

anathema

By Nick Roberts

For Keagan

anathema

noun

anath'e ma

1a: one that is cursed by ecclesiastical authority

b: someone or something intensely disliked or loathed

2a: a ban or curse solemnly pronounced by ecclesiastical authority and accompanied by excommunication

b: the denunciation of something as accursed

c: a vigorous denunciation : CURSE

Merriam-Webster Dictionary

Prologue

The streetlights did their best to fend away the darkness, but there weren't enough of them to illuminate the entire neighborhood. The townhouses, in neat little clusters, formed a circle that made up the River's Edge subdivision. A playground and basketball court rested in the middle of the neighborhood, the road wrapping around it. There were signs everywhere that provided the residents with a sense of security: "SLOW, CHILDREN AT PLAY"; "SPEED LIMIT 15 MPH"; "NEIGHBORHOOD WATCH". Speed bumps aided in the illusion.

It was a half-moon night. Twelve-year-old David Russell was walking home along the sidewalk at a brisk pace. He pulled out his cell phone to check the time. 12:13 AM. He was supposed to be home over two hours ago. He prayed that his parents weren't waiting up for him. David shoved his hands in his pockets to try and keep them warm. He was short and scrawny for his age and felt the absence of body fat on brisk nights like this. The night air was chilled, typical for early March in southeastern West Virginia. If David slowed down enough to notice, his exhaled breath would be visible.

My mom is going to kill me, David thought as his hurried footsteps caused echoes to bounce off the modest townhouses. He heard an eerie hum, and looked up at one of the street lights that stood over the basketball court to his left. It flickered and fought to stay alive. A cutting wind came across the courtyard, stinging the side of David's face.

David pictured his mom and dad sitting in the chairs in the living room with the lights on drinking coffee to stay awake while plotting on how they were going to set

him straight. He was already working his defense out in his head: *I was over at Max's, and we were hanging out in the woods behind his house...I just lost track of time.* David shook his head in disapproval.

“That’s stupid,” he said out loud to himself. Maybe if he just told the truth, about how he was watching a movie with Kristen White, and how he never gets to see her outside of school, his parents would take it easy on him. Surely, his dad could relate to not wanting the night with a pretty girl to come to an end. *That’s what I’ll do,* he thought. *I’ll tell them I was caught up in the throes of love, lost track of time, and promise I will never do it again.*

David was about halfway to his house and starting to really feel the chill in the air. The wind was blowing cold off the river that stretched behind the left side of the neighborhood. David heard the sound of the rushing waters, but paid no attention to it. Nor did he find any significance in the soundtrack of chirping crickets or noisy tree frogs as they bellowed their nightly symphonies. Having grown up in River’s Edge, in between the river and the woods, he was accustomed to a certain rural ambiance.

David looked up from the sidewalk and could see his house about a quarter of a mile down the road. He accidentally kicked a soda can lying on the sidewalk. The sound of the aluminum grating against the concrete jolted his nervous system. He suddenly realized how on edge he was, alone out here in the middle of the night. The lights were off in most of the houses, allowing the darkness to fester at the windows. The two-story townhomes were light in color, mostly gradients of white and cream, and the blackness of the windows against the starkness of the siding created a grotesque

illusion of tall, pale faces with hollow eyes. With only two more units of housing until he reached his front door, he started to feel some relief.

A scream came from the house immediately to David's right. His stomach knotted up, and he froze with fear. He had heard screams before – those of anger and pain – but what he just heard filled him with panic. Even when his friend Billy broke his arm when they were playing football, David wasn't as scared as he was now. But this, what he just heard, sounded like it came from a grown man, and it was full of pain and *terror*.

After what seemed like an eternity, but was probably only five seconds, David broke from his paralysis and looked at the townhouses to his right. There were four of them connected, just like in every other unit. The lights were off in all the houses in this unit, except for the one at the very end. David instinctively crept down and hid behind a "FOR SALE BY OWNER" sign in the front yard of the neighboring house from where the scream originated. He slowly poked his head up from behind the sign, peaking at the house.

