



A NOVEL BASED ON THE LIFE OF
ST. AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO

THE
FLESH
— AND THE —
SPIRIT

Sharon Reiser & Ali A. Smith

M
THE
MENTORIS
PROJECT

“I see in my members another principle at war with the law of my mind, taking me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. Miserable one that I am! Who will deliver me from this mortal body?”

—Romans 7:23–24

“May I not be my own life.”

—St. Augustine, *The Confessions* XII.x

Prologue

IN THE BEGINNING

November 13, 354

Thagaste, North Africa

The midwife appeared from the doorway of the stone house and placed the bundle down at Patricius's feet, according to Roman custom. The old woman then stepped back.

Patricius stood outside in the morning sunlight. Rough brown mountains and trees circled his farmland, and the morning sky was a brilliant blue. But his focus was not on his surroundings—rather, his eyes were fixed on the crying infant before him. He bent down, picked up the newborn, and looked into his son's dark eyes. He had no desire to do anything else. He had no desire but to claim the child as his, even though Rome gave him the choice not to.

It was a long way from Rome to Patricius's small farm in northern Africa, but Rome's influence extended far. The Roman Empire stretched from Africa to Britain, from Gaul to Constantinople. To most men, it was the world, and it surely was to

Patricius. Rome was stability and tradition. It told a man what his place was in the world and what he should do. And in return for granting this order, Rome claimed the authority to enforce it, extending authority over life and death.

As Rome was to the Empire, so a man was to his household. This baby, this newborn Patricius now held in his arms, was his son. He fully intended to rear him as well as he could, to give him everything he was able to give. He wondered why that couldn't be a responsibility he really did choose, rather than something that was required of him.

It was a useless question. In this matter, someone else in his household held the final authority.

Patricius pushed aside the curtain that opened to the room where Monica lay exhausted on a pallet. Monica—her dark hair now wet with sweat—looked up at her husband and baby with a wan smile. She looked peaceful even now, after giving birth. This was the trait Patricius appreciated most in his wife—except when he was very angry, and then it seemed to him a kind of obstinacy that could throw him into a rage.

He stared down at her now, returning her smile. He was moved to hold their fine son in his arms, and relieved that Monica's ordeal was over. But he could not resist asking the first question that came into his mind: "Shall he be baptized?"

This question that troubled Patricius also troubled scores of others. Baptizing infants was not unknown at the time, but it was more common to wait until adulthood. The delay came mainly from the great reverence in which the power of the baptismal water was held. Baptism was considered a complete cleansing

of sin, and a person could receive it only once. Wasn't it better, argued many people, to wait to cleanse the sins of a lifetime all at once? Surely, that was better than to be cleansed too early and then fall back into sin. Others asked a different question: How long should a man wait to have his sins washed away?

Patricius knew Monica had asked herself these questions. Sometimes he wondered whether she had thought about anything else in all the months of her pregnancy.

Monica was a Christian in every thought and task; Patricius did not appreciate this about her, and he let her know his feelings often. A wife should consider her husband her sole lord, and Monica never let him forget that she recognized a higher lord. Of that she was sure, and she often suffered her husband's anger for it.

So, Patricius was surprised when she replied to his question with one of her own.

"Would you permit it?" she asked. She instinctively formed her words to keep her husband's violent temper from erupting.

Patricius wanted to be gentle as he held his newborn son, but his smile faded. "Much you would care if I did not," he said with a sarcastic grimace. His wife was quiet and determined, and he was suddenly ready to argue with her.

He wished she would fight, but instead she remained as calm as ever and said, "I obey you in everything I can, and I will obey you in this. I ask for permission to make him a catechumen. The rest can wait on his own choice."

Patricius was dimly aware of the catechumenate rite. The

sign of the cross on the forehead, the laying on of hands, the murmur of some words, the touch of salt on the tongue—harmless enough. “Very well. I grant it,” he said.

“Thank you.” Monica’s gratitude was real, and she lifted herself to a sitting position, leaning against the bedroom’s sturdy wooden wall. After a moment, she asked quietly, “May I hold him?” Whenever she spoke to her husband, Monica kept her tone even and quiet.

