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Fiction piece – Dyostopic Literature story  
Senior Year

## Birth Control

Brenda eyed the multicolored flyers bolted to a faded green lamppost. The familiar headline read in gold text: “God has a plan for you. Join the United World Religion.” A pair of hands snuck from behind Brenda and clasped her sweater, rubbing her belly. “Are you ready to go, honey?” asked Brenda’s husband.

“Where should we go, Patrick?” Brenda asked.

Patrick circled to her front and gazed into Brenda’s brown eyes. “It’s going to be okay, sweetheart. We’ll join the UWR, and then we can have the baby.”

A chilling wind clutched Brenda’s bare ankles. The lights from the movie theater they had just come from did little to banish the darkness. She could hardly believe that their only option at the movie theater was between some new Disney animated movie about a princess or another propaganda film about a couple finding happiness by discovering religion. But she’d wanted a night out with her husband in a darkened theater. This was the last chance she’d have to really think about her decision.

Brown leaves danced around the young couple, and the UWR flyers strained to stay on their posts. Brenda tucked a lock of curly brown hair behind her ear as she took a long look at the picture underneath the UWR advertisement. In the ad, a group of people gathered around in a circle, holding hands. In the center, a generic man and woman held a baby between them. Brenda knew, as everyone did, that each person in the circle represented a different faith or world culture. But the conflicting faiths were now joined in one ideology for the betterment of mankind; this circle was a symbol of unity.

“It’s funny,” Brenda said. “I never noticed how they all smile until now.”

Patrick gave her shoulder a loving squeeze but said nothing.

Patrick sipped his apple juice as he watched the news on TV. He could barely remember the taste of beer; it had been outlawed for nearly a decade. It was one of the first acts of the new government that had abolished the separation of church and state. What used to be the Senate was now the Appointed Cardinals’ Association, a primary ruling body of the UWR. When the government dissolved in favor of total religious leadership, laws were passed to make the future safe for everyone on the planet. This included not only the ban, but elimination of alcohol. There were protests, but soon the dissidents were suppressed when they realized that God had a plan for them. They went to spiritual rehabilitation camps to see that protesting was against the will of God. With all the slogans and neighbors that were part of the UWR, even Patrick began to think God had a plan for him, too. However, he did miss his booze.

Patrick’s parents used to tell him that he was special. Cemented in that ideal at a young age, he grew up thinking that it was okay that he stood away from the crowds of religious followers. After marrying Brenda, however, he began to question what it was that made him so special. After all, all he really was by the age of thirty-three was a safety inspector at an automobile factory. While he supervised safe working conditions, he met the workers who appeared happy and content as members of the UWR. They didn’t try to climb the corporate ladder or raise complaints. They took pleasure in their work on a manufacturing line, free of the burden of need for individual achievement. Patrick used to think it was a little like socialism, but after being involved with such a dedicated group of people, he saw their strength in unity. To them, he was still an outsider. It’s not as though they didn’t trust Patrick, but their eyes always

seemed to linger on him, while he checked off inspection items on his clipboard. Did he have the right to consider himself special? Perhaps there was something for him by being a part of the spiritual community, but he knew his wife wouldn't have any of it.

Brenda was grilling fish for dinner and hummed to herself, trying not to feel the tiny lump in her belly.

"Hey, Brenda," Patrick called from the living room. "They just caught another one. It's on the news right now."

Brenda wiped her hands on her apron and moved into the living room where Patrick watched the scene. The reporter blared out, "Today another child born of an agnostic couple was taken into God's flock. The parents had apparently fled with the child after refusing to obtain a license to breed, according to the law enacted five years ago by the Preservation of Faith Foundation." Brenda watched a man and woman in the background escorted to a van and an infant being escorted to a different van.

The couple moved slowly, dragging their feet. The men who escorted them were in suits. This wasn't the first time Brenda and Patrick had seen one of these escorts televised. Patrick used to make fun of the suits, saying they always looked like they dressed in their Sunday best all the time. Patrick didn't make fun of it anymore.

"They look so tired," Brenda said.

