

SINNERS and SAINTS and SUITCASES
by Aimee Baker

They'd been in the motel room for two hours, and the suitcases were still zipped, lying on the floor next to one of the double beds. The smell of smoke permeated all the clothing, what little there was stuffed unfolded between Samsonite logos and metal clasps. Between the two double beds with their scratchy over-bleached duvets, Charlie flipped through the pages of the New Testament.

With the big glass door thrown open, midafternoon sunlight and the rush of traffic across the street filled the empty spaces between the conversation outside.

"One more time," Her father's suit was immaculate, still starched and pressed into neat lines that ran from his knees down his shins. "run through it again."

"I'd left him at home with dinner on the stove to run out for more bread." The usually neatly combed blonde hairs on her mother's head were frazzled, standing up at all angles, a church of worshipers screaming to the heavens. There was ash under her fingernails, streaked grey up her arms exposed by unevenly rolled sleeves.

"Good, keep going."

"I told him it was only going to be a few minutes, and that I was taking Charlie along, so she didn't cause him trouble."

There was no glossary or index in the New Testament, whatever it was; the almost translucent pages held words Charlie had never seen before, damnation, salvation, repent. The Bible was no Charlotte's Web, no Dr. Seuss. Page after page of tiny font, perfectly neat lines, numbers were lining some parts' edges and not others. To top it off, not a single picture to be found. Even the cover was dull.

"What's wrong?" Craning her head up over the stripes of navy and red, Charlie peered outside. There was ash on her mother's face where she'd scrubbed her hands over it, tinted the box-blonde of her hair at the temples.

"We weren't supposed to lose the house! It was supposed to be quick, painless..."

"Hey, this is a great thing." Her father's hand placed on her mother's shoulder was large, steady, unblemished with ash or imperfection. Just as it always was when he came home from work or tucked her into bed. "This is more than we could have asked for, trust me."

The saints between the pages Charlie held between her fingers were silent, offering no help or advice as she flipped through the pages. What kind of book with no pictures was also lacking a glossary or even an index? How were adults supposed to find their way through the static of repetitive lines without it?

"There were photos in there, jewelry of your moms too." Through the buzzing static of the traffic just beyond the patio, the sigh her mother gave was almost drowned out, became more background noise to fill the empty spaces of the modest motel room. A semi-truck pressed on the gas, echoed mechanical thunder across the street, and rattled the glass panes of the door.

Tucked between the beds, on the faded green carpet with her bare feet tucked under the duvet that smelled so similar to their clothes still packed away, Charlie skimmed over the words. Let her eyes roam over neat rows of words, turned each page with reverent boredom. Somewhere outside, her mother lit a cigarette, talked about salvation with her father as he began to remove his tie. To a ten-year-old, words like salvation meant nothing, and even the saints thought that was for the best.