Patricius placed the baby in her arms. Monica wondered briefly whether she should have insisted on baptism. It was easy in the abstract to say she would obey her husband in everything that did not conflict with the law of God. In practice, though, it was not always so clear where the conflicts might lie. But right now she had everything she needed, and it was enough. She was a mother. She cradled her beautiful son in her arms. Her Augustine.

Part One

THE FRUIT OF THE GARDEN

Chapter One

It was not easy to remain sleeping with the hot morning sun in his eyes, but during his sixteen years Augustine had practiced this skill. At home, he filled every chink in the shutters. But he was traveling now, and the morning light found its way to his face and shoulders.

He was traveling to Carthage, the great Roman city on the shore of the Mediterranean Sea. In this hub of art and culture, he could receive an education that would prepare him for a great career.

Many times, he had tried to imagine Carthage, one hundred and fifty miles east of the town of Thagaste in Northern Africa, where he'd been born. Augustine had never ventured from home before now, and he'd never seen the sea. Growing up on his father's olive farm, he'd watch as workers pressed and poured oil into jars before it made its journey to vendors across the sea.

Whenever traders came to the farm, he had listened intently when they described what it was like to stand on the deck of a ship and adjust your footing to the rocking waves. At first it seemed impossible, then was soon done with as little thought as drawing breath—and after that, walking on land felt unnatural.

Young Augustine was intrigued by the traders' stories and couldn't wait to test his balance on a ship at sea. Some days he stared into a cup of water and tried to imagine what it would feel like to float on it like a boat. After today, he would not have to imagine. He lifted his head and looked around the small room, squinting at the brightness of it.

He'd been traveling for nearly a week, and today would be another day on a horse, with the hot, white road stretching out ahead toward the horizon under the African sun. It would be another day in which his senses told him they were not truly advancing, despite what the road markers indicated. By the fourth day, he had begun to wonder if the road markers lied.

"Up!" commanded Priscus, the leader of the merchants with whom Augustine was traveling. By now, all of the merchants knew his aversion to morning light and had learned that strong measures must be taken. Without a chance to protest or obey, Augustine tumbled onto the hard dirt floor as three young men yanked the cushion from beneath him.

"All right, I am up!" Augustine shouted in mock indignation. "You have no respect for a person's need for sleep!"

"If we didn't pull you out of bed, you'd languish there all day! We need to get to Carthage, and according to your father, so do you." The merchants teased Augustine mercilessly. He didn't mind.

Augustine shook his head and ran his fingers through his dark, curly hair. Evidently, it was time to get up.

Late that afternoon, the travelers sat up in their saddles at the

sight of large stone tombs—now they knew Carthage was close. The dead of Carthage greeted Augustine and his party before they even reached the city gates.

Augustine and the others understood that though a man's breath did not last and his words were fleeting, stone could grant a kind of eternal life that Romans valued. Outside cities throughout the Empire, inscriptions on mausoleums seemed to call to travelers with words about justice and piety and courage. These words carved into stone at least gave a man life by entering the thoughts of the living as often as his name was read.

Priscus, the most talkative of the merchants, sidled up to Augustine on his horse and leaned over to give the teenager's shoulder a teasing shake. "Have you started writing your inscription?" Augustine gave him a long, skeptical look. Priscus persisted, "Come, Augustine, what will your inscription say?"

This passed for humor during the days of counting road markers. Augustine's body was not all that ached after a day in the saddle; his mind longed for intelligent conversation. Still, he liked Priscus, a stout man, older than the others, with a face that seemed to naturally break into a smile. He managed to joke even during the dullest or most tedious stretches of travel.

But instead of answering, Augustine returned the question to Priscus: "What will *yours* say?"

Priscus laughed at the challenge. "More than will fit on a column—if they could print any of it. I have lived for the spirit—I do not say I haven't—but more often than not, the flesh has claimed my attention. There is a good deal more of it, you will agree, and it cries to be fed. The first time I came to

Carthage . . .” He grinned. “Have I told you of the first time I came to Carthage?”

You have, thought Augustine, who now avoided looking directly at Priscus. No use in answering. It would not matter.

“Even if I have, you should have it fresh in your mind. How else will you know what mistakes are worth the making? The first time I came to Carthage . . .”

