

Preaching to the Choir

Written by

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FADE IN:

INT. MAIN OFFICE OF "THE WORD" - AFTERNOON

Religious paintings and crosses on the walls. Slightly messy paper-wise, but there's charm nonetheless.

The tech here: a bizarre mix-match of antique and hi-tech. A battered DESKTOP and CRT in one corner. A ginormous HD MONITOR takes up half of a nearby wall.

A door opens. Voices echo in an unseen hallway: ROBINSON and LILY.

ROBINSON

Ready for the unveiling?

LILY

Are you kidding? My niece says so many wonderful things about Pastor T. Collins!

ROBINSON

Little known fact, the "T" stands for "Thaddeus". Quite biblical, don't you agree?

LILY

To be invited into his office is... an honor. I'm not only ready - I'm a little giddy, too!

ROBINSON

Oh, Miss Lily, you're too kind. And don't get your hopes TOO high. We at the Word like to keep things humble. We're instructed to, by The Lord.

ROBINSON (30s) walks in. At first glance, his casual clothes are "humble." On closer inspection, those khakis and that watch don't look so cheap. He waves his arm dramatically:

ROBINSON

Ta-da. Behold!

Lily (70s) toddles in. A bird-like woman, her eyes are as bright as her floral dress. But the rest of her could get blown over in a limp breeze.

LILY

Oooooo.

She sees the piles of paperwork. Flinches. But stifles herself to keep criticism to herself.

ROBINSON

Don't say I didn't warn you.
Religious Disneyland, it's so not.

Lily tiptoes past paperwork - eyes it like dead bugs.

ROBINSON

Look on the bright side. This chaos is exactly why we jumped to hire you. An accountant who shares Pastor Collins' values: what's not to like? I can tell by your look, you're "old-school." You'll tame this mess like a Roman Lion in no time.

Reaching the opposite wall, Lily admires the paintings.

LILY

This is exquisite!

ROBINSON

That's putting it mildly. The one you're looking at now depicts the Calling of St. Matthew.

Lily holds her hand up to it. Robinson intercepts, gently stops her arm.

ROBINSON

Sorry, dear. Please don't touch. It's delicate. Expensive, too.

LILY

Like museum expensive? How much?

Robinson leads her away, towards other art.

ROBINSON

Enough. I know it seems a extravagant, but Pastor Collins like his artwork to be genuine and original - like him! That can get pretty pricey. But one must blame the art galleries for that. Only the best and most acclaimed will do!

Noticing Lily's turned away, Robinson mutters under his breath.

ROBINSON
God forbid anyone ever displays
something new...

Lily stops at the HD Monitor. She marvels at it, eyes wide.

LILY
What's THIS wonder of science for?

Robinson beams, turns it on.

ROBINSON
I'm glad you asked. You're just in
time.

PASTOR T. COLLINS' face fills the screen. 30s and surreally
handsome - charisma oozes from every pore. He stands at a
podium. Waves at an unseen audience.

ROBINSON
Pastor Collins just started his
afternoon sermon. I'm sure you've
heard his Word before.

LILY
The Lord's Word? Of course! But
his...? No. I'm afraid I'm not
technologically inclined. My niece
even has to help me program the TV
remote. So when I need a spiritual
pick-me-up, I find it at my little,
local church.

ROBINSON
You're a virg- I mean, you've never
listened to Collin's podcast before?
Well, that makes this even more a
treat. The Pastor's speaking now -
downtown!

Robinson cranks up the volume. Pastor Collins' digital voice
booms across the room.

PASTOR COLLINS
And I say to you - love matters over
all! God's love, that is. Jesus' too.
Every one of us must meekly submit to
what they ordain. But in these sinful
times, what makes the world go round?

An unseen audience howls back - like this is a routine
they've participated in before.

AUDIENCE

Money! Boo!!

Pastor Collins enthusiastically joins in.

PASTOR COLLINS

Do you hear us, Satan?!? Boo! And so shalt it be until the world is raptured - and one would hope that day comes soon. But before that, it will be regrettably necessary for us to -

He rubs his fingers together in that familiar gesture.

PASTOR COLLINS

Grease the gears of evil, to turn their infernal machinery around to good. Beating swords into plowshares, in a modern way. So donate now. Don't be ashamed of how little you can spare. When it comes to Jesus, every penny counts!

A number flashes under him: Call 1-800-555-SAVE!

Pastor Collins leans into the microphone. His voice drops to a whisper.

