

The Many Temptations of Pearl Clutchers

First Temptation: The Woman in the Pew

Pearl Clutchers—Sister Pearl to the rest of the congregation—sits in the frontmost pew of the church auditorium. Back straight. Chin up. Auburn hair pulled into a bun tight enough that her hairline looks painted onto her scalp. Hands folded neatly across the leather-bound, gold-edged Bible in her lap. She barely budes when Brother Travis rises from his place next to her to take a seat on the opposite side of the auditorium.

Pearl's outfit is an icon of propriety. Her deep plum dress fully covers her neck and arms and descends to her ankles (currently crossed in a truly ladylike fashion). Miniscule ruffles of cream accent the wrists and neck. It is a flawless fit on the twenty-one-year-old's slight, angular frame.

Like the rest of her, the accessories have been curated to showcase her modesty and faith. A tiny white gold cross hangs from a delicate chain. It drapes against her suggestion of a small well-mannered bust. Three charms dangle from her trendy silver bracelet—a cross, a book, a dove. A tiny black leather clutch that matches her Bible sits neatly tucked between her slender butt and the pew's red padding.

With the first set of hymns finished, Brother Wash approaches the pulpit's tiny oak podium in his pristine charcoal suit. His silver cross tie pin gleams as brightly as his slicked over and artificially darkened hair. He carefully lays out his papers, rethinking which should overlay which several times. The low chatter in the small auditorium dies to a few whispers. Brother Wash dabs at his brow with a baby blue handkerchief that matches his tie before replacing it in his breast pocket. He pulls the flexible metal arm of the podium's microphone toward his lips, nearly kissing it before pushing it back a few inches. The croak of him clearing his throat thunders from far too many speakers for the modest space. He gazes out at the five dozen congregants.

Pearl locks her gaze to the man, moving only her neck.

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“Good morning, everyone!” Brother Wash begins. “Let us bow our heads in prayer.”

Sixty-plus combed and styled scalps angle toward the preacher. He follows suit, ensuring his mouth does not stray far from his mic.

“Our dear Heavenly Father, we come to you today, your faithful—”

The creak of a door and the soft hum of passing traffic interrupts the prayer. Brother Wash lifts his head, as do a select few for whom the temptation of this distraction proves too great. Those heads turn to the rear of the auditorium where a woman stands in the tiny vestibule just beyond the rear pews. The church’s front doors drift closed behind her, resealing the space in expectant quiet.

She is a tall and stunningly beautiful young lady with a look that contrasts sharply with the austere church and its inhabitants. Her raven black hair hangs just past her shoulders in shimmering waves. It contrasts the crisp white skin of her soft face. Her plump, fiery lips and glittering orange eyeshadow are more vibrant against the backdrop of black and white.

Her strapless white cotton sundress is less worn by her than it is overpowered by her figure. Large breasts stuff the upper portion of the dress, twin hillocks overflow upward to her clavicle. A star pendant hangs from a chain long enough to place it well into the depths of her cleavage.

The dress cinches around her narrow waist before it is flared wide at her impressive hips, thighs, and backside. The thin white material leaves little to the imagination without crossing the line into obscene. There are no pointed nipples visible. No panty line. It’s a perfectly fitted dress on a perfectly proportioned body. One that does not fit the aesthetics of its surroundings in all the right ways.

A disapproving grunt issues from an old lady sitting in the front pew near Sister Pearl. She was the first to turn around upon this woman’s intrusion.

“So sorry...” whispers the woman, giving a single wave of her hand in apology.

“No need to apologize, Miss,” says Brother Wash softly. His quiet speech booms over the speakers like the voice of God. “It’s wonderful to have another

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new member in attendance. We've had plenty of new faces today, already, and we're happy to welcome another into the house of the Lord." He nods to Brother Alcomb, a short, rotund middle-aged man with far less salt-and-pepper hair than his reddened head needs.

Brother Alcomb returns the nod and stands from his place in the rear pew. He places a hand gently on the woman's elbow and leads her back into the vestibule away from the opening into the auditorium. It's the corner from which the man warmly greets every worshipper as they enter the church. He'll be presenting her with a contact card to fill out so she can receive the weekly church bulletin.

