

It's a Grand Old Flag

When the national anthem was sung, some professional athletes put their fists up in the air. Didn't they go to school? Don't they know the rules?

In the small town in Oklahoma where I grew up, I shivered as "Old Glory" passed on parade. In school, we learned how to hang the flag (stars on the upper left) and where to place our hand (over the heart) when we said the pledge of allegiance. We learned how to dispose of it when it was old and worn. They were more than suggestions. Everyone did it. It was the right thing to do.

When our flag enters the arena at the opening ceremonies of the Olympics, I get goosebumps. Likewise, when they hoist the flag and play the anthem, and one of our athletes is awarded a gold medal. When the flag married sports, it didn't bother me. Today some kids think the last two words of our national anthem are: "Play ball."

The athletes defended the raised fist as freedom of speech. The Constitution guarantees it. So, what's their point?

They say something is wrong in our country. That's no surprise. Politicians say that and ask for our vote so they can fix it. Religious leaders regularly tell us our country needs change.

When football players raised their fists as the national anthem sounded, they said what politicians, religious leaders, and the PTA president say every time they open their mouths. “We think something is wrong in our democracy, in our church, in our schools, or in the world—and we should fix it.”

If there is anything wrong in the country, the person who calls our attention to it is more of a patriot than those who don’t speak up.

“Black Lives Matter” does not imply white lives *don’t* matter. The message is the life of a black person should not matter *less* than the life of a white person. Overwhelming evidence suggests the life of a black person in our system is not given the same value as the life of a white person. What’s wrong with protesting inequality?

Did those players who raised a fist disrespect our flag? No, they said our flag is not just a beautiful piece of material blowing in the wind. It stands for liberty and justice for all, equal liberty, and equal justice. Perhaps they’re more patriotic than those of us who only stand and cheer.

Me and the Good Book

I began attending K Street Baptist Church in Ardmore, Oklahoma at age sixteen^[SEP] at the urging of my oldest brother and his wife. The church met in a newly constructed, white wooden building furnished with homemade pews. Every person in the congregation was encouraged to bring a Bible to church. The Bible was the center of every sermon.

In my mind's eye, I can still see Rev. Ross Hughes gripping the sides of the pulpit with both hands, bringing to life the story of Gideon and the Midianites. Gideon, instructed by God, was ordered to pare his army down to a small handful of men; then, to our great relief, with God's help, his small band routed the Midianite oppressors.

I “courted” the Bible. We were a couple, me and the Bible. True, God was everywhere, but the Bible was the heart of the matter. God and the Bible, like Siamese twins, were vitally connected. Everything I knew about God came from the Bible. The words I used to describe one worked equally well with the other. Both were holy and without error. In the Bible lay eternal life and truth, just like God.

During my days at Oklahoma Baptist University, I “married” the Bible—not a formal church wedding—more like a common-law marriage. “All scripture is inspired by

God.” (II Timothy 3:16). To me, the logic was clear. All Scripture was inspired; the Bible is the Scripture; therefore, the Bible is the inspired word of God.

Billy Graham had just come on the scene. He was one of us. His devotion to the scriptures was a model for us. I felt confident we Baptists followed the Bible more closely than other Christians. We were the “people of God,” loving our Bibles—the Word of God.

I was on automatic pilot to become a denominational hack, following the party line like a sheep. However, after a long marriage to the Bible, a breakup came—not overnight, but gradually, like the turning of an oil tanker. A pivotal step was my leaving the professional ministry at age 40. Outside denominational boundaries, I felt free to ask questions I would probably never have asked if I had stayed in the profession. Being an insider would have stifled inquiry.

An early wake-up call came when I discovered not a single original copy of any writing in the Bible exists today. We must make do with handmade copies, separated by centuries from the originals. Among the more than 5,000 manuscripts and pieces of manuscripts we now have, no two are identical. That means there is no single “Bible.” There are 5,000 “Bibles” scholars comb in search of the original documents. Maybe the originals were inspired, but no living person has ever seen one.

Another turn came in a Presbyterian Bible study. I was secure in my view that the only way a human can relate to God, as delineated by Paul in Ephesians, is by faith.

Humans cannot gain God's favor by simply living a good life. My view was challenged by the group's leader who suggested I read Jesus' account of the great judgment as told in Matthew.

In Matthew's story, the king separates the people as a shepherd separates sheep from goats. He invites one group to enter the kingdom, giving as His reason they had cared for him.

Surprised, they asked, "When did we help you?"

The reply was, "When you did it to the least of these my brethren, you did it to me." With no mention of grace, or faith, or even Jesus, I faced the possibility that Paul in Ephesians described one way into the kingdom; while Jesus, in the gospel of Matthew described another.

Encountering apparent contradictions, like Paul's message of salvation by faith alone versus James' message that "faith without works is dead," I adopted Paul's view and rationalized James' view away.

I never thought I was worshipping the Bible, yet I used it as a representation of God, something most people would call an idol. I had held the Bible in the air and begun a sermon with the words, "God said," as if the Bible were God.

If God wrote the Bible, I began to wonder why He used writers who were bad spellers and who used poor

grammar and rhetoric. *Why did it take centuries to pull it together? Why not just deliver the finished product?*

Further, if an all-powerful God took the trouble to write the Bible, why didn't He also preserve the original copies, so there would be no question about what He said?

When I raised these questions in my favorite online chat room, they quickly and sternly rebuked me. The charge invariably was if I only “had the Spirit,” and therefore “discernment,” then I wouldn't be asking questions. They said, “Those who aren't Christians can't understand or accept the Bible because they are not taught by the Holy Spirit.” Translation: If you don't interpret the Bible as I do, then you must not know God. To some in the chat room, my questioning was proof I was not a Christian. Ironically, the people who charged me with not having discernment seemed to have it in abundance.

Another change of direction in my life came when my men's Friday Bible group studied “Rescuing the Bible from Fundamentalism” by the renegade Episcopal Bishop John Shelby Spong. Without endorsing any of his views, I felt encouraged to discover at least one other soul in the world besides me was asking questions.

Spong, as it turned out, was a member of the infamous Jesus Seminar who vaulted Biblical criticism into popular culture for a couple of decades. The Jesus Seminar produced its flagship book, “The Five Gospels,” based on the assumption we can study scriptures from a historical standpoint.

My attachment to the Bible was deeply rooted in my psyche. The thought of ending my “marriage” to the Bible brought a torrent of questions. *If I divorced the Bible, would I still be a Christian? Would other Christians shun me? Should I abandon the Bible altogether? Had I lost my faith? Was there a place where I might discuss my feelings? Would I sit in judgment of friends who were unwilling or unable to ask similar questions? Were they idolaters? Could we even discuss it?*

The idea that God is everywhere and therefore ever-present had long sat undisturbed in my mind. When I least expected it, it quietly slipped over the threshold and dropped into my heart. A light dawned. I “knew” God in a different way. The Bible was off the throne. God occupied it fully.

As I saw it, I had substituted a marriage certificate for marriage, a cookbook for a meal, a beautiful oil painting for a sunset. I had settled for Biblical descriptions of others’ experiences of God without thinking of my own. But that was no longer necessary.

Attempting to describe my coming to know God, I coined the word *GodPresent*. However, explaining religious experiences is like trying to describe the taste of ice cream. For the person who has never tasted ice cream, no description is adequate. And the person who has tasted it needs no description.

As for “Me and the Good Book,” I enjoy what has been called a “friendly divorce.” As part of my “divorce settlement,” I abandoned the traditional doctrine of

inspiration. Instead, I learned to read without filtering them through my theological upbringing. I weaned myself from inserting, even subconsciously, words like 'literal' or 'inerrant' or 'authority.' I eliminated the use of phrases like "The Bible says . . ." or "It says . . ." in favor of "Leviticus says . . ." or "Paul wrote . . ." or some other phrase indicating the primary source.

To my surprise, as soon as I began to let the writings speak for themselves, studying the writings became a delight. The Bible is a remarkable collection of writings. I respect Biblical accounts of experiences of God, illustrated numerous times in Bible stories. I also respect records of experiences of God outside the Bible. I have equal respect for people who have had no experience of God nor any desire for such an experience.

Moray

Although he did not need notes, young, distinguished professor of philosophy, Dr. Matthew Moray left for his Philosophy 101 lecture with his notebook in hand. Passing by his office wallboard, he sneered at the photograph held there by thumbtacks. Department heads, dressed in academic robes and wearing colored hoods denoting their degrees and honors, were not in his league. Moray's was the only doctorate on the entire staff from an Ivy League school. Comparing their credentials with his was like comparing a stick figure to the Mona Lisa.

When the university offered Moray a position, he had told his wife, "I'm taking this job because the good universities have no openings." Describing the committee who interviewed him, he said, "They need my degree to help them qualify for accreditation." Fingering his Phi Beta Kappa ring, he thought, The head of the department will age out soon. They'll ask me to head the department. Of course, I'll accept. It's the fastest way out of a second-rate, no-name university.

Just like me, many students are here because they couldn't get into a better school. I suppose we have that in common. At least, we have this in common. His expectations were not high. Pseudo-intellectual students, eager for their

first encounter with classical philosophy, flocked to his **ethics** classes.

Moray swept into the lecture hall like a prince coming to claim his throne. Students filled the 285 seats, and more lined the walls, hoping others would drop the course and they could get in.

Moray arranged his notebook on the podium and raised his eyes to assess his new flock of sheep. His gaze stopped at the front row where he caught himself gaping at a pair of shapely, crossed legs.

Raising his eyes slightly, he beheld perky breasts, a symmetrical face, and shiny hair. Crowning it all was a smile of adoration. He had seen that look before. *Probably infatuated with a person of authority*, he reasoned. *Young, impression-able girls often fall for professors.*

She came by the dais after class to ask about a point in his lecture. Her name was Cassandra. After his second lecture, Cassandra waited to ask yet another question. Moray was pleased that at least one student in the crowd showed some understanding.

One day Cassandra looked unhappy. She remained in her seat after class. He walked over to her. “Cassandra, you don’t seem yourself today.”

“Thanks for noticing, Dr. Moray. Things have come together to make the perfect storm,” she sighed. “My bus

pass expired yesterday, my bike broke down, and I had to walk to school. Now I'm dreading the walk home."

"What direction do you go?" he asked.

"I live near Parkside and Lincoln," she replied.

"That's on my way home. I could give you a lift."

"Could you? I would be so grateful."

As he drove, they chatted about his lecture on the arguments for the existence of a divine being, one of Moray's most popular lectures in the Bible belt.

She said, "I see now that the arguments are based on facts, but they're still not facts—only arguments."

He said, "I think you got the point."

