

## **Dear God**

By Clay Pruitt

Based on a True Story

*Dear God,*

Sometimes I wonder if I am normal. I try to tame my wild, ratty hair into a nice long braid like the other girls. I listen to my elders and respect them. I watch the three littlest ones without complaining. But I don't think my soul is the same as my family members'. Abigail scolds me for writing. She tells me, "Laura, it is not a girl's place to write words other than scripture." So I figured that if I wrote a letter to you, Lord, that it would not be a sin. When I was in school, writing was my favorite subject. I liked being able to imagine stories and write them down for others to read. I miss school a lot but I know my duties are here at home.

The other day was my birthday. I was out in the pasture, kneeling and praying to you. I asked you to guide me in my life and point me in the proper direction. I could still use some help. Just as I finished my prayer, my brother, Michael, rode up on Luke, my favorite of our horses, and told me I could have a turn riding him if I liked. "Really?" I asked, not waiting for an answer before I ran into the house and straight for my pair of riding denims, quickly pulling them on under my long dress that Grandma Barlow made me. Luke and I rode together only for a few minutes but we rode so swiftly. My hair fell out of my braid and blew in the wind just like Luke's mane.

Lord, I know we should not be gluttonous with things we like, but I would have given up near anything if I could have ridden him a bit more. I pretended I didn't hear my mother calling me. Looking beyond the fences, the green trees against the red dirt landscape of Colorado City, Arizona transformed into a majestic place, like heaven. Is that what heaven is like?

“Laura! I said get off that horse and come inside and help with dinner!” Mother rarely raises her voice—it's unladylike and disrespectful. I jumped off Luke, brushed myself off, and ran up to the back porch to Mom.

“Sorry, Mom. I couldn't hear you, the wind was in my face,” I told her. I know it was a lie, but I figured you would forgive me for it on my birthday.

Mashed potatoes, that was my job. With most of my sisters and all four of the mothers cooking side-by-side, we barely fit in the kitchen. I had to move the large bowl of potatoes into the laundry room to cut them up. It was a Sunday; we always make a large meal on Sundays. Father was getting home at 6:30 and we wanted everything ready when he walked through the door.

I heard Mom and the other sister wives talking in the kitchen as I chopped. At some point in the conversation she mentioned it was my birthday. I smiled at her remembering. Abigail said she was wondering what the cake was for. I immediately got excited.

“How old is she now?” asked Mary.

My mother replied, “She's twelve.”

“She'll be seeing the elders in a couple years. She could use a good husband. Too much wildness in that young girl.” I ignored the anger I felt towards her, like I was

supposed to. I tried to concentrate on the potatoes and the idea of birthday cake. I imagined it was a carrot cake with cream cheese frosting. Twelve perfect candles spaced evenly in a circle on its top. Perhaps Father would remember my birthday too.

When the potatoes were done boiling, Mom helped me pour off the water and mash them. I added the butter and milk like I was taught. Mom handed me a bottle labeled “Garlic Powder” and told me to add to taste. After about ten minutes of adding and tasting, the potatoes were perfect.

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“Laura did. It’s her birthday today.” She looked at me and smiled.

“Really?” Father replied, “How old are you now, honey?”

“I’m twelve, Father. I’m glad you like them.” The day was going so well, I thought my cheeks would be permanently frozen in a smile with my dimples puckering. He gave a quick wink and went back to eating his meal.

At the end of supper, Mom and Mary disappeared into the kitchen momentarily before we began to clear away the dishes. The lights abruptly went out and Mom, shrouded in an orange glow, entered carrying the cake. One by one, my family started in singing “Happy Birthday.” I don’t think I ever had so much attention. I blushed and hid my face. I looked around to see the others singing at me. When I got to father he wasn’t

singing but staring into the flames of the candles. He looked up when he sensed my looking at him and cracked a half smile and joined in the song. Twelve candles was a lot but I blew them all out in one try. And I was right; it was a carrot cake with cream cheese frosting. Lord, I never felt so loved by my family. Usually I get lost in the crowd of them but that night I felt special.

After the leftovers were put away and the dishes cleaned I played Hide-and-Go-Seek with the younger children. We played until their bedtime and they went scurrying off to their rooms. I helped tidy up the house a bit and then went to bed myself. I shared a small room with Marian, my 16-year-old half sister who had just found a husband, and little Lydia and Jessica, who were sleeping in the nursery with the other little ones that night. I had the room to myself. Being around so many people all day, I really appreciate any alone time I can get.