The yard was neatly manicured, and the front of the house was freshly power-washed, but that told David nothing of the inhabitants; the groundskeepers maintain the outside of the homes in River's Edge. David was trying to see what lay inside. All four windows were covered by heavy-looking, white blinds. The first floor was completely dark, but one of the two second-story windows housed a strange white light that beamed through the cracks in the blinds. The few other homes in the neighborhood

with their lights on seemed to have a warmer, yellowish glow compared to the clinical fluorescent whiteness coming from this house.

The neighborhood was completely quiet. David's ears perked up as he realized that he couldn't hear the river, and the crickets had stopped chirping. David saw movement down the road. It was a man was in his front yard with his dog. He was peering in David's direction. *He must have heard the scream.* The thought gave David some relief, knowing that he was not out here alone, and that a grown-up could soon take control of the situation.

Another piercing scream ripped through the night. It was the same man as before, but this scream was longer and louder. There was even more pain in the voice now. David quickly looked down the road at the man and his dog again. The man's movements were nervous and frantic. It was obvious that he heard that scream. The dog even started to bark in David's direction, but the man pulled on its leash to get it to stop. He hurriedly scampered back inside his home.

"Are you serious?" David whispered in disbelief. *He'd better be calling the cops,* David thought. He looked around at the neighboring houses, and not a single additional light came on. *Unbelievable.*

A frightened man's voice shouted from behind the window.

"No, God, I can't do it! Please! Don't make me do this. Something else, please," he pleaded with a hoarse voice. David could see shadows moving behind the blinds, obscuring the light. Something shattered from inside the room. He looked around again

to see if any of the neighbors were hearing this, but he appeared to still be by himself. The house for sale next door was completely vacant, so there was no help there.

There was more commotion coming from the lit room. Something smashed up against the blinds, bending them flat. It looked like someone inside the room was pressed against the window. Muffled grunts and groans were barely audible. David could hear the struggle, then saw the shape get pulled off the blinds only to smash back against the window even harder this time. The glass splintered from end to end, and a man groaned.

“OK, OK,” the man said, and, after a moment, “I’ll do it.” David thought he could hear the man whimpering, and then heard him scream like before. His painful moans trailed off, and all went quiet. He didn’t know how long he sat there, crouched behind the sign, but it seemed like an eternity. When a cricket loudly chirped just a few feet away from him, David suddenly realized that he could hear the world again.

He was confused about what to do next. He concluded that he would tell his parents and let them call the cops. Surely, they would believe him. He was never one to cry wolf. His nerves finally started to settle back down.

Just as he was about to stand up, the front door of the house opened and a man stumbled out. David stayed perfectly still, but allowed one eye to peek around the side of the sign.

The man was in his mid-fifties and slightly balding. He wore thin-framed glasses that were now busted. His face had bloody gashes across his cheeks that David could

tell were dripping all over his white button-up shirt that was stretched out and ripped at the collar. His tie pulled tight around his neck as if someone else had done it. He hobbled in excruciating pain, struggling to even carry his briefcase. David saw that he was wearing black slacks and black dress shoes as he carefully walked to the small SUV parked in the driveway. He opened the front passenger door and sat his briefcase on the floor mat, then closed the door behind him. This motion caused him to wince and grab his groin. He bent over and placed both hands on his knees as his body trembled. After a few moments he took one long, deep breath and stood up and walked to the driver's side of the car. David watched him gingerly climb in and sit down, visibly pained beyond measure.

The car's engine started up, and the headlights flashed on. David quickly realized that when the man backs out of the driveway the headlights will be shining directly on him. He made a quick dash to the closest available car parked in the driveway two houses down and crouched behind it.

David sat there motionless. He just wanted the moment to end so he could run back to the comforts of home and unload this burden to his parents. He could hear the car driving in his direction, and he continued to sit with his arms wrapped around his legs and his faced buried in his knees. The car drove past him, and David exhaled a deep breath of relief.