Oh, thanks be to God, Augustine thought. *The gates.*

Already he felt the cool ocean breeze Carthage was known for against his hot skin. Excitement rose in his chest—he was in Carthage at last!

The city had loomed large in Augustine’s boyhood imagination ever since he learned its history from his father, who was well-informed, having regular contact with merchants from other countries who bought his olive oil. Augustine reflected on the stories he remembered of Carthage and how it came to be.

Here it was before him, this famous city: stone buildings, wide avenues with people coursing through, and glimpses of the sea. Yet, his father had told him, Carthage had once been entirely destroyed. Centuries before, the Phoenicians had built a colony on the site; the inhabitants, the language, and the city itself came to be called *Punic*, from their Phoenician origins. The city grew to dominate the western Mediterranean, and its ships ventured through the straits and down the coast of Africa.

“Legend has it that a Trojan prince named Aeneas came to the city in his wanderings, and when he was welcomed by Queen Dido, he contemplated more than a political alliance,” Patricius once explained to Augustine as they walked through

the olive trees. Patricius had glanced at his son to see if he'd said too much. Augustine had not reacted to the sexual reference, so Patricius went on. "But his gods did not will it. They commanded him to leave, and their commands had to be obeyed. So, Aeneas left Dido, left her to the fire, and sailed away toward the city he would found, the city that would one day put all of Carthage to the flames."

"Was that really the reason Rome and Carthage were enemies?" Augustine had asked. He was an inquisitive boy with a developed sense of logic.

"Ah, you are right to ask!" his father said happily. "There were indeed other reasons for the rivalry of Rome and Carthage—sea lanes, trade, strategically placed islands, and the other concerns of outward-looking people."

Augustine nodded, for these were reasons he understood.

"Still, it gave men a comfortable feeling to believe the gods were on their side," Patricius said. "In those days, there were many gods to choose from. Each man could confidently choose his favorites." He was proud of his son's intelligence and fed it as much as he could. He added, "You will be interested to know that the Carthaginians—heirs to the Phoenicians, who had first claimed the Mediterranean as their trade route—thought the sea would be their battleground and were greatly surprised by how remarkably able Romans were in learning from their adversaries how to build their ships."

As they traversed the grove of olive trees, stopping now and then to inspect their leaves, Patricius explained that, stalemated

on the sea, Carthage determined to take the long road, led by a man who possessed both endurance and audacity.

“Who was that?” young Augustine asked.

“His name was Hannibal,” Patricius said with reverence. “He conquered the Alps and brought his elephants within sight of Rome. In the end, he failed to take the city, but he had come close enough to require more than defeat. Carthage had to be punished.”

And so, Augustine learned, Carthage was defeated, sacked, despoiled, and burned. Carthage was no more, and Rome rejoiced.

“The city was gone, but the land remained a strategic peninsula with a harbor within easy sailing distance of Rome,” Patricius said, explaining that within a generation, Rome attempted to colonize the area. But most of the Senate preferred to consolidate power closer to home and let Africa run wild.

It would take another century for Roman influence to be established there. And it would take another man of endurance and audacity to do it: Julius Caesar. Augustine knew this name—all boys did. On African soil, Caesar defeated his great rival, Pompey, and the native chieftains who were loyal to him. “The men of his victorious army saw African land and African women, and Caesar was pleased to let them claim both,” Patricius said angrily. Clearly, he did not enjoy this part of the history.

What Caesar did not have time to complete, Patricius said, his nephew Augustus accomplished. A statesman and military leader, Augustus sent his surveyors to Africa, and from the top

of Byrsa Hill, the heart of the Punic city, they laid out a new Carthage in a grid of east-west and north-south streets.

“Carthage became Roman,” Patricius said matter-of-factly. “The port was restored and the grain of Africa sailed to Italy. The city acquired a forum, a temple to Jupiter, libraries, baths—everything that, to its colonizers, comprised civilization . . .”

Suddenly, Priscus’s shouts roused Augustine from his reflections on the long history of Carthage. “The gates! We have arrived!”

Augustine looked up at the city now within view and halted his horse while the others trotted for the gates. He wanted to take in the full implication of the city before him.

Here was Carthage. The city that was given a new birth by the conquerors who had taken its first life.