When he stopped at the curb, she got out quickly and thanked him. He watched her bound up the stairs. He found himself thinking, *She's cute but too young for me.*

Two more times Cassandra had a problem with transportation. Each time Moray dropped her off at her apartment. Class after class, she flashed her smile from the front row. *What a bright light she is*, he thought. *Most students' brains are like streetlamps that turn off automatically when the sun comes up.*

One Friday she hardly looked up the entire lecture. After the room emptied, he went to her, still seated.

“Cassandra, what’s the problem?”

“It’s my boyfriend,” she said. “We’ve been together for almost two years. He told me last night he’s seeing someone else. It was unexpected.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” he said.

“It’s not your problem,” she conceded. “He gave me the usual line: He wasn’t happy, he wasn’t being fulfilled, and he wanted to explore other options.”

“If he feels that way, perhaps you should explore other options, too,” Moray said. “As pretty and smart as you are, there must be a long line of young men who would like to meet you.”

“Most of the guys I know backed off after Gary and I got together. I’m not sure any of them would be interested now. Besides, I feel like I’m not the same person I was before I started taking your class.” Her face lit up with admiration. “What a difference you’ve made in the way I think and how I understand life.”

She paused and looked up at him, only a little embarrassed. “I’m stranded—again. I would accept a ride if you wouldn’t mind. I could walk, of course, if you’re not leaving soon.”

“No problem. I’ll give you a lift.”

When they arrived at her apartment, she pleaded. “Would you mind coming up for a few minutes? The apartment seems so empty. Gary took all his things when he moved out.”

What can be the harm? he thought. *I’ll be comforting a student I respect, spending a few minutes with a student who needs someone to talk to.*

As they entered the studio apartment, she asked, “Would you like coffee, or perhaps something else to drink?”

“Coffee’s fine,” he said, reminding himself he didn’t handle alcohol well. Brewing would take a while. As he speculated about how to fill those minutes, she sat down near him at the small table.

“Do you use cream?” she asked. “Sugar’s on the table.”

“I take it black.” Attempting to lighten the mood, he added, “No use spoiling the taste.”

She looked at him and said, “Your course has been a tremendous help. Before I met you, I was thinking about dropping out of school.”

“What a waste,” he said. “You have a lot to offer.”

She moved closer to him, and his pulse quickened. She looked directly at him. “You’re so kind and

understanding. Not everyone would be so caring.” She poured the coffee, and when she sat back down, inched her chair closer to his.

Moray blushed.

What’s happening? Is she coming on to me? I’m almost twice her age! His face flushed, and she backed away.

“Thanks for coming up. I appreciate every minute you give me.”

He rose, sighed deeply, went out the door and down the stairs. Driving home, he thought, *That was close! I’ve known teachers who got caught messing around with a student. Back east, it wouldn’t be an issue. But here in redneck country, it’s a foolish and unnecessary risk.*

In the foyer of his home, he met a frowning wife, arms on her hips. “Did you get the things on the shopping list?” Seeing his empty arms, she said, “You forgot again.”

He thought *Whatever happened to ‘Welcome home, dear, how was your day?’*

“Damn!” he said. “I’ll run to the store.”

“Never mind.” Her tone was flat. “We’ll make do with leftovers.” She ferried food from the refrigerator to the microwave, and after a few minutes, called Moray to dinner.

He toyed with his food. When he looked up, she was staring at him. He had difficulty meeting her gaze. *Why am I nervous? I did nothing wrong. She's the one who's letting herself go, putting on extra weight, nagging me. My God, has she no self-respect?*

Lying beside his wife in bed that night, Moray knew he should want her. He let his hand fall on her breast, and she turned to him willingly. But in his imagination, he had switched was making love to Cassandra. "Cassandra" smiled. "Cassandra" admired his lovemaking. He left "Cassandra" longing for more, but his wife turned her back to him and went to sleep.

The next day in class, looking at Cassandra, he wondered, *Did she fantasize about me last night as I did about her?*

After class, she came up to him. He knew she had yet another emergency, and she'd accept a ride home.

On the drive to her apartment, Moray felt her presence in the seat opposite him. He sensed the fullness of her figure and felt a hunger rising. For her part, she sat quietly. When they arrived, she invited him up.

Entering her apartment, he noticed her carefully made bed with a vase of fresh-cut flowers on the bedside table. She made no effort to open the drapes. Instead of overhead lights, she switched on a small bedside lamp. Cassandra brought a bottle of wine and two glasses to the table and poured each of them a drink.

Moray began to breathe rapidly.

Raising her glass, Cassandra said, “No other teacher has treated me like you do. I care for you. I’m aware of our age difference, but it doesn’t matter. I hope you feel the same.”

“I do care for you, but I wouldn’t want to take advantage of you.” The wine was causing him to lose his focus. “You’re my student,” he reminded her.

“I think I’m beyond being a student. I feel so close to you.” Her face was that of an innocent kitten begging for love. “I hope it doesn’t embarrass you that I find you attractive. I’ve never had a better teacher—or friend.” She placed both her hands over his, then took one of his hands, and raised it to her cheek.

Moray felt aroused as he had not been for a long time. His adrenaline rush screamed, “*Damn the consequences! Be a man!*”

An hour later, on her bed, he said, “You’re so beautiful. You’ve made me feel . . . well, I haven’t felt this way in a long time. I feel invigorated, almost young again.”

“You’re wonderful,” she said. “I’ve never felt so safe.”

Cassandra’s emergencies were not great, but they were steady, needing a ride home, once, sometimes twice a week. Each time, Moray was in her apartment for more than

an hour. But the longer their arrangement continued, the more clearly he saw the threat it could be to his future.

The sex is great, and Cassandra is beautiful, but she doesn't fit into my plans. He rehearsed his exit like lines in a play. In Cassandra's apartment, seated at her little table, he began, "I'm feeling ashamed."

"Ashamed? Of me?"

"You? Of course, not. Of myself. I lost interest in my wife. Still—she doesn't deserve to be hurt," he said.

"What are you saying?" she asked.

"I'm saying you're gorgeous and smart, but I'm not proud of myself. I hope you'll forgive me."

Moray stood and took from his pocket a velvet-covered box, opening it to reveal a gold chain, and a pendant with bore the image of his philosophy fraternity.

"I want to give you something to remember me by."

Cassandra stood with her back to him. He could not see her tears as he connected the gold chain behind her neck or her hand rising to caress the pendant.

The following day Cassandra came to class late, sat in the back row, unsmiling. Perhaps she had seen their relationship growing into something more than he had. He needed to heal the wound if he could. When the students

were leaving, he met her in the aisle and blocked her exit.
“Cassandra, could I see you for a moment?”

“Of course, Dr. Moray,” she said. The room was soon empty except for the two of them.

“Did you enjoy the lecture today?”

“Is that what you wanted to see me about?”

“Not really,” he said.

“I feel I’ve hurt you. It’s entirely my fault. I want to apologize again. I hope to make it up to you. I don’t know how, but I’ll try to find a way.”

“I don’t think that will be necessary,” she said. “Gary came back last night. We’re back together again. He was **terribly** ~~very~~ upset when I told him about us. He said something about working it out with you. If he calls you, I think an apology will set things right.”

Moray’s wife was in the kitchen loading the dishwasher when the phone rang. Moray, in his study, lifted the receiver and heard an unfamiliar voice. “Dr. Moray?”

“Yes.”

“It’s come to my attention you’ve been messing around with one of your female students.”

“Cassandra told me you might call,” Moray answered. “I apologize for any misunderstanding. I hope it’s all behind us.”

“You hope so,” came a cold voice, “but I don’t think it’s going to be so easy. You can’t take an apology to the bank.”

“Meaning what?” Moray asked.

“Meaning one word from me, and the university would likely fire your ass. I’m guessing your wife wouldn’t be too thrilled about it either.”

“I agree my wife wouldn’t be thrilled, but I doubt if it would affect my teaching career. Cassandra isn’t a high school student.”

“If you want to take a chance, be my guest. Otherwise, I want to hear a cha-ching soon.”

“Are you trying to blackmail me?” he said.

“You catch on fast for a college professor.”

“What are you suggesting?” asked Moray.

“This is not a suggestion. For starters, you should hand over to Cassie a plain envelope containing one thousand dollars in bills no larger than a twenty. Tell her it’s your gift to Gary. Do as I say, and you can keep your little job,” he said and hung up.

Suddenly the specter loomed large. If he reported the attempted blackmail, his affair with Cassandra would surely be in the newspapers. He could see jobs at better universities vanishing in thin air. On the other hand, if he paid Gary, he might think he had a good thing going, get greedy, and ask for more. Moray felt like a rock climber suspended by a thin rope Gary could snip at any time, now, or in the future.

So, one week later, before the close of his lecture, Moray said, “Miss Phillips, may I see you after class?”

When all the other students had left, he took from his briefcase a plain envelope and placed it in Cassandra’s hands. She had a puzzled look when he said, “Give this to Gary,” but she placed the envelope in her book bag and left without a word.

He thought, *She doesn’t know. But she’s a smart cookie. By the time she hands this to Gary, she’ll have it figured out.*

A month later, to the day, he got a call from Gary. “Time for your monthly dues,” he announced.

Monthly? How long does he intend to keep this up?

Moray weighed his options and saw no immediate way out of his situation, so he began paying the sum regularly.

Months later, in a lawyer’s office, Moray asked, “Are our conversations protected by attorney-client privilege?”

The lawyer answered, “So long as the problem you mention is not a crime, and is, as you say, an indiscretion, our conversation is protected. What indiscretion have you committed?”

“It’s not about me. I’m asking for a colleague. He slept with one of his students. My friend realized it was a mistake and has broken it off. Now, someone is trying to blackmail him.”

“Blackmail’s a crime. All your friend has to do is blow the whistle on the blackmailer,” said the lawyer. “However, I’m sure you’re aware in our community, any scandal would put his career at risk.”

He knew he was not thinking clearly. “If my friend got a signed statement from the woman involved saying they never had relations, would that stop the blackmailer?”

“Just the opposite. If your friend went to the trouble of getting a legal document denying it, an investigator would ask him why he felt the need for such a document if he’s not guilty. So long as the blackmailer has the affair to hold over your friend’s head, the blackmailer holds the winning hand.”

Moray left the lawyer’s office, casting about for options. He rejected hiring a private detective to follow Gary, to record Gary accepting the blackmail payment, or to see if any of his acquaintances might rat him out. Involving a detective added a new and unwelcome dimension to his puzzle.

If I had only gotten a position in a real university, this would never have been an issue. But in this Bible Belt, it could destroy my career or at least set it back light-years. Without my academic career, I have nothing. What I've dreamed of all these years is slipping through my fingers because of a sniveling two-bit blackmailer and his spineless girlfriend. He'll bleed me dry, and still not keep quiet—but not if I can secure a new teaching post before it becomes public.