PASTOR COLLINS

While we're waiting for a final count, I'd like to say a few things about Sins of the Flesh -

Robinson turns off the monitor.

ROBINSON

Pastor Collins sometimes preaches for hours. I could listen to it all day, but the rest of the office tour can't wait. You think this part's exciting, wait 'til you see your desk!

He stops, soaks in Lily's suddenly somber look.

ROBINSON

That sermon was riveting, wasn't it? The Pastor's voice is just -

LILY

Well, I'm no minister...

Robinson's eyes betray a touch of impatience.

ROBINSON

Pastor Collins cares about getting his Word across effectively. He welcomes constructive criticism. So - as a Christian - what did you think?

LILY

I... I'd like to hear more about his thoughts on spirituality. Talk of money? Not so much.

Robinson laughs nervously.

ROBINSON

You're a CPA, Miss Lily! I'd think money would be a topic you'd never tire of!

LILY

I deal with numbers for a living, yes. But when I go to church, I'd much rather hear what I'm living FOR.

ROBINSON

Tell you what: I'll find some of Pastor Collins' old tapes for you to take home and play after work. We've only known each other a few minutes, but I can already tell: you're going to love what he has to say!

Robinson guides Lily to the battered desktop and CRT. Even more piles of paper there.

ROBINSON

In the meantime, here's the little office niche we've carved out for you. We operate on the honor system, time-wise. Be flexible. Make your own hours. I've separated the expenses for the 2021 audit in that pile. Please - make yourself at home. As for lunch: that's on me. And the church!

He leaves Lily to the mess. She winces at the pile.

Ignoring the computer, Lily fishes a CALCULATOR out of her purse. She makes a sign of the cross. Digs in. Sighs.

LATER

The clock reads 8 PM. The computer's on - an Excel sheet glows onscreen. Lily's still number crunching, paperwork separated into neat little piles.

One particular hard-copy invoice has her puzzled: it's a WINE BILL from a Bermuda based resort.

She calls over her shoulder:

LILY
Mr. Robinson? I have a question!

No response. She calls again.

LILY
Mr. Robinson? Is there a back door?
Are you still here?

Nothing. Receipt in hand, Lily gets up slowly. Brittle knees CRACK.

Feeling her age, she makes her way across the room. Past the HD Monitor: a frozen, smiling freeze frame of Pastor Collins in view.

The old accountant toddles under the high price paintings next. Saints gaze down at her. She smiles up, almost shy.

LILY
St. Michael, be patient. I'm not the
bouncy girl I used to be. But I work
hard, and keep the faith!

She reaches a dark hallway - one she hasn't walked through... yet.

The open door leading to it reads: CONFIDENTIAL. Lily calls.

LILY
Mr. Robinson?

No answer. But somewhere nearby, keys CLICK.

Lily follows the sound into the hallway. She almost turns on the light, but decides against it last second.

LILY
I'm sure it's off for a good reason.
We have to battle Con Ed somehow!

INT. HALLWAY - CONTINUOUS

In pursuit of that typing sound, Lily inches down the corridor. Until she reaches:

A ROOM with an all-glass wall.

LILY
Ooh my. That's fancy...

Compared to the front office, very fancy indeed. And what's inside: fancier still!

Unaware of her presence, Robinson huddles over a whole bank of COMPUTER SERVERS; silhouetted against a 27 inch screen.

A photo of Pastor Collins glows on it. But the shot seems a little TOO perfect.

Robinson touches a stylus to the glass - pulls. Collin's smile widens like clay. Robinson types keys: Collin's eyes develop extra gleam.

Robinson grabs a HEAD SET. Putting it on, he speaks:

ROBINSON
Gentle people of my flock, there are
wolves around us everywhere. So
listen to what I have to say...

The "photo" of Collins talks in sync with his words, like a digital puppet! Robinson watches it carefully, takes notes.

ROBINSON
Not quite poetic enough. And it needs
alliteration. Wait... I know!

Clearing his throat, he starts over:

ROBINSON
'Gentle FOLK of my flock, wolves
circle us even now. So perk up your
tender ears, and harken what your
shepherd has to say.' Wooo - yeah,
that works!

Self-satisfied, Robinson leans back - hands behind his head.

ROBINSON
You should've been an actor, Rob. Or
an artist. But no! Mommy Dearest had
to be all "Get yourself a PROPER job,
Robbie. One a REAL man would do..."

Lily gasps. Stumbles. She hits the window with both palms - BANG.

Hearing, Robinson whips around. Sees Lily.

He rockets from his chair, towards the door.

