

## EXCERPT



### **A Prayer for Orion** *A Son's Addiction and a Mother's Love*

Available January 28, 2020 | \$16, 180 pages, paperback | 978-0-8308-4577-4

**Katherine James** received the Felipe P. De Alba Fellowship from Columbia University, where she also taught undergraduate fiction. Her debut novel, *Can You See Anything Now?*, won Christianity Today's 2018 Fiction Book award and was a semifinalist for the Doris Bakwin Award.

## "This is the way it happened"

They say that when you tie a rubber tube around an upper arm, you feel the love the way a river feels a rock—a swish up or over or around. The river tightens and narrows, the wake behind it shoots out water like the universe shoots out stars, and the gritty fog of sediment tells the whole story. We didn't know that leaning forward—always—could make that last stiff spine split open in prayer; the backdrop to St. Paul's words.

The needle goes in. The insides of elbows all over America are sucking juice like Thin Mints out of a Girl Scout box; one is never enough. Rubber tube. Pull it tight. Flatten the arm. Needle.

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This is the way it happened, or, at least, the way Rick told me it happened. Sweetboy was nowhere around. I was in the kitchen. Waylen and Rick were in the breezeway sitting in the white Adirondack chairs. They're not the traditional Adirondack chairs—they're more square than rounded. There are four of them. Rick was sitting across from Waylen, who wore aviator sunglasses so you couldn't see his eyes, only yourself, and his dirty blond hair was pulled back in a ponytail. Rick told him that God wanted to help him and then they prayed together, and even though he couldn't see Waylen's eyes because of the sunglasses, when he looked back up Rick saw a tear run down Waylen's cheek. That's what he told me and that's what I remember, like I was sitting there with them—or to be more precise, I was Rick—looking at that tear, and behind Waylen was the yard and the different patterns of shade from the huge maple trees making their blue splatters on the grass.

After that, every time I saw Waylen or talked to him, I thought of the tear. As far as I was concerned it was on his face for good. Three years after that tear first appeared Waylen was dead of an overdose and his best friend, Stephan, was sitting next to his dead body in the hospital, never having seen anyone dead before, sitting there and praying because you never know, wasn't it about time for another Lazarus? And then Stephan was sitting there and watching Waylen's mother come through the door having just arrived and seeing her son and crumpling up, like her own body was finished with this life thing. Stephan took a picture of Waylen dead in the hospital and asked me if I wanted to see it. I said no. I wanted to remember the tear.

I know what it feels like to have your body crumple up like it's finished with this life thing. Like all of a sudden you realize that the only thing that had been keeping you alive was your son, and when you think he's gone your body tries so hard to die too, but it won't, so that's the most painful thing, that you can't get your own body to freaking die and you don't have any choice but to live. There's nothing you can do. He's dead and you want to be, but you're not.

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Years ago I used to look at Orion's Belt through the enormous floor-to-ceiling bay window in our living room with individual glass panes and pray for our children: Sophie, Jules, and Sweetboy. The window leaks heat like breath through

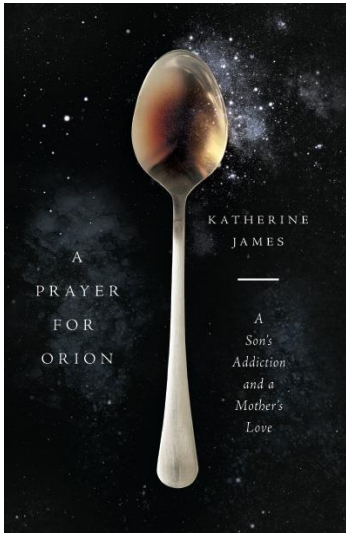


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a cold fist, but I would stand there at night where I could see the stars and align Orion's Belt into one rectangular pane by shifting where I stood. I had a favorite pane that I liked to view them through, the second row from the top—when I stood just right, the stars went from lower left to upper right: Alnitak, Alnilam, Mintaka. Those are their names. Mintaka, that last star. Like the bitter end of a tightened belt.

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It was in our living room with the bay window that I thought we might lose Sweetboy and called the police. Sophie, our oldest, had been married the previous month and Sweetboy had helped to string the lights and fix up the backyard—he'd looked so handsome in his suit with his crisp white shirt and auburn hair cut short and other than carrying a red energy drink around with him that ended up in all the photos, he'd looked like the perfect groomsman. Jules had flown in from San Francisco and sang Wreckless Eric's "Whole Wide World" at the reception.