Her name is Samantha. At least, that's the name she will give Brother Alcomb.

Throughout this ordeal, Pearl Clutchers keeps her head bowed silently. She's not one to be distracted from her worship by a single newcomer. Not yet.

With another clearing of his throat, Brother Wash resumes his prayer. "We come to you today, O Lord, to worship you and thank you for your providence. To bring ourselves closer to you through fellowship and service. To humbly ask forgiveness for our sins, for we are imperfect creations."

Imperfect creations, indeed. Some more imperfect than others...

He pauses just long enough that a tension forms in the stuffy air. Then he adds, "We ask that you help us to welcome any new sheep into your flock so that they, too, can be saved by your love. In Christ's name."

"Amen," echoes the congregation in perfect time to his final word. The sea of scalps rise once more.

"Everyone please turn to the book of Matthew, Chapter 26, Verse 41."

Pages rustle as Pearl effortlessly slides a French manicured nail between the pages of her Bible and opens it with a practiced certainty. She turns only two pages before landing on the prescribed scripture. The same nail follows along with the words as Brother Wash reads about temptation and the power of prayer in overcoming it. About the weakness of the flesh.

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He pontificates on the meaning of the verse as Brother Alcomb and the new arrival reemerge from the vestibule. She shakes his hand firmly with a wide smile, bending forward just enough to make the gesture possible. Her ample assets wobble around her pendant, inches from his face. His red hue deepens, and his eyes search for anywhere else to look. He sighs with relief when she finally releases him.

With a sweep of his arm, he ushers her to find a place in the pews. She scans the packed seating carefully, but all the new faces mean it's an unusually packed Sunday morning at the Church of the Holy Emergence. The worshippers sit shoulder-to-shoulder with one another, packing the rows from front to back.

There is only one vacancy. It was created when Brother Travis swapped seats right before Brother Wash took to the podium.

It is directly adjacent to Pearl Clutchers.

Samantha swings her hips up the center aisle. Numerous *tsks* and *tuts* follow her, paired with glares, stares, and plenty of gawking. She flashes a knowing grin and takes her place in the front pew.

Pearl and the disapproving old woman on the other side of the gap do their best to scoot aside, but the space required by those thighs demands even those on the other side of the old woman move aside. It's like a semi-truck merging into gridlock.

"Good morning," Samantha whispers to Sister Old Lady who sets her jowls in a hard frown and looks away. Unbothered, she turns to Pearl and smiles. "Good morning."

The nod of acknowledgement Pearl gives the newcomer is hardly enough to be considered a gesture. It's certainly not welcoming. It is the basest requirement of civility. But it's all she offers before turning to look past her new sister to Brother Wash.

Samatha settles into her spot and starts looking around and beside her, searching for something. She turns at the waist to reach behind her, patting the back of the pew where a slot for books is built into it. The awkward pose thrusts her large chest toward Pearl. The sharp little woman leans forward and to the

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side with great exaggeration. Her feeble attempt at subtly conveying her disapproval of Samantha's body and outfit is either unnoticed or unheeded.

Samantha's searching turns up a hymnal which she returns to its place in the book slot. Giving up, she shrugs and turns around. Without those breasts so close to her, Pearl flexes her neck self-righteously and returns to her previous position.

Taking a new tack, Samantha turns to Sister Old Lady. The glare she receives sends her immediately back to Pearl. Samantha leans in and lifts a finger to get her attention, but Pearl cranes her neck pointedly away, focusing on Brother Wash and his sermon with zealous devotion. Her eyeline remains elevated well above the protrusions nearby.

Samantha's signaling continues until she opts to lean close and whisper. She points at the Bible lying open in Pearl's lap, shrugging apologetically. Pearl rolls her eyes and sighs, nodding defeatedly. At this, Samantha smiles and adjusts her posture to read along as Pearl uses her nail to highlight passages in sync with Brother Wash's words.

This goes on for the remainder of the half-hour sermon. Periodically, Samantha reconfigures the way she sits. This inevitably leads to a monumental jiggling in Pearl's immediate vicinity. The first few times, she ignores it. Then her eyes begin to pull from their focus, caught in the gravitational pull of the orbs half-packed into that white cotton and the shadowy ravine between them.

