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Wisdom House Books

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SYNOPSIS



WHAT HAPPENS AT THE CHURCH STREET BREWERY DOESN'T ALL STAY THERE

The Church Street Brewery is located in the center of Uptown, in what use to be called Mechanicsville, a mile north of downtown. In the 1930s, during the Depression, only the rich factory owners could afford to live in downtown. The small-business owners of automobile shops or tailors could not afford the city taxes in downtown. These small-business owners moved to Mechanicsville, where now stands The Church Street Brewery.

On any night, this former furniture factory, a one-story remodeled building is surrounded by several dozen folks sitting or standing on the outdoor patio or attending a university-sponsored religions discussion. Some sit like Rae and some stand like Professor David. A reserved Nadia sits at a nearby table and talks with her college friend Yuan, a 20-something Chinese-born student. Some men, like the 70-something Jim, a pillar of the community, float around the patio with a glass of chardonnay in hand. The reserved Carlton is a 71-year-old widower whose wife Dorothy died of breast cancer nine months ago. On sunny days, a cancer survivor, Debra, dons a cap to hide her hair loss while she strokes paint across a canvas. Next to Debra is Katherine, a 40-something, single, political operative who works for the governor of North Carolina.

Then one fall Wednesday evening, all these characters strangely (coincidentally?) meet, converse, and warm their bodies from the patio fire pit. Some drink and some just talk. Some are kind and some are rude.

At least one person's life is changed in a moment that Wednesday night.



PAGE EXCERPTS

Chapter 1

CARLTON



Carlton awakens, alone, for the first time in forty-one years. His tears, quietly rolling down his cheek, are reflected in the framed glass protecting his bedside picture of Dot and their two grown children.

What am I living for, now? Carlton asks himself. But if I go to the gravesite and place some flowers, it will make me feel better. I know she hears me when I talk. And I know I need to go see her, but I don't know if I can get out of bed.

His house is quiet now. No more pots and pans rattling prior to her breakfast call. No more sipping coffee together and chatting on the back porch.

When the kids left for college, we thought we were in heaven, having so much time for each other.

Carlton hears silence as he walks slipper-less to the kitchen. He opens the refrigerator which is nearly empty. Missing are the eggs, bacon, and bread for toast that Dot would prepare every day—she was the cook; she was the one who kept the refrigerator full, who made weekly trips to the grocery store.



Damn it: I just don't feel like going to the store.

With his window down, he smells the flowers along the gravel driveway that circles the cemetery just a few blocks from his home. He parks his car and walks up the hill—sweat beading on his forehead from anticipation as much as the beaming sun. A monument to Jesus overlooks the ten acres of grass and headstones. Its Jesus statue is a towering figure among cemetery-goers like Carlton. His outstretched arms and figure, with white face, are now discolored due to the fifty-plus years of weathering.

God, I miss her. God, why do the good die young?

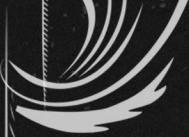
“Dorothy, are you there?” Carl whispers. She can hear him, he knows.

He sits down on the hard-concrete bench within a few feet of her grave.

Sobbing, he pulls out a letter she wrote to him a few weeks before she died, while in hospice care. Again, he reads it:

Dear Carl,

I have been trying to write this for a while, but the morphine and pain have drained my energy and interfered with whatever writing ability remains. I have been married to the most extraordinary man for forty-one years. I was planning for us to have at least another twenty together. However, we do not get to choose. From the day we wed, to the amazing birth of our two children, and our walks along the New River, just months ago, I have never loved another man. We shared so much happiness. I truly believe that God, our grand architect, put us together. I want more time with you, Carl, but it seems that's not going to happen. When I'm gone, please don't weep for me; instead, cherish the memories and pray that God will give you peace.



Carl, struggling, tries to read more, but he fails and retreats back to his car.

He used to drive an old pickup truck to the furniture factory he worked at for thirty-something years until NAFTA brought cheaper labor from Mexico. His layoff notice, a few years ago, was welcomed; retiring with Dot made him happy. Now, the once handcrafted chairs are shipped from Mexico to North Carolina showrooms. In his days at the factory, men and women worked hard to feed their families—many were Vietnam vets or single mothers.

Now, Carlton drives a new F-150 pickup truck around town. He parks it in his garage, and, like his careful craftsmanship of fine furniture, his garage is clean and his tools organized. Each drawer of the tool chest holds wrenches cleaned after each previous use, and there's not one oil spot on the garage floor.

