

Leah Billings

Exodus

In the dry, open country of Kansas, there wasn't much to break the silence except the wind. The landscape was brown and endless, stretching out as far as Faith's young eyes could see, and in its emptiness was a solemn reminder of what her father called "the weight of the world's sin." Faith was six years old the first time he took her to the very edge of their property, where a single dirt road stretched endlessly like a scar across the prairie. Its dusty path was the only break through the endless fields of sun-bleached corn. There, with the dying sun casting an orange halo over the distant field, he knelt beside her in the dirt, hands clasped in prayer, and instructed her to do the same.

"This land is blessed," he said in his deep, rigid voice. "This land was given to us by the Almighty. And He demands our reverence."

Faith knelt, pressing her hands into the cool soil as she mimicked her father's solemn stance. She could feel the wind pulling at her braids, her knees sinking into the dry, cracked earth. It felt strange, being so close to the dirt, but she kept her gaze fixed on the ground. Her father said God spoke in silence, that if she listened closely enough, she would hear His will.

"We're a chosen people," he whispered as if someone else were listening. "And when the time comes, we will prove our devotion."

As Faith grew, the boundaries of her world seemed to tighten. Every unmoving mile of Kansas lay upon her like a dense, inescapable weight pressing down from above. Every Sunday, she sat through endless sermons that echoed through the walls of their small church, each one a constant reminder of her predetermined fate to be chosen, to devote herself, and to sacrifice for the sake of their religion. Faith would sit next to her mother, her dainty hands folded neatly in her lap, trying to absorb Reverend Pharis's words without letting them sink too deep. She knew there were parts of their world that would never make sense to her, parts she shamefully feared.

Faith would occasionally hear whispered fragments from the larger world in turmoil. There were murmurs of boys from their town being drafted and soldiers being sent to Vietnam. Her mother would turn the radio low, but not low enough to hide the steady stream of news crackling over the airwaves. Protests in Washington, images of soldiers trudging through dense, foreign jungles, the rising toll of lives lost. Faith's father, however, never spoke of it. There wasn't much to their life out there. To him, the war was yet another piece of evidence of God's wrath stirring among the faithless.

Faith and her mother were seated on the porch as her father worked inside, meticulously cleaning his beloved hunting rifles. As they sat under a velvet-black sky, her mother turned to her, a cigarette smoldering between her fingers. She rarely smoked in front of Faith, as if it were a sin she didn't want her daughter to witness. Her mother's voice was soft, barely a whisper above the sound of crickets chirping in the field.

"Faith, do you know what it means to be saved?"

Faith, at fourteen, now understood that these questions never had simple answers. She frowned slightly, searching her mother's face for clues. Her mother's eyes were shadowed, worn with a lifetime of duty and silence.

"Like, hell?"

Her mother took a long drag on the cigarette, the ember glowing bright in the darkness. She exhaled slowly, the smoke curling around her face before dissipating into the night air.

"Not just hell. It means you give yourself to God, wholly and without question. We don't choose our path, Faith; God chooses it for us, for all of us are sinners." She pointed out into the night sky, her hand sweeping above the field and into the stars.

Faith followed her mother's gaze, trying to see what she saw. But all she could make out were the silhouettes of the corn stalks, swaying gently in the breeze.

"I don't understand," she said softly.

Her mother sighed, flicking the ash from her cigarette. "He will find you eventually."

The words spewed from Reverend Pharis echoed in her mind, reminding her of the disconnect between faith and reality. Her confusion consumed her as she thought of all the suffering in the world. If there truly was a god, why did they allow such pain and misery to exist? Her foundation of belief crumbled beneath her as she struggled to make sense of it all. Faith felt a wave of shame wash over her, hot and prickling against her skin. The very thought of questioning God, of doubting His plan, felt like a betrayal. She knew the words that would tumble from her father's mouth if he could hear her thoughts. Heresy, blasphemy, sin!

"What if..." she trembled.

Faith swallowed hard, pushing down the lump that had formed in her throat. "What if I don't feel chosen?"

The words hung heavy and forbidden between them.

"What if I'm not good enough? What if I can't be saved?"

Her mother's silence felt like a low, oppressive mist, creeping through the bones of the house, settling on Faith's skin until she could hardly breathe. She turned to look at her mother, searching for any sign: a glance, a sigh, anything that might release her from this suffocating, invisible weight. But her mother remained, staring out at the horizon with that same stoic gaze, unyielding as stone. Faith realized then that her mother would never bridge the silence, that this was her only answer: an immutable, wordless disappointment. And as the shadows lengthened, she felt herself shrink within it, becoming no more than a figure outlined against a boundless, indifferent sky, trapped between her mother's unmoving form and the endless fields that stretched out beyond them, stretching, waiting, cold, silent, and vast.

