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A
WHALE
CALLED
GRIEF

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dramatis personae

PASTOR: BLACK, GRIEVING, MALE, MIDDLE AGE OR OLDER.
DARK NIGHT OF THE SOUL. SHAKEN BY FLAMES

SISTER: BLACK, GRIEVING, FEMALE OLDER OR MIDDLE AGE.
BOISTERED BY FLAMES

1872. CHICAGO. QUINN CHAPEL AME. After the GREAT CHICAGO FIRE. PASTOR stands outside of a burned lot. They carry flowers with dirt on the roots. Maybe they cross themselves. They appear lost in thought until SISTER appears. The smell of sulfur permeates.

*PASTOR & SISTER stare at the ruins for a while. Eventually SISTER notices the flowers.
They are a dingy white / covered in black*

SISTER
You brought flowers.

PASTOR
Of course.

SISTER
Where'd you get those? Maggie's went up first.

PASTOR
Outside the city. Walked for miles and picked these myself.

SISTER
For yourself? Or for them?

PASTOR
For them.

Pastor drops a flower

For the dead.

SISTER
What do the dead need flowers for?

PASTOR
For their graves.

Sister inspects the crude arrangement.

SISTER
Lilies. The flower of renewal.

PASTOR
I didn't know that when I picked them. It felt like...

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SISTER

What?

PASTOR

They picked me.

SISTER

God led you then. Like always.

PASTOR

I was just thinking what's grave appropriate.

SISTER

Anything alive will do. Leave them in the garden though.

PASTOR

Why?

SISTER

Because flowers belong in a garden. Not a grave. Sister Johnson would've approved.

PASTOR

Would. Besides, all gardens are graves without flowers.

SISTER

Who told you that?

PASTOR

The fire.

SISTER

Where it say that in the Bible? Or are you being spiritual?

PASTOR

I'm being real.

SISTER

I wish you wasn't. 'Can't tell me this is real.

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PASTOR

It is.

SISTER

I will never believe it's gone.

PASTOR

They're all gone. God took them away. You *and* the dead should believe that.

SISTER

You keep saying the dead. They have names.

PASTOR

Not anymore.

SISTER

They have names.

PASTOR

I brought the flowers.

SISTER

So?

PASTOR

So the rest is up to you.

Hands her the bouquet. She inspects them.

SISTER

They're singed.

PASTOR

Better than scorched.

SISTER

I don't think anybody else is coming.

PASTOR

They're already here. We still don't have the total count.

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SISTER
The lost you mean?

PASTOR
Yeah.

SISTER
What? Nobody else checked in?

PASTOR
This was the meeting spot. Dead, alive, they're all here.

PASTOR turns to go

SISTER
Pastor.

PASTOR
Sister.

SISTER
I need you to be strong.

PASTOR
I'm no Goliath.

SISTER
Then David will do.

PASTOR
...

SISTER
Are you listening?

PASTOR
I hear you.

SISTER
We need you.

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PASTOR
We?

SISTER
The Church, Pastor. The Church.

PASTOR
The Church went up in flames, Sister.

SISTER
A Church ain't nothing but four walls.

PASTOR
And what about the people who worship inside those walls?

SISTER
We ain't no ordinary folk. This is Chicago, Pastor! We tougher than tough! Look at these bad boys!

*Sister flexes her muscles
Waits for Pastor's reaction
Nothing.*

It's not just about the people.

PASTOR
It's always about the people, Sister.

SISTER
It's about who's leading them, Pastor.

PASTOR
And look where they were led to.

SISTER
This isn't your fault.

PASTOR
But this is my trial.

SISTER
Or your Testament. There was nothing you could've done. The whole city was engulfed!

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You're only one man.

PASTOR

One man of God.

God stopped the Floods, but couldn't be bothered with the Fire.

I thought my God was a miracle *worker*.

SISTER

He is.