Soon after he visited the lawyer, Moray heard from Gary. “Sorry to say this, Moray, but my expenses are going up, so I’ll need more money next month.”

Moray was growing desperate, “You’re draining me dry as it is. I’m running out of resources. Have a little pity.”

“Oh, yeah, I’m a pity expert, old man! You’ll see how serious I am when you get back to the university.”

Later, Moray passed a younger colleague in the hallway who showed Moray a small, yellow scrap of paper and said with a smirk on his face, “Moray, old buddy, what does this mean? The note says, ‘Ask Moray about Cassie.’”

“Just a little inside joke. Think nothing of it,” Moray responded and walked on to indicate its insignificance.

Moray walked into his office, slumped in his swivel chair, and sat staring at the floor. He had no idea where Gary might strike again, but he was sure it was coming. With no

relief in sight, his anger churned like lava in a volcano. He was barely able to see to drive home.

On his doorstep was a rose with a note attached: “To M with love, C & G.” Relieved he had gotten home before his wife, he threw the rose aside, crumpled the note, and stuffed it in his pocket. His mind raced. *Is there no way to stop this leech? One way or another, he’ll destroy me.*

Moray threw his jacket on the sofa, trudged into his library, and withdrew the note from his pocket. Eyeing it, he poured himself a tall glass of scotch.

As the alcohol seeped into all parts of his body, ideas, like building blocks, began to come together. If he resisted, Gary would laugh as he brought him down. He was horrified, but as he took the last gulp of scotch, the idea overwhelmed him: *If Gary were dead, my problem would be solved.*

The word *murder* was foreign to Moray’s morality, but there it was. His mind began to explore the extreme end of a list of **viable** ~~possible~~ solutions.

If I were to do this terrible thing, I would act the victim—which I truly am—and it would have to look like self-defense. An old man in the next block had been beaten in a home invasion recently. Burglaries in Moray’s neighborhood, although sporadic, were frequent enough to justify the use of a weapon in self-defense. Of course, he could never bring himself to it, yet he couldn’t control the urge that compelled him forward.

The following morning, slightly hungover, he removed his handgun from his bedroom closet, checked its condition, and placed it in the desk drawer in his study.

On the last day of the month, Cassandra, wearing yet another new and attractive outfit, approached him. “Cassandra, tell Gary I can’t pay him this month.”

She lowered her gaze and walked away quietly.

He waited by the phone. It didn’t ring on the first night—or the second. On the third night, he heard the familiar voice.

“You’re late with your payment. I guess I’ll have to drop by the dean’s office tomorrow and let him in on your little secret—maybe invite a newspaper photographer to get a nice shot of you lecturing.”

“Gary,” he tried to sound desperate, “you don’t understand. I’ve withdrawn all the ready cash I have. My bank account is flat. I can get cash from my retirement funds, but not till next month. Can’t you cut me a little slack?”

“I suppose we can work something out. You must have something in your house worth a thousand—a painting, some jewelry, something.”

“I have a gold watch.”

“OK, professor. One gold watch. Don’t try anything funny.”

“I’m trying my best. Can you come after 11:00? My wife will be in bed. I’ll leave the garden door to my office unlocked. Come alone. I want this to be just between you and me.”

By 10:30, Moray had said goodnight to his wife. He made sure the French doors to the garden were unlocked and waited in his study with the safety on his gun turned off. The knife he would place in Gary’s hand would be wiped clean, bearing no evidence Moray had ever touched it.

On the tiled garden path rested a large stone which Moray planned to throw through the windowpane into the library, showing how Gary had gained entrance.

Shooting Gary in the chest would indicate Gary was coming toward him and not running away. Gary would be dead before Moray’s wife woke from the sound of the gunshot and got downstairs.

As soon as the police finished their investigation and left, he would rush to Cassandra’s apartment to convince her he had shot Gary in self-defense. He’d stress that if Cassandra went to the police, she would implicate herself in a felony and probably go to jail. Her only chance was to stay clear and say nothing.

Moray rehearsed questions the detective would ask: *How did the intruder get in?*

“Through the door leading in from the garden.”

How did he get the door open?

“He must have thrown the rock through one of the panes and stuck his hand through to unlock the door.”

What were you doing when he forced his way in?

“I was in deep meditation which I do every night in the darkness before retiring. The breaking glass jarred me out of my trance. As soon as I got my bearings, I turned on the light. There was this crazy man.

Did you recognize him? “No.”

What happened next?

“I was scared out of my wits. He was a lot bigger than I am. His eyes looked like he might be on drugs. He seemed startled to see someone in the room. He came at me with a knife. I jerked open the drawer, grabbed my revolver, and fired. I meant to stop him, not kill him.”

What was a loaded revolver doing in your desk?

“I moved it there only two weeks ago. Since there have been problems in the neighborhood lately, I just thought of it as insurance, but I never expected to use it.”

And it happened like a well-rehearsed play. Gary appeared at the garden door. Moray motioned him in. As Gary approached, Moray opened his desk drawer as if to retrieve his watch, called up all his courage, and without a

word, he fired. Gary fell forward in front of the desk. Moray hurried to place the knife in his hands and made sure Gary's fingerprints were on it.

Following the shot, he laid the gun on the desktop. From the garden, he threw the rock through the window and let it lie where it landed on the carpet. Then he dialed 911, identified himself, and said, "Please send an ambulance and the police. A man has been shot."

He placed the phone back in its cradle and waited. He heard Hearing a noise, he glanced up at the garden door, then leaped from his chair. There stood Cassandra. "What in hell are you doing here?"

"I was waiting in the car for Gary," she muttered. Seeing Gary's body on the floor, her face contorted. She turned to Moray and spoke barely above a whisper, "Did you shoot him?"

"I tried to reason with him, but he got angry and came at me. He might've killed me," Moray said, indicating the knife he had placed in Gary's hand.

She protested, "Gary didn't carry a knife."

The office door opened, and Moray's wife entered the room. "What was that horrible noise?" She saw the body on the floor and Cassandra, weeping. "What's going on? Who's that man—and this woman?"

Hearing the faint sounds of sirens, Moray began to panic. Ignoring his wife, he spoke firmly to Cassandra, “Get out! When the police arrive, you’ll be implicated for blackmail. Leave now if you want to protect yourself.”

Cassandra whined, “I don’t understand.”

“You don’t have to understand!” he barked. “If you want to stay out of jail, leave! Now! Say nothing of this to anyone!”

On the verge of tears again, Cassandra’s looked from the body on the floor, to Moray and Mrs. Moray. Moray grabbed Cassandra’s arm, rushed her to the garden door, and snarled as he pushed her. “Go now, or you’ll be in this deeper than you can imagine!” She limped away as if in a trance and disappeared into the darkness.

Moray turned to his wife, pleading. “The police will be here shortly. Please, just go along with whatever I tell them. Answer their questions, but under no circumstance volunteer a word about the woman you saw. She is one of my students. After this mess is over, I’ll explain everything.”

The sound of an approaching siren intensified the pressure Moray felt. “Can you do that for me?”

“What’s this all about?” she demanded as the sirens grew louder.

“The man on the floor is a burglar. When he saw me, he went crazy and tried to attack me. I shot him in self-

defense. Tell the police about the shot you heard and what you see here.” He was shouting. “Just say nothing about the woman and don’t mention the word ‘blackmail!’”

The sirens died, and within seconds the doorbell sounded. Moray signaled to his wife to let them in. She obeyed like she was in a daze.

Paramedics rushed in, and then a short man followed, wearing an off-the-rack suit, said, “I’m Detective Willard. You Moray?”

He examined the body on the carpet, and paramedics soon determined the man on the floor was dead. Photographers took a series of shots from different angles.

The detective withdrew a wallet from Gary’s pocket. After identifying him, Willard directed an officer to do a background check. The officer entered the code on his laptop and in seconds reported, “Sir, the only record for Gary Dorman shows an arrest on suspicion of mugging. Never charged for lack of evidence. Nothing else comes up.”

As the paramedics wheeled the body out of the room, two officers entered the house with a tear-streaked Cassandra holding a wadded handkerchief in her hands.

They said, “Sir, this woman was sitting in front of the house in a car. We asked her what she was doing there, and she couldn’t explain, so we brought her in.”

Moray interrupted. “Officer, this young lady is a student of mine at the university. She dropped by for tutoring.”

“Isn’t this hour a little late for tutoring?” asked Willard.

Moray glanced sideways at the detective and raised his eyebrow. “It was a special kind of tutoring.”

“Oh,” said the detective.

Moray began to perspire. “I think I need a drink of water. Honey, would you bring me a glass, please?” Willard nodded his permission for her to leave.

She didn’t move. Instead, she looked at the detective and said, “I think I prefer to stay and hear what my husband has to say.”

The detective shrugged. “Let’s see what the young lady has to say,” he said. “Ma’am, what is your name?”

“My name is Cassandra Phillips.”

“Can you explain what you’re doing here?” Willard asked.

Her creased brow and trembling chin produced a cold sweat in Moray. His mind raced. *Will she do as I told her? Has she realized her risk of going to jail?*

Cassandra collapsed into the high wingback chair that faced his desk, still weeping. She lifted her face to Moray and sobbed, “I’m so sorry, professor! I’ve got to tell the truth!”

Moray prepared for the worst.

“I fell in love with my teacher. I’ve been chasing him the entire year, and he’s ignored me. I came tonight to try once more, to see if he had any feelings for me at all. But it was no use; he sent me away.”

Moray stifled a gasp. His wife gave him a “drop dead” look.

Cassandra continued, “I was sitting in my car when I heard a gunshot.”

“Well, Dr. Moray,” Willard said, “on the surface, this seems open and shut. We’ll wait for forensics to finish their report to determine how to go forward. Professor, Mrs. Moray, and Miss Phillips, we’ll need formal statements from you at the station tomorrow. I think we have what we need for the time being.”

The detectives followed Cassandra out of the house. Moray and his wife heard the cars pulling away. It was finally Mrs. Moray’s turn.

She looked at her husband and said, “Now, what is this about blackmail?”

“Sit down, Honey. I have a confession to make,” he said as he ran his thumb over his Phi Beta Kappa ring. “I had an affair with Cassandra. It was early last semester. It was brief, and it’s been over for months. After I broke it off, her boyfriend began blackmailing me, threatening to go public. If it got out, I knew it would end my career and our chance for better things, so I paid several thousand dollars to keep him quiet.