ROBINSON

Hey lady, this area's confidential.
Can't you read?!?

Almost comically, the MODEL of Pastor Collins picks up and repeats Robinson's words.

Lily turns to flee, but Robinson is much younger. Faster. He bounds into the hallway, blocks her exit... eyes blazing.

The old woman backs away, makes the sign of the cross.

LILY

Though I walk in the valley of
death...

Robinson melts. He gently puts his hands on Lily's shoulders. She tries to pull away. He holds on tight.

ROBINSON

Miss Lily, my apologies. You
surprised me. Please forgive me for
being rude!

Once again, the model of Collins echoes his words. Lily points to the monitor, finger shaking.

LILY

YOU'RE surprised? What is that thing?

Turning around, Robinson realized he's still synced to the puppet. He whips off his headset, turns it off in disgust.

ROBINSON

Nothing important. I know you said
you weren't too tech savvy. So this
must all seem strange to you.

He tries to guide her away. Lily digs in heels. She's a lightweight, but Robinson doesn't have it in him to get rough. So for this test of wills, the old lady scores.

LILY

I said I wasn't tech savvy. But that
doesn't make me blind! I saw: you
were making that picture of Pastor
Collins speak YOUR words!

She gasps, suspicion sinks in.

LILY
Is he even real?

ROBINSON
Of course he is! Pastor Collins is known and loved, worldwide! He does plenty in person seminars. Even lays on hands, from time to time. You can't fake that. Even if we tried.

LILY
Then what were you doing in there? Does Pastor Collins know? Young man, I've got at least forty years on you. And I've seen my fill of swindlers. So don't try to lie. Tell the truth!

Robinson plasters on a car salesman smile.

ROBINSON
Oh, Pastor Collins knows. In fact, he asked me to. You see -

He guides Lily towards the door. This time, she submits.

ROBINSON
Pastor Collins' sermons are streamed round the globe. So it's crucial he gets them right - first time. What I'm doing here is - uh- "practicing" for him digitally. Doing test runs in the virtual realm so he can pick and choose what has the best impact.

His voice smooth and soothing, Robinson walks Lily into...

MAIN ROOM

ROBINSON
It's all for the message. Do you understand, Miss Lily?

LILY
I...I think so?

She stares down at the receipt. Robinson notices, asks.

ROBINSON
Why'd you come in anyway?

LILY
To ask you about this!

She hands him the receipt. Robinson squints.

ROBINSON

What's wrong? Looks pretty clear cut to me.

LILY

In the Bahamas? We're in Ohio!

ROBINSON

So? Pastor Collins does seminars worldwide.

LILY

And pays that much for wine?

ROBINSON

Well, it STARTED as water. But hey - you know...

(laughs)

Just kidding. It was an after sermon party for charity. Winning diplomats over to the Lord isn't easy - or cheap!

He shoots Lily a serious look.

ROBINSON

You've had a very eventful first night. Why don't you just.. go home?

Lily shakes her head, obstinate.

LILY

No. That just won't do. You said I could keep my own hours.

ROBINSON

So?

LILY

So. As an accountant, I'm OCD about - well - most everything. I'm almost done with September's receipts. I'll leave after that's complete. Which means another thirty minutes, give or take?

Robinson sags.

ROBINSON

As you wish.

He heads back into the "Confidential" hallway.

Shuts the door. LOCKS it. Disappears.

Lily eyes the door, skeptical. Receipt in hand, she toddles back to her low tech computer.

LILY

Not tech savvy, my wrinkled ass. In preparation for this job, my niece gave me a full day's session on modern office gadgets.

She zooms into the excel sheet. Hunts, pecks through menus. Eventually she locates "Find."

And types: Bahamas. ENTER. A whole list of items pulls up-

Meals, Entertainment Bills worth thousands. And a hotel room rented... NOW.

Lily gulps. She CLICKS the entry for details, read:

LILY

Honeymoon suite for one Mr. Thaddeus CULLINS? Hmmm, different spelling. Coincidences do happen, right?

She flips through paperwork, finds Pastor Collin's social and cell number. BOTH match the reservation.

LILY

I thought he was speaking downtown?

Her eyes slip to the CONFERENCE PHONE on her desk. Half buried on paper, she can still see: a LINE'S lit up!

Lily reaches for it. Hesitates.

LILY

Spying isn't a sin, if it uncovers truth!

Fumbling with the keys, she picks up the receiver and listens to... Robinson. Who's on the phone with...