PASTOR

So where was He when I needed the Miracle of Miracles?

Actually, give the rest of those flowers to Aaliyah.

SISTER

The praise dancer? Why?

PASTOR

“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life...” Hmph.

All these people —

SISTER

Your people —

PASTOR

My *flock*.

SISTER

Your congregation.

PASTOR

My *fools* believed in the same God I did. They prayed – oh Lord how they prayed – to never see the flames in life OR death. All of them, earnest believers, Sister! ALL of them, devoted followers! But we serve a God of Deceivers. A God of *Liars*.

What a mighty God we serve, Sister! A God of Rot. We servants are no better than the dirt those flowers came from.

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SISTER

Pastor. I understand you're hurting, I'm hurting real bad too. But that's mighty close to blasphemy.

PASTOR

Blashphemy? That's *Gospel*. The real Good News is *at least* they don't have to be deceived anymore praying to a Landlord God.

SISTER

I don't care if you turn your back on God.

PASTOR

I'm standing up *to* God.

SISTER

No. You're running away just like Jonah. But I don't care either, it don't bother me nun. Run from God / hide if ya want to. Turn to stone or be swallowed by *any whale called Grief*. But don't you ever turn your back on your people! Talkin' 'bout some "Standing up to God". Boy! Stand up for the people. Struggle with them. Struggle *for* them. That's the Gospel you're looking for.

PASTOR

Sister, every Sunday I stood up in front of that congregation.
I preached, we congregated, and God conjured.
But last Sunday, I didn't see the Holy Spirit or Jericho crumple.
I saw my Father's Church ablazed.
I saw my city in Flame and Chaos.
I saw my dreams go up in smoke. But this wasn't vision or prophecy. It was real.
God, it was too real! A fire so grand, so *great*, I thought it was the end of days.
But it was just Sunday.
What's the point of being Chicago's oldest Black Church
when the Young die earlier than the Elders?
When there's no dance to be praised, or a pulpit to sanctify?

We were a part of the Underground Railroad!

We were Abolitionists before the Emancipation Proclamation!

We were founded 4 years after Chicago was!

I wanted to make history / not become it, but continue it!

So what was the point?

What does a shepherd do when all the sheep are sacrificed and the Shepherd is left?

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And why, oh God why...

To God. or the fallen congregation. Maybe a whisper.

...Did you leave me here?

*SISTER sits in silence.
then she picks up the fallen lily
hands it to the Pastor*

SISTER

Because the only thing that separates graves from gardens is the Dead.
And Pastor? I'm so very glad you're Alive. One day, you might too.

She takes his hand

This Church was founded by 7 folks. 7 faithful folks, Pastor! It wasn't even a Church for real. Just seven folks. Seven prayers. 7 pairs of clasped hands. Just a congregation and a dream. The building's gone, but the dream isn't. Dreams burn brighter than any fire! But the real Miracle, Pastor, is the fact we're still here. You're still here. I'm still here. That means they are too. That's your *why*. Blessing staring you right in the face, but you can't even see it, can you? Can you? Hmmm, thought so. Yes, mourn the dead. I don't think I'll ever unhear the screams of the Children Ministry as the smoke rose as high as Jesus rose to Heaven. I like to believe that's where they are too. With Jesus. Or someplace better than what some grave can give 'em. So please grieve, please mourn, please cry. Weep for the dead, but never, ever, weep for your life! If this city can receive a *second* chance, a *second* shot, a *second* life then why can't you? Ain't rebirth what we Christians about? Ain't resilience what we Chicago folk do *best*? Oooo, Pastor I guarantee you...

The sun starts to come out.

(The last 30 secs of 'It Is Well Within My Soul' rendition by Mahalia Jackson is heard)

*♪It is well, it is well
With my soul
It is well, it is well
With my soul♪*

Another fire is lit, but this time...

You ain't seen your best blessing yet!

inside the Pastor's Heart

END OF PLAY