Cassandra came tonight to collect a payment, but I told her I’d had enough. I wasn’t going to pay anymore. She left. A few minutes later, her boyfriend broke into the library. He came at me with a knife, and I shot him in self-defense.”

She took a few minutes to process all the information he had just given her. Her mind fell on his infidelity. “I’m not surprised you had an affair,” she admitted. “I’ve suspected for a long time.”

Her chin rose and she looked down her nose. “Why did that woman lie to the police?”

“If she admitted they came here to get money, she would face charges of blackmail. She lied to cover her butt.”

“This is an ugly mess I can’t make sense of. I can’t believe what’s happening,” she shook her head. “I’m going back to bed. You get the sofa.”

She’ll keep quiet. Would Cassandra, also? Moray wondered.

Moray finally dozed off on the sofa and went into a deep sleep. The next morning, still dressed in clothes from the previous night, he staggered into the kitchen in search of some breakfast. He drew water and started the coffee. Before the brewing had finished, he heard a car in the driveway, and his wife came in the back door.

“You’re out early.”

She said, “I’ve been to church.”

“To church?” He was incredulous. “For what?”

“I went to confession,” she replied.

“Confession?” The word alarmed him. “You didn’t say anything about last night, did you?”

“No. Things have been bad between us for a long time. I felt neglected and pushed aside. I can’t tell you how bad I felt. It turned me into a harpy.”

“So, what did you confess?” he probed.

“I confessed the failure of our marriage—my failure as a wife. I should have been more supportive. You’ve worked so hard to get ahead. I’ve let you down. I’m genuinely sorry. I had a long talk with the priest. If you’re willing, I want us to start all over again.”

Relief swept over him like a fresh ocean breeze. “You have nothing to apologize for. I’m the unfaithful one.” He opened his arms and held her as she sobbed softly.

Several days after the event, the local newspaper printed a follow-up story on the shooting at the Moray home. He was a hero. He had defended his home, the report said, just as most others would do—or would hope to do.

In succeeding months, the story disappeared from the news cycle. Moray’s lectures were full. Cassandra dropped his class. Mrs. Moray lost 25 pounds and looked like her old self after a makeover and a new wardrobe befitting the wife of an important professor. She attended faculty functions, chatted up every guest there, and organized a few ~~very~~ successful parties **to boost his career** ~~herself~~. In bed, she made Matthew hum like a new Corvette. *Things*, he thought, *couldn’t be better*. With less than two months left in the year, Moray received official notice the board chose him as the new head of the philosophy department.

Finally! he thought. *Light at the end of the tunnel. As head of the department, I’ll have a much easier time attracting the attention of a better school. It’s my ticket out of this God-forsaken desert.*

At the end of graduation exercises, Moray and his wife attended a faculty reception where they schmoozed with the alumni, especially the rich ones.

Afterward, his wife went home while Moray wandered back to his office to luxuriate in his success. He

sat alone, surrounded by boxes and files ready to be moved to the larger office of the department head.

In a locked drawer in his desk was an unopened letter he had received three days earlier. His hand trembled slightly as he inserted his key, pulled open the drawer, and withdrew the letter. The embossed envelope bore the insignia of his alma mater. It was not from a professor but the dean. Moray was sure it could mean only one thing: an invitation to fill an opening, **to be** head of the department. He had paid his dues in this outpost of civilization.

He slid his letter opener under the flap of the envelope. Before examining its contents, he glanced up to see, coming down the hall, the familiar face of Detective Willard, followed by an assistant. He watched Willard stop to ask directions from the secretary before proceeding to his office. The door was open, but Willard knocked. Moray invited the men in and asked them to sit down.

“What can I do for you, gentlemen?” Moray remained calm.

“Well, professor, I’ll come right to the point. The case of the burglar shot in your house was not as so simple as we thought. Forensics showed Dorman was not high on drugs. With that theory out the window, we began searching for another angle. It took a considerable effort, professor, but we finally got access to your bank account. Our search turned up what looked like withdrawals from your account, and corresponding amounts deposited to the account of Miss Phillips.

Moray squirmed in his chair.

“At headquarters, we asked Miss Phillips if she could explain the large deposits each month into her account. At first, she maintained it was money her family sent her. I asked if her family would verify her story. We showed her the matching amounts withdrawn from your bank at about the same time she made deposits. We made it clear if this turns into something other than self-defense and she lies about it, we will charge her as an accessory. She told us about your affair and showed us an amulet that matches the ring you’re wearing.”

Moray tried to look disinterested. “Mr. Willard, I never denied an affair. Having an affair with a student does not implicate me in anything further.”

Willard continued, “She also said you invited Dorman to your home, and she waited in the car while he went in. When she heard the shot, she hurried in and saw Dorman lying dead. She said he wasn’t armed.”

“You’re taking her word Dorman had no knife. It is equally possible he had a knife she was simply unaware of. Would a blackmailer go unarmed to a meeting with his victim? He was at my house. I wasn’t in his. Your case is circumstantial, based on the word of a witness who invented a story which is in her self-interest. If you arrest me, and this goes to trial, and I’m subsequently found innocent, I can promise you a civil suit against you and your department for damages. Multiply my annual salary by 20 years and that’s

the amount I would be seeking. You can imagine the effect it might have on your career.”

“I take your point, professor,” said Willard, “however, the way it looks to me is your motive of self-defense might not stand up against the fact that you’re the only one who stood to gain by having Dorman dead. I’m willing to bet arresting you is more likely to enhance my career than throttle it.”

Willard ended with, “Professor, we’re taking you in on suspicion of murder.”

Willard’s assistant produced handcuffs and indicated for Moray to extend his wrists. The chains rattled as the three of them filed past a wide-eyed secretary.

Odd Animal Behavior

This story is true in every detail except for where I have slightly embellished it. I was probably about five years old at the time.

Our tiny white house was situated on a dirt road at the edge of a small village in southern Oklahoma. The time was late summer. That meant going barefoot, playing *Hide-and-Seek* after sundown with neighborhood children, and sitting on quilts on the lawn while counting “shooting stars” across the eastern horizon.

The neighborhood men, home from work, washed and fed, were on our front porch and lawn with my dad, listening to the broadcast of Joe Louis, world champion heavyweight boxer. My dad, glued to the set, envisioned every throw and jab of left and right, while the women visited among themselves, and we children played tag and other running games.

A small, yellow-haired dog ran up, darting in and out of our small group. Perhaps I became more aggressive than I should have, or I touched the animal and scared it. For whatever reason, the little fellow nipped my ankle.

He didn't break the skin, but the sensation of his teeth on my flesh scared and infuriated me. I dived for him, but he

saw me coming and darted out of our yard and down the road. Finally, after about a half-block, panting breathlessly, I caught the rascal.

Holding him with both hands, I knelt and bit him back. The instant I felt his hair on my tongue, the thought popped into my mind: *My friends and all the adults in the neighborhood watched me chase the dog, grip him with both hands, and kneel to bite him.*

They must have thought, *What odd animal behavior. And that dog was odd, too.*

On Poetry

Some people, when they see poetry coming, lock their hearts, their minds, and their wallets. They are confident they will not understand it, but if they do, they know it will bore them to tears, real tears. Their reactions are due to a gross misunderstanding.

Poetry, like music, should strike the ear, not the eye. Words on paper are no more poetry than notes on paper are music. Reading a poem without hearing the words is like taking sheet music to your bedroom and leaving your guitar on the couch. Music comes alive only when it's heard, like Elton John with backup or the New York Philharmonic fiddling as if their lives depended on it.

So, read aloud and thrill to the music of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's serenade to her husband:

How do I love thee? Let me count the ways.
I love thee to the depth and breadth and height
My soul can reach, when feeling out of sight
For the ends of being and ideal grace.

Hear the hoofbeats of Alfred, Lord Tennyson's "Charge of the Light Brigade," about 600 British cavalry riding into a trap to be slaughtered.

Into the valley of Death
Rode the six hundred.
Theirs not to make reply,
Theirs not to reason why,
Theirs but to do and die.

Listen to a nation at the close of the American Civil War, writhing in pain as you read aloud, “O Captain, My Captain,” Walt Whitman’s lament at the death of Lincoln:

The ship has weather’d every rack,
The prize we sought is won,
The port is near, the bells I hear,
the people all exulting,
While follow eyes the steady keel,
The vessel grim and daring;
But O heart! Heart! Heart!^[SEP]
O the bleeding drops of red,
Where on the deck my Captain lies,
Fallen cold and dead.

All poetry is not for all people, just as all music is not for everybody. Play an aria from a Verdi opera and a foot-stomping ballad about a runaway hound dog in succession. You’re unlikely to enjoy both equally. My choice would be to leave the dog alone. If he loves you, he will return.

The Paris premier of a Wagner opera resulted in riots in the streets. Parisiennes did not care for it. If the ear rejects the music, move on just as you would put down a one book and reach for another.

I contend that the purpose and function of the poet is to probe our minds and emotions, then to help us put into words what we think and feel. Of course, not everyone will get the same picture, but everyone gets some picture listing to the words of Robert Frost in “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening:”

The woods are lovely, dark, and deep,
But I have promises to keep,^{{}{}}
And miles to go before I sleep.

It’s about the music of the words. I look at a rainbow and say, “Beautiful.” William Wordsworth looked at a rainbow and wrote:

My heart leaps up when I behold a rainbow in the sky.
So was it when I was a child.
So is it now I am a man.^{{}{}}
So be it when I shall grow old,
Or let me die.

So, a poem is words one after another that, when read aloud, make us feel, in the midst of darkness, like someone lit a match. And like a movie that is so good we forget we’re watching a film, or a book so engrossing we inhabit another time and place for a season, the sound of a great poem carries us along like the crest of a 20-foot wave on Honolulu’s north shore! Awesome, dude, hang ten!

One Step for Man

On Sunday morning, Keith, about midway on his cross-country trek, tossed his backpack into the bed of a pickup truck. He introduced himself to the driver, who asked, “Where you headed?”

“I’ve been hitching across the country, getting a close look at the ‘real America.’”

“Well, son, you better spend a little time in this next village. It’s off the beaten path, but I guess it’s still part of America,” he said, and chuckled.

Keith stepped out of the truck and saw a village that reminded him of the small town where he grew up. Near its center stood a large church building, the town’s dominant feature. Keith strolled toward the building along with a steady stream of townspeople until he made out the church sign: Anabaptist.

A few cars dotted the parking lot, but most congregants were walking. Couples and families poured in through large open doors. An attractive young lady about Keith’s age walked up the steps alone.

He thought she could have been a professional model with her strawberry blond hair and her figure. He quickened

his pace to catch up with her but slowed when he noticed an older man and woman close behind her. The older woman was dabbing her eyes with a handkerchief she put away as she walked through the front door.