ROBINSON

Thaddeus? Yeah, I know it's late. If it wasn't an emergency, I wouldn't call.

The voice which answers is charismatic. Powerful. Cranky. A familiar: Pastor Collins, there's no doubt!

PASTOR COLLINS

And interrupt me from private confessional time? Have you seen Jessica, Rob? She's worth ten million Hail Mary's. And she's wearing that bikini I told you about. Looks pretty miraculous out of it, too...

ROBINSON

Spare me the mental visuals.

PASTOR COLLINS

I know, I know. Not your "thing". So, what prompted you to call at such an ungodly hour, hmmm?

ROBINSON

It's the new accountant we hired to handle the IRS investigation.

PASTOR COLLINS

I hear she's older than Methuselah. A life-long Christian. What's wrong? She's working out? Seems to me she checks every box on the list.

ROBINSON

We... had a small problem.

PASTOR COLLINS

On Day One?!? What?

ROBINSON

She asked about the wine bills.

PASTOR COLLINS

Big whoop. Tell her I went on a Communion Crawl.

ROBINSON

But that's not all. She also accidentally, uh, saw me working on the Deep Fake Puppet.

PASTOR COLLINS

You let her watch? Oh My God...

ROBINSON

I didn't LET her. She came in unexpectedly.

PASTOR COLLINS

Jesus H. Christ!!

Awkward silence between the men. Lily trembles, starts to hyperventilate. Rob hears.

ROBINSON

Uh, Thaddeus? Is Jessica with you?
Like, right now?

PASTOR COLLINS

(sarcastic)

Yes, why? You wanna go for a
threesome? Thought not.

ROBINSON

No. I hear something. Heavy
breathing.

Lily chokes. Remembering what her niece said about "mute" buttons, she stabs the button.

Oblivious, Pastor Collins continues on.

PASTOR COLLINS

Rob, if she's seen all that - you
know what you've got to do.

ROBINSON

I know. Fire her. Better now than
later, before she does too much work.

PASTOR COLLINS

Let's just say: heart attacks and
slips happen at her age. A lot.

ROBINSON

Hold up. You're NOT asking me to -

PASTOR COLLINS

Heaven forbid. No!

Pastor Collins' voice turns sickly sweet, ominous.

PASTOR COLLINS

But if that biddy breathes a word of
this. Or when I get back is breathing
at all... I guess I'll be forced to
clue the church in tomorrow about
what a security risk you pose. Your
parents will be fascinated by your
predilections. And thrilled to meet
your friend Daniel, I'm sure.

ROBINSON

Leave Daniel out of this!

PASTOR COLLINS

Chop, chop Robbie. Tonight, you can talk over pros and cons with your "partner". And in case there are any tragic "accountant accidents", I'll keep one eye on Jessica... and the other glued to local news!

ROBINSON

You really don't mean it, do you?

PASTOR COLLINS

It's God's Will. So I do.

CLICK. Collins hangs up.

Horrified, Lily jumps to her feet... scrabbles to collect her shawl and purse.

She freezes when Robinson emerges from the back room. The two lock eyes. His betray deep guilt.

Lily glances towards the exit. Can she run for it? No way that'll work.

Dropping keys in a counter drawer, Robinson grabs his jacket - heads for the door.

LILY

What... what are you doing?

ROBINSON

Going home. It's late. You look exhausted. You should, too. Do you... want me to wait for you?

LILY

No! I... I think I'll stay a bit longer. If you don't mind?

ROBINSON

Suit yourself.

He pauses at the exit.

ROBINSON

You remind me of my mom. It's dark outside. And not everyone's a Christian. So be careful when you leave?

Lily gulps. Nods. Robinson exits.

The old woman mulls over her options. What next?

She fishes an old FLIP PHONE out of her purse, starts to dial "Niece." But puts it down.

LILY
No. I've got a better idea.

Lily tiptoes towards the counter where Robinson left the keys. And shrinks at the digital freeze frame of Pastor Collins. She wags a finger at him.

LILY
You dirty old fraud. Don't look.

She scoops up the keys, heads for the back hallway...

INT. COMPUTER ROOM - MOMENTS LATER

Lily sits before the monitor. The digital puppet of Collins glows onscreen. She turns the headset over in her hands.

LILY
It didn't look so hard when Robinson did it.

She turns the device on, slips it over her head. A bit large, it's wobbly. She adjusts a strap.

LILY
All I have to do is speak?

The puppet of Collins mimics her words! Lily grins, a smile of pure triumph and joy.