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A sudden knocking awoke me. The knock came again. I looked toward the door as it opened, allowing a flickering, golden light from a candle into the room. My eyes

foggy from sleep, I couldn't see who it was at first. As the person came closer, the candle in their hand illuminated their face. It was father. "Hey, pumpkin," he said.

I sat up, "Is something wrong? Are the little ones alright?"

"They're fine. Everything's fine," he told me in a soft, slow voice. "Lay back down." I did as he told me, though I was confused by his visit. He sat on the edge of my bed and placed the candle on the table next to it. He started running his hand through my hair. I had never felt so much attention from him before. "Did you have a good birthday, darling?"

"Yes, father. I got to ride Luke. And the cake Mom made was delicious."

"Good. Good..." He seemed like he wanted to say something else. He continued to rub my hair. I turned my head away from the candle light and closed my eyes. His rough fingers running through my hair sent cooling shivers down my back. I heard a clinking sound and jerked to see if something fell off my bed table onto the floor. I couldn't see anything that could have made the sound. Then I looked at father. His belt was undone and his other hand was in his pants. I pretended I didn't see; I didn't want to embarrass him. I lay my head back down, again facing away.

I clenched my eyes tight trying to force myself to sleep. *Back to the river's bend.* I felt his hot, sticky breath on my cheek. The garlic smell intoxicated me and made me nauseous. He slowly laid his lips on my face and placed a lingering kiss on my skin. His mouth moved to my ear. "Laura, I need you to do something for your father."

Under my breath, my shaking voice said, "Yes, father?"

"You know it is the duty of women to obey men. You are a woman now." I felt his body rise from the mattress, his hand remained on my head. I heard his heavy pants

fall to the floor and him step out of them. His breathing was heavy now. “Look at me, Laura.”

I wanted to obey him, but my body wouldn't move. *Think of riding Luke.*

“Look at me.” I turned slowly, keeping my eyes clinched. *Wind in my hair.* His coarse fingers wrapped around my hand and he pulled it toward him. “Open your eyes.” I did. He had himself exposed before me. “I want you to touch it. Be gentle.” I swallowed hard. *The beautiful sunlight on the stone wall.* My heart pounded in my ears. “Laura, do as your father says. It's God's way.” I inched my way toward him, his large appendage waiting. I took it in my hand, he moaned with satisfaction. “Now slowly tug on it. But remember, be gentle.”

I did as he said. *Think of riding Luke.* The sounds he made hurt my ears. *Think of the sunset.* The way he rubbed and squeezed my head. *Look at your reflection in the river.* The jerking motions he made with a hidden chuckle. *Pet Luke and tell him everything is all right.*

“Good job, darling. You made your father proud. Go back to sleep now.” He pulled on his pants, buckled his belt, grabbed the candle, and left the room. I couldn't help but cry. I told myself not to, that I was serving my father like I should. I didn't sleep the rest of the night.

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Satan's bidding. Something told me that this wasn't your will. Am I wrong to think that? Please give me some guidance, Lord. I could use some help. Amen.

Your faithful servant,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Laura". The letters are fluid and connected, with a prominent loop at the end of the word.

**A Note from the Author:** This story is based on the childhood experiences of Laura Chapman while living in Colorado City, Arizona. She grew up as the twenty-fifth child of thirty-one children total. Laura's father continuously sexually assaulted her for many years. At the age of eighteen, she married George Barlow in an arranged marriage. After having five children, four daughters and an autistic son, George decided to take another wife. Laura's strong will compelled her to leave, taking all the children and moving to Salt Lake City where she obtained her degree in Psychology. She has been a key member in activism against polygamy and currently lives in Southwest Colorado working in Child Protection.

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Sometimes I wonder if I am normal. I try to tame my wild, ratty hair into a nice long braid like the other girls. I listen to my elders and respect them. I watch the three littlest ones without complaining. But I don't think my soul is the same as my family members'. Abigail scolds me for writing. She tells me, "Laura, it is not a girl's place to write words other than scripture." So I figured that if I wrote a letter to you, Lord, that it would not be a sin. When I was in school, writing was my favorite subject. I liked being able to imagine stories and write them down for others to read. I miss school a lot but I know my duties are here at home.