Dot's car still sits next to his shiny white truck. The couple used to cruise Main Street in her car, holding hands as they walked, visiting an ice cream parlor every Friday night before going to see a movie.

Finally arising from bed, Carl looks at Dot's portrait in the kitchen, then steps into the garage, eyes her car, and slowly takes a seat in his truck.

He's not sure how he's gotten to this place of utter loneliness. How has his life unraveled, leaving him sitting in a pile of used tissues, unfulfilled wishes, and hopeless dreams?

His plans had been her plans. They were big. All hope and dreams came crashing down after Dot lost her battle to breast cancer. This was not the life he envisioned. That was for sure.

"Surviving the Death of Your Spouse" is an insulting read, suggesting I cannot grow as a person without forming new relationships, Carlton throws the book in the kitchen trashcan. He walks around the house mumbling to himself. The phone rings. His daughter, Emily, calls and tries to counsel him on grief, as if it would help.

"As numerous research studies have demonstrated, bereavement by a spouse is a major source of life stress that can leave people vulnerable to later problems including depression, chronic stress, and reduced life expectancy," Emily explains to her dad, trying to help, but sounding too teacher-ish.



“I don’t need this right now,” Carlton says.

Emily pleads with him: “Daddy, I know you are lonely. You should visit the church you and Mother attended. There are some really compassionate folks who go there.”

As Emily continues to plead, all Carl can think about is his time as a foot soldier, taking gunfire for his platoon and receiving over a dozen shrapnel wounds. He realizes he is literally fighting a different kind of battle—loneliness and despair are his enemies now.

Like many Vietnam vets, Carlton’s stubbornness and grieving would forsake the care offered from his immediate family—daughter, Emily, and son, Eddie. He needed healing of his soul, but the wound was deep, maybe too deep. Emily and Eddie both live several states away and have their own families to care for and manage.

Carlton has still been lonely for friendship. Many of his colleagues from the factory are deceased or suffer from PTSD or illnesses they blame on Agent Orange.

Carlton hangs the phone up, his hand still holding the receiver, pondering what Emily said about church.

Friday arrives, and before Carlton visits Dot’s gravesite, he stops off at Johnson Brothers’ BBQ. Johnson Brothers’ makes more food than just BBQ; they also serve breakfast and dinner. The marquee sign outside their storefront reads: “Fight Truth Decay, Study the Bible Daily.”

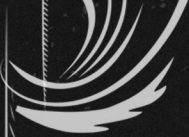
However, Bible verses are of little comfort to a man grieving his lifelong friend, partner, and soulmate. Carl finds some solace in the place—the waitresses feel sorry for him.

The forty-something waitress, Donna, says, “What ya having today, Carl?” Most of the time, Donna has a stern look on her face; she’s a single mother of three who quotes Bible verses and pours coffee.

Carlton sits down at his usual table—the one nearest the cash register. Everyone has to pass by him, even the men from the church, who gather every Friday morning for Bible Study.

“I don’t know what I want today,” Carl responds to Donna with a soft voice and a depressed look.

“Where’s your better half?” Donna asks. Carl doesn’t respond, but his eyes start to water.



He looks across the room, seeing the men's group. He knew of the Men's Bible Study, having attended church with them before Dot died. The preacher walks into the restaurant after Carl sits down.

"Hi. Carl, good to see you," the preacher calls out on his way to the corner booth. Carl sits quietly—no newspaper or Bible, no smartphone or other reading material, just thoughts of Dot. With his head down, he responds to the preacher: "I'm making it," he lies.

Donna brings Carl his order of eggs, grits, and toast, with black coffee. The coffee is so hot the steam rises up and clouds his glasses. The room, too, is already hot on this summer morning.

Carlton finishes his breakfast and pays the cashier. On his way out, the preacher sees Carl with his head down, glasses fogged up, making his way across the parking lot to his truck.

Driving to the cemetery, Carl passes The Church Street Brewery, a gathering spot on Main Street.

The Church Street Brewery started as a food truck parked in an abandoned parking lot just three years ago. The bar, also called "the watering hole," by the local crowd, has curb appeal: outdoor seating, a big firepit, and live music. The Brewery, as it's also called, is the newest addition to uptown retail drinking establishments since the closing of many clothing and furniture stores in the heart of the city. Breweries have been popping up all over town, complementing restaurants.