Seven months earlier Sweetboy had told us he'd started doing hard drugs and wanted to stop so we'd started testing him. He'd consistently tested negative so eventually we stopped testing him altogether. We were like parents at a PTA meeting sitting in back of the high school auditorium, nodding our heads in agreement while the principal lectures on about how bad the drug problem is, nodding because our own kid had done them and we knew how serious the problem was. But the truth was, although we couldn't know it yet, that one word, *had*, would be incorrect.

While the memory of those days has faded, the accompanying sensations have not. I think I would call the overarching sensation compassion, although I'm not sure that's quite right. I don't think we feel compassion for our children. What we feel is a paler, yet far fiercer, sort of mercy. It's meant for ourselves of course—this mercy, that without it will mean suffering the implosion of every organ within us—and we will go through any conceivable trouble, even giving our own lives, to achieve it. Even as I dialed, I didn't know where life would go because we might lose our son and then everything would change forever. I didn't feel angry, although it would have been appropriate—I lack in that department, which I've always assumed is at least one of the reasons I've lived most of my life with a dull, thumping bleakness that for some reason, in my visually inclined imagination, takes the form of a thick, fat hand pounding on an arterial door at the base of my neck. The door is probably made of horded muscle, formed over time from the mere act of staying shut.

I called the police because I found a text on Sweetboy's phone that stunned me. I didn't think he was doing drugs anymore. He couldn't be. We assumed he was one of those kids who experiment with drugs, realize it's stupid, and quit. His friends were helping him. Kids' lives were changing. There was prayer. Our home was full of life. Although dread had accompanied many of my days over the last year, I was finally, hesitantly, beginning to relax. The last year had been full of the unique, solitary fear that only a parent of a child who's gotten involved with hard drugs can understand. Sweetboy had habitually come home at 4:00 a.m., sometimes not at all; he'd been smoking almost two packs of Marlboros a day, once Rick found him snorting a pill, every phone call or trip out or text had been suspect. But the low, uneven sky had been slowly rising and Sweetboy, once again, was headed in the right direction. Things were good.

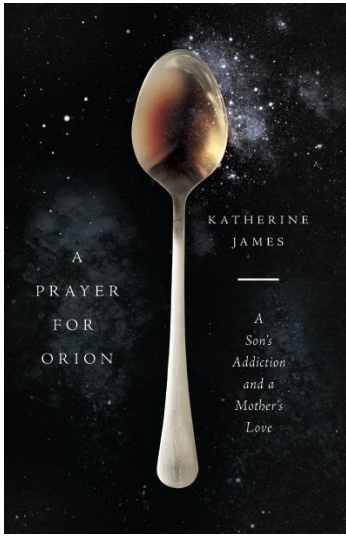
Our home had become a cross between a Billy Sunday revival tent and a carny—half church, half zoo—and while early on arms raised toward a canvas roof could just as well be seeking a high as redemption, the love of God was prevailing. Our



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home had become a gathering place for kids who wanted to hang out and talk. Rick had started two Bible studies. Tuesday evenings were for kids who were still using drugs, Wednesdays for kids who were clean and wanted to grow. Our living room was full of Sweetboy's friends, and friends of friends. Sometimes kids we'd never seen before. Our lights were on all night. The house was like a fishbowl, and with the cars bumper-to-bumper in our driveway and pulled up on the grass in front, and the bay window with the lit-up living room declaring all the people hanging out, I imagine there had to have been a bit of rubbernecking from the neighbors.

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I saw the text around 11:00 in the morning. I had gone into his room to make sure he was awake, but I found him asleep on his back and covered by a blanket with one knee raised and his phone lying next to his pillow. He'd always tended to sleep that way, with one knee raised, which I could never understand because it implies some sort of tension while asleep, to keep your knee up like that. He was snoring. There was a slant of sun through the window that hit the wall as though it was about to ricochet and bounce quietly around the room, but it stayed in place, the golden light slicing the room in half. Sweetboy's skin is fair but he can still tan, and although when he was young it was a deep auburn, his hair is more of a brown now unless he's standing in the sun, where it looks almost red. Rick's grandparents were Irish and spoke in a thick brogue, and even though he has the deep auburn hair and he doesn't always burn in the sun, there's still an Irishness about him, as though even though he doesn't have freckles, he should have them. His eyes are so dark you can't tell his pupils from his irises. I've never been able to tell them apart. Opiates cause the pupils to constrict onto pin dots.