Augustine was acutely aware that he’d come a long way from Thagaste. The air was thicker here, laden with a moisture and fragrance that Augustine learned was the sea. He was used to breathing a higher air, half a mile above sea level and seasoned with pine, not salt.

The air was not the only difference. From his first moments in the city, Augustine compared himself to the citizens and recognized he was just a provincial, the son of a poor farmer from a small town.

Patricius had saved and sacrificed everything he could, without giving up the name of a free man, so his brilliant boy would not become a poor farmer. Indeed, Patricius had seen to it that both his sons—for after Augustine, Monica gave birth to their second boy, Navigius—received the education of free Romans.

Patricius was proud of their family name, Aurelius, which indicated their Roman citizenship.

The heart of such an education, as any Roman or African knew well, was rhetoric. The use of words mattered more than the thoughts they expressed, and schools held contests and offered prizes for recitation. Even as a child, Augustine had suffered agonies in memorizing Juno's wrath at the coming of Aeneas to Italy in Virgil's *Aeneid*. When it was his turn to declaim, his pure, young voice filled the square with the poem's hexameters:

*“Then am I vanquished? Must I yield?” said she,
“And must the Trojans reign in Italy?
So Fate will have it, and Jove adds his force;
Nor can my pow’r divert their happy course.
Could angry Pallas, with revengeful spleen,
The Grecian navy burn, and drown the men?
She, for the fault of one offending foe,
The bolts of Jove himself presum’d to throw:
With whirlwinds from beneath she tossed the ship,
And bare expos’d the bosom of the deep;
Then, as an eagle gripes the trembling game,
The wretch, yet hissing with her father’s flame,
She strongly seized, and with a burning wound
Transfix’d, and naked, on a rock she bound.
But I, who walk in awful state above,
The majesty of heav’n, the sister wife of Jove,
For length of years my fruitless force employ
Against the thin remains of ruin’d Troy!*

*What nations now to Juno's pow'r will pray,
Or offerings on my slighted altars lay?"*

Everyone present heard the heart of the goddess herself coming from the body of the quiet boy who always stood at the edge of the crowd.

Patricius did not understand his son Augustine, but he recognized that here was the material from which lawyers were fashioned, and from lawyers came the officials of the Empire. The Empire was the world. The man who served the Empire might, to one degree or another, command all the world had to offer.

So Patricius had denied himself and his family all but what was strictly necessary to sustain life. They patched their own clothes and let the embers sink low in the braziers. Patricius had called in every favor he could claim, from distant kinship to the local landowner, Romanianus. It pleased Romanianus to be the patron of talent, and he was generous enough to do so without demanding the debt be paid in land. Patricius might be left with nearly nothing, but whatever was not nothing remained his.

When Patricius sent Augustine to Carthage to further the boy's education, Augustine was especially sad to leave his brother behind in Thagaste. Navigius was bored by books and content with tending the olive trees. But in moments when he was not content, he envied his brother for being sent to distant Carthage.

Yet Augustine felt the pressure—his success would be his

family's success; his failure, their failure. So, as soon as Augustine found his school in Carthage and settled into his room, he applied himself to his studies with a fervor that sought to avert failure by sheer will.

Here in Carthage, I have every advantage of civilization and culture, he reminded himself. Here, if success cannot be achieved, the fault lies with the one who cannot achieve it. Here begins the rest of my life, here at the edge of the world.

Still, Augustine was a teenager and enthralled by the city's people, architecture, and landscape—particularly the harbor, where the Mediterranean sparkled in all its magnificence. In the afternoons when classes were done, he walked the dusty streets toward the waterfront. He passed grotesque mosaics of men without mouths, or of men with no heads who kept their eyes in their shoulders, or of men with two feet protruding from a single leg. He paused and marveled, but these curiosities were only the prelude.

At the harbor, he watched men load ships with silver and tin to trade in faraway countries. But the light dancing on the water fascinated him most of all, even as it nearly blinded him. He stood and stared, with the world behind him, and before him the infinite that turned a man into nothing but a glint on the tip of a wave.

When he had dreamed of the sea as a boy, he imagined it as he had seen it on maps: bounded, enclosed. Yet this sea that was beyond the measure of his mind was itself only a part of the world.

