Walked like him. David would get lost during practice time, observing Nat lovingly, mournfully. Then he'd snap at Nat for playing too slow or too fast or like a damned blues player. Nat ignored David's rants until he dropped his drumsticks and stormed out one afternoon. He returned the next day as if nothing happened. David shrugged.

Bigger things seized his mind, like how to refashion jazz into gospel and gospel into jazz, searching for the sound of Cross River. David wandered the town, sitting in juke joints, talking to people in barbershops, and parking himself for hours at river's edge where his Father once sat listening for the rhythm. David would go home, humming a melody, but when he tried to turn it into a composition, it sounded flat and bland. So on Sunday mornings, the band would play jazzed-up versions of Negro spirituals and gospel standards. It was passable, good enough, great at times, even, but it was just background noise.

His heart swelled with love for God, and often when he prayed, he prayed for a new sound, though he remembered what Delante told him once: God answers all prayers and sometimes His answer is no.

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One morning, as David tuned his guitar, Christ III interrupted his work to mention that there was a pretty woman with no husband who worked with the Sunday-school children. After all, Christ III said, who ever heard of a church elder with no woman at his side?

I'm not an elder, David said.

And you'll never be one if you don't have a woman, Christ III said, flashing a wicked smile.

Gwendolyn was tall and wore long dresses that often swept the ground and made her appear taller. She walked with a glide. Christ III introduced them after the service one day and chaperoned their early dates himself.

Man and woman, Christ III preached, should never be alone together until God or His representative blesses their union.

She was sultry and sexy in her movements and even her voice. The bones of her cheeks sat high and firm and her skin soft, her neck long. David daydreamed of holding her hand, but that would lead to sin. Even the daydreaming was a sin. They spent long hours talking after Sunday service or walking through a nearby park, always tailed by a church member or in the company of another couple. Soon it seemed she had always been there and always would be there.

David proposed in April and married Gwen in May, asking himself the whole time if he had done it just so they could be alone. Just to run his fingers along her cheekbones. Just to leave soft, shallow pools of saliva along her torso.

He told her of his quest to recreate the rhythm of all things one morning after they had been married some months. They lay there half-dressed with slats of early sunlight peeking in on them, but she seemed distracted.

This town has its own sound, he said. Things are different as soon as you leave. You can't feel it no more. I'm trying to get the guys to capture that, but dude we got on the drums...I might need to fire that guy. He just ain't got it. I knew a dude with half the education, but twice the soul—

Baby, she replied. Nat is all right, stop being antsy. I like the way he plays.

David carried on, but Gwendolyn looked toward the wall where a brown spider ran about.

None of that is important, David, his wife said running her hand across her stomach. You think this little baby in here care about Nat? Naw, he gonna need food and shelter and someone to teach him to listen for God's love.

Little baby?

And like that, they were no longer alone. David wanted to name the child

Rhythm and after some weeks he got Gwendolyn to agree, but the church rejected that so they named the boy Randy.

Randy was small and pink for a long time after he was born. Almost like a white baby. Right down to the light hair. He marveled at the fragility of the child and feared one day that Randy would come apart in his arms or flake into a fine dust, and his life with Gwen would likewise crumble all around him. When he thought of this, he'd grip the baby more tightly before loosening his hold on the child, fearing his carelessness would bring about the very disaster he imagined.

Early one morning, David snatched the baby from the crib and cradled him against his shoulder. The baby was distressed, his face scrunched and his mouth wide open, bawling a song that seemed to have no meaning outside of announcing his existence. This phase had stopped being a novelty. He wondered when it would pass. David's mind wandered. Melodies. Lyrics. Some scattin' he'd add to a composition. David didn't scat often. Do bok do do bop ba dop...

All this was imaginary. There was no composition in the works, not really. There'd never be time to work on these ideas. He'd never been farther from that universal sound, even in prison.

When he despaired at his music, Gwen would sigh, great knots of frustration built in her neck until she exploded: It's all music with you, huh? she said. Worry enough about music to pay the bills, but save your worry for us.

You're asking me to be mediocre, David replied.

Pick up that book, she said, pointing to the Bible. Tell me where it says being mediocre is a sin. Bet I'll find where it says not taking care of your family is a sin quicker.

Gwen's right, he heard a voice inside his head say, Why should we care about any other rhythm but the little rhythm right here cradled against our chest?

David nodded and walked the dark house, lightly bouncing the baby in

his arms, hoping to soothe his distress, trying to put the quest that once set his mind ablaze to the side as if it were a childish thing.

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There was a rumor David heard more than once, and he heard it again one Monday near the end of the year while the band practiced in the church's undercroft.

