

# Bless Your Heart

Fiction • Alex Lewis

Southern hospitality. I've always hated that expression. Because, yes, this Easter Sunday was brimming with smiles, small talk, and anecdotes of the cousins' latest successes, but we all knew it was so much more than that. It was drama, theatrics, whispered judgments, and the least humble of brags. It wasn't hospitable at all.

"Elizabeth," I heard my shrill Aunt Jennifer squawk from across the kitchen, "Come here right now, missy." Missy. I hated that. She pulled me in for a halfhearted hug, the smell of her perfume burning my lungs as it washed over me. "You're getting so big." She took a step back to look at me.

I had realized recently that the phrase, 'you're getting big,' stopped being a compliment after age fourteen. I nodded, kept the small talk going, and endured a few more skillfully masked insults. Before long I was back in the buffet line that my grandmother had curated for the Easter celebration, filled with homemade casseroles, Jennifer's famous cornbread, and fried chicken that we all pretended wasn't from KFC. I drank bright red Kool-Aid from a clear solo cup and listened to the conversations around me. It was less exhausting than participating in them.

"I heard your oldest couldn't go into the air force like he wanted to. I can't imagine how hard he took that. Bless his heart."

Bless your heart. The most derogatory remark an old southern woman can utter. Its effectiveness displays the main tenant of southern hospitality: leave the nastiest insults unspoken. There was a certain art to it.

By saying, 'bless his heart,' what my first cousin once removed, Rosie, had meant was, 'How pitiful.' This was because Rosie probably knew why he had actually been denied by the military.

Linda, Rosie's sister-in-law, had told everyone that her oldest son, Brent, had been refused entrance because he was color blind, but I, and I suppose Rosie, knew that wasn't true. He had failed the psychiatric test because he was on antidepressants during his senior year of high school. But no one was allowed to talk about that. Just like we weren't allowed to talk about how my Aunt Jennifer and her husband Mark had been to couple's therapy three years ago after she cheated on him with the neighbor, or how my older brother had dropped out of college earlier that month. My mother had reminded us all in the car that it wasn't an "extended family topic." Whatever that meant.

Worried that another relative might question me on my grades, college plans, or why I still didn't have a boyfriend, I wandered upstairs, into the stuffy attic, especially warm on a spring afternoon. I rummaged through the deep pockets of my bag, retrieving a pack of Lucky Strikes. I made my way to the window on the far side of the house which supplied a perfect view of the backyard where the men of the family played a bastardized version of baseball.

"Elizabeth?" I heard as I rounded the corner to the farthest expanse of the attic. It was my older cousin, John, home for a short break from his fancy, liberal arts college in California. I tried to act casual, hiding the carton of cigarettes behind my back. "It's fine," he laughed, pulling a lit cigarette up from where he hid it behind the windowsill, "That's the only reason I'm up here." I gave an appreciative laugh in response as I slowly walked over to the lofty window, open fully to let the soft breeze into the scorching attic.

I carefully lit the cigarette, turning away from the view of the yard just in case a curious cousin were to glance up and see me. It felt weird. No one knew that I smoked outside of the friend that supplied me with the cigarettes. And my father who had found my stash of Marlboro Silvers in the garage and promptly replaced them with a carton of Luckies. He left a yellow sticky note on top of them: 'Lizzie, if you're going to break the rules, at least break them well.' He had known that the cigarettes were mine, I didn't know how, but I didn't question it. I had found his stash just a few weeks before and hadn't said anything to mom. Maybe he knew that too and

was just returning the favor. Yet another thing that was left suspensefully unspoken between us.

“You’re a junior now, right?” John asked. I nodded. “Cool,” he nodded his head slowly, “And you’re playing the organ down at church?”

“Yeah.”

“I bet Debbie was pretty pissed about that. You know her son has been in piano lessons since fourth grade trying to get that job.”

“Yeah,” I laughed.