He had often spoken to his mother about the sea, wondering aloud what it looked like and what he would do if he saw it. "A man should do what was set before him to do," his mother would say. Monica had little use for speculation. While Augustine lived in the past in order to shape the future, she dwelled in the present with a fervent hope for the future.

Though she was far away at home, Augustine's mother seemed to be lodged in his mind. She was a quiet but forceful and intelligent woman.

Augustine thought about his parents' relationship. Patricius could be kinder than most men when he was not angry, and Monica had learned that when he was angry, she was wise to remain silent. In Patricius's calmer moments, Monica would explain to him her Christian viewpoints. And always she prayed.

Patricius practiced the old Roman ways, not out of religious conviction so much as hallowed custom. Ancestors and gods were to be respected. These gods had served Rome well enough thus far.

Augustine was well aware that his mother was a Christian, less because she talked about it but more because of the principles that guided her actions and her kindness toward others. He could tell his mother felt that her husband's soul was in her care, and she felt even more responsible for her son's soul. Augustine had been sped on his way to Carthage with Monica's prayers and exhortations and admonitions and supplications, and then more prayers.

Augustine did pray. His earliest prayers had been made with

great fervor: he pleaded to his mother's God to save him from the constant beatings of the schoolmaster who taught him his first grammar and arithmetic. It was hard to pay attention to those subjects when there were games to be played, and the schoolmaster clearly did not consider it part of his job to give games any kind of allure. It was enough for him that the boys should learn their letters and numbers, no matter if it be under the rod.

Those prayers had not been answered, but Augustine still prayed—when he remembered. He had watched his mother's devotions, morning and evening, continue as the years passed, despite the fact that Patricius's views remained unchanged.

The Christian God had held sway in Monica's household, but in Carthage, Augustine encountered men and women with quite different, even bizarre, beliefs. Many who found Roman religion—with its abacus-like delineation of duties and cold stance on questions of life, death, and life after death—unfriendly turned to Eastern cults, of which Christianity was only one. The god Mithra and goddesses Isis and Cybele, for example, all claimed devoted adherents—and Augustine would soon encounter them.

In the glow of the moon shining high in the night sky, Augustine held his breath and tried to hide his shock at the scene he faced. He'd been wandering alone through the streets of Carthage on a warm evening when he turned a corner and encountered an agitated crowd. He tried to see what they were looking at, but there were too many people pushing to get to the center.

Augustine heard the name Cybele and the word *initiation*,

and he remembered boys at school talking about this cult. Could this be one of their rites? He drew closer, though he was wary, for he sensed an explosive energy in the crowd.

It was a ceremony unlike anything Augustine had ever seen. Some participants shouted, laughed, and shook their heads in an ecstatic trance. The ceremony was at once intimate—the men and women seemed to let their emotions flow freely—and public, with many spectators. Augustine soon realized this was indeed an initiation rite. The chosen man—a youth with handsome dark features—descended into a deep pit covered with rough planks, arranged with gaps between them.

“Step aside! Step aside!” called a priest. He led a steer, garlanded and gilded, through the crowd and onto the platform, then positioned it for sacrifice. The priest pulled from his robe a long, sharp dagger and violently stabbed the animal, which jerked and groaned. From the pit the young man strained up, his head and chest thrown back to offer as much of his body as possible to the cleansing rain of blood.

Augustine knew the followers of the Cybele cult believed the man was now reborn to eternal life—for a period of twenty years, at least, after which this gruesome ceremony could be repeated.

Fascinated, sickened, and shocked, Augustine watched until the carcass had been drained and the new man emerged from the pit. He was impressed by the fervor of the people around him, but he did not share in their awe. After all, his mother had raised him with stories of a sacrifice greater than a steer.

Augustine rushed away from the scene and found his way

back to the room he rented from his school. That night in bed, the brutal ritual he'd witnessed kept him up awake. Surely, the rebirth of a man's soul must come from within that man, he thought, not from the blood of a beast.

September in Carthage brought cooler temperatures and ripe pomegranates.

"What are you doing, coming to lessons with your hands stained red from pomegranate seeds? Go wash them immediately," reprimanded the teacher to three of Augustine's fellow pupils. "And look at your tunics—you've ruined them!"