"The reporter said they'd been out of contact with their local agnostic citizen's group for over a week. I'm sure that's how the suits found them." Agnostic Anonymous meetings were a blatant contradiction. There was nothing anonymous about those meetings since all attendee's were required to register with the government.

“I hate those meetings, Patrick.”

“I know. I do, too. I remember when I was a kid and none of this existed and you could believe what you wanted to believe. Now it’s as if there’s something wrong with us for not following the UWR. Lately, I’m not sure though. There could be something there worth looking into.” Patrick took another sip of his apple juice and sank into his comfortable reclining chair.

“I’m not having that conversation with you again. It’s as if you really want to join them, and it’s not just about the baby.” Brenda walked back into the kitchen to finish getting dinner ready. “Why do we have to be a part of the UWR in order to be spiritual? I mean, I have my beliefs, but they’re mine. I shouldn’t have to always share or be told what to believe. I shouldn’t have to explain my faith to a group of people or be forced to attend church twice a week and on Sunday. I shouldn’t—” The fish, now thoroughly burned, caught Brenda’s attention.

Brenda stood and shivered. “Patrick.”

Her husband appeared in the doorway and smiled at his wife. “We’ll think of something. You know I love you, and I’d never let anything hurt you, but we have to be reasonable here.” The UWR local representative would be at the house anytime now.

“We can’t. We can’t run.” It was as if Brenda had to say the words, to convince herself this was the only way. “If we’re going to have our baby, we’re going to have to join.” Brenda dropped to the kitchen floor, tile smacking her as she landed. The cupboards felt like a prison wall against her back as she crumpled. “I won’t let them have our child.”

“Baby, it won’t be that way.” Patrick stroked her shoulder, his fingers gently working their way into strained muscles.

“I don’t want it to be that way, but that’s how it is. If we don’t convert, they’ll raise our child in some camp somewhere and brainwash him with their beliefs. He’ll wind up like them,

just another follower looking to be part of something big.” Her hands patted her belly. She knew she could no longer escape the inevitable truth that she was pregnant. She didn’t believe in the religion. She believed in herself and her personal faith for a life of principle. She believed in the morals and values that her parents had instilled in her before they had passed away.

Her parents had lived in a different world that seemed like an old photo, fading with age. They had grown up in a time where religious freedom was not only tolerated, it was encouraged. The mandatory, assigned spiritual discussion groups didn’t exist. Instead, a person could follow his or her own path. People, if they chose to, didn’t have to follow any path to spiritual enlightenment. The word “agnostic” couldn’t be used against a person as a reason to send them to a reeducation center. Brenda’s dad, when she was still young and the uprising against the government hadn’t been successful yet, took her to see the play *The Crucible*. The witch trials depicted in the play stuck with her through the years. She learned about the ways in which the so-called righteous justified persecution.

While she was in high school, a loud speaker crackled with her name to report to the office. An honor student, Brenda couldn’t begin to imagine why she had to go see the principal. Bright yellow banners were spread through the halls with the words “God has finally come to save you” tattooed across them. Most of the students were so overjoyed that the banners had even covered the lockers. Brenda couldn’t get to her Social Studies or Government textbooks had she wanted to that day. The principal, wearing a grin and a badge that spelled UWR, urged her to sit down.

“Ms. Faucy, thank you for coming so promptly.” He sat on the edge of his desk, his knees almost skimming across her legs, smiled down at her. “As I’m sure you’re aware, the UWR movement has passed.”

“I know, Mr. Ridgeby. Everybody seems so happy.” Brenda pushed her knees under the chair. His pant leg scraping across the bare skin on her legs itched. Mr. Ridgeby didn’t seem to notice.

“But of course. This means an end to wars. In fact, not so long ago we were getting worried that we’d have to educate you students about bomb scare drills.” But now that the world leaders have signed over to the UWR, the threat of World War Three was no longer a possibility. He placed his hands together in front of him, as though he readied himself for prayer. “Because of the UWR, we’re going to be in a period of transition. Now, I don’t want you to be alarmed, and quite frankly, there’s no reason to be, but we need to discuss your parents.”

Brenda swallowed hard. “What about them?”

“Your parents were activists that opposed the UWR. They can’t deny it, I’m afraid. The authorities have documented videos of them in an unarmed protest at the gates of the White House.” Mr. Ridgeby wiped a mess of crumbs off the sleeve of his jacket.