Near the sermon's halfway point, Brother Wash dives into a lengthy diatribe against those who would willingly give into sinful temptations. In the pew, Pearl's cheeks grow flushed. Then most of her face soon after. She bites at her inner cheek and lower lip. Swallows with increased frequency.

While Pearl and the other prudes around her might take umbrage with Samantha's figure or her choice of dress for a worship session, the woman goes to great pains to be courteous and respectful. Just as she is meant to. She crosses no lines. Does not touch Pearl. Does not interrupt her focus.

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No, Pearl does that all on her own. She cannot stop herself from eyeing the goods on display. She fights the urge to stare, to maintain her sense of propriety. She fights fiercely throughout the sermon, but she is failing.

And her desires continue to manifest.

She adjusts the Bible in her lap, uncrossing and recrossing her legs. She squirms in the pew. She brings a hand to her neck where she pinches and rubs at the tight skin beneath her jaw. She retrieves a folding fan from her clutch and fans air across her face.

The war in her mind and soul rages, all brought about by this attractive woman's existence in her sphere. This manifestation of the very sinful pleasures Brother Wash lectures against.

At last, the sermon comes to a close: "I remind you all to keep these lessons in your heart. We must do our best to resist the temptations of the flesh, the temptations of sin, the temptations of the world, the temptations of the devil himself.

"Complacency. Showy possessions. Debauchery. Drugs. Drink."—he pauses to dab his brow again—"Sexual depravity. But try as we might, we *must* remember that we are creatures of flesh, and the flesh is weak. The flesh is sinful! We *will* inevitably fall to temptation. It is in our nature. It is only through prayer and faith that we can call on the power of Christ the Lord to overcome these temptations."

Pearl nods emphatically, beads of sweat forming at her taut hairline. Her eyes dart repeatedly toward the nearest sinful flesh. Few would hardly describe it as weak. Pearl certainly wouldn't. With no more scripture to follow, the shapely woman no longer leans in, yet Pearl only struggles harder against the temptation burning inside her.

"Let us pray," says Brother Wash. Pearl's eyes clench shut, and her head drops so fast she nearly slams her chin into her sternum. The preacher leads the congregation in another prayer, this one asking for strength to resist Earthly temptations and forgiveness for those who've already succumbed.

Fitting.

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The ever-stoic Pearl brings a hand up to the cross around her neck and mouths a separate silent prayer. Behind that cross, the plum cloth of her modest dress begins to swell. Not a lot. Not enough to be noticed by someone not specifically watching for it. But it does. Her breasts are growing.

After the customary chorus “Amen!” Brother Wash announces the partaking of the Lord’s Supper. Four men—Brother Travis among them—stand from the pews and leave the auditorium through a door in the wall behind the pulpit. They reemerge moments later, carrying chrome trays. Each one has a single piece of unleavened bread—no more than a big unsalted cracker.

Brother Wash instructs the faithful to “eat of the body of Christ” as the trays are passed along the pews. Each worshipper breaks off a tiny piece of the cracker and places it into their mouth before handing off the tray.

The force of snapping the hard cracker sends a fresh ripple through the expanse of visible flesh emerging from Samantha’s sundress. Pearl, having already popped her bite into her mouth, chews absentmindedly, still failing her battle of wills. The further tightening at her chest and now at her thighs is evidence of that.

At the end of the line, one of the men takes each tray and passes it back to the next pew. Once the circuit is complete, the process is repeated for another set of trays, these carrying dozens of thimble-sized cups of grape juice.

“Drink of the blood of Christ,” instructs Brother Wash.

Pearl throws hers back like a shot at a bar, swallowing it and exhaling so hard she’s practically panting. She hands the tray off to Samantha and wipes at the sweat on her forehead with her sleeve. A few strands of her hair pull free of her tidy bun and flop into her pink face. She’s too busy doing her best to sneak another peek that she disregards them. The young woman is beginning to come undone.

To her right, Samantha brings a cup to her lips and sips it delicately. A single errant drop of violet juice drips down her luscious lower lip. It rolls down her fair chin, leaving a path of glistening wetness, before it pauses at the lowest point. From there, it plummets elegantly onto the curve of her gorgeous breast. It

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continues its journey down into the abyss of cleavage, leaving its slippery trail the entire way before creating a tiny purple splotch at the upper reaches of her pristine dress.

