

Episode 23 — Pale Congregation

A woman named Sarah Hollis sat at her kitchen table in Millbrook, Vermont, staring at a piece of paper. The paper had been blank for three months. It was now worn from handling, creased from where she had folded it and unfolded it and folded it again. There was a pen beside it. She had not picked up the pen in forty-seven days.

The decision was simple. Stay in Millbrook, where she had lived for thirty-two years, where her job was secure and her house was paid for and the library where she worked knew her name. Or leave for Boston, where her daughter had recently moved, where there were museums and opportunities and a grandchild she was meeting for the first time in six months.

It was a simple decision.

Sarah could not make it.

Not because she was afraid. Fear would have been comprehensible. This was something else. It was an inability to believe in the importance of either choice. It was as though someone had opened her chest and extracted the part of her that cared. The part of her that was capable of conviction.

She folded the paper. She unfolded it. She folded it again. She looked at her own hands as though they belonged to someone else.

She had attended the Pale Congregation's revival meeting five times in the two weeks they had been in town. Reverend Michaels was charismatic—sincere in a way that most clergy weren't. His faith seemed genuine, earned through years of work with people and places that had broken his heart and mended it again. His services were powerful. People wept. People testified. People spoke of being filled with purpose again.

Sarah had wept too, on the third night. But when she left the tent, something was different. The conviction didn't stick. It dissipated like smoke. By the next morning, she couldn't remember why it had mattered.

She looked at the blank paper again. She would go to her daughter. Or she would stay. Both were possible. Neither seemed real.

She folded the paper and put it in a drawer.

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Ace had been tracking the Pale Congregation for two weeks before she came to Millbrook.

She had visited the first town six months after the church had left it—a place called Clearwater, in Tennessee. It had been a normal small town when the church arrived. It had become something else when they left. Not visibly. The buildings were still standing. The people still moved through their daily lives. But they had become flat, as though someone had removed a dimension from them.

She had interviewed the town's pastor, its school principal, a woman who ran a bookstore. All of them reported the same thing: a kind of drifting inability to believe in anything very much. Not depression. Not hopelessness. Just an absence of conviction.

The second town, a place called Merrick in North Carolina, was still recovering. The church had been there a month ago. The people were still in the early stages of hollowing. They made plans and then

abandoned them. They started projects and lost interest. They spoke about the future in past tense.

The third town was Millbrook, Vermont, where the Pale Congregation had set up its tent four days ago.

Ace had arrived and begun asking questions with the careful precision of someone who knew that the truth she was looking for was too terrible for direct inquiry. She had learned about Sarah Hollis. About Marcus Webb, a man who had been accepted into a graduate program and then, abruptly, didn't believe the acceptance meant anything anymore. About Linda Chen, who had sold her house and then, the week before the move, couldn't understand why she had done it.

The pattern was consistent. The conviction was being extracted.

Ace went to one of the services on the fourth night, sitting in the back of the tent where the speaker system made the pastor's voice sound larger than it actually was.

Reverend Michaels was in his sixties, with gray hair and a face that suggested he had earned every line of it by taking people seriously. He spoke about faith—not the religious kind specifically, but the deeper kind. The kind that allowed you to commit to something, to believe in your own choices, to trust that the world could change if you worked at it.

It was a powerful speech. Ace could feel it working on the people around her, filling them up with purpose.

And she could feel the pulpit drinking it in.

It was an old piece of furniture, wood so dark it was almost black, carved with patterns that looked almost religious but weren't quite. The proportions were slightly wrong. The symbols suggested meaning but were one degree off from actual meaning. A human looking at it would find nothing consciously wrong, but their instincts would register the wrongness at a cellular level.

The entity was lodged in the wood itself. It had been there for nine years, traveling with the church, feeding on the belief generated in revival services. The pulpit was the anchor. As long as it existed, the entity could reach out into the tent and extract the conviction from the people present. Not their faith in God specifically. Just their faith in anything. In choice. In meaning. In the importance of their own existence.

It was feeding them faith and extracting something far more subtle in return: the capacity for faith itself.

Ace left the service and went directly to the pastor's temporary residence—a rented house at the edge of town where the Pale Congregation's staff was staying.