Faith awoke with a start, her heart pounding in her chest as her father's voice echoed through the thin walls of their farmhouse. The sky outside her window was still an inky black. The first tendrils of dawn were barely visible on the horizon. She knew what was coming and could feel it in the heavy footsteps that approached her bedroom door.

The door swung open, and her father's silhouette filled the frame, his broad shoulders nearly touching its sides.

"Get up," he commanded, his voice rough with sleep and something Faith had come to recognize as a righteous anger.

Faith sat upright in her bed, still wrapped in the hazy shock of sleep.

"Damnit, child, did you hear me!"

Faith scrambled out of bed, her bare feet hitting the cold wooden floor. She knew better than to make her father wait. Her father grabbed her roughly by the shoulder, his fingers digging into her skin through the thin fabric of her nightgown. With a forceful shove, he pushed her down to the floor. Faith's knees hit the hardwood with a painful crack. She bit back a yelp, knowing it would only fuel her father's rage.

"Pray," he commanded, towering over her. "Pray until you feel the grace of God enter your wretched soul."

The wooden floorboards were ice-cold beneath her bare legs. Nonetheless, Faith obeyed.

"Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name..."

"Your mother told me what you said today." His words cut through her prayer.

She kept her head bowed, her words tumbling out in a desperate plea for forgiveness.

"Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven..."

"You doubt His plan for you?" Her father's voice was low, laced with a simmering fury. "You question the path He has laid before you?"

Faith's hands trembled as she clasped them tighter, her knuckles turning white. She could feel her father's gaze boring into the top of her head, could sense the disgust radiating off him in waves.

"Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our trespasses..."

"There is no forgiveness for those who turn their backs on God,"

"as we forgive those who trespass against us..."

"Do you know what happens to sinners, Faith? Do you know what happens to those who doubt the word of God?" He leaned in close, his breath hot against her face. "They burn. They burn for all eternity in the fires of Hell."

"Amen." Faith kept her head bowed, her lips moving in silent prayer as her father's words washed over her like a tidal wave of condemnation. She could feel the weight of his judgment pressing down on her, crushing the air from her lungs.

"Get dressed," he spat, turning on his heel. "We leave for church in ten minutes."

The door slammed behind him, the sound reverberating through Faith's bones. She stayed there for a moment, her knees aching against the hard floor, her heart pounding in her ears. Slowly, she pushed herself to her feet, wincing at the pain that shot through her legs.

The ride to church was silent, the air thick with unspoken tension. The only sound was the crunching of gravel beneath the tires of their old truck. Faith kept her gaze fixed out the window, watching the fields of corn blur past, the stalks swaying in the early morning breeze. She could feel her father's gaze on her, heavy and judging. She clasped her hands even tighter together. When they arrived, he gripped her arm, his fingers digging into her flesh as he led her towards the church.

They walked in silence to the white clapboard building, its steeple piercing the pale blue sky. Inside, the congregation was already seated, their heads bowed in prayer. Faith took her usual place in the front pews.

Reverend Pharis stood at the pulpit, his wiry frame drenched beneath his soot-hued robe. His face remained grave and solemn, and his eyes burned with a hellish anger that leered over Faith. As she and her father bowed their heads, he began to speak, his voice booming through the small chapel.

"Brothers and sisters, we live in a world of sin," he began, his eyes sweeping over the congregation. "A world where the devil lurks in every corner, ready to claim the souls of the weak and the doubters." He paused, letting the words sink in, his gaze heavy as it landed on each face before him.

He continued, his voice dropping to a near whisper,

"But last night, God spoke to me,"

Faith's mother shifted slightly, watching as Faith furrowed her brows.

"Yes, the Almighty Himself gave me a vision. In this vision," Reverend Pharis continued, his voice rising with fervor, "I saw a great cleansing. A purification of the righteous. And a sacrifice...a sacrifice that will prove our unwavering devotion to the Lord."

A murmur rippled through the congregation, a mixture of awe and trepidation. Faith's mother reached over and grasped her hand, squeezing it tightly. But Faith couldn't return the gesture, her fingers numb and unresponsive.

"He told me that the gates of heaven are nearly full. Only a few seats remain for the faithful, those pure and worthy."

Faith felt a chill run down her spine at Reverend Pharis's words. The air in the church seemed to thicken, charged with a palpable sense of foreboding. She glanced around at the faces of the congregation, seeing a mix of rapt attention and fear.