“Oh no,” she whispers as she hurriedly passes the tray to the perpetually scowling Sister Old Lady.

Samantha digs a napkin from her purse and furiously dabs at her chest and dress. No longer does her supple flesh display the sizeable jiggles and wobbles as it has previously. Instead, it quakes as though the prophesied sixth seal of last week’s sermon has been opened.

And that quake swallows up Pearl’s gaze wholesale. Her lower lip quivers, and her hands clench in her lap to stop from shaking. She squirms in her seat. Her shining cross catches the overhead lights as it is pushed forward again, buoyed by more marginal growth of her own small chest. Still, she does not notice.

Samantha glances down where the miniscule gap between her own thigh and Pearls has closed, but she does not visibly react. As before, only tiny gains are present, but they are gains.

They are progress. They are confirmation.

At last, Pearl takes notice of her clothing’s growing tightness. She rubs at her shoulders where her unseen bra straps dig just a bit more than usual. Her elbow massages her side where the band has cinched. She pulls at the fabric of her dress, and wriggles against the pinch of her panties.

Before the grape juice is passed around fully, Pearl glances again at Samantha’s flesh, licks at the inner part her upper lip, lets out a pained grunt, and jumps up from her seat. She tears a path to the back wall where she enters the women’s room.

A few congregants watch her speedy escape curiously. Others whisper. It’s unusual for someone to leave the auditorium during the Lord’s Supper, particularly someone as strait-laced and devout as Sister Pearl.

Several of the new attendees smile with satisfaction as she races past.

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Samantha's eyes follow Pearl's path for a moment, then she turns back to face the front of the auditorium. The victorious delight in her features is difficult to parse, but only to those who don't know her intimately.

Pearl is absent for about five minutes. She misses the final trays, passed around to collect the offering of tithes. She returns to her place in the front row just as time approaches for the second set of hymns. Her face is less flushed, and her loose hairs are tamed once more.

And her swelling has subsided.

She stares forward into space, unblinking. A straining in her neck is clear as she fights against turning toward Samantha. She may not know how, but she knows this woman and her sinful attributes are awakening something within her. Something she wants no part of.

Brother Wash leaves the podium, exchanging places again with Brother Seth who leads the congregation in song. The elderly man approaches the front, carefully puts on his reading glasses, and opens a worn hymnal.

"We have a special request for our next hymn," he crows in his shaky voice as he looks to the small choir box behind him with an appreciative nod. "Open your hymnals to page 269, please, and join as we sing 'To You I Give Myself.' First verse and chorus, only."

Pearl retrieves a pair of aged hymnals from the end of the pew. She passes one to Samantha, who opens the book in her lap before holding it out awkwardly so she can see fully past the barrier of her chest. Pearl opens hers mechanically, not even to the correct page. She has given in and is again transfixed by the mounds to her right.

Brother Seth, the choir of half a dozen, and the rest of the auditorium begin singing as the speakers play a soft piano accompaniment. The hymn is slow and powerful. Each syllable is stretched into myriad rising and falling notes.

It burns in my heart, O Lord...

Samantha sings fervently, but Pearl emits only unformed lyrics and a loosely matched melody. She is enraptured by the rise and fall of Samantha's hills as the woman sings her lungs out.

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It swells in my breast, O Lord...

Every note causes new, violent motion. Pearl no longer attempts to hide her ogling. Her own breasts begin to ease outward once more.

This need I possess, O Lord...

Her thighs and rear join in as the growth becomes less subtle. The top of her head rises by millimeters as her behind pads itself beneath her.

Shape my soul for you, O Lord...

Pearl's gaze finally shakes free of its shackles. She's realized.

The hand not steadying her hymnal shoots to her chest where her fingers find a surplus of volume. She ventures an exploratory squeeze. Her lips suck inward, her eyes go wide, and her face turns crimson. She retracts her hand immediately, bringing it to her side where she finds too much thigh.

To You...

Panic takes hold. Her head swivels frantically to see if anyone else has noticed her changes, small though they may be.

I Give...