Brenda noticed that his speech seemed rehearsed. She had heard a host of student names being called over the intercom all morning. He must’ve given those students this same rhetoric.

“What I’m trying to tell you is that your parents have been detained.”

Brenda jumped up from her chair. “Detained? For protesting?”

“That’s right. But don’t worry; they’re going to a newly established spiritual reeducation camp. They’re perfectly safe. And, once they’ve graduated and promise to drop their protest, they’ll be returned. In the meantime, housing is being negotiated for you and other students whose parents participated in the protest. It’s a sad part of this, really. Many of them were upstanding members of the PTA.”

Mr. Ridgeby had said they would be returned to her. But she never saw her parents again. She had been allowed a brief goodbye. After hugging her mom and dad, they left on a bus. Brenda remembered the last thing her mother ever said: Be strong and stick to what you believe is right.

Brenda heard a knock at the door. "He's here," she said.

Patrick gave her clammy hand an affectionate squeeze and answered the door. She picked herself off the kitchen floor and dumped the fish in the trash; the smell of burned salmon lingering in the room. She peeked around the corner to watch Patrick shake hands with a well-dressed young man in a grey suit. "We're happy to have you here. Would you please come in?" Patrick led the young man into the living room.

Brenda watched the UWR representative scan the room. She had to admit that he was quite handsome. Straight brown hair hugged his scalp, and his eyes looked gentle and relaxed; however, as he looked around the living room, Brenda felt uneasy. He picked up a porcelain doll as if it were his and examined it the way an antiques dealer would appraise an object.

"And this is my wife, Brenda." Brenda shook the man's hand.

"My name is Brother Michael. It's very nice to meet you, Mrs. Appleton. We're so glad you and your husband contacted us. God is looking out for you, and I'm happy I can be the one to share his glorious plan with you."

"Thank you for coming to our home." Brenda bit her lip.

Patrick urged Michael to sit. The young Brother gave thick pamphlets to both Patrick and Brenda. "This is for you. These should answer many of your questions as to schedules and where

you'll need to sign up. I'll be able to assign a church to you later after we've completed your orientation into your new Godly lifestyle.”

Patrick began leafing through the pamphlet like a kid on Christmas. Brenda, unfortunately, didn't have quite the same level of enthusiasm. “Is everything all right Mrs. Appleton?”

“Oh yes, quite. This is all just so new. We're very excited to be a part of the United World Religion, and I'm simply overwhelmed.”

Michael gave her leg a reassuring pat. Brenda recoiled at his touch. Michael began to tell them about the wonderful history of the UWR and how they now effectively ran the world, a grand idea. Rights such as freedom of speech had to be dismissed because of the counterculture influence. Among other freedoms that Brenda had while growing up, abortion, gay marriage, and birth control had all been outlawed. Brenda listened to the rest of his laundry list of religious indoctrinations. Michael, smiling the whole time, ran down the list of basic liberties that Brenda's parents had lived with, such as freedom of religion, and systematically destroyed those values. What ideals she held as sacred as a girl were now considered unclean. A simple infraction, such as letting a curse word pass her lips, would earn Brenda and her husband a trip to a spiritual guidance counselor where they would learn that swearing is an offense against God.

“On to the children.” Michael smiled. “As you know, God desires the world to be filled with children, to nourish new souls to bring into His kingdom.” An old grandfather clock, part of Brenda's inheritance from generations ago, chimed nine times. Michael paused while the noise filled the background and looked at Brenda with that nearly innocent smile. She had seen enough smiling for one evening. Is this what would become of my child? The followers of God all

seemed to wear these smiles as though they were born with them plastered across their faces. Her fingers instinctively ran across her belly once more.

“Would you excuse me for a minute?” Brenda got up and went to the bedroom. As she walked down the hallway, she could hear her husband and that man chatting away like old school buddies.

Night flooded the small bedroom, but Brenda didn't feel like turning the lights on. She sat on the edge of their fluffy bed and stared at pictures of her family she had on her dresser. A little girl in pigtails waved to the camera. Her mother waved as well, wide-eyed, with her arms outstretched. Brenda's father cracked his toothy grin that she used to think made him look goofy. The memory felt as though it happened to someone else. This was all that was left of them now.