"And do you know what the Lord demands of us, to secure our place in His eternal kingdom?"

His voice dropped to a whisper once more, yet it seemed to echo in the hushed stillness of the church.

"Blood."

The word hung in the air.

"The blood of the damned, the sinners, the nonbelievers! The Lord has shown me the way. We must cleanse ourselves of the wicked!"

The Reverend's crooked finger swept across the room as he recited,

"Leviticus 24:16, And he that blasphemeth the name of the Lord, he shall surely be put to death, and all the congregation shall certainly stone him: as well the stranger, as he that is born in the land, when he blasphemeth the name of the Lord, shall be put to death."

A collective gasp rippled through the church. Faith felt her mother's hand tighten around hers, nails digging into her palm. Faith's eyes bulged as she remained on the Reverend and his speech.

"Exodus and Deuteronomy! Does anyone remember? Deuteronomy 17:7, *The hands of the witnesses shall be first upon him to put him to death,*"

The congregation joined the Reverend in reciting the rest of the verse,

"and afterward the hands of all the people. So thou shalt put the evil away from among you."

Everyone except Faith.

"Yes, my brothers and sisters," Reverend Pharis continued, his voice rising with fire.

"We must take up the sword of righteousness and cut out the cancer that threatens to destroy us from within. Only then can we secure our spot in the Lord's Kingdom."

The walls of the church seemed to exhale a low and collective "Amen", their heads bowing like wilted flowers, while Faith sat stiff in her pew. Her heart pounded in her chest as the Reverend's words echoed in her mind. Blood. Sacrifice. Cleansing. Faith felt her mom's worried glance land on her, a quick flick of eyes that lingered just long enough to ask if she was okay without saying a word, but Faith quickly turned her gaze to her father. She lingered on his face, set in grim determination, his eyes alight with a fear she had never seen before.

As the service ended, the congregation filed out of the church in a daze, a hushed murmur of fear rippling through the crowd. Faith noticed the other families huddled together, speaking in hushed, urgent tones. Mothers clutched their children close, while fathers cast wary glances at one another, as if trying to discern who among them might be deemed unworthy in the eyes of God. Faith's father gripped her shoulder, steering her towards the truck.

"You heard the Reverend," he said into Faith's ear, his voice low and intense. "The time has come. We must prepare."

Faith nodded mutely, her throat too tight to speak. She climbed into the truck without question, yet her mind was in a whirlwind of thoughts.

As soon as they entered the house, he turned to her, his eyes blazing.

"Go to your room and pray, Faith. Pray for guidance, for strength. Beg for forgiveness for your doubts and wicked thoughts. The Lord will judge us all soon."

Faith quickly obeyed, ascending the creaky stairs to her small bedroom. She knelt by her bed, clasping her hands together until her knuckles turned white. But the words wouldn't come. Her mind was a tempest of confusion and fear. Reverend Pharis's sermon echoed in her head.

Blood. Sacrifice. Cleansing.

She squeezed her eyes shut, trying to block out the images that flooded her mind. The thought of taking a life, of spilling blood in the name of God...it made her stomach turn. Was this truly the Lord's will?

As Faith hunched over the hardwood planks of her room, she heard a faint murmur beneath her. Forgetting her prayer, she pressed her ear against the wood, straining to catch her parents' muffled voices from the other side.

"...too young. She's not ready..." Her mother's pleading tone was barely audible.

"She must be cleansed. It's God's will." Her father's voice was firm, unyielding.

"But she's our daughter! She is hardly fourteen! Surely this can't be!"

"Enough!" Her father's shout made Faith flinch. "You will not question the Lord!"

Faith recoiled from the floorboards as if they had burned her, her heart racing. She stared at the wooden planks, her mind spinning with the implications of what she had just overheard. Cleansed? What did her father mean? A sickening dread began to pool in her stomach. She thought back to Reverend Pharis's sermon, his words now taking on a new, terrifying meaning. Blood. Sacrifice. Was she to be the sacrifice? The thought made her head swim, the room suddenly feeling too small, the air too thin.

Faith stood on shaky legs, her mind made up. She couldn't stay here, not now, not with this.

She had to get out. Now.

Moving quickly, she grabbed her school satchel, dumping the contents onto the bed. With trembling hands, she packed a change of clothes, a few precious keepsakes, and the small stash of coins and crumpled bills she'd saved from her chores.

Her fingers brushed against the small wooden cross her mother had given her for her birthday. She hesitated for a moment, then snatched it up and slipped it into her pocket.