The other day was my birthday. I was out in the pasture, kneeling and praying to you. I asked you to guide me in my life and point me in the proper direction. I could still use some help. Just as I finished my prayer, my brother, Michael, rode up on Luke, my favorite of our horses, and told me I could have a turn riding him if I liked. "Really?" I asked, not waiting for an answer before I ran into the house and straight for my pair of

riding denims, quickly pulling them on under my long dress that Grandma Barlow made me. Luke and I rode together only for a few minutes but we rode so swiftly. My hair fell out of my braid and blew in the wind just like Luke's mane.

Lord, I know we should not be gluttonous with things we like, but I would have given up near anything if I could have ridden him a bit more. I pretended I didn't hear my mother calling me. Looking beyond the fences, the green trees against the red dirt landscape of Colorado City, Arizona transformed into a majestic place, like heaven. Is that what heaven is like?

"Laura! I said get off that horse and come inside and help with dinner!" Mother rarely raises her voice—it's unladylike and disrespectful. I jumped off Luke, brushed myself off, and ran up to the back porch to Mom.

"Sorry, Mom. I couldn't hear you, the wind was in my face," I told her. I know it was a lie, but I figured you would forgive me for it on my birthday.

Mashed potatoes, that was my job. With most of my sisters and all four of the mothers cooking side-by-side, we barely fit in the kitchen. I had to move the large bowl of potatoes into the laundry room to cut them up. It was a Sunday; we always make a large meal on Sundays. Father was getting home at 6:30 and we wanted everything ready when he walked through the door.

I heard Mom and the other sister wives talking in the kitchen as I chopped. At some point in the conversation she mentioned it was my birthday. I smiled at her remembering. Abigail said she was wondering what the cake was for. I immediately got excited.

"How old is she now?" asked Mary.

My mother replied, “She’s twelve.”

“She’ll be seeing the elders in a couple years. She could use a good husband. Too much wildness in that young girl.” I ignored the anger I felt towards her, like I was supposed to. I tried to concentrate on the potatoes and the idea of birthday cake. I imagined it was a carrot cake with cream cheese frosting. Twelve perfect candles spaced evenly in a circle on its top. Perhaps Father would remember my birthday too.

When the potatoes were done boiling, Mom helped me pour off the water and mash them. I added the butter and milk like I was taught. Mom handed me a bottle labeled “Garlic Powder” and told me to add to taste. After about ten minutes of adding and tasting, the potatoes were perfect.

When Father arrived, we had everything ready and hot on the main table. Mom told me I could sit at the main table since it was my birthday. She didn’t know that I knew about the cake. Father said grace and we ate. Out of all the food we prepared, Father chose to comment on the mashed potatoes. “These are some wonderful garlic mashed potatoes. Who made them?” No one said anything for a moment. Then mother cleared her throat and spoke.

“Laura did. It’s her birthday today.” She looked at me and smiled.

“Really?” Father replied, “How old are you now, honey?”

“I’m twelve, Father. I’m glad you like them.” The day was going so well, I thought my cheeks would be permanently frozen in a smile with my dimples puckering. He gave a quick wink and went back to eating his meal.

At the end of supper, Mom and Mary disappeared into the kitchen momentarily before we began to clear away the dishes. The lights abruptly went out and Mom,



shrouded in an orange glow, entered carrying the cake. One by one, my family started in singing “Happy Birthday.” I don’t think I ever had so much attention. I blushed and hid my face. I looked around to see the others singing at me. When I got to father he wasn’t singing but staring into the flames of the candles. He looked up when he sensed my looking at him and cracked a half smile and joined in the song. Twelve candles was a lot but I blew them all out in one try. And I was right; it was a carrot cake with cream cheese frosting. Lord, I never felt so loved by my family. Usually I get lost in the crowd of them but that night I felt special.

After the leftovers were put away and the dishes cleaned I played Hide-and-Go-Seek with the younger children. We played until their bedtime and they went scurrying off to their rooms. I helped tidy up the house a bit and then went to bed myself. I shared a small room with Marian, my 16-year-old half sister who had just found a husband, and little Lydia and Jessica, who were sleeping in the nursery with the other little ones that night. I had the room to myself. Being around so many people all day, I really appreciate any alone time I can get.