She knocked. Reverend Michaels answered. He was kind in person, not just from the pulpit. He had the manner of someone who spent a lot of his life listening to other people's problems.

"I know what you're carrying in that pulpit," Ace said. "It's killing people."

She watched his face change. The pastor looked at her carefully, the way you look at someone you're trying to understand.

"Are you all right?" he asked.

That was when Ace understood the complete tragedy of it. He truly didn't know. He wasn't infected. He wasn't possessed. He was exactly what he appeared to be: a good man carrying something evil in his own trunk and completely unaware of what he carried.

She had no language to explain it that would make him believe. She left.

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That night, the final service of the revival. The tent was full. Ace came with an idea that had no good ending but seemed like the only ending available.

Reverend Michaels gave his closing sermon. It was about the importance of committing to what you believed in, of trusting your convictions, of letting your faith guide you forward.

The people wept. The pulpit drank.

When the service ended and the congregation filed out, Ace moved. Reverend Michaels was beginning to gather his papers. His staff was folding chairs. Nobody was watching the pulpit itself.

Ace walked to it and drove the first katana through the wood.

The split was clean. The blade went in and the darkness came out.

What emerged from the pulpit was not aggressive. It was almost beautiful in its wrongness—a pale luminescence that filled the tent with a light that had no heat, no warmth, no business being beautiful. It was the color of conviction extracted and emptied out, of faith that had been drained until it was just a shell. It was hypnotic in a way that made your instincts want to turn away.

Ace drove the second blade through it.

The entity convulsed. Reverend Michaels screamed. His staff ran. The tent seemed to shake, though it was probably just the people inside it trying to escape.

Ace fought in that pale light, her movements precise and brutal. The entity had no defense system. It was a parasite that was only dangerous while it was anchored. Freed from the pulpit, it was just a hunger looking for a vessel. She cut through it like it was made of thought, because in a sense it was. Extracted faith made manifest. Nothing physical about it at all.

It died without ceremony. It simply ceased to be, fading from existence like the day fading into night—not dramatically, just gradually, completely.

The tent was still standing. The chairs were still there, arranged in rows. The pulpit was kindling.

Ace wiped her blades and walked out.

Reverend Michaels was in the field outside the tent, watching it shake from within. When Ace emerged, he said: "What did you do?"

"Your pulpit was killing people," Ace said.

"That's not—" He looked at her carefully, the way he might look at someone who was making a wild accusation. "That's not possible."

Ace didn't argue. She had no way to prove it. She walked back to her truck, started the engine, and

drove.

In her rearview mirror, the tent was still standing. The pulpit was reduced to scorched wood and splinters. Reverend Michaels was still standing in the field, trying to understand what had happened.

He would eventually decide she had been disturbed. The tent had caught fire somehow, probably from faulty equipment. The pulpit was an old antique that wasn't irreplaceable. He would rebuild. The Pale Congregation would continue. But it would travel without the pulpit, and the entity would need to find another anchor, and that would take time.

The people in Millbrook would not recover. Sarah Hollis would keep that blank piece of paper in her drawer forever, unable to commit to Boston or Millbrook or anywhere else. Marcus Webb would never be able to convince himself that his acceptance meant anything. Linda Chen would spend the rest of her life with a house she couldn't quite believe she had intended to leave.

But no new victims would be extracted. The entity would not feed again, at least not this way. It would not hollow out a new town with every revival.

In the truck, driving through the dark, Ace thought about Reverend Michaels. He had been doing good work, genuinely, until he wasn't. He had been carrying evil without knowing it, because the entity had needed a good man to be effective.

The worst of humanity was often the most honest: the people who meant well and destroyed everything anyway.

She drove east, toward morning, toward places where people had not yet lost their conviction. There were always more places. There was always more work.

Behind her, the Pale Congregation folded its tent. Reverend Michaels picked through the splinters of the pulpit, looking for something that might explain what had happened. He found nothing but charred wood.

The revival was over.

But the hollowness remained. It would remain in those towns forever, a kind of spiritual scar tissue where the capacity for faith had been extracted like a tooth.

Ace drove on. The road was long. The work was never done. But for now, at least, this thing was stopped.

For now, that was enough.

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