LILY
See?!? An old coot CAN learn new tricks!

The puppet says that, too.

Lily looks around, spots a big RED BUTTON labeled "RECORD". Besides it, a GREEN BUTTON captioned "PUBLISH".

A mischievous gleam in her eye, Lily goes to work....

EXT. THE WORD STOREFRONT CHURCH - MORNING

Pretty modest, though a sign reads: "Coming soon - the Word Tabernacle! Permit Pending".

Sunlight gleams. CROWDS flock in. Including a sheepish Robinson, flanked by an old couple: "MOM" and "DAD."

INT. THE WORD STOREFRONT CHURCH - CONTINUOUS

Pretty modest in here, too.

Except for the HUGE MONITOR which hangs over a podium.
Presumably another case of Pastor Collins working "remote."

The monitor springs to life. Parishioners sit down.

Pastor Collins smiles down at his flock.

The Text underneath him claims it's a live feed. Robinson slumps, knowing it's not true.

The Pastor clears his throat. His voice booms.

PASTOR COLLINS

My dear comrades in Christ; welcome
to this glorious Sunday the Lord hath
served! I see from Rob- I mean from
my notes...

Robinson double-takes. Something's wrong?

PASTOR COLLINS

That today's sermon was going to be
about charity. And I assure you,
future ones will. But I have an extra
special topic to discuss today.
SECRETS.

Robinson jaw drops. He looks quickly at Mom and Dad. Shakes
his head:

ROBINSON

No, no, no...

PASTOR COLLINS

I'm afraid, Dear Children - ungodly
things abound. An evil which
threatens this very congregation! An
evil, evil man, right there -

Parishioners gasp. Robinson stands up, poised to flee.

PASTOR COLLINS

In the Bahamas.

Robinson's mother and father TSK at his odd behavior, pull
him back down.

PASTOR COLLINS

A man who goes by the name Thaddeus
CULLIN.

(MORE)

PASTOR COLLINS (cont'd)
 Cavorting on that demonic island, he lives in sin with some harlot known as "Jessica." Whoever that is. But worse - I have now found he intends to pose as me to usurp this church! I understand - through confidential sources I cannot reveal - that he's even had plastic surgery done, and fake ID cards made. But I assure you, good men and women of the Word, he is not me. Never was. Never will be. And he must be forever shunned!

Robinson stares. What the fuck?!?

He looks around - finds the congregation whipped to a passionate fervor. Now would not be the best time to run.

And in the corner, Robinson sees:

Miss Lily. Clad in her Sunday Best, she holds the supporting arm of her NIECE. She waggles fingers at him. Mouths: Wait.

Robinson swings back to the monitor of Pastor Collins, who cradles a sheet of paper in his hands.

PASTOR COLLINS
 All shocking news, I've no doubt. It was to me, as well. And the fates to be revealed today are not yet complete. For today is the day I announce my retirement. Make no mistake, I do not intend to fully leave this church - I never will. But I vow to bow out of the spotlight, donating much of my wealth to charity. As was always my intention, of course! And so, I turn over the mantle of leadership to -

Collins flips over the paper, displaying a picture of:

PASTOR COLLINS
 My right hand man, Robinson. Be forewarned - the same dark forces which attempted to steal my very identity are guaranteed to smear him, too. But I stake my WORD on it, as a man of God. Robinson is a saintly man, above reproach. And when he loves, you may rest assured, it's for the good. I'm afraid I have much to do, and so must cut this sermon short.

(MORE)

PASTOR COLLINS (cont'd)
But please join me in welcoming him
as your shepherd now... as if he were
me, in the flesh! Good bye. Be good.
Be Christian. And forever spread the
Word!

The monitor flickers. Cuts out.

Robinson runs over to Lily. The congregation surges behind
him. Hallelujahs abound.

ROBINSON
(yells to Lily)
You!

Lily smiles sweetly. Butter wouldn't melt.

LILY
You know, my niece taught me how to
copy files to a finger drive, too.

ROBINSON
That's a "thumb drive". Wait. What?
Really?!?

Lily taps, then pinches Robinson's cheek.

LILY
You're good at heart, Robinson. I've
only known you one day, but I've got
forty years on you. And I see. Take
the helm. I'll handle the numbers
from here on out.

ROBINSON
But -

LILY
Your congregation awaits, PASTOR
Robinson. Later... we'll talk.

Overwhelmed with joy, the congregation mobs their new
Shepherd. Robinson's swallowed up before he can respond.

FINAL FADE OUT: