

# A MAN WHO PRAYS

*Richard Hawley*

Paul Breit opened his eyes a few minutes before first light, considered blankly for a moment, then prayed with all his heart for his Lord to have mercy upon his soul. Prayer—particularly this simple petition—had become so fundamental, so automatic in his conscious life that he expressed it more as an attitude than as an intelligible arrangement of words. When Paul Breit prayed, he felt as if he were *leaning*, forward and up. He placed his palm lightly upon his wife's sleeping cheek and got out of bed.

Through the smoky light of the upstairs hallway, he peered into his sons' room and saw the backs of their heads on the bunk bed pillows. Staring past himself in the bathroom mirror, he thanked God for his bounty.

When he had showered, dressed, and started the coffee downstairs his wife joined him in the kitchen light. Her eyes were swollen with sleep.

"Will you be home tonight? For dinner?"

"I don't know yet. I hope so."

"You don't know. When will you know?"

"It really depends what they throw on my desk after the copy deadline. The big stuff always seems to come in late."

"Big stuff..." Linda Breit did not think much of the *Beacon*, the paper Paul worked for, nor for most of the people she knew who worked there, nor, really, for journalism itself.

"I'll call you as soon as I know. I'm almost certain I'll make dinner."

"It'd be nice for the boys to see you."

"I'll see them." Paul drew his wife's head gently to his chest and brought his cheek against her hair. From the core of his stomach he felt an almost overwhelming effusion of love for her, for the fact of their marriage, for the thought of her separate from him and asleep, of her dressing the boys—firm and dexterous amidst their jumpy exuberance—at the door waving them off to the bus in the March chill.

"I'll call you, love."

"Call me."

Paul Breit took his place in morning traffic and through its halting progress prayed that God would work his will through him. He prayed for spontaneity. He prayed, at the first stop light,

for the remission of Marcie Hutton's cancer, for the painless and speedy recovery of a neighbor's infant son, a first born, whose heart had been surgically altered the previous day, and he prayed for the comforting of his mother's arthritic pain and for Grace to enter her life.

As he approached the city, his thoughts turned to the troubles at Mark's, his older son's, school. The situation was clearly not improving. He asked himself, out loud, how bad could it *be*? He remembered his own school years, even the early ones, fairly distinctly. There had been amiable women, very kind women, and an ogre or two, but their personalities, however prominent in his childhood days, had not seemed to touch his inner life very deeply; they were important facts, like the weather. But Mark's teacher in the second grade, Mrs. Hagermeyer, seemed to touch him deeply, to hurt him. She had detected, she believed, both a reading problem and a speech problem, had asked that Mark be given special tests. She had changed his reading group—and thus his social place in the classroom. All of this seemed to confuse the Mark, to make him feel vaguely accused, and now for the first time since his infancy he was crying at home. He would cry at night in his bed and, Linda said, in the afternoons when he came home from school. "Aren't I a *good* reader?" he had asked Paul, miserably, the night before.

Paul and Linda had not liked Mrs. Hagermeyer when they saw her in action on Parents Night, nor did they warm to her when they were called in to discuss Mark's reading problem. She spoke loudly and artificially, a shrill edge to her voice. Paul could only imagine the effect of her presence in the classroom beyond that Mark's once-incessant chattering about school had ceased. Why wasn't he more resilient? Paul asked himself. Had he and Linda been cloying? Had he, in finding his sons unutterably lovable, made them insufficiently durable? He opened his mind wordlessly to God.

Linda, with his encouragement, had looked into the private schools. One, the Hadley School, she reported was a cheerful, bustling, homey place: a converted mansion on cultivated lawns, a child-scaled world, a second grade of only fourteen, and an attractive young teacher, buck-toothed and smiley, with Gibson Girl hair. Paul and Linda observed and interviewed for a morning and were encouraged that Mark might be admitted, even mid-year. Driving home from the school, Paul felt excited and also faintly wary that a world of "better things" seemed to exist in such proximity to, yet not quite touching, his own world. The cost for Mark to attend the Hadley School would be \$13,000 a year, and they did not have it, any of it.

“*Why on earth* should a good-natured, eager seven-year-old be frightened to tears at the prospect of failure in *the second grade?*” Paul thought, as he pulled into the *Beacon* lot. He sat for a moment at the wheel, upset, his throat slightly constricted, imagining his son, tense and hotly ashamed before his classmates as he stumbled over the blurred text of his reader. Paul prayed, concluding, “Thy will be done.”

Theoretically, Paul Breit’s work as copy editor was supposed to commence when he arrived at his desk at half past eight. His receiving basket should have contained city politics and police stories from the previous night and there should have been a few reviews of new movies and first nights. These he was to correct, trim, measure, and send to the shop to set; then, with a rough idea of what was in and what would come in later, he would begin to lay out the news pages of the evening edition. In practice, there was increasingly little late-night copy from the reporters, and there was little to edit when Paul arrived at the *Beacon*. This morning there was a Highway Department press release, unedited, indicating driver’s license revocations and suspensions in the metro area. Paul read through the copy carefully but without interest. He did not recognize any of the names among the dozens of drivers cited. He typed a correct, voiceless, lead to the piece, composed a mid-sized headline, edited the copy, and walked it to the shop.

When he returned, with coffee, to his desk, he was greeted by some of the reporters who had begun, in a trickle, to arrive. Fritz Tull and Lanny Parkman both promised copy shortly; but neither seemed anxious to begin writing.

As Paul read last night’s edition for errors, and to pass the time, he listened to Tull and Parkman chatting in Tull’s alcove.

“What time did you leave, anyway? When I got home I looked at the clock by the bed and saw it was three. Christ.”

“I left just after you.”

“Christ. What about whatsername, Melissa? She seemed to be loosening up a little. Did you and Melissa establish meaningful contact?”

“Deeply meaningful. It’s *Melinda*. ”

“Christ. How do you finesse that at home?”

“I am a reporter. A reporter must go where the action is.”

“You are a rake and an infidel, Parkman.”

“I am a reporter, a fearless reporter.”

Parkman’s phone rang and he moved to his desk to take the call.

Paul Breit thought about Cissy Parkman, Parkman’s wife and a friend of Linda’s. The Parkmans had had a baby, a girl, a year

ago and had taken the Breits' crib and some other infant things. Cissy seemed to Paul an unaccountably alarming person: slight, pretty, dark, with skittish dark eyes like frightened animal's. She seemed painfully unsure of herself, even among friends, and especially so since the baby. She had been over to lunch with Linda the previous week, and when Paul asked Linda about it, Linda had said, "She was over here for at least two hours and never once looked at me, only at the baby who was fine on the floor. I don't know whether she is bored or on the brink of hysterics. I am always extra nice to Cissy and exhausted when she leaves."

Paul wondered if Cissy knew about Lanny's infidelities. She probably knows, or suspects, he thought, but he could not imagine them talking about it. He opened his heart in prayer for the Parkmans, for their mutual love and trust, for grace and forgiveness, for a glimmer of the peace that passes all understanding.

Parkman put down the phone and was on his feet. "Hey, Fritz. Got a story. A homicide. A mess. A woman in Highland View just shot her husband in a big row, then did herself. In front of three kids, all watching the thing. Ages five, seven, and nine. I'm going over there with a photographer. Want to come?"

"Can't, I'm way behind. Christ, it sounds horrendous anyway. Who you going to talk to? Sounds like everybody's dead."

"Somebody's there with the kids. I just called. I gotta run. Hey, Paul, whaddaya say? Come with me. You might be able to give some comfort. Come on. You can't possibly claim you have anything to do."

Paul Breit agreed to go. He was not a reporter; it wasn't his job. Nor did he feel any impulse to find out or to see anything more about what he had just heard from Parkman. If anything, he felt revulsion: a powerful sensation of hurt. The sudden loss of life, the stunning cruelty undid him every time. Wrongs that could not be righted, wrongs of endless resonance propelled him past his powers to explain. Paul did not like this in himself. He felt it was, in part, cowardly, at best unhelpful to those aggrieved. In response, and because there was no other work for him to do, Paul left the office with Parkman.