She crept to the window, pushing it open as quietly as she could. The autumn air was cool against her flushed skin.

Faith swung one leg over the windowsill, her heart pounding in her ears. She paused, glancing back at her room - the faded quilt on her bed, the stack of well-worn books on her desk, the cross hanging above her door. For a moment, doubt crept into her mind. Was she really going to do this? Leave everything she had ever known?

But then she thought of her father's words, of the hatred in Reverend Pharis' voice, and a shudder ran through her spine.

No, she couldn't stay. Not now.

She swung her other leg over, perching on the sill for a heartbeat before dropping down onto the roof of the porch below. The corrugated metal groaned under her weight, and she froze, holding her breath. But no sound came from within the house.

Sending up a silent prayer, Faith crept to the edge of the roof and lowered herself down, dropping the last few feet to the ground. However, the impact shot through her knee, surrounding the same spot her father had slammed her onto the hardwood floor earlier that morning. A yelp escaped Faith's lips.

From the kitchen window, Faith saw her father's head snap up from the kitchen table. He rose slowly from his chair, his eyes narrowing as he squinted into the midday sun, searching for any sign of movement.

"Faith? That you, girl?" His gruff voice carried an unmistakable edge of anger.

Faith held her breath, pressing herself against the side of the house, willing herself to become invisible in the shadows. Her father's footsteps echoed on the porch, each creak of the wooden boards sending a jolt of fear through her body.

"Faith! Answer me, girl!" His voice was closer now, just on the other side of the wall.

Faith squeezed her eyes shut, her heart pounding so loudly she was sure he could hear it. She clutched her satchel to her chest, ready to run.

The footsteps stopped. Faith held herself utterly still, not daring to breathe.

His voice was low, dangerous. "Faith! I know you're out here, girl. Don't make me come find you."

Faith squeezed her eyes shut, silently praying that he would give up and go back inside. But the footsteps continued, slowly circling the house. She could hear the scrape of her father's gun dragging slowly across the floor, each rasping sound pulling at the silence like a reluctant echo.

She realized with a surge of terror that he was hunting her.

Faith knew she had only seconds before her father would round the corner and find her.

With a burst of adrenaline, she pushed off from the wall and sprinted towards the cornfield, her satchel bouncing against her hip.

She heard her father's shout behind her, but she didn't dare look back. She crashed through the first row of stalks, the leaves whipping at her face and arms. The field seemed to go on forever as Faith ran blindly into an abyss of corn.

Her lungs burned, and her legs ached, but she pushed on, driven by pure fear. She could hear her father crashing through the corn behind her, his heavy footfalls getting closer.

She heard her father's enraged shout as he spotted her fleeing figure. "FAITH! Get back here, girl! Don't you dare run from the Lord's will!"

His heavy footfalls pounded behind her, getting closer with each passing second. Faith pushed herself harder, her lungs burning, her legs pumping. She zigzagged through the corn, trying to lose him in the maze of green.

But her father knew these fields; he'd walked them every day of his life. Faith could hear him crashing through the stalks, his breath coming in angry huffs.

"You can't run from God, Faith! He sees all, knows all!"

Steaming tears streamed down Faith's face as she ran. She burst out of the cornfield and found herself on the dirt road that bordered their property. Without hesitation, she turned and ran down the road, kicking up clouds of dust behind her.

Faith's feet pounded against the packed dirt, each stride carrying her further from the only life she'd ever known. The dirt burned in her lungs as she gulped it in, pushing herself to run faster, harder. Behind her, she could hear her father's enraged shouts, his heavy footsteps thudding closer.

"FAITH! You can't escape His judgment!" His words carried on the wind, lashing at her back like shards of glass. "The Lord will find you, girl! You can't hide from His wrath!"

Suddenly, a large boom echoed through their property, and a sharp pain shot through her leg.

Faith stumbled, gasping as she hit the ground. Her vision blurred, and the sounds around her faded, replaced by the pounding of her heart.

Before she could gather her thoughts, her father appeared, looming over her like a storm cloud, grasping his rifle.

"You think you can run away and be spared!" he shouted, his voice a mixture of rage and desperation. "You're putting everything at risk. My place in heaven, Faith! Do you understand that you've disobeyed the Lord!"

She looked down, horrified to see blood pooling on the ground, her breath coming in quick gasps.

"Please, no," she cried, the sound barely escaping her lips. Her knees sank in the dirt, her body shaking with sobs. Everything she had ever known, ever believed, was crumbling around her. The God she had been taught to trust unconditionally now stood silent, a mere witness to her despair. The heavens offered no comfort, only the chilling realization that perhaps the divine had never been listening at all, or worse, that it had, and simply chosen not to intervene.