Brakes screeched and David popped up his head to look at the car come to a stop. The driver's door opened. *Oh, my God, no!* David thought as his heart seemed to stop beating. But the man did not fully get out of the car. Instead, he just leaned his

upper torso out and vomited all over the pavement. David saw him wipe his face with his shirt sleeve and try to regain his composure. He spat the last remnants of vomit onto the road, and shut the door once more. The driver's window rolled down, and he tossed something into a neighbor's plastic trash bin beside the road. The car finally drove away, disappearing into the darkness.

David used his own shirt to wipe away sweat from his brow and tears from the corners of his eyes. He looked around and saw that he was still the only witness to the commotion. Once he figured the coast was clear, he slowly stood up. His knees were sore from crouching for so long, and they ached as he began to walk toward the road. He looked up at the house from where the man came and saw that the lights were now off. He started to take a few steps toward his house when he was suddenly overwhelmed with curiosity: he had to know what that man threw out of his car. David stopped walking and shook his head, seeming to disagree with a decision he had already made.

"Be quick," he whispered to himself as he turned around and quickly marched to the trashcan. The sound of his scampering footsteps bounced off the surrounding houses. He slowed down once he was about five steps from his target, afraid of what he might find. He took careful steps forward, and began to see the contents of the bin. There were two full garbage bags stuffed inside that the owner obviously put in there to be emptied in the morning. On top of one of the black trash bags was what looked like a plastic grocery bag, balled up and with something inside it.

David stood peering down at the plastic bag, working up the nerve to pick it up. His stomach knotted once again when he noticed some dark stains on the outside of the bag. He closed his eyes and felt terror, but was determined to know what was in there. He took a deep breath, opened his eyes, and reached down for the bag.

He pinched a clean part of the bag and lifted it out of the trashcan. He brought it to his face and examined the balled-up mess. There was something white inside; it looked like soft paper or tissue. David used his other hand to pinch the bag and he carefully pulled it apart. A wadded-up ball of paper towels fell to the ground. Spots of fresh blood covered the surface in varied shapes and sizes.

David felt the sticky liquid on his finger tips and quickly wiped them on his pants. He took another deep breath and bent down to the ground to study the contents. He pulled the paper towel ball in opposing directions, causing something to fall out and hit the pavement. David looked down at the two objects on the street. He crouched beside them and saw the clotted blood sticking to the pale surfaces. They were oval shaped with somewhat of a smooth surface, but it was hard to tell in the darkness.

David pulled out his cellphone and turned on the flashlight function. He shone the light on the objects and could now see that little veins were strewn across the surfaces of the peach-colored objects. (An image from Health class last semester suddenly popped in David's head.) He quickly stood up and fought the urge to vomit as recognition for the objects flooded his senses. (The class was told to be mature when viewing the instructional videos.) He could no longer keep composure of his bodily functions and vomited in the street less than a few feet from the man's vomit. (The

teacher pressed play on the DVD player and the sixth-grade class saw diagrams of human anatomy, male and female sexual organs exposed to giggling pre-teens.) David wiped the spittle from his chin and slowly backed away from the objects in the road, eyes wide with shock as he fought for breath. (The class groaned with disgust at the sight of surgically removed human testicles in glass jars.) David continued to back away from the reproductive parts lying in the road, surrounded by bloody paper towels and vomit.

Just as he was about to turn around, he backed into someone standing in the road. David's eyes widened with fear as a hand covered his mouth, muffling his scream. Adrenaline numbed the sting of the needle that plunged into his neck. David bit down hard on the pale hand in his mouth, but his world quickly began to spin out of control and his muscles relaxed. His eyes rolled into the back of his head, exposing the whites below as he hit his knees and toppled over. His final moment of consciousness was spent focused on the putrid taste left behind in his mouth from the pale hand, and then darkness enveloped his senses.