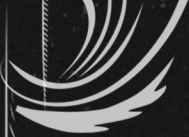
At The Brewery, food trucks show up to offer tastes of the next big thing, long before it is the next big thing. Whatever you eat will taste a whole lot better with a side of future bragging rights. Carlton drives around town thinking about Dot and the next big thing. On most nights, a crowd of two or three dozen assembles outside. The inside bar is the taproom, where the ambiance is cozy and the different beers are plentiful.

Maybe this evening, I can stop by The Brewery and meet someone, Carlton muses.

"Do you need any life insurance?" the radio announcer says.

Carlton thinks, *the life I had was with Dot—I need a life, not life insurance! Dot was not a beer drinker. Maybe I should not stop by Church Street tonight.*

The Brewery used to be an old 5,000-square-foot furniture manufac-



turing store with old wooden floors and a sinking roof, but now it's a beer haven with LED lighting and modern plumbing. The firepit heats customers outside in the fall, while, inside, conversationalists try to warm the hearts of each other, drinking their favorite wine or beer or cocktail.

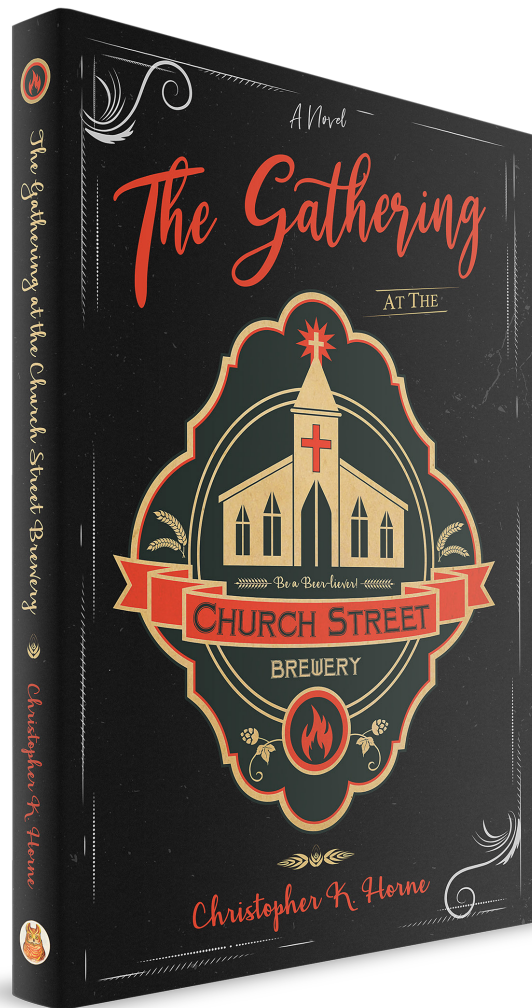
For every ten men that show up at Church Street, on their busiest night, Friday, there might be three women. Some older women come from the rich neighborhood two streets over, and some younger girls from the nearby university. Carlton didn't go to college. He attended "the school of hard knocks"—the Vietnam War. He didn't get a Vietnam University varsity sweater, but he came home alive.

Finally, Carlton arrives at the grave of his dear Dorothy. He reaches for his back pocket and pulls out a picture of her. He carries it around with him everywhere he goes. "You are beautiful. I don't mind looking at you all the time," Carlton says. "I miss you so much. And Emily says she misses you, too."

The next day, Carlton sobs, as the hot North Carolina summer sun beats down on his back, perspiring, due to the walk from his truck to the gravesite bench. Carl had always been a God-fearing man, raised by farmers who practiced the Ten Commandments. He played football in high school as an offensive lineman. He utilized his physical strength to build camps, tents, and huts for his comrades in the jungles of Vietnam. It was during the war that he grew to hate the Vietcong, but, there, he fell in love with a seventeen-year-old girl named Trinh. When Carlton was told he would leave Vietnam in 1969, he asked Trinh if she wanted to go to the U.S. with him, but she refused. She did not want to leave her family. Trinh was not meant to be, and true love came with Dot.

Carl wanted to die with Dot. This lonesome feeling is like being in a desert with nowhere to go. He decides to visit The Brewery not to make memories but to find a friend to listen to his pain and heartache.

Outside, the sun is setting behind the nearby two-story apartments, and The Brewery's firepit is aglow. The firepit is recessed into the concrete wall. Sandstone cobbles edge the five-foot diameter lava-rock-topped pit that blazes with gas-fed flames. The fire warms Carl's skin and lights up the small world around him, as he slides a wooden chair up near the circular knee-high wall surrounding the pit.



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