Man, Case said to no one in particular while cleaning his saxophone, I hope Christ III is not gonna replace us. I keep hearing that shi—stuff.

Who you hear that from? David asked.

Everyone is saying it, Carter said. Christ be frowning when we be playing. He think I don't see him, but I do.

Nat nodded and tapped rapidly at the drums. Who could blame him, Nat said. When was the last time we did anything special up on that stage?

Why don't you do something special then? David snapped. Ain't no slacking in the house of the Lord.

I'm just saying. He paused. I seen plenty of church bands. Played with a few. This is the only one that was trying to do something different. We settled into a groove. I ain't pointing no fingers. I'm just as guilty, but—

Yes you are, David snapped.

The next morning, he woke early and went to see Christ III in his office. It was an orderly place with everything arranged in neat stacks. Christ III's desk had a green marble surface, and all his chairs were covered with grainy red leather. The walls were lined with gold-plated paintings of God in His various phases: young with black hair, an unsure gaze, and a few followers; slightly older with a messy beard, fiery eyes, and an army of adherents; much older with a wrinkled, tired face and a staff He held like a sword, leading a dwindling flock; in decline with all white hair and a

pocket full of stones, wading into the Cross River. David took a seat in a leather chair, and Christ III interlocked his fingers and rested them beneath his chin. When David asked about the rumors, Christ III leaned back and looked at the squiggly plaster lines in the ceiling.

Brother, he said. There is no room for slacking in the house of God. Remember your drummer Webs? Even you knew when it was time for him to go, and you fired his ass. You got to remember, I gave you a raise when your son was born. You promised me a new sound, but your music sounds like gospel—good gospel, damn good gospel, but gospel nonetheless. I'm not sure we need damn good gospel. Mediocre gospel would be cheaper, and people in the congregation probably wouldn't notice much. Of course, I'm just thinking out loud. This wouldn't be an issue if that new sound had come through. I was really excited, but it hasn't worked out as I had hoped. I don't know.

The brothers watched each other. I've given everything to this church, David replied. You not being fair to me. It can take years of study to develop a sound.

You gotta see it from my perspective, little bro, Christ III said. I'm a music lover, but I'm also a businessman here. He paused. I'm gonna give you another chance, little brother. Let's give it a month. See what happens. I'm really proud of you. You've come a long way.

As he left his brother's office, David's stomach churned like he had eaten bad meat. Even sitting on the church's gold-plated toilets didn't give him the relief he sought. He walked from the church out onto the street. It was a gray and chilly day. Rain threatening. He rambled in the direction of the river so he could listen to it. His jacket snagged on the sharp point of a fence and tore a little bit. David removed the cloth from the fence with great annoyance.

He wondered if he had sold his soul for stability. What would Randall think? Perhaps he had learned nothing from the drummer's death, making it another random and meaningless event. No more significant than snagging his sleeve on the jagged point of that fence.



David passed the bus depot. Gray buses belched black smoke. With his head down and the noise from the grinding engines swirling all around him, David didn't hear the boy calling his name over and over until he was nearly on the next block. The boy was slim and brown, with a black duffle bag hanging from his right shoulder. He was probably fifteen. The boy smiled, exposing big crooked front teeth.

Elder Sherman, he said, sticking out his hand toward David. It's good seeing you again. The boy shook like no one had ever taught him how, his hand becoming soft and pliable as a leaf in David's palm.

Reggie, the boy said. Reggie from the Southside. A bunch of us, we be coming on Sundays to see what you gonna do with the music. I don't mess with that God stuff too much, but I appreciate how you do the arrangements.

Thanks, little brother.

I was sorry to hear that y'all not going to be playing the church come next month. Where can I hear y'all play?

Who told you we wasn't playing the church no more, boy?

I got a partner from Georgia. Told me he and his boys was hired by Christ III to be the in-house band and they was coming up next month. Asked me to sit with them.

All the blood left David's face and he could feel his brain swimming in it. He opened his mouth, but couldn't speak.

Man, Reggie said, You not looking too good, Elder Sherman. Shoot, this is the first you're hearing this, huh?

Um, David stammered. Um...my brother and me...and I...we, uh, prayed on it and made a mutual decision. God, our Father, really made the decision, really.

Reggie nodded.

Sure, he said. God don't speak to me, but when He's your Father—

No, don't say that. God ain't speaking to you, me, or Christ III. I ain't no better than you.

Reggie nodded again. Say, Elder Sherman, you want to go to River Street and get some beers?

David shook Reggie's hand. I got to go and pray on my future, he said waving to Reggie and walking swiftly in the direction of the water.