Keith followed them inside and watched the girl sit, straight and erect, with her chin high, the older couple just behind her. The older woman again dabbed her eyes. Into the pulpit strode a short, stout man, obviously, the pastor. He wore a tailored suit and had a gold cross hanging from his neck. He opened a Bible and read its majestic King James' English. The children sang, "I'll take my stand, where I know it's grand, on the B-i-b-l-e."

The sermon explained plainly to the congregation that they were sinners who needed salvation so their spirits may go to heaven when they die. Then, just before his benediction, the pastor reminded the people of a business meeting that evening.

At the close of the service Keith strolled out to the church patio. A large coffee urn waited at the end of three long tables piled high with goodies, ranging from healthy snacks to some that might induce a diabetic shock. He watched the young lady get coffee and sit alone on a bench under a purple wisteria vine. The light green dress she wore complemented her hair and ivory skin tone.

He spread creamed cheese on a bagel, got coffee, and approached her. "May I join you?"

She glanced at Keith and said, "At your own risk."

“Wow!” he laughed.^[L]^[SEP]“What does that mean? What risk?”

“You must be the only person who doesn’t know,” she said, “if you don’t.”

Keith asked, “What’s to know?” He gave her his brightest grin. “I’m Keith, Keith Larsen.”

“I’m Daisy Thompson. The risk is that you’ll be seen with me. The special meeting tonight is about me. It seems I’ve caused a bit of trouble. The meeting tonight will decide what to do about it.”

“It sounds like a trial of some sort. You didn’t rob a bank or something, did you?”

“No,” she said. “It’s not a long story. My philosophy professor asked our class, “What if Jesus never actually walked on water, as the book says?” I had heard that story countless times and never once considered whether it happened or not. When I asked the Pastor the same question,^[L]^[SEP]he turned red and was almost apoplectic.

“In our church, we’re trained from an early age not to question our beliefs.^[L]^[SEP]If someone questions,^[L]^[SEP]the church decides what’s to be done. The most common outcome is to be ‘churched.’”

“Being ‘churched’ is a bad thing?”

“Perhaps it **It** should be called de-churching. It means that individuals are no longer a part of the community. They’ll be shunned—even by their own family—and largely friendless. Eventually those who are church-ed just sort of disappear, like my brother did.”

“What happened to him?”

Daisy stood. “Look, I’ll let my parents explain. It’s Sunday, so you won’t find any place in town open today. If you’d like to have dinner with us, mother will set an extra place. My dad calls inviting a person to share a meal “taking in the stranger within your gates.”

“I’d love a home-cooked meal.”

Keith fell into step beside Daisy. He glanced at the top of her head. She was only a few inches shorter than he was. When Keith saw their reflection in a store window, he thought, Not a bad looking couple. This is a lady I’d like to know better.

Daisy’s house, yellow with white trim, had a small front porch sporting a glider and a cushioned, wrought iron chair. As they entered through a screened door, Daisy’s father pushed old-fashioned horn-rimmed glasses up on his nose and rose to greet them. “Daisy, what have we here?”

“Dad, this is Keith Larsen. I invited him to eat with us. Keith, this is my dad.”

“Glad to meet you, Mr. Thompson. Thanks for your hospitality.”

“Think nothing of it. We like company. Dinner will be ready soon.”

Mrs. Thompson, graying hair only slightly out of place, came into the adjoining dining room wearing an apron over her church clothes.^[SEP]In her hands, she carried a place setting for their guest.

“Mom, this is Keith. Keith, my mom.”

“Hi, Mrs. Thompson.”

“Hello, Keith. We’re glad to have you.”

Daisy sat beside her father on a sofa upholstered with a print of large yellow and blue blossoms. Keith sank into a matching overstuffed chair.

“Daisy has me going, talking about being ‘churched’^[SEP]and about your son. I’d like to hear more if you feel like talking about it.”

“I wished someone would talk about it,” he replied, pushing his glasses up on his nose. “People in our little town don’t discuss this sort of thing.” He leaned forward. “It’s been hard on our family. When they churched our son Ricky, we handed over to the church all traces of him. We still have his junior high yearbook photo^[SEP]we found later beneath some other papers in the bureau drawer. We look at it and

wonder where he might be today. Ricky and Daisy's cases are pretty much the same. Rick began asking a question here, a question there, back when he was Daisy's age.^[SEP]Then he was gone like a whirlwind."

"That just doesn't seem right to me," said Keith softly.

"It shouldn't have caught me off guard, but it did. I didn't know what to do. I felt sort of paralyzed," said Mr. Thompson. "It still hurts. Probably always will. We just hope he's okay."

Keith glanced up to see Mrs. Thompson^[SEP]staring at her husband with a look Keith could not quite make out. *Was it contempt? Or disdain? Or even revulsion?*

The dinner was the best Keith had eaten in a long time: fried chicken, creamed gravy, mashed potatoes, his favorites. When the meal ended with cherry pie, Daisy began clearing the table. Mr. and Mrs. Thompson sat down in the living room. Keith remained standing.

"Mr. Thompson, thanks for your hospitality, and to you, Mrs. Thompson, fantastic food! Reminds me of Mom's cooking.^[SEP]However, if I'm not being too rude," he said, "I think I'll stroll up to the church and meet your pastor. My curiosity is getting the better of me."

Mr. Thompson looked up at Keith and said, "You're a stranger, but if there's any chance it might help, we'll appreciate it."

“At first glance, the situation seems unfair and unreasonable.^[SEP]I’d like to hear what the Pastor has to say about it.”

Mrs. Thompson said, “The Pastor spends Sunday in his study, so you won’t have trouble finding him. He tells us to rest on the Sabbath, but he doesn’t.”

The short walk back to the church brought Keith to a door marked “Office.” A voice answered promptly: “Enter!”

Books lined the walls of the small office. The Pastor offered Keith a chair. “What can we do for you, young man? Keith, isn’t it? I saw your visitor’s card.”

“Yes, sir, it’s Keith. I had dinner with the Thompsons.^[SEP]They told me they had an older son whose case was similar to Daisy’s. I’ve never heard of someone being ‘churched.’ What’s that all about?”

“What’s your interest in the matter, may I ask?”

“I think it boils down to curiosity. The Thompson’s seem to me like the salt of the earth.”

“Indeed, they are,” said the Pastor. “And in times of crisis our church’s task is to preserve the salt. It’s important to protect the community from outside influences. Daisy, sadly, appears to have slipped over the line. Nowadays, nothing is so insidious as the influence of college professors who seem determined to destroy their students’ faith. We’ve been losing more and more of our young people.”

Keith replied, “I still don’t get it. Exactly what did Daisy do?”

“What she did was to question the Bible,” he said.

“You mean about Jesus walking on water?” Keith said.

“Right. A strict belief in what the Bible says is essential. Any question with an uncertain answer discredits the entire book.”

Keith thought for a minute. “So, your entire community hinges on a book? And more specifically, on your interpretation of the book?”

“There is only one interpretation. We cannot sustain ourselves if there are two possible answers. Questions would raise doubt.” He paused. “May I offer you some cold water?” He poured two glasses and continued. “Let me guess, Keith. Our church is not like the church in your hometown.”

“It looks the same on the outside, but I’ve never heard of churching. I don’t know what to make of it.”

“Any question must be followed by its answer. It’s a threat unless it is followed promptly by ‘Yes, a real human being can walk on real water.’ Daisy’s question, you see, raises more questions. And to question the Bible is the same as questioning God.” The Pastor concluded, “The outcome of our meeting tonight is almost a foregone conclusion.”

Keith left, trying to make sense of what he had heard. A very pretty girl who seems sensible, a good family about to have major surgery performed on it, and a church and its leader who live in a cocoon devoid of thought and feelings. None of it makes sense.

Nothing in town was open except a small 7-Eleven. The clerk, a young man about 20 years of age, greeted Keith with a friendly smile. “May I help you find something?”

“I’ll take this soda and candy. By the way, how does it happen that you’re open for business today?”

“So travelers that need gas can get it and be on their way.”

“I’m Keith.”^[L]_[SEP]

“Fred. Most people call me Freddie.”

Keith said, “Freddie, the thing that’s happening at the church—Daisy about to come under fire.^[L]_[SEP]What do you make of it?”

Freddie had a ready answer: “The church teaches us eternal truths. We never ask questions. Why question truth?^[L]_[SEP]There’s no point in it, is there?^[L]_[SEP]Daisy stepped over the line,^[L]_[SEP]and the church can’t ignore it.”

Keith replied, “You’re okay with what’s going on?”

Freddie said, “Well, it bothers me, Daisy’s getting cut out.^[SEP]I like Daisy and her family. We churched her older brother years ago.”^[SEP]He shrugged. “Maybe there’s something wrong with the whole family.”

“Is it fair for her to lose everything in her life, her family, the community, and her friends, just for asking a simple question?”

Freddie said, “It depends on the question. If it questions the Bible, that’s forbidden, so I’d have a hard time with that. But even so, you’re right.^[SEP]That’s a big loss just for asking a question.”

“Freddie, tonight, shouldn’t someone ask a question, not about the Bible, but about fairness, justice? What I’m saying is, shouldn’t someone defend Daisy?”

Freddie frowned. “No one being churched has ever had a defense.”^[SEP]His forehead creased as if he were trying to get it straight in his head. “My feelings for Daisy can’t muddy my thinking,^[SEP]but I see your point. To be fair, someone should speak.”

“Right,” Keith said.^[SEP]“I feel like I’ve stepped into some sort of time warp.”^[SEP]He looked out the front window of the store and said, “I think I’ll take my soda and candy over to the park.”

A short distance away, picnic tables lined the back edge of a grassy area. Keith sat in one of the swings, resting in full shade near a slide and a sandbox. By the time he had

finished his candy and half the soda, he spied a woman approaching. It was Daisy's mother, coming straight toward him.

"Mrs. Thompson," he greeted her.

"Emma, please," she said. "I came to thank you for being interested in Daisy and our family. At times, I feel like no one cares. The rules are plain, and I don't think Daisy is sorry one minute that she's broken one. I can't think what to do. We've lost our son. I can't lose Daisy. I've grown tired of believing truth that has no heart."

Keith said, "Interesting phrase—'truth with no heart.' Is that what you're going to say tonight in Daisy's defense? I understand if no one speaks, whatever you decide will go down without question."

Emma said, "That's the way it's always been. No one in town wants change. Mr. Thompson should speak up, but he's so busy being a Christian, if a tractor ran over him, he'd get up and apologize to the tractor."

"Why subject yourself to this? Why doesn't Daisy leave? We live in a big country."

