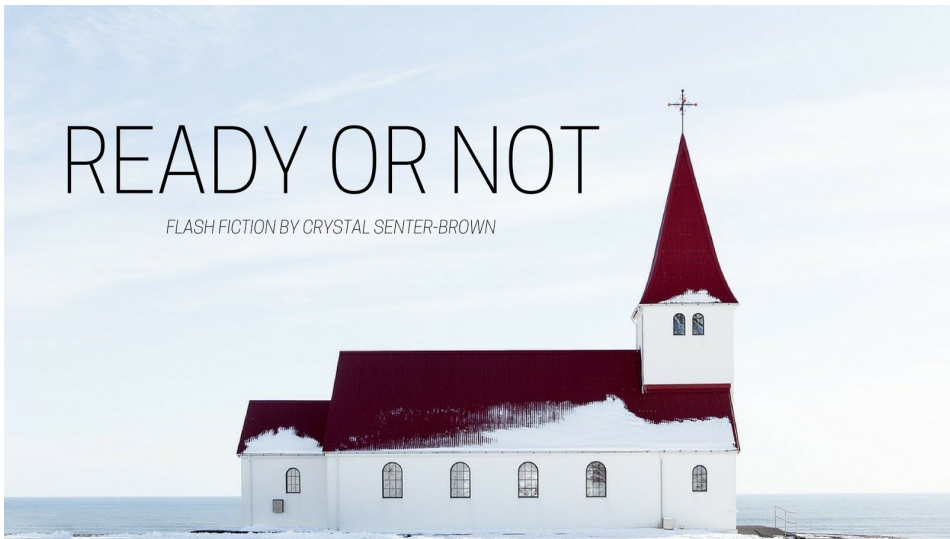


READY OR NOT

FLASH FICTION BY CRYSTAL SENTER-BROWN



When my phone rang at 2:00 a.m., I knew it couldn't be good news.

My mama only said five words:

"You gotta come home, Jacob."

I didn't think seeing my father in a hospital bed would bother me, but it did. It's not like he had never been in the hospital before, but this time felt *different*. The larger-than-life presence he usually had was reduced by tubes and machines.

My father had been a diabetic since his early twenties, and my mother had tried to get him to follow his doctor's orders for as long as I can remember. She'd bake his chicken, but he'd always talk one of the church mothers into sneaking a few pieces of fried chicken to his office after fellowship was over. Mama would even take the time to make sugar free cakes and pies, but he'd just wait until everyone had gone to bed before devouring what was left of her peach cobbler.

I first noticed his swollen feet when I came home for Christmas. Mama was fed up by this point, raising her voice for the first time in my life. "He's almost 75," she said. "Does he want me to be a widow before my time?"

"Don't worry, Mom," I said. "He'll get it together."

~*~

When Dad opened his eyes and saw me sitting at his bedside, he frowned.

"Jacob? Boy ain't you supposed to be at school in Seattle? What are you doing back in Blue?"

"I took a break, Pops."

"Ohhh, no. You ain't missin' no school on a'count of me. No sir-ree-Bob!" My father said as he struggled to prop himself up higher in his hospital bed. "You get back to that school, boy! I mean it!" he said as he poked my chest with his finger.

I shook my head. "Pops, it's fine. I'll go back in a few days. I'm worried about you! Mama said you took a really bad fall!"

My father was silent for a moment.

"Yeah I guess I did, huh?" he said as he laughed. "Well it's a good thing your mama changed her mind about going to see her sister down in Charlotte this weekend. Who knows what would have happened if she hadn't..." His voice trailed off.

"All that matters now is that you're fine," I said.

"Yeah. Well, since you're here, you gonna bring a word my my place on Sunday? Doc says it'll be a few weeks before I'll be able to even come back to Elm Street. Let alone preach."

My heart began to race. "Me? But I'm not even done with my first year of coursework! I'm not ready to preach yet, Dad."

"Nonsense. You *know* the Bible. You can do it, Jacob. It's in your blood!"

I wanted to say no, but I couldn't turn him down. I knew I would eventually be standing in the pulpit of our family church, but I didn't think that time would come so soon.

"Okay. What were you planning on preaching about on Sunday? I know you already have it outlined," I said, as I pulled my notebook and pen out of my backpack.

"Boy, put that notebook away! This ain't school! And I ain't gonna tell you what to preach about either," my father said.

"I want you to find a quiet place tonight when you get back to our house. And then talk to God. Ask him for help. Before you know it, that little notebook you love so much will be brimming with sermon ideas."

This was certainly not the structured process for preparing for a sermon that I learned in class, but it was worth a try.

"Okay Pops, I trust you."

"Don't trust *me*! Trust *Him*!" My father said as he pointed to the ceiling.

As I hugged him goodbye and walked away, I could hear him calling my name.

"Jacob?"

"Yes, sir?" I said as I stepped back into his room.

"Bring me some of your mama's peach cobbler when you come to visit tomorrow."

Meet Jacob Anderson in *The Rhythm in Blue* and *But Now I See by* Crystal Senter-Brown- available on Nook, Kindle and in print!