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David sat by the river, watching it sway, and after about an hour, he grew bored. He threw his arms back and held them behind his head. He realized it was a pose his Father often struck. Truly, he thought, I've become like my Dad: inscrutable even to myself, single-mindedly pushing toward some goal only I could possibly care about. He sat for some time meditating on his Father. Was He really a madman? Sometimes—particularly when He was holding a belt, disciplining him—David's Father seemed so sane. They played soccer in the park like a regular Father and son. Beyond sane. He closed his eyes and breathed deeply in and out. After another hour passed, he heard the moon talk, but it was a whisper. David ignored it. Sometimes when he was drifting off to sleep, he heard things that weren't there. The brain firing off randomly into the universe. This was like that. The waters parted and God rose, but He was invisible. Still, David knew He was there.

God revealed that the voice of the moon was His own. He spoke in a language David didn't understand, yet in a way he did.

How do I know you're God? David asked.

Scoob, skip skip scap scap bop. Bddaaa-dat-da, God said, revealing his pocket full of stones.

But why? David asked.

Scap scap, skibbid scap scap. Bdddaaaa!

But will they understand?

Bdaaaa! Biggedy bop bop bap bop...

And God faded away, but the water played a music like David had never heard. He looked around trying to feel God but felt nothing. He walked all along the water trying to find Him, but He simply wasn't there.

David's mind churned and churned. It seemed parts of his brain he hadn't used in years were alive with electricity, flowing with blood. Through it all, David knew he was sane. He asked himself, though, what would it feel like to be insane? He couldn't answer. All that he knew was that he was sane. Very sane.

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David was difficult to be around that week. He became short-tempered and ill mannered. He smoked ceaselessly, blowing plumes in all directions. Often when he spoke, he made no sense, and he'd snap at the listener for misunderstanding.

He came home from practice one Wednesday and headed straight for the kitchen, where he arranged the pots and pans along the counter from largest to smallest. He slapped them with wooden spoons, filling the house with a metallic racket.

Gwen—in the back bedroom with her baby—wanted to tap her feet. She didn't, however. Instead, she frowned. Gwen placed Randy on his back in his playpen. He turned on his side and sucked at his thumb, quickly falling off to sleep despite the noise.

A door slammed from somewhere near the living room.

Just what on earth is wrong with you? Gwendolyn screamed, walking from the room where her son slept.

Nothing, David replied.

David stood at the doorway, watching her blankly. He tapped the wooden spoon against a pan, a lid, a pan, and the lid again. He opened the door wide and prepared to slam it. He shoved the door, and Gwendolyn caught it in her hand.

David, don't you know you've been acting like a lunatic? That everybody's worried about you? Stop slamming doors. Sit down, let's talk. OK?

Naw, baby. No time to sit. This is music. It don't sound like it. I'm testing things out, so it don't sound like nothing. But I think I got it. The drums is the sun. The center.

David, I know things at the church are stressful, but you're not making any sense. Have you spoken to Christ III?

Baby, Christ III don't know any more than me or you.

See what I mean? You're talking crooked. We should pray on this.

No use praying, baby. Too late for prayer. Christ III don't want my music. He already hired a new band. He about to replace me, Nat, and everybody so he don't got to pay as much for the music. Cheap-ass motherfucker.

Watch your mouth.

David moved toward his wife, reached for her hand, and gave it a light squeeze.

Baby, our time at the Church of the Ever-Loving Christ is short.

Why would we leave the Church of the Ever-Loving Christ? It's where we met. It's our spiritual home. It's who we are.

But if I'm not playing there no more—

You not playing there has nothing to do with where we worship. If you think it does, that's vanity, and you know that's a sin. If you want to leave

the church, I can't follow you. You're asking me to love you more than I love God, and you know that's about the biggest sin there is. Don't you remember Christ III preaching about that? The disciples dropped everything, left their kids fatherless to follow Christ. Left their wives poor and lonely. Who knows, I may be called to leave Randy alone in that crib. It would be hard, but I gotta be prepared for that. But if you walk out them church doors, David Sherman, I can't follow you.

David heard his son bawling, newly awakened by the shouting. He wanted to ignore it, let Gwen answer the call. But David needed a break from the argument. From the music that was bursting his brain. He scooped up his son and rested him on his shoulder. Looking out the window always calmed the boy. They gazed out onto the world. David hoped the sky would open and offer answers, but it didn't. The world outside the window provided no solace, and Randy continued to cry and bawl, squirming in his father's arms, piercing his father's eardrums, disrupting his father's thoughts.