In the parking lot they met the photographer, a boy in jeans who looked to Paul no older than a teenager, and the three of them made their way in Parkman's station wagon to an address in Highland View.

Paul Breit prayed for the souls of the couple whose lives had ended that morning in rage and fear, and he prayed for the souls of the children who had seen it happen and who must now adapt to the unthinkable.

“What are you going to do?” Paul asked. “Check in with the police? Probably save you time.”

“No, the house, while everything’s still haywire. In an hour everything will be closed up and nobody talking.”

“Who is with the kids?”

“Don’t know. Maybe we’ll see.”

Parkman turned off the highway onto a street of nearly identical aluminum sided bungalows. He pulled up close behind a van bearing the call letters of one of the city TV networks. There was a squad car in front of the van, another in the nearest driveway.

“Not first on the scene,” said Parkman, “but no worse than second.”

Paul and the photographer followed Parkman up the walk to the door. Parkman rapped sharply, paused, and was about to rap again, when the door opened and a fat man in shirtsleeves gestured dramatically with a finger over his lips to be quiet. Parkman flashed his *Beacon* press card and mimed a gesture or two indicating affiliation with Paul and the photographer, then moved inside where, brightly illuminated on a sofa, a heavy woman was being interviewed for TV by a stylish young woman Paul recognized from the evening news.

“There was no special trouble, at least none that I know about,” the heavy woman was saying, looking past the interviewer to the camera. “Tim was away a lot, delivering, and that was a problem, I know.” The heavy woman was intent and obedient in the bright light in front of the camera. Paul could not see in this woman—neighbor? friend?—any sign of being touched by loss or death. Perhaps there hadn’t been time before the television crew set up, before the immediate demands of emergency and celebrity had overwhelmed her.

Two uniformed policemen emerged from a small kitchen. The first of them handed a cup of coffee to a man, not in uniform, seated at a cluttered dining table and writing in a notebook. At the far end of the table a coffee pot and a pitcher were askew on their sides. A box of cereal and some dishes littered the carpet, which was darkly stained.

“No, no trouble with the police,” the heavy woman said into the light. “I never even knew they had a gun. They never mentioned it. They musta just got it.”

Down the hallway a door opened, and a muffled woman’s voice could be heard. A boy started down the hall, then hesitated glancing up at the bright light, the strangers, and the talk. The woman’s voice cooed something, and the boy dropped his gaze and continued into the sitting room where he turned sharply past the policemen, past the mess about the table, and into the kitchen.

The interviewer caught the cameraman's eye, and the bright light was in an instant wheeled around to illumine the plaster archway into the kitchen.

"There was problems with money," the heavy woman said and then trailed off. In the kitchen the refrigerator door closed and the boy emerged into the white light holding a glass of juice. He blinked in the light, then stared past it, then dropped his gaze again and disappeared down the hall. Paul knew how that footage would be used on the evening news; he could see it, hear the voice-over commentary. The boy looked to him about seven, his son Mark's age.

Parkman had apparently gotten all the information he wanted from the fat man, who turned out to be the dead man's brother and the husband of the woman on the sofa. Parkman stood opposite the fat man, arms folded across his chest, nodding. Parkman had put his note pad away. The TV news team packed up their gear and departed. Paul and the photographer waited in the cold station wagon while Parkman talked with the police.

"Learn anything?" asked Paul when they were back on the highway.

"Just what happened."

"Why did that woman shoot her husband and then herself?"

"Who knows. Sounds to me like neglect. He was a trucker, away three or four days a week. They had three kids, she was home, no relief. So, he comes home dog-tired, something comes up, they tie into each other, it gets ugly, she sees red and lets go."

Once again Paul prayed for the mutual love and understanding of the Parkmans.

"There but for fortune go you or I," Parkman said, then looking at Paul. "Or at least I."