“Is everything all right?” Patrick slipped his head through the door.

“Of course it isn't.” Brenda gazed up at her husband. “My family is gone, taken away by these people. And now I have a chance to start a real family of my own.” Her hands wrestled in her lap. “I'm so scared of losing our child. I'm afraid that the baby will have to go through what I went through. That one day, someone will see through me and my act and take my child away from me.”

“Don't worry, love.” Patrick brushed his hand through her hair. “Once we're in, we're in. They won't suspect anything. And besides, who knows? Maybe you'll find something to love by being a part of them.”

Brenda slapped his hand away. “Are you serious? How can you say that to me? You're sounding like one of them.”

“Sweetie, I don't know if I can take not being one of them anymore.”

She peered into those big eyes, the eyes she fell in love with. In the darkness, they looked foreign to her, as if this weren't her husband.

“We have a child on the way and now you're telling me you *want* to convert,” she blurted out. Then she saw past him and gazed in horror at the man standing in Patrick's shadow. Michael had heard her.

Michael slipped past Patrick and stood over Brenda. “It's wonderful that you shared this news. Since you're just now coming into the fold and learning about this wonderful new life that you've chosen for yourself, we have a program for you, your husband, and your child.” This isn't happening, Brenda thought.

“You see, we teach parents, as well as children, all about the lessons God wants us to know in order to help you live a moral and valuable life. Before joining us, you were more susceptible to worldly dangers like many others out there. We teach these morals, through the Lord God, so you no longer have to walk such a sinful path. Since the Unified World Religion has flooded into the hearts of believers around the world, we've shown the righteous path to living this life to the fullest.”

But she knew stealing and killing were wrong. She had all the morals she needed and they didn't come from any God, but from her own experiences. Here this man was, telling her that she didn't know anything about right and wrong. He told her she had no choice but to sin without the influence of God in her heart.

“We may have to take your child, just very temporarily, between the age of three and six, to share with him or her the teachings of our Lord. You'll be with your child of course, learning right along with him.” The man caught a glimpse of her photo when she was a child. “You'll be as happy as you were in this picture.”

“That sounds great,” Patrick said. “Doesn’t it, honey?”

“No.” A lock of hair fell in front of Brenda’s face. She stood, her legs feeling numb, but she couldn’t take Michael being in her bedroom, so she stormed toward the kitchen.

“I’m sorry, Mrs. Appleton. Was there something wrong?” The two men followed her, speaking to her back.

She spun around. “I hate this. I hate all of this. As if I’d join such an organization by choice.” Brenda’s voice remained calm and even. “You people preach about having morals and values. But what you really offer is conformity.”

“Brenda!” Patrick said. Michael stood back, his eyes going wide.

“I’m sick of it. I’m tired of all this nonsense. To tell me I can’t have a child unless I join this religion is pure bullshit. I hope, if there is a God, he laughs at all you people.” Shoes slammed on tile with each step on her way to the kitchen. She could hear her husband offer apologies to Michael as she turned on the faucet in the sink. For fifteen years now, she’d heard the ads, seen the ads, listened to religious slogans everywhere she went, but now it was in her home. Her family had already been destroyed by this once. “My parents would’ve never stood for this. I want to live my own life. I want my child to have a life of freedom.”

Michael stepped to the side of her, and Patrick remained in the doorway. “I’m sorry to have to tell you this Mrs. Appleton but,” he wiped his brow, “well, oh dear.”

Water filled the sink even though the drain was open. Brenda sighed aloud, eyes rolling. “If we were a part of the UWR, maybe I could at least get someone to come and fix this sink.” Brenda reached under the sink for the Drano to unclog the pipes. “What is it, Brother?” She wouldn’t turn to face him anymore, not that smile. Brenda could find another answer, find a way out. Maybe move to Canada; the UWR existed there as well but the law wasn’t as strict.

“Well, I don’t know how to say this, but since you’re already pregnant, and it’s obvious that you no longer intend to join us, I’m afraid I’ll have to report your pregnancy to the authorities.” Brenda turned; a plate balanced on the edge of the counter fell and shattered.