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Sunday morning, it felt to David that his life was hanging off a cliff and its fingers were becoming tired. He had told no one what he'd experienced at the Cross River. How could he? They'd dismiss him as a lunatic. Christ III and Jeez always spoke of talking to God. People accepted them. Why wouldn't people accept him too? After all, he was a church elder. Didn't that give him the right to talk to God? He had thought of the Sunday guitar solo as his sermon. His voice wasn't strong—it was scratchy and rough—so he didn't often sing, but this time he had to, didn't he? There was much to say. He'd play the Sunday solo by ear, though he had not only forgotten God's words, but also the substance of His message.

The band warmed up. They moved robotically through "Amazing Grace" and methodically through "Swing Low Sweet Chariot."

God spoke.

Bodop bop bop bddaaaa! Bow bop bow, God said.

Scapidee skip skip bop bddatt-skabaidee pop, David replied.

Huh? Nat said as he tapped the drums. David didn't reply. He looked to the wooden slats of the high ceiling. Nat banged on the drums, rapidly, two beats at a time to get his boss's attention.

David turned to him.

What was that? David asked.

You zoned out on me, man, Nat said.

That sounded good. That sounded damn good. That sounded like the river. Like the town. You need to do that while we playing. Yeah, man. When I give you the word. You double up on the beats. That's our sound. As a matter of fact, keep working on it. Keep practicing until the service starts. We gonna do something special for the solo.

Man, Dave, that's crazy, Nat said.

Naw, said Case, the saxophonist. Might as well do something strange. This may be the last time we play this place. I'm with you, David.

Nat started pounding, doubling up his drumbeats.

I don't know if I can keep this up all the way through the solo, he said.

You, skaba dip skaba dip, never know, David scatted, skaba dip dip, what you'll be able to do, bop bop bdddattt, until you go 'head and do it.

When the service started, David nodded to his wife and son in the front row. Gwendolyn raised Randy's tiny hand and waved it at his father. Reggie sat a few rows behind them. All the regular faces smiled up at him, but they looked somehow strange. Full of judgment, as though they knew what lay on the horizon. At the normal points in the service, the band played all the usual songs. "Amazing Grace." "Go Down Moses." "Swing Low Sweet Chariot." God whispered to David, speaking in scats,

mocking the music he played. *Do it! God called. Do it now!*

Christ III, wearing a blistering white suit with long tails that scraped the floor and bleached white alligator boots, delivered a sermon about the evils of poverty. Nat snuck in some doubled drums here and there, but no one was ready for what happened when it was time for the solo.

David whispered God's words as the saxophone started and the drums came in, first in English, then in God's scattin', which he came to realize was the one true language, the lost language, the language of the rolling tongue. Nat doubled the drumbeats and people in the audience swayed, suddenly alive as God's music entered them.

David threw his hands into the air and started scattin'. He spoke an entire monologue full of many of God's secrets, and what the congregation couldn't understand through their ears, they felt in their chests. People gasped. Which wasn't unusual, as God's truth can, at times, be hard to take. Some waved their hands and shook and writhed like snakes through the aisles. The music made the people dance sexy, lusty dances. Free-spirited movements that drew attention to thrusting, shaking nether regions. Just about the whole congregation let loose. No one gave a damn who looked on.

After ten minutes, Christ III wiped the sweat from his brow, strode over to David, and attempted to whisper something into his ear. David put his arm around his brother and scatted loudly. A woman in the front row passed out.

When David paused, Case—without giving it a second thought—began playing his notes backward, and the rest of the band followed. Nat pounded harder and harder until he became exhausted and dropped his sticks to the floor. Case faded out. The bass player stopped. The organist stopped. David scatted a line more, his hands raised above his head. He walked down the center aisle with his arms still in the air, his band, the choir and Christ III at his back.

Christ III took the mic, his voice full of rage and damnation.

What you heard was the music of the devil, he said. A son of God has been seduced. You just seen a child of God speak in tongues, not like the righteous, but like a beast!

David Sherman, the last son of God, opened the doors and walked out into the bright sun, feeling nothing at all like the demon his brother accused him of being. Instead, he opened his arms wide while the sun beamed upon him, feeling light, as if the ground was no longer beneath his feet and he was drifting in midair, ascending to Heaven.

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Rion Amilcar Scott has contributed to *PANK*, the *Rumpus*, *Fiction International*, *Confrontation*, and *Crab Orchard Review*, among others. He was raised in Silver Spring, Maryland, and earned an MFA at George Mason University. His collection, *Wolf Tickets*, is forthcoming from Tiny Hardcore Press. Presently, he teaches English at Bowie State University.

Illustration by Elaine Chen

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