Nothing unspoken. No suffocating subtext. We sat in silence, watching the game below us. Mark and Jeff, brothers, were the two team captains. They were horribly competitive and turned every gathering at my grandmother’s house into a battle of the families, with their sons filling either baseball team. Brent stood at the makeshift pitcher’s mound, ready to pitch the ball for Mark to hit. The crack of the bat was followed by a sharp smacking sound. The ball had struck Brent in the temple, knocking him off the mound and into the kept lawn. Gasps sounded throughout the yard, Linda ran over to her son, grabbing at his face. John sat still. I held my breath. Brent shot up, shoving his mother’s arms off himself.

“Sorry, son. You all right?” Mark asked. Brent only laughed in response.

“You did that on purpose,” he yelled, pointing an accusatory finger in his direction.

“If my aim was that good, I’d be in the big leagues, kid.” The spectators nervously laughed around them, hoping that Brent was joking.

“Don’t call me kid. Stop patronizing me, okay? Just because I didn’t get into the air force, because I know that’s what you’re thinking. That’s what everyone’s thinking. Poor Brent. Poor you, Mark. You’re the one who can’t even keep his wife happy enough to stay out of the neighbor’s house, yeah? Poor Mark.”

“Brent,” an uncle said from across the yard, trying to intervene.

“Oh, don’t act like you’re not the problem too, Justin. I heard you telling your wife that I belonged in the nuthouse earlier in the living room. Right? So let’s share then. Since you want to share. Your daughter doesn’t even receive communion anymore. What’s that all about? Maybe it’s because she’s following in the footsteps of her big sister who had a baby, let’s see, five months after her wedding? Let’s do that math. And the priest was still

willing to officiate it. Now I wonder what divinely inspired him to do that. Maybe the same divine inspiration that helped you buy your fancy new Mustang. That inspiration you 'earned' with the law degree your daddy paid for. I'm so- I'm- I can't-." He began to walk away, toward Justin's Mustang that he had mentioned a few moments ago.

The entire yard stood in silence, no one brave enough to call attention to themselves. He approached the vehicle, stopping to take a rest, I assumed, as the bump on his temple grew bigger and more purple by the second. He raised his hand, clenching it into a fist and bringing it down onto the hood of the car, placing an ugly dent right in the middle. The car alarm sounded, masking the gasps of the family and the scream of Justin's wife. John clapped a hand over his face, muffling a laugh.

This couldn't be happening. There it all was, everything everyone had been thinking all afternoon, out in the open. It hung in the air like a thick layer of smoke, leaving the audience choking on the implications.

"What the hell is going on?" John asked through fits of laughter. I shrugged, at a loss for words.

I looked towards my father, who stood in the corner of the yard, beer in hand. He held the same expression that he had before the incident: unreadable. I was waiting for his response, a reaction of some sort. He turned away from the scene, as Linda ran after her concussed son, Jennifer tried to calm her husband down, and Justin slapped the steering wheel of the car as he tried unsuccessfully to turn off the alarm. I watched as he made his way to the farthest flowerbeds. He pulled a small carton out of his vest pocket, along with a lighter. For the first time in my life, I watched as he lit a cigarette, holding it carelessly in the air as he watched the scene unfold before him.

Because why not? Why not leave it all out in the open? There was no more game to be played this afternoon, no more subtle disses, no more tension over clear solo cups of red Kool-Aid, no more baseball games to reconcile brotherly hatred. Suddenly, in the wake of true, authentic, Yankee-like insults, the entire family seemed to let out a deep sigh of relief. Because why did it matter if my father smoked a cigarette?

This time next year we would all pretend like we had forgotten the incident altogether, as if it slipped our minds. I knew that Justin would show up to church next Sunday in his Mustang, miraculously dent-free, and shake

Brent's hand like nothing had happened. Because if we were to remember this, then what was the point? There would be no more sweeping things under the rug. We could no longer pretend that we were all free of flaws and ignorant of each other's business. Because that wouldn't be hospitable at all, would it?