“You can’t,” Brenda pleaded “We’ve worked so hard for our family. You can’t just take it all away from us.”

Patrick grabbed Michael by the arm. “Please don’t report us. Let me talk to my wife; I’m sure I can convince her that this is the right way. We’ve nearly started our family. It’s all we’ve ever wanted.”

Her husband sounded like one of them.

“You want more, Mr. Appleton. I do understand, but there are rules. God is a part of your life as He is a part of all life. You need God in your heart to live a spiritually healthy existence. Your child would suffer unimaginably without our teachings.”

They were trapped. Their child would be taken away and they’d disappear somewhere. Only Michael knew the truth about them. Brenda looked at the bottle of Drano in her hands and then at her husband. Only by getting rid of this zealot would they have any chance at a real life. She saw Patrick holding her hand in the park as they enjoyed a cool autumn breeze. The way he held her as they made love, so gentle and caring, made her never want to know the touch of another man. Brenda loved him with all her heart. She remembered sitting in front of the fire with him naked as they talked of their dreams and what they each wanted out of life. Her toes scrunched and curled when she brought up the nervous subject of having a child with him. Memories of happy beginnings that belonged to her, and only to her, wove into each other, threatening to drown her with love. But lately, she had seen a change come over him. She wished

he was still the same man she married. He had to be. “Patrick, if you’ve ever loved me, please help me now.”

“What are you saying? What are you thinking?”

“Hold him.”

“We can’t—”

“We must. This is about you and me. Please choose me. I promise this is what we must do to stay safe. Think of our child.”

“Our child wouldn’t have a choice, would he?”

“Of course your child would have a choice, Mr. Appleton. Whether you have a boy or girl, your child would be born into God’s flock along with all of us. You can come with us too and be a part of your infant’s life,” Michael said. “It’s the only way.”

“I suppose we really don’t have a choice then.”

Patrick snatched Michael by the shoulders and kicked out his legs. Michael fell to the ground, screaming in pain. “Please don’t do this! The Lord will forgive you. Everything will be okay.”

Brenda unscrewed the cap of the Drano. “I’m sorry but this is the only way. We’ll find a way. Because I love my husband and I love my baby. I will have what’s best for my child. And my baby needs to live free.” Brenda held out the bottle while Patrick grabbed his hair and held his head back.

She poured and poured the thick blue liquid down his throat. He choked, spurring the Drano everywhere, but Patrick held on. His muffled screams and flailing arms soon subsided. Those eyes, that peaceful smile soon faded until a thin stream of blue gook trailed down his lips, spattering on the floor. Patrick let go and Michael collapsed.

“What have we done, Brenda?” he whispered.

“We’ve done what any parent would’ve done. We did what we had to. Whether what we did was immoral or not, I don’t know. But if anything, we have to be free.”

The empty Drano bottle spun a little as it hit the floor.

“I don’t know that I can do this.” Patrick shook; a UWR pamphlet slipped out of Michael’s pocket.

“It’s okay, my love, I understand. This whole world has gone mad and we—”

“Please, Brenda. We must ask for forgiveness. We have to turn ourselves in; God will forgive us.” Her husband dropped to his knees next to Brother Michael’s body. They didn’t look all that different anymore. His fingers crunched the pamphlet.

“I’ll go by myself in the morning.” She brushed past Patrick towards the bedroom. The grandfather clock ticked away as silence descended.

“In other news, a young woman, Brenda Appleton, who was wanted for the slaying of a local UWR representative, was caught by authorities in Detroit, Michigan today. Apparently, she had been fleeing to Canada while she was three months pregnant. A tip from her husband, Patrick Appleton, led to her arrest. Though he was involved in the slaying, he has since repented and become another well-adjusted member of the UWR. Authorities believe this woman to be mentally disturbed and in serious need of religious therapy. She will remain incarcerated until the birth of her child, at which time the child will be given to the father to raise under the light of God. The mother will eventually be released upon the completion of the federally mandated program for antireligious disorder, a fairly common disorder that sadly still plagues society even after the UWR assumed control over all governments fifteen years ago.”