

FICTION

THE Story OF Ever Payne

The book lay sealed in zippered plastic on my passenger seat. The dark green cover had wrinkled with age and was faded and flaking, but the very sight of it moved me. It was a treasure.



by CHRIS FABRY

I DROVE WINDING ROADS into the hills that Google had never seen, with trees exploding green around and above me. It was like traveling through a tunnel in time. Weathered mailboxes sat on cut phone poles. Others were mounted on rusted metal stands that leaned with the shifting landscape.

I passed the driveway twice before realizing the sloping path led to the man's house. Inching up that hill, I wondered how he got out in the winter or if he needed to.

I parked next to a house that looked in much better condition than the book beside me. In the shade sat an older man with a hand resting on a cane. His legs were matchstick thin, and he wore

a brown cardigan that hung on him. I set the brake and carried the bag, struggling until I made it to the deck where the man sat.

Two dogs barked and ran toward me with long tails wagging. A third dog stared from the side of the house, either disinterested or too arthritic to move.

"Hidee." The old man waved. "What can I do for you?"

"Mr. Thomas? Homer Thomas?"

He didn't move. "That's me."

I stood at the top of the stairs, studying his face. Rheumy eyes. A mouth that worked at dentures or a chew or nothing at all. Skin wrinkled and flaking.

"I've been looking forward to meeting you for a long time, sir."

"Is that so?" He straightened his legs and tried to push on the cane to stand.

"Please, don't get up."

He obliged and sat hard. "Ah-ight. If you insist."

On the deck, I reached out a hand. He shook it, squinting at the bag I carried.

"Is that what I think it is?"

I smiled. "I've thought about finding you for a couple of decades."

"Have a seat."

I pulled a folding chair close. He stared at the book.

"How'd you find it?"

"I don't think I did. I think it found me."

Homer gave a hint of a smile, his eyes crinkling. "Tell me."

I had come to hear from him, learn more about all I didn't know. But he beckoned the story, so I launched into the tale I had rehearsed on the drive from Tennessee. I had been thinking of what I would say to the author of that book since I was 16. Sitting on the man's deck, looking him in the eye, felt like a dream.

"We went to a little country church," I said, naming the town. "The library was a shelf in the back by the kitchen. A few Gideon Bibles and a copy of *The Pilgrim's Progress*. Commentaries and King James Bibles."

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"I'll bet they sang from hymnals in that church." I nodded. "I was in Sunday School, a little bored. Coming back from the restroom, I stopped at the bookshelf. I found it wedged in a corner, like it was hiding. I began to read. It touched a nerve. I can't explain it. I sat on the concrete stairs in the back and read the whole thing. I got lost in that book. Or maybe I got found there."

The old man studied the hillside as a breeze lifted a tuft of hair.

"Why did you write it?" I said.

"I don't have a good answer other than I just obeyed. I knew I needed to put it down."

"I got lost in that book. Or maybe I got found there."

"And you had no idea some kid would pick it up and be profoundly moved. I've read it so many times — well, look at the shape it's in."

"If I had known you were going to pick it up, I would have tried to say what you needed to hear. And that would have taken all the power out of it."

Chickens clucked in their pen, and somewhere a cow lowed, as if it were milking time. Evening shadows crept closer.

"What were you going through when you read it?" Homer said.

"My mother was sick, confined to her bed. She wanted us to go to church. So my father dropped us off and drowned his troubles in a six-pack in some convenience store parking lot until the service was over. It redefined the words 'Sunday drive' for me and my siblings."

Memories surfaced like smoke from an empty campfire. I remembered his old Buick. The empty cans.

"I'm sorry," Homer said.

"Your story helped me see the truth. That God allows all kinds of hard for all kinds of reasons."

"Yep. Most people run from hard like it was the plague. They'll do anything to avoid hurting. I don't blame them. But the hard shows you who you are. That's the thing about life. We judge it good if it's easy. We judge it bad if it's a struggle."

"How'd you come up with the idea?" I said.

"I knew this old boy named Ever. I made his last name Payne because I believe every pain is there to do a work. See, I read this booklet once about Jesus moving into a man's home and going through every room and changing him. I wondered what would happen if we surrendered the pain and struggle? What if we embraced it instead of avoiding it?"

"Had you ever written anything before that?"

"Letters. Papers for school. That sort of thing. Nothing of consequence."

"How many copies did you sell?"

He turned and looked a hole through me. "Not a one. Printed 50 and gave them away."

"You're kidding."

"Nope. It was an offering of sorts. And when I gave the last one away, I felt like I'd been faithful to do what God wanted me to do."

Listening closely now, it was as if Homer were describing a ditch he'd dug or a screen door hinge he'd fixed. And it made me notice every small and insignificant deed I took for granted. A letter delivered. A tree planted. A smile. The list was endless.

"How many of these have you seen since you gave them away?"

"Yours is the first one to come back," he said.

"So the story wasn't a success? You didn't get fame and fortune?"

"Success? What is that? How do you measure it? Being faithful to do what you're called to do is success. And look what happened. You drove up from Tennessee to tell me what that tattered book did inside you. That's enough."

An uncomfortable silence followed, which I tried to get more comfortable with by closing my eyes and listening to the birds and the wind in the trees. Finally, Homer spoke again.

"Your life is a poem written by God. You make choices. You're part of the process. But He's the

One putting your life on the page. Paul writes that we are God's workmanship, His masterpieces. We are created to do the work He has chosen for us ahead of time. Try to wrap your head around that. God wanted you to do things He's already mapped out. Your job is to be faithful when He gives the opportunity."

"Like you writing about Ever Payne?"

"And like you coming all this way to give an old man some encouragement."

I found out a lot about Homer that day. What happened to his wife and family. All the pain and secret sorrow. I drove him to a little restaurant a few miles from his house. The meal felt providential.

I drove him home and fed the scraps of our meal to the dogs. Before I left, I opened the bag and pulled out my prized possession. I handed him a pen, and he scribbled something, then handed it back and gave me a hug.

I drove all the way home without stopping. I walked into the house in the wee hours of the

"Your life is a poem written by God. You make choices. You're part of the process. But He's the One putting your life on the page."

morning and crept to my office and opened the book and read the words Homer had scrawled.

"Ever Payne is worth it. Thank you for being faithful. Homer Thompson."

I smiled at his words and the power of a story. I sealed the book in the plastic bag and put it on my shelf. ☺

CHRIS FABRY is an award-winning author of more than 80 books, including his latest novel, *Saving Grayson*, available now. Chris is also host of *Chris Fabry Live on Moody Radio*. Find out more at ChrisFabry.com.



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