"The sweetness of the seeds is worth the caning," whispered one of the boys to Augustine.

"We will be beaten today for some fault anyway, if not for this," said another boy with a laugh.

Augustine watched with amusement, and considering the general laziness of the offenders, he privately agreed. But he was at a loss to understand how a fleeting sweetness could be worth public dishonor.

His family had been poor, so food was nourishment, and that was all. It could be pleasing, the pomegranate as much as other fruit, but it would be gone in moments, leaving only its juices behind, the enduring mark of a trivial—Augustine thought pathetic—sin.

Sin. That was a word from his mother, from the stories she told him when he was a boy. Augustine's attention drifted as he stared out the small classroom window onto the dusty street.

He had given little thought to his mother's stories in these past months, and suddenly Augustine missed her very much. He wanted to do something to please his mother and her God.

Between lessons, as he strolled out into the school courtyard with other boys, one of them asked, "Are you going?" Augustine looked at the boy quizzically. The boy explained that the next evening everyone would attend a Christian celebration for the beloved Bishop Cyprian, who had been martyred in 258 during the persecution commanded by Emperor Valerian. Augustine already knew the great basilica he passed each morning was built over the site of Bishop Cyprian's burial spot—and this is where the celebration would be held. He readily agreed to meet his classmates there.

But he never found them—thronged of men, women, and children flocked to the basilica the next night, cramming the forecourt and spilling into the street. Once or twice he caught a glimpse of a classmate, but before he could reach him, the crowd pushed him in a different direction. Augustine was surrounded by such a press of people that he could barely pass around the platters of food and amphoras of wine that circulated through the crowd in great numbers. The light of the stars and torches was not enough for him to distinguish one person from the next. In place of sight, though, his other senses were stimulated by the intense fragrance of food, the warm taste of wine, the touch of cool cobblestones, and the shouts of men and women singing praises of Carthage's patron, the bishop who had not deserted his flock. The throng extolled Bishop Cyprian's courage,

praised his continence, and proclaimed his skill as an orator as a gift of heaven.

Stirred by the voice of a man who stood on a wooden box reading the Psalms, Augustine closed his eyes and prayed. He prayed to possess the holy bishop's virtues, though he hesitated and quickly amended *continence* to *chastity*. Augustine resisted the idea of renouncing the flesh altogether.

Next, an old man stood on a bench above the crowd and told of Cyprian's generosity and how he had sold his inheritance to provide for the poor. Tonight, in his name, the man said, the poor were fed.

"We are all poor in spirit, so the Gospel tells us," laughed someone nearby as he refilled Augustine's cup from an amphora.

The people's singing was becoming less coherent. As the wine warmed his blood, Augustine found that his own feet were becoming less steady. He was pulled by the ebb and flow of the crowd. He put out a hand for balance, though he had a small chance of finding anything steadier than himself. His hand found the curve of a woman's hip. He pulled his hand away. "My fault," he said at once.

The woman turned to face him, her dark eyes glittering in the torchlight. "A man should be sorry for his faults," she said, her voice youthful. She smiled. "Are you sorry?"

It would be easy to say yes, to own the fault and turn away. But there was a warmth in his blood that was not wine, and a stirring that had nothing to do with psalms. It reminded him of a few years earlier, when he was at the baths with his father, who

shouted with delight to the other men present that he looked forward to his son making him a grandfather.

Augustine shook his head—he had come here tonight to please his mother. It seemed that he might end the night by pleasing his father instead.

“That depends,” he told the girl. “It has been said that there are many poor people here tonight. To answer your question, I must first inquire into the nature of poverty.”

“Must you?” Her fingers brushed his. She did not understand the game, but she was willing to play it.

“Poverty, surely, is a lack—a need unmet. If either of us had such a need, then we would be poor. And if we each had a need the other could meet, then we would be poor together, for so long as we were unsatisfied.”

She took his hand and returned it to where it had so briefly rested. “I am poor,” she said.

“Then I am not sorry.”

With her hand over his, they sought a path through the crowd, intoxicated with wine and psalms. As they stepped out into the street, Augustine made a further emendation to his prayer: “O God, give me chastity and continence . . . but not yet.”