Not a soul looks her way.

Myself...

The pew behind her watches Brother Seth as his waving arm keeps time for the hymn.

O Lord...

She swallows hard and forces her head down to read from her hymnal, only now discovering that she's on the wrong page.

To You I Give Myself...

She flips through the book rapidly, arriving at the correct page in time to join in the final words.

O Lord...

Pearl is a model worshipper for the remaining songs. She keeps her eyes on the hymnal and off Samantha's body. Her own hands grip the book so hard her knuckles turn white. She refuses to let them wander and explore her body's minor changes. Changes that, as she tamps down the urges inside her, slowly

ebb away. By the fourth and final hymn, Pearl Clutchers is the familiar, tightly packed picture of modesty she's always been.

After a final prayer, Brother Wash dismisses the congregation to their individual Bible study groups. Everyone rises from the pews and chats as they file out of the auditorium to the classrooms in the building's rear. Few of the new attendees stick around, instead filing out through the vestibule with those with other commitments.

Pearl takes the opportunity to exit quietly with the crowd. She gives Brother Alcomb an apologetic smile as she departs.

Brother Seth approaches the choir box where the singers are dispersing for their study groups.

"Lovely suggestion, Sister Marta, just lovely," he beams, clasping my hands between his. "Haven't sung that one in years, seems like, and it's always so moving."

"Thank you, Brother Seth," I return his positivity. "It's one of my old favorites, and today just seemed like the perfect time to bring it back."

"Truly. Truly... So was it a big favorite with your last congregation?"

"Oh, yes. Travis and I must've sung those first two lines *hundreds* of times during our ceremonies."

"It burns in my heart, O Lord. It swells in my breast, O Lord..." Brother Seth sings and says in equal measure like he's weighing the words. "It really is a wonderful song. The way it conveys the yearning to be one with God."

"It really is," I say as Lang—the man known to the church as Travis—steps up beside him. "If you'll excuse me."

"Of course," Brother Seth steps away, clapping Lang on the shoulder.

"Great singing, babe," Lang says, stepping in close.

I scan our surroundings. Once I'm sure no one is close enough to overhear, I whisper to him, "It worked."

He smiles wickedly before policing his emotions. He returns to the mild-mannered churchgoer the others know.

"Told you Siva could awaken it," he whispers victoriously.

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“Let’s not forget the song and sermon. Those were *my* idea.”

And I put in serious effort to make that sermon happen, I don’t say.

“And I’m sure they were just as effective as Siva’s massive melons,” he says patronizingly with a shit-eating grin. He bumps my shoulder with his. Behind him, Samantha/Siva flashes a quick wave as she joins the reluctant gaggle of ladies breaking away for the young women’s study group. She pumps her eyebrows in celebration as she gives a slight wiggle of her chest.

“Few things in this world hold that kind of sway...” I mutter in concession, drinking in our accomplice’s flawless assets. Once she passes through the door toward the classrooms, I turn back to Lang.

He accepts his win graciously.

“Hey, how about we don’t worry who’s—” he drops his sentence as Old Lady passes by. The old bitch has refused to interact with us outside of disapproving scowls since we first tracked Pearl down to this shit-ass church and started attending. I’m certain it’s due to my bronze skin tone.

Once her scowling face passes the threshold toward the classrooms, Lang resumes speaking.

“Let’s not worry who’s responsible for it working. Fact is, it worked. It’s starting.”

No matter. She grew today. That means we were right about her. Years of searching. Months of planning.

They all paid off today.

“You’re right, *Travis*,” I throw plenty of inflection on the name. He hates his pseudonym with a burning passion. Rubbing it in is my way of getting back at him for having the better—if far less covert—idea.

Still, he should be rewarded for his triumph. “Wanna go celebrate in the supply room?” I ask him.

A smile arcs his closely trimmed beard, and he nods so excitedly that the red-brown of his beard and hair blur into his pale, freckled face. His suit pants swell with a familiar bulging. We need to get away before someone sees. I lead him by the wrist toward the doorway.

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As we trot down the church's succinct back hall, he grabs a handful of my ass. My nipples go immediately erect as my chest billows behind my choir robe. We stealthily slip into the darkened supply room and shut the door behind us.