"She hasn't said anything to us, but Daisy would never leave us voluntarily. We're her parents, and family is everything. But in our community, the church comes before family," Emma explained.

Keith looked at Emma and thought, *This little lady is no more than five feet tall, but I think that's no measure of her stature. I'm seeing the old adage in the flesh: "Don't get between a mother bear and her cub."*^[L]_[SEP]

He said, "Do you think there might be others who have doubts as you do but lack the courage to speak up?"

She said, "There must be. Other families have lost sons and daughters, or even a parent. Surely, we're not all unfeeling creatures."

Keith watched Emma walk away while he wondered what, if anything, he could achieve by getting mixed up in a matter that was none of his business.

That evening as Keith approached the church, the people gathered, most walking as they had in the morning. The pastor stood near the entrance, greeting those who arrived early.

"Keith, my boy," he said,^[L]_[SEP]"all this must be a bit strange to you.^[L]_[SEP]I hope you're not disappointed by our action this evening. It's all for the good of the community."

They entered together,^[L]_[SEP]Keith turning to take a seat halfway to the front and the Pastor continuing up to the podium. Keith spotted Daisy and the Thompsons. Freddie sat alone.

“We’ll come to order and declare ourselves to be in session. We have only one item to consider tonight. Sam, chairman of our Board of Deacons, will read the charge.”

A tall, lean man dressed in a gray suit rose slowly, holding a paper in his hand. Keith suspected the Pastor may have written the note. Sam read, “As the Bible tells us, ‘There is one faith, one baptism, and one body.’ Daisy Thompson has questioned the Bible. We must declare her out of fellowship with this body.”

The Pastor turned toward Daisy.

“Daisy, our sister, you have heard the report. Do you have anything to add, or is there any error in what Brother Sam has read?”

Daisy shook her head.

A pause followed, then the Pastor said, “All we need now is a motion and a second.”

Sam said, “I so move.”

For a while, no one spoke. Finally, the Pastor raised an eyebrow, and his eyes scanned the congregation.

Finally came a voice, “I second the motion.”

“We have a motion and a second. All in favor . . .”

Out of nowhere came a young voice. “Aren’t we supposed to have discussion before a vote?”

Like the crack of a whip, every head in the room turned, searching for the source of the statement. The Pastor's gaze swept the congregation. His scowl fell on Freddie. "Freddie, of course, you're right," he conceded. "Is there anyone who would like to speak?"

For a few seconds, no one rose. Then slowly and deliberately, Emma Thompson stood to her full height, her face like stone, determined, angry. She clutched the pew in front of her. "Everyone here knows our family, Mr. Thompson, me, Daisy, and our son Ricky who was church-ed years ago. Not a person here can accuse us of being bad people. Yet the church is about to do something bad to us. Now, it's my turn to ask a question. Why are you doing this to us?" She waited. "And I'm not going anywhere until I have an answer."

A murmur passed through the room. "The explanation is simple, Emma," the Pastor said.

A young voice interrupted. It was Freddie again. "Can a moderator take sides? He has to be neutral and see that each side has its say, doesn't he?"

"Correct again, Freddie," the Pastor grudgingly admitted. "Thank you. Perhaps the Chairman of the Board can explain. Sam?"

Sam, looking befuddled, stood, and said, "We've never had a divided congregation before. There's never been a discussion," and sat back down.

Freddie stood slowly and raised his right hand. The pastor said, “Yes, Freddie. You have something to say?”

Freddie turned, making eye contact with the group. “We all know the Thompsons are good people, not troublemakers. Daisy never said that she didn’t believe.^[L]She only asked a simple question. Why can’t she have an answer and we all get on with our lives?”

Across the room a middle-aged man stood abruptly and spoke in clipped tones. “When my son was churched, there was no discussion. Nobody had to figure out anything—and we took it. He broke the rules. End of discussion.^[L]How’s this any different?^[L]Why are we dickering about this now?”

Sounds of approval hummed across the room.

Emma rose again, turned to the man, and said, “Frank, have you completely forgotten Brian?”

Frank’s face twisted in pain at the mention of his son’s name.

Emma continued, “Have you erased all traces of Brian from your memory? What a good boy he was,^[L]loved by everyone in this room. And when he was wrenched from your arms, do you remember how you felt,^[L]seeing him walk out of this hall for the last time?”

Frank’s shoulders began to shake, and he sobbed. “I’ll never forget it! Day or night! God, forgive me!” Frank

crumpled back into his seat,^[L]_[SEP]and the woman next to him put her arms around his shoulders. Several people around the room moved as if ready to stand and speak. The pastor dashed to the pulpit and grabbed the microphone. “Folks! Folks! Let’s not let this get out of hand. We must come to order!”

The chatter continued unabated, so he finally shouted, “This meeting is adjourned!^[L]_[SEP]We’ll come back Wednesday night and discuss this in an orderly fashion. You’re dismissed.”^[L]_[SEP]He darted out through a door behind the pulpit,^[L]_[SEP]and in a few seconds,^[L]_[SEP]the lights in the room began to go out one by one.

Freddie came up to Keith in the parking lot. “Keith, there’s no place in town for you to stay. You can crash on my sofa if you like.”

The light Freddie switched on in a small apartment a short distance away revealed a sparsely furnished living room. Leading the way in, Freddie said,^[L]_[SEP]“I’m gonna make some coffee. You want some?”

“Sounds good,” answered Keith.

Freddie measured water in a carafe^[L]_[SEP]and spooned ground coffee into the machine. A red light indicated the brewing was in progress. “How do you take your coffee?”

“Black, thanks,” said Keith. “It smells good.”

He said, “Freddie, when you spoke up tonight, you set all this in motion. Is that what you expected?”

“I had no idea.^[SEP]I just felt like Daisy was getting railroaded. No one else would have said a word,” Freddie said. “I wasn’t even sure her folks would speak,^[SEP]but her mother said just the right things.^[SEP]I sometimes think women have more guts than men.”

“Daisy hasn’t said a word in her defense,” said Keith. “Why do you think she hasn’t?”

“Daisy needs no defense in my book. She’s the prettiest, smartest girl in town. Most of the guys are afraid to go after her.^[SEP]I would but I don’t have much to offer. Why would she give a second thought to a clerk? Plus, she’s a year older than me.”

“Maybe you’re underestimating yourself,” Keith said. “What you did tonight ought to earn you a few points with her. I like her self-confidence. She warned me not to speak to her after church this morning. She said I’d be taking a risk, like she was contagious. What do you think, Freddie? Are you in trouble, speaking up as you did?^[SEP]I think you upset the pastor. I’m guessing you may now be a target.”

Freddie reached into a small closet and tossed a sheet and blanket to Keith. “Not necessarily.^[SEP]I didn’t question what we believe—just how we were dealing with it.”^[SEP]A yawn and a smile, and Freddie was off to bed. After struggling to get comfortable on the tiny sofa, Keith finally dozed off and slept soundly.

When he awoke, he could smell coffee.^[L]Freddie had left a spoon and bowl beside a box of cereal, clearly inviting Keith to have breakfast on him.

Sitting at the table downing his cereal, Keith scanned the apartment. Freddie was right.^[L]He didn't have much to offer a girl like Daisy. On the other hand, he had supported her publicly.

Keith walked to the 7-Eleven store to thank Freddie, but he was busy with customers, so Keith continued toward the church across the empty parking lot. He entered the unlocked building and continued to the office in the rear.

He heard the pastor's voice and paused. Whether the Pastor was praying, on the phone, or not alone in the study, Keith didn't want to eavesdrop. When the sound stopped, Keith knocked on the door.

"Enter," came the same friendly voice and tone as before.^[L]Keith greeted the pastor and took the offered seat. "Sir, I still don't know what to make of this church and this town."

The pastor responded,^[L]"This little problem is just a bump in the road.^[L]Our community is too deeply committed to entertain any possibility of change." He paused and frowned. "Make no mistake, anything less than churching Daisy would constitute a monumental shift." The pastor's pursed lips and his creased brow suggested he was not so sure of the outcome as he sounded.

Keith decided to stay through Wednesday. He had to know whether the people would vote to throw Daisy out. He returned to the 7-Eleven, where Freddie was idle for the moment. “Freddie, I need a place to crash for a couple of nights. How about my using your sofa, and I’ll buy a few groceries?”

“Great,” Freddie said, “I’d enjoy the company if you can stand the sofa.”

When Freddie came home that night, Keith said, “Freddie, what’s the history of this little town? Has it always been like it is now?”

“Here’s the short version of what I learned when I was a kid,” said Freddie. “In the late 1800’s, because of persecution, a small group of our ancestors emigrated from what is now western Russia and established this village. They set up this town off the beaten path to be free of worldly influences. Every time any outside thought or idea comes this way, we quash it. Most of our members would choose to send Daisy away rather than risk contamination from a sinful world where doubt is acceptable. The pastor has told us numerous times that the words ‘question’ and ‘heretic’ have the same root meanings. And both lead to evil ends.”

When Freddie left for work Wednesday morning, he told Keith, “I’m going straight to the church after work. You entertain yourself, and I’ll see you there.”

When Keith neared the church, he noticed Freddie at the entrance, as if he were waiting for someone. Soon the

Thompson's arrived with Daisy lagging behind them. Keith guessed, when Daisy saw Freddie, she would speak to him. Keith arrived at the entrance in time to hear the end of her sentence, "... if it hadn't been for you." She placed her hand on Freddie's arm.^[L]_[SEP]

Freddie blushed. He placed his hand over hers. "I think a lot of you, Daisy." He seemed unable to continue.

Keith followed them inside and stood at the back. He felt like he was observing a battleground just as a great struggle was about to begin. Those huddled on his left spoke in somber tones, heads nodding. Those on his right were quiet, as if they had no leader,^[L]_[SEP]no one to rally them.

Daisy was alone in the second row from the pulpit, apart from everyone else. The pastor's eyes swept the room congregation, as if looking for potential hot spots.

Keith wondered, *Who will stand up for Daisy? She can't defend herself. Emma already spoke. Freddie might,^[L]_[SEP]but it would be the voice of a boy, not yet a man.*

Keith saw no one who might be Daisy's champion. He wondered, Should I speak? I'm not even a member.

"Let's come to order," said the pastor.^[L]_[SEP]"Let's be in order," he repeated. "We have one item to consider tonight. There has already been a motion and a second. We will give time for discussion, then we'll vote. Does anyone wish to speak?"

From the group, on Keith's left, a man stood. Keith recognized Brian's father, who had broken down weeping Sunday night. With a small note in his right hand, he composed himself and began to speak to the other side of the auditorium.