The language in the text was foreign; it wasn't the way Sweetboy talked, or texted. Or the way his friends talked, and at first I thought that he'd accidentally ended up with someone else's phone. *Yo, u want me to get u some* (I don't remember what he called it). *Ima go into the city tonight if u want some cheap. Gotta go the Dad's comin.* All I could think was that some greasy haired kid was in his basement with the TV on, texting everyone he knew so he could sell some smack (or whatever he called it). Maybe he had a bunch of baggies on a coffee table in front of him that he would spend an hour that night filling with some kind of powder he'd gotten after passing a wad of dirty bills through the window of some kind of dilapidated Chevy Impala or maybe a slick new Mercedes with the windows blacked out as it slowed to a stop and a guy wearing some kind of sweatshirt with some kind of hood up and half over his face would unroll the window. He'd be all pimply and pale because he didn't have a clue how to wash his face since both of his parents were addicts and didn't pay any attention to him growing up and he'd been hanging out on the street since he was ten. He wouldn't bother to look up at the kid who texted Sweetboy to see if he wanted some smack, or whatever he called it, he'd just take his money and maybe flip through the bills with his dirty unwashed hands before handing off the smack, or whatever he called it, to make sure there were enough bills before the Mercedes or dilapidated Impala slowly pulled away and turned the corner onto a dark street with a waste of syringes, like abandoned tampon applicators, clogging the gutters. I imagined dozens of Ziploc sandwich bags full of whatever it was the kid was buying—which I know now would have been enough dope to feed every addict in Philly for a month. I imagined half inflated CVS bags pressed into the grills of drains—heavy rains having tried, and failed, to pull them into the sewers. I know a lot more now, but back then I didn't have a clue.

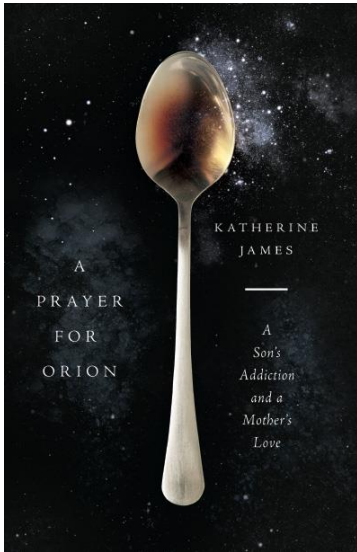
—Adapted from Part 1



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## DETAILS



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## It's Always Somebody Else's Kid—Until It's Yours

"They say that when you tie a rubber tube around an upper arm, you feel the love the way a river feels a rock—a swish up or over or around. The river tightens and narrows, the wake behind it shoots out water like the universe shoots out stars, and the gritty fog of sediment tells the whole story. We didn't know that leaning forward—always—could make that last stiff spine split open in prayer; the backdrop to St. Paul's words.

"The needle goes in. The insides of elbows all over America are sucking juice like Thin Mints out of a Girl Scout box; one is never enough. Rubber tube. Pull it tight. Flatten the arm. Needle."

So begins this haunting memoir from Katherine James, author of the award-winning *Can You See Anything Now?*. In this moving story of James's son's battle with addiction, we see what it looks like to be a loved one on the other side of the opium epidemic.

When James and her husband found out their son was using heroin, their responses ran the gamut: disbelief, anger, helplessness, guilt. As they struggled to come to grips with their son's addiction and decide how best to help him, their home became a refuge for an unlikely assortment of their son's friends, each with their own story, drawn by the simple love and acceptance they found there—"the Lost Boys," James calls them.

"As a writer, after walking through the journey of having a son addicted, and then overdosing, on heroin, I wanted to tell the story of all that I've been through from the perspective of a mother, but also as a writer," said James. "My desire was to show some of the realities that are unique to addicts and those who love them. Much like Michael Herr's memoir, *Dispatches*, about Herr's time as an embedded journalist in the Vietnam war, I wanted to express in my own words—to show as much as tell—what it's like to see the world in terms of 'us' and 'them,' where the enemy is heroin and my job is to report back to those not affected by it and hopefully bring more clarity to the opiate epidemic in America."

In this sensitive, vulnerable memoir, award-winning novelist James turns her lush prose to a new purpose: to tell her family's story through the twists and turns of her son's addiction, overdose, and slow recovery.

As James writes in the preface, "William Faulkner said that the past is never dead—that it's not even the past. He meant that our past isn't a benign thing—it's as much a part of us as the color of our eyes because in so many ways it has formed who we are now. In writing this memoir I've had to discover and study the specifics of events and even emotions that I had no intention of going back to, but in doing so I've found Faulkner's words to be true; my past is not even my past. I am who I am because of it. It's a hard memoir to write, but there's no one else in the world who can write it."

The result is not just a look at the phenomenon of drug abuse in suburban America, but also a meditation on the particular anguish of loving a wayward child and clinging to a desperate trust in God's providence through it all.



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