The weight of his voice pressed down on her, mingling with the thudding of her heart.

“I must secure my place with the Lord! The sacrifice must be made!” He stepped closer, his voice dripping with anger. “You are an evil entity, Faith! A sinner walking among us! Your rebellion threatens to destroy everything we’ve built! You need to understand this isn’t just about you!”

The barrel of his gun slowly touched her stomach as he grunted in a whisper, “*Exodus 22:18*”

“What?” Faith uttered softly, wincing in pain.

“Recite it, child!” The spit from his bark landed amongst her cheeks.

Through her tears, she recited, “*Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live.*”

Faith recoiled at her own words, her heart pounding in her chest.

“Dad, please! I’m not what you think! I’m not evil, I’m just a *girl!*” she cried, desperation spilling over.

She screamed through her pouring tears, “I’m your daughter!”

“No.”

He breathed slowly, like the air itself was holding its breath. His eyes found hers, black and burning, and she felt it crawling under her skin before he even said a word.

“*You’re the Devil.*” he replied lowly, without a sense of emotion in his voice.

Before Faith could comprehend his next move, a sudden rustle to her left drew her attention. Faith’s heart leaped as her mother emerged from the cornstalks, and in her hand glinted a metallic flash.

“Mom!” Faith shouted, hope mingling with fear. “Help me!”

But her mother hesitated.

The shadows cast by the white sun highlighted the lines etched by years of conflict and fear. Her lips quivered slightly downward.

“Faith, you need to understand,” she said, her voice trembling. “You have strayed from God.” Tears streamed down her mother’s face as she sucked in a whimper.

“You are a sinner, and your defiance brings peril upon us all. We cannot afford to turn from His grace.”

Faith’s heart sank as she took in the conflicting pain in her mother’s eyes. It was clear that the battle within her raged fiercely, the gun still gripped tightly in her hand.

Faith lifted her gaze to meet her mother’s and, it lingered there, like a deer pausing in the underbrush.

“Please.”

In that short moment of despair, two gunshots rang out, shattering the country-silence like glass. Faith’s eyes widened as a jolt of pain ripped through her, even more intense than before. She found herself falling further into the ground, just below the smoky barrel of her father’s rifle. The world tilted into darkness as her body hit the ground with a thud.

A strange stillness enveloped her. She gasped for breath, but the air felt less like the dust and dirt of the earth and more like the weightlessness of water. She felt herself rising, her spirit lifting from the pain-riddled body that lay sprawled in the dirt. A rush of warmth pooled beneath her, but as her vision blurred, something in her mind clicked into place.

She realized then that she was only shot once.

A singular voice echoed in the distance, muffled and distorted. This voice was unmistakably her father's.

“What have you done, woman!” he shouted, his voice cracking with terror. “You’ve damned us both!”

Faith floated just above the ground, watching as her mother stood frozen, the realization of her actions dawning upon her, her shotgun still smoking in her hand.

“Faith!” her mother cried out, her voice quivering with urgency as she moved closer. “Oh, my child! He’s shot you! Are you well?”

Her mother’s tears mixed with the beads of sweat on her head.

“Wake up. C’mon, Faith, you will be okay, baby.”

Her voice now trembled to a soft whisper.

“Speak to me, Faith.” Her words faded into the air, swallowed by the dust as Faith’s vision slowly began to blur.

At the same time, Faith could imagine her father, eyes wide with disbelief, the gun he had just fired at Faith shivering in his hand.

The panic in his voice mingled with anger as he processed the betrayal and horror unfolding before him.

“You shot me!” he cried.

Faith’s heart ached as she pictured the weight of their tragedy. The man she had always feared, who had sought to bring her to heel with threats of damnation, now lay vulnerable, staring into the abyss of his choices.

Will this be the end?

How is this fair?

The world around her started to swallow her in a brilliant light that felt both terrifying and comforting. Images flashed before her: moments of love and sorrow, each one sticky and thick, twisting together until she couldn’t tell where one ended and the next began. In that light, she understood something profound: this was not the end but a beginning of sorts. As the light grew brighter, her thoughts swirled with the understanding of life beyond life. She felt a sense of clarity washing over her, as if the burdens of fear and judgment were lifting away. But before she could grasp it, the light enveloped her completely, leaving behind the chaos of her mother’s despair and the pain of the world she once knew.

Suddenly, in that moment, she felt an overwhelming sense of peace.

“*Faith*”

Faith.