I fell asleep and dreamt of riding Luke again. We bounded over fences and off into the sunset like the cowboys in a movie I once saw my brothers watching. We rode alone for what seemed like hours. We stopped for water at a place where the river bends. The light in the dream was so beautiful—spilling softly over the stone wall eroded by the ancient presence of rushing water. A waterfall of amber. A waterfall of amber glowing all the way to the reflective water below. I looked in the calm eddy at the river’s edge. I saw myself but something was different. I was a woman. Still young, but I was no longer a girl.

A sudden knocking awoke me. The knock came again. I looked toward the door as it opened, allowing a flickering, golden light from a candle into the room. My eyes foggy from sleep, I couldn't see who it was at first. As the person came closer, the candle in their hand illuminated their face. It was father. "Hey, pumpkin," he said.

I sat up, "Is something wrong? Are the little ones alright?"

"They're fine. Everything's fine," he told me in a soft, slow voice. "Lay back down." I did as he told me, though I was confused by his visit. He sat on the edge of my bed and placed the candle on the table next to it. He started running his hand through my hair. I had never felt so much attention from him before. "Did you have a good birthday, darling?"

"Yes, father. I got to ride Luke. And the cake Mom made was delicious."

"Good. Good..." He seemed like he wanted to say something else. He continued to rub my hair. I turned my head away from the candle light and closed my eyes. His rough fingers running through my hair sent cooling shivers down my back. I heard a clinking sound and jerked to see if something fell off my bed table onto the floor. I couldn't see anything that could have made the sound. Then I looked at father. His belt was undone and his other hand was in his pants. I pretended I didn't see; I didn't want to embarrass him. I lay my head back down, again facing away.

I clenched my eyes tight trying to force myself to sleep. *Back to the river's bend.* I felt his hot, sticky breath on my cheek. The garlic smell intoxicated me and made me nauseous. He slowly laid his lips on my face and placed a lingering kiss on my skin. His mouth moved to my ear. "Laura, I need you to do something for your father."

Under my breath, my shaking voice said, "Yes, father?"

“You know it is the duty of women to obey men. You are a woman now.” I felt his body rise from the mattress, his hand remained on my head. I heard his heavy pants fall to the floor and him step out of them. His breathing was heavy now. “Look at me, Laura.”

I wanted to obey him, but my body wouldn't move. *Think of riding Luke.*

“Look at me.” I turned slowly, keeping my eyes clinched. *Wind in my hair.* His coarse fingers wrapped around my hand and he pulled it toward him. “Open your eyes.” I did. He had himself exposed before me. “I want you to touch it. Be gentle.” I swallowed hard. *The beautiful sunlight on the stone wall.* My heart pounded in my ears. “Laura, do as your father says. It's God's way.” I inched my way toward him, his large appendage waiting. I took it in my hand, he moaned with satisfaction. “Now slowly tug on it. But remember, be gentle.”

I did as he said. *Think of riding Luke.* The sounds he made hurt my ears. *Think of the sunset.* The way he rubbed and squeezed my head. *Look at your reflection in the river.* The jerking motions he made with a hidden chuckle. *Pet Luke and tell him everything is all right.*

“Good job, darling. You made your father proud. Go back to sleep now.” He pulled on his pants, buckled his belt, grabbed the candle, and left the room. I couldn't help but cry. I told myself not to, that I was serving my father like I should. I didn't sleep the rest of the night.

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The next morning, I didn't tell you about this in my prayers, Lord. I haven't told you until now, though I know you know anyway. Am I normal, Lord? I know I was

serving my father as a woman should obey a man. Something inside me felt that it was Satan's bidding. Something told me that this wasn't your will. Am I wrong to think that? Please give me some guidance, Lord. I could use some help. Amen.

Your faithful servant,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Laura". The letters are fluid and connected, with a prominent loop at the end of the word.

**A Note from the Author:** This story is based on the childhood experiences of Laura Chapman while living in Colorado City, Arizona. She grew up as the twenty-fifth child of thirty-one children total. Laura's father continuously sexually assaulted her for many years. At the age of eighteen, she married George Barlow in an arranged marriage. After having five children, four daughters and an autistic son, George decided to take another wife. Laura's strong will compelled her to leave, taking all the children and moving to Salt Lake City where she obtained her degree in Psychology. She has been a key member in activism against polygamy and currently lives in Southwest Colorado working in Child Protection.