"I fell apart last Sunday when Emma Thompson mentioned my boy's name. I apologize. According to our rules, he was treated fairly, just like others before him. To hold together as a unit, we've got to stop all speculation and questions. If someone leaves, we weep for them, but we go on. We don't change. I'm sorry Daisy is taking the path that leads away from us. If she must leave, it's her choice. No one's forcing her to question the Bible. This is a bitter pill we've taken before, and we must do it again."

With a relieved look on his face, the pastor spoke, "Is there anyone else who would like to speak?"

To Keith, the silence seemed to go on forever. Then he noticed some movement among those on his right. Rising slowly, pushing his horn-rimmed glasses back in place, Mr. Thompson stood. Emma's eyes swept up to his countenance.

Of all people, thought Keith, he's no knight in shining armor. He looks more like Oliver Twist with his hands outstretched begging, 'Could I have more, please?'

At first Mr. Thompson spoke so softly that people leaned forward to catch what he was saying. "Friends," he said, "all of you know me. I'm not much of a talker. Standing up here is about the hardest thing I've ever done."

After a long pause, he continued in a louder voice, “You know I love our church. I would gladly suffer for you if need be. If I’ve offended anyone, speak now so I can beg forgiveness before I go on.” He paused again.

“I love every person in this room, but above all, I love my family. When our son Ricky vanished, I felt like a wrecking ball flattened me. I still haven’t recovered. Some of you have suffered in the same way. I don’t think I can bear losing our Daisy. For what? What’s she done? Has she hurt one of us? No. Has she said something that’s untrue? No. Has she been unfaithful to our church and community? No.

“All she did was ask a question. In the Bible, people asked the Master questions. He didn’t cast out a single one of them. Should asking a question bring down punishment on someone’s head? Isn’t it time for us to examine our practice of churching?”

“Sorry, Mr. Thompson,” interrupted the Pastor firmly. “The motion is only about Daisy and her questioning the Bible. I have to rule you out of order.”

From the other side of the room came a man’s strong voice, “Let him speak!” followed by soft “yes” from the people across the room.

And from the same voice, “We want to hear what he’s got to say!” The pastor sat down almost as if he had been pushed.

Mr. Thompson went on.^[SEP]“I don’t want to us to fight, but we’re already split, not by a bolt of lightning from heaven, but because our Daisy asked a question. Isn’t the way we are treating Daisy^[SEP]as bad as the way outsiders behave? Isn’t it time we make a change, put an end to it? I say we should stop it—now.”

Mrs. Thompson looked up at her husband. Struggling to hold back tears, she stood, and embraced him. People around the room nodded in agreement.

The pastor almost leaped to the podium and reached below the rostrum. The microphone volume rose dramatically, and he shouted, “This meeting is out of order!^[SEP]I declare us adjourned till we can go home^[SEP]and consider the gravity of what Mr. Thompson’s suggesting! Are we willing to risk all we have for one person? We’ll settle this quietly and with dignity at our next meeting.”

With that he turned off the microphone and headed for the back where Keith knew the light switches must be.

Freddie fell in beside Daisy as the people disbursed. The pastor re-entered the darkened auditorium, heading for the exit.

“Pastor,” Keith called out.

The Pastor squinted in the near darkness. “Keith? I never thought I’d see the day. I guess you know you witnessed something tonight that’s never happened before in our community.”

“Discussion and dissent?” asked Keith.

“Right,” said the Pastor.

“Good luck,” Keith said. “I’m taking off in the morning.”

Surprised, the Pastor said, “Surely, you want some closure.”

Keith smiled a gentle smile. “I’ll admit I’m curious about the church, the Thompsons, Daisy, and even Freddie. But now, whatever happens, the people know they can speak freely. They can disagree, without fearing they’ve done something wrong. I think everyone grew a little tonight, including you, Pastor. It’s a small step, but it’s a step.”

One String Banjo

Brother Jim glanced from his car window as he passed under the eight-foot neon sign with JESUS SAVES in red on the crossbar. The smell of rain was in the air. Men in dark, soiled clothes under layers of jackets waited in line on the sidewalk to enter the mission, their backs turned to the wind. He turned into the parking lot of the Dade County Rescue Mission.

Brother Jim and his group, six men and four women, left their cars and chatted among themselves as they entered the chapel through a rear door. Walking to the stage, they stayed close, like sheep among wolves and fixed themselves in the light blue plastic chairs provided for guests who conducted the services.

While they waited, the men on the sidewalk inched up a narrow brick stairway, stepped through the door, and waited under a glaring fluorescent light while a staff member assigned each a bed. With a number tag in hand, they continued into the chapel to wait for the service to begin. Attendance was a prerequisite for receiving a hot meal and a bed for the night.

Two large paintings dominated the walls of the chapel. On one side hung a four-foot reproduction of Jesus, his right hand knocking at a vine-framed door. On the

opposite wall hung an oil painting depicting a sturdy lighthouse sending a beacon into a storm-tossed sea.

The front rows were occupied by a staff of thirty men being helped by the mission to put their lives back together. They did the practical chores: cooking, housekeeping, and maintenance, including buffing the gray vinyl floor to a high gloss. On each of 150 dark brown metal folding chairs, a hymnal awaited an occupant. Some staff chatted; a few were laughing. The street people waited in silence.

A homemade podium with a microphone occupied the center of the stage, and to one side sat a brown spinet piano. A lady sat down at the piano, opened the hymnal, and began to play softly. Brother Jim's voice intermingled with the sound of the piano as he instructed each person on the stage. "Brother Dan, pick out the songs the boys know--about three. You know which ones. Lucy, you gonna' sing one song, or two?"

Lucy was one of three women who came prepared to sing solos. "One," she said. "You girls be sure to give your testimony before you sing. That'll help the boys." He didn't need to say much. He and his group had been following the same routine once a month for at least two decades. The pianist stopped playing when Jason, one of the staff, stepped up to the microphone.

Tall, light-complected with blond hair cut short, he barked into the microphone in the stern, no-nonsense voice of a drill sergeant. "There'll be no talking during the service. No littering. No spitting on the sidewalk outside. No sitting

on the steps. Please stand only when asked to. Reading the Bible only is permitted. Showers and shaves on Monday and Thursday. Clothing is available first-come, first-served on Tuesday and Friday. Could we have two brothers, please?"

Two men from the staff rose, walked up to the altar, and bowed their heads. After a brief prayer, they turned to pass two small, woven baskets for donations, first on the stage among the guests, then among the audience.

As they disappeared at the rear of the chapel, Jason said, "Now, we'll turn the service over to Brother Jim and his group. Let's all give them a big hand."

A smattering of applause brought Brother Jim to his feet with a smile. During the years he had been coming to the mission, Brother Jim's hair had turned from black to salt and pepper. Other than that, not much had changed. His dusty black shoes and white socks were those of a working man. He removed a loose-fitting black topcoat that hung almost to his knees, revealing tan denim pants held up by a belt. His white dress shirt, open at the collar, was neat and clean, but not ministerial.

He announced with a smile, "We're here to praise the Lord, so get your hymnals and join in as Brother Don comes to lead the singin'."

Brother Don opened his hymnal at the podium and the music began. The men sang with gusto familiar gospel hymns, "The Old Rugged Cross," "How Great Thou Art," "When We All Get to Heaven," songs of hope and

forgiveness with the promise of a better deal, if not here, then surely hereafter.

The soloists had background tapes of gospel music with a contemporary beat featuring a full orchestra and backup singers. The only missing part on the tapes was the solo, which the ladies provided. The sound man in the control booth at the rear had trouble managing the tapes. While he fumbled, the ladies shared their faith and expressed their love and concern for the men and their unfortunate circumstances. The twang from the first singer suggested an untrained voice; the other women's voices were more musical. The audience gave no sign they had noticed a difference.

After the last solo, Brother Jim came to the podium and presided as volunteers told what God had done for them, a privilege restricted to the staff and to those seated on the stage. "Wine testimonies" from street people who might have had too much to drink were discouraged because they often dragged on and usually included things nobody wanted to listen to.

Finally, Brother Jim placed his well-worn King James Version of the Bible on the podium, opened it, and read. "All have sinned and come short of the glory of God." As he continued to read, he mispronounced difficult Biblical names and often missed words of three or more syllables. His torturous reading was immaterial; he had a message to deliver. He prayed, "God, anoint me to deliver the message you have for the boys here tonight."

He continued, “I left home when I was 14 and made a promise I’d never cry again,” a vow he did not explain. “I drifted around, rode the rails, fought overseas, drunk anything that come in a bottle or a can. I could swear with the best of ‘em, and I done a lot of things I’m ashamed of, praise God. I’d fight at the drop of a hat just for the pleasure of seein’ someone laid out with a broken nose, praise God.” He had drifted for years with little to show for it.

He understood how the boys felt. “I know what you’re goin’ through, praise God, but” and this line he had repeated word for word, many times for many years, “what he’s done for me, he’ll do for you, praise God.” Then he came to the point in his sermon that he relished. He proudly pointed to his wife, Verleen, seated behind him on the stage.

Verleen had never been a beauty, nor had he been handsome, but their union lifted him out of a life where he couldn’t be himself, thinking he had to be tough. With her at his side, he had roots, someone to come home to, someone to share his life with.

He had often wondered but never understood why she consented to marry him. He was grateful he didn’t have to put on a show for her, didn’t have to hide his pain. She was the only person in the world other than himself he had ever loved or cared for.

As close as they were, their marriage hadn’t affected his lifestyle. People at work still got out of his way when they saw him coming. His language still came hot off the

grill, smothered in profanity. He still kept up with the best drinkers.

When Verleen's health began to fail, there was never any question about who would care for her. "Verleen had three major surgeries," he said. "We was in debt for medicine, hospitals, and doctors, praise God, and our bills was piled up knee-deep on the table. Just tryin' to keep bare essentials was real hard.

"Just about the time we thought we was through with our run of bad luck, Verleen got severe ep'lepsy. But I stayed in there. It was years went by and doctors come and went, one after another. They all finally give up. The pain medicines didn't work anymore, and Verleen spent many a day and night in agony.

"I worked all day, then spent evenin's cookin', ironin', cleanin', and carin' for Verleen. Over three years," he continued, "she was nearly a total invalid, praise God. A few times she'd have a meal for me when I come home from work, but I never expected it, and she never done any more than that.

"One Tuesday they called work to tell me to come home, 'cause Verleen was havin' such a hard time. When I got home, the doctor was just leavin'. He said he couldn' help her, and he knew nothin' else to do, praise God. Verleen couldn' stop cryin'. I did what I could to comfort her, but that didn't help. I didn't know nothin' else to do, so I got busy with the housework. I thought it might take my mind off her suffering.