Parkman wrote up a medium length news feature on the double slaying, which Paul decided to run adjacent to a story about a handguns bill just reported out of committee and about to come before the state legislature. Paul filled in half the front page and most of the inside news pages with copy from the national wire services. By skipping lunch, he managed to have the news section of the paper laid out and put away — with the exception of a thirty inch hole on busing which Tull promised to edit and run down to the shop himself. Paul edited miscellaneous press releases — corporate promotions, shopping center openings, League of Women Voters minutes — and scanned the wire services for next-day copy, then, at quarter past three, he left the office.

During the Lenten season St. Stephen's celebrated daily communion services at 6:30 a.m. and 3:30 p.m. Except for one day when there was a crisis in the shop, Paul had attended each afternoon.

The church was chilly and forlorn in the late afternoon March light. Even the smaller Martyr's Chapel seemed vacant with its half dozen isolated communicants. Paul knelt in wordless prayer until the liturgy began. The daily services, far more than Sundays, allowed him to be uncritically carried along with the liturgy. He did not feel compelled to impose meaning upon the familiar prayers, certain phrases of which recurred to him unbidden in the course of his Lenten days, at the *Beacon* and at home. Reciting the liturgy, in the cold light of St. Stephen's, Paul Breit felt purposeful and at rest.

*We do earnestly repent, and we are heartily sorry for these our misdoings; The remembrance of them is grievous unto us; The burden of them is intolerable. Have mercy upon us, have mercy upon us, most merciful Father*

At the Highland View house, Paul mused numbly, he had been of no use to anyone, had scarcely spoken, had not even met the child's eyes.

*Take and eat this in remembrance that Christ died for thee,  
And feed on him in thy heart by faith, with thanksgiving  
Drink this in remembrance that Christ's blood was shed for thee,  
and be thankful.*

Being a couple of years older than Parkman, but still a friend, Paul knew it would not be too uncomfortable to talk to him over a lunch somewhere about how he was bearing up to paternity, to tell him he and Linda were concerned about Cissy.

*If any man say, I am a grievous sinner, and therefore am afraid to come: Wherefore then do ye not repent and amend?*

Thick, gold, promising light beamed from every window of the house as Paul Breit turned into his drive.

"Hi, Dad!"

"Hi, Dad!"

"Hello, Andrew! Hello, Mark!"

The two boys, holding shopping bags over their heads, clamored from the kitchen toward their father in the entranceway, veered sharply into the living room, then into the dining room, back into the kitchen, then around again. The blood-sweet scent of a roast was in the air.

"Hello, Linda." She wore a long skirt beneath her apron. "Going somewhere?"

"I am going to dinner with my family."

They embraced, and Linda held him tight around the neck.

"Hey, Bag-heads, how's school?"

"Good!"

"Good!"

"Mark, are you a good reader today?"

"Yes!" shrieked Mark, unmasking himself with a flourish.

"That's good. Maybe you could read me a story before I go to bed tonight."

"Too late!" Mark howled and ran off.

"Watch the news?" asked Linda.

"No thanks, I've seen it."

"Drink?"

"Drink."

Linda had lit a fire in the den. Paul followed her there with their drinks. With some excitement she told Paul a friend had said that if a specialist could confirm that Mark required a special learning program, the state could help pay for the Hadley School. "He says he's a good reader today," said Paul.

"Lucky for the state," said Linda.

From the living room they could hear the boys collapsing in laughter.

They sang the Doxology for grace, and as Paul sliced the roast, Andrew asked him if God was everywhere.

"I think so."

"Is God *inside* you?"

"In a way. If you let him in."

"How do you let him in?"

"You just—open up and let him. You pray."

"And then what?"

"And then you eat your supper."

And then, Paul Breit thought, you weaken with love. You marvel at the mystery of yourself propelled through ephemeral commonplaces: measuring out the news of the day, wearing a neck tie, carving beef. You feel yourself propelled unarmed and vulnerable through every terrifying uncertainty.

#### HIGHLAND WOMAN SLAYS SPOUSE, SELF, AS THREE CHILDREN LOOK ON

And nothing in any of that could account for this light, this meal, the face of this woman, the trust of these children.

Paul Breit filled their plates.