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Bailey: Why Should I Stand for Jesus

MILTON KESSLER MEMORIAL PRIZE

FINALIST

WHY SHOULD I STAND FOR JESUS

Scott Bailey

When I win four hundred dollars at the National Tobacco Spitting Contest, I buy a Civic, the paint peeling. I feel a Holy-Ghost freedom when I try to pass the fat, grinning, rich, daddy's boy who called me *Buckteeth Ugly*, laughing at my fake Reeboks, the ones Eunice bought with a sack of change at Dollar General. When he passes me in his silver Trans Am, bumper sticker *Eat My Grits*, I floor it; my motor blows, and I coast to the side of the road, fat boy flipping me the bird, driving on, most likely to Wards for a Big One.

I walk down a hill to a porch where an old woman is stitching a quilt; she tells me to take it slow, just as she is, sipping on a glass of warm milk, sitting in her rocker, waiting for her dogs, already in heaven, who met their fates on the road. I call Sam on her phone, a red rotary box, just like Louise's, which hangs on her wall under a stuffed sea bass that Rueben catches while honeymooning on the coast.

When Sam arrives, tractor chain in hand, I drive attached to his beat-up blue Chevrolet with dents from pulp-wooding, the truck that my cousin and I drive to downtown Magee, to Crazy Day—wooden ducks, benches with heart-shaped backs, peanut brittle, hotdogs and powdered doughnuts—that kind of crazy; people crowd the streets to show off fancy cars, sparkling rims, spoilers, Motorola antennas. We never score a date, only invitations for mud-bog, beer-guzzles.

After months of looking, we place a newer-model motor in an older-junk frame. Sam loans it to me after my brother wrecks his car, skidding off the road and hitting an oak; the body not completely totaled, so Ulmer and Sam repeatedly pull the car with a tractor into a pine until the body is beyond repair. When we realize that the pine won't live, the sapling my brother won as a prize for selling the most pies for Smokey-the-Bear Awareness Week, it's a cold morning before school, the day my classmates swear to a walkout.

When I crank the car, such God-awful screaming. I pop the hood to find guts, stool, hair, and fluffy tails splattered all over that newly installed motor. Another kitten, its butt bald without a tail, wobbles out from under the car that dies and won't crank, so I have to ride the bus, bus 125 where I got into fight with Tanya.

Four years prior she slaps my glasses off, calls me *sis*. I slam her on the floorboard and commence to punch, then her tall brother's on my back, scratching me, kids screaming *kick that bitch's ass*. Till this day, I don't know if they were referring to me or to Tanya.

Her father comes to our house, and Sam whips me with a switch, tells her father that I won't cause any more trouble. I'm confused. I was just standing up for myself. But Sam says if I'm doing any standing up, I should be standing for Jeeezuss. He drives a forklift at a plant all day. He knows the importance of standing. The walkout is a success. We make it on TV; Principal Bowen asks us to return to class, but we say, *Hell No! We Won't Go* all the way down Main Street.

I hear that Tanya has a lazy eye with stigmatism, like a team of horses pulling in two directions at the same time. She's married, wearing Dollar General makeup and feeding her kids baloneeee and welfare-cheese sandwiches. That serves her right, I think. Maybe, she'll think twice before slapping another *sis*.

Who knows where she and fat boy end, but I know Ulmer's tilling gardens and Rueben's spilling heavenly seeds, that old lady taking it slow, stitching, sipping on a glass of milk alongside her dogs panting with purring kittens, all watching Sam driving a forklift, praying I choose to stand. I don't want to live or die. I want to be.