“Late that night I was all tuckered out. I set down in our ol’ beat-up rocker. It tilted a little to the left, but I never had time to fix it. My mind was spinnin’ like I was drunk. Verleen was so sick and in pain, it made my heartache. It looked like we’d never get our bills paid. I was mad at the world and tired of livin’. All them things was whirlin’ around in my head like witches dancin’ around a pot of poison.

“I switched on the TV, lookin’ for somethin’, anythin’ that would drown out my troubles for a few minutes. A religious program come on, but I was too tired to switch channels. The preacher on the TV looked me straight in the eye and said, ‘Friend, if you need healing, GOD CAN HEAL!’

“When he said that, I felt like I’d been hit with a telephone pole, praise God. I knew they was somethin’ special about the man. He said, ‘Friend, just come over here and put your hand on the TV. We’re gonna pray for you now.’”

Brother Jim continued his story as a freight train came rumbling down the tracks behind the mission, shaking the building as boxcars passed, followed by several minutes of click-clack-click-clack. Brother Jim was not deterred; he merely raised his voice till the train had passed.

“I heard Verleen there in the next room, groanin’ in pain with no relief in sight. Before I knew it, I was on my hands and knees, crawlin’ toward the TV. For the first time since I grew up, praise God, I started cryin’ and I couldn’

stop. I put my hand on the TV and listened while the preacher prayed.

“In my heart, I was pleadin’, ‘God, if there’s a God, if you heal my wife, I’ll go to church. I’ll be saved. I’ll do anything you ask! Just heal my wife!’

“Then I heard a voice. It told me to go to Second and Thomas. I couldn’ tell if it was only in my mind or out loud. I didn’t know, and I didn’t care. I walked into the bedroom and told Verleen what had just happened, and for the first time in months, she slept the whole night through without wakin’ up once, praise God.

“The next day I asked the only man at work who had ever acted friendly to me if he knew anything about Second and Thomas.

“He smiled and said, ‘That’s the church I go to.’

“I gave him the surprise of his life by tellin’ him, ‘I’ll see you there next Sunday.’ All the rest of that week I couldn’ stop thinkin’ about that voice that told me to go to Second and Thomas.

“When Sunday come, I had a time gettin’ Verleen out of bed to dress her. At first, she couldn’ stop tremblin’. When she finally stopped, she was as limp as a rag doll. Her arms flopped around and never went where they was supposed to. I told her, ‘We’re goin’ to church.’

“When we pulled into the gravel parkin’ lot at Second and Thomas, I didn’t know what to expect. The little, white-framed buildin’ looked like a garage.

“I got Verleen out of the car and through the front door. It was the first church I’d ever been inside in my life. They had rows of homemade benches, all facin’ a stage at the other end of the room. A speaker’s stand had a white cross painted on it. The preacher was preachin’ up a storm. Nobody even looked up when we come in.

“I didn’t know how to act in church, so I headed for the preacher. Verleen was limpin’, and I was her crutch.

“When we got down to the altar, the preacher stopped right in the middle of his sermon. Ever’body was lookin’ at us.

“He said, ‘What do you want?’

“I told him, ‘My wife is sick. I want you to pray for her to be healed.’

“The preacher said, ‘Do you believe?’

“I said, ‘If I didn’t, I wouldn’ be here.’

“He called for all the people who believed to gather ‘round to pray for Verleen.

Them people was prayer warriors! They was used to spiritual battle! They swarmed the altar like a bunch of bees

and began prayin' all at once. In a few seconds, the noise was almost deafnin', people cryin', beggin' for mercy, askin' for healin', confessin' their sins, demandin' that God heal Verleen. Some of 'em was on their knees. Some had their hands in the air, some weepin', holdin' one another, placin' their hands-on Verleen.

“I can't tell you how long it went on—an hour or two hours, I don't know. But like somebody give a signal, the prayin' stopped and a feeling of peace fell over the room.

“Verleen lay before the altar as still as a baby in a crib, praise God. God had visited us. Verleen was healed. It was a miracle.”

Brother Jim glowed. He had reached the climax of his story. “I can't describe the look on her face,” Brother Jim said. Behind him, on the stage, Verleen's face showed the marks of age and a long life.

He continued, “She looked at me like she couldn't believe what just happened. People was sayin', ‘Praise God! Praise God,’ and Verleen walked without help out to the car to go home.

“About a week later we went to see the doctor. He told us they wasn't no way medical science could explain what happened to her.” Brother Jim took a deep breath and repeated his mantra: “And what He's done for me, he'll do for you!”

As he descended from his emotional high, glassy-eyed stares in the faces of the staff in the front rows made him break his rhythm.

What did that look mean? Didn't they believe him? Hadn't they been listening? He glanced first right then left, like an actor who had lost his place in the script searching for someone to cue him. Brother Jim's face had the blank, uncomprehending gaze of a shock victim. His head bent forward, looking toward the floor but not at it. He mumbled quietly, almost in an aside, "It's been a long time since anyone got healed at church. Now when someone's sick, they just say a little prayer, and ever'one goes home. No one wants to stay and pray it through."

Shaking his head, he lamented, "People just don't seem to have power like they used to. It's been years since I seen anybody healed."

God had not changed, nor His message. People were still sick and in need. Where were the miracles? Had he been wrong all these years? Would God do for these men what He had done for him and Verleen? And if God would, why hadn't He?

He suddenly felt like the singer who walks up a ramp to a raised platform. House lights dim, spotlights come on, and he is in his glory, singing the loud notes, the high notes, the long-held notes, and ending with "and the home of the brave!" That's the signal for the audience to finish the anthem with, "PLAY BALL!" The spots go off, and they shuttle the singer off the field. They have heard the anthem

many times before, and the singer is instantly irrelevant. In a secret place, Brother Jim harbored the fear that as he finished his message, the men might stand up and shout, "LET'S EAT!"

Brother Jim's eyes glazed, his hands hung limp at his side, and his voice trailed off. "I don't understand . . . people aren't bein' healed like they used to."

Like a fish that had taken a hook but continued fighting, he plunged deep into his inner darkness. In those shadows, his persona welcomed him back to a familiar warmth and security. Almost like an afterthought, he offered, "God promises to heal if we believe . . . God always does what he says he'll do. If people aren't healed, I guess they just don't believe. It must be," he repeated, beginning to brighten up, "we just don't have faith like we used to, praise God."

He was back on script. "Now, anybody who wants prayer, come to the front and we'll pray for you." Still brighter with a smile and a vigorous nod, he repeated, "What he's done for me, he'll do for you, praise God."

The pianist began playing, "Just as I am, without one plea, O Lamb of God, I come." Brother Jim left the stage and stood at the altar with his arms outstretched toward the audience. Four men rose, one by one, and came to stand by him.

He talked with each one. Some men came off the stage and placed their arms around the shoulders of the four

men. They all prayed aloud simultaneously while the audience waited patiently.

As 8:30 neared, Brother Jim returned to the podium and announced over the microphone, “I see my time’s about up. Anybody else who wants prayer, we’ll meet you in the prayer room. Don’t worry about supper. If you need prayer, they’ll save some for you.

He bowed his head. ‘Dear Lord, thank you for the food these men are about to receive. Bless it to the nourishment of their bodies and bless the hands that prepared it.’”

Suddenly animated, 150 men came to their feet and filed out by rows, through a side door, down a long hall to a dining room where a hot meal awaited them. Brother Jim and his group, still clustering like aliens from another planet, left by the same door they had entered an hour earlier. As the door closed behind them, two staff members began quietly straightening chairs for the following night’s service.

The Body Shoppe 2054

My wife died on our 47th anniversary. Two years later, at 70, I still got the urges common to all males past puberty. But I would never have guessed technology could solve my problem.

In the clubhouse locker room, my friend Hayden smiled and said, “You heard about Jim?”

“Tell me,” I said. We all knew Hayden enjoyed locker-room gossip.

“Jim went to a new store on the mall and exchanged bodies with a young man! For two days, he packed in everything he could think of.”

“How did he do that?”

“He went to a store that has an app that lets two people trade bodies. Think about it. We could be young again—for a price,” he said, grinning.

“That sounds amazing. How does it work?”

“They have a stable of healthy young people willing to exchange bodies with an older person for a day or two. The kids make a bundle for a couple of days of

inconvenience. You trade bodies but keep your personalities. I thought: The idea is intriguing. A romp in a younger body might be worth considering. Then when your time's up, you both revert to your normal selves."

I thought this idea over several days. Sex without relationship is normal, a biological act animals do routinely. And if both parties accept the idea of casual sex, no one gets hurt. Admittedly, shelling out a large amount of money for a one-night stand doesn't make all that much sense. But recalling the early days of my marriage, the intensity of sex with a much younger body was a strong pull. I had the money and the desire, so I decided to go for it.

I went to the mall and found the store. A banner over the entrance proclaimed: Live your Fantasy! and a sign over the door read: The Body Shoppe. The owner, a man of about 40, built like he didn't need the service he was peddling, greeted me.

"Come in!" he almost shouted.

Life-sized posters of young, attractive couples covered the walls, and at the back were two upright transparent cylinders, about 8 feet tall. "This is where the magic takes place," he said. "And it's painless. Lasts for as long as you want, then you're back to your normal self. Fully insured and approved by the FDA."

"If you're interested, sit here, and I'll pull up the file of our employees," he said.

I flipped through images of young men, all healthy, clean looking. Finally, I stopped on one about my size, with dark hair like I once had, a friendly face, and a baritone voice. “Is the charge the same for all of them?”

“Yes, a flat rate. You interested in Donovan?” he said, indicating the man showing on my monitor.

“I am.”

“The shortest time you can buy is 24 hours. The price for a day goes down by 50% past the first day. The set-up is the big cost.”

The price amounted to an entire month of my retirement income. Despite the cost, I signed a waiver of responsibility and paid for 24 hours.

On Saturday morning, I arrived at 8:00 A.M. for my appointment. The clerk told me to “dress young,” so I wore jeans and a sports shirt. Donovan showed up; we smiled at each other and shook hands.

“I’ve done this a few times,” Donovan said. “Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do.” He laughed.

Each of us got into one of the cylinders. The clerk locked the chambers and moved to a console where he pushed some buttons. It didn’t take long, and I only felt a slight vibration, but I stepped out of the cylinder and my hands were those of a young man. Donovan got out of the other cylinder, but slowly. Yes, he had my body.

As I drove away, I reviewed my plans. I had already discarded the idea of searching for someone at a movie theater. A grocery store aisle might work, but I settled on the golf course at my club.

I waited on a bench near the first hole like a spider hoping for a fly. Four women came out of the clubhouse and moved to the first tee. Each teed her ball and drove down the fairway. They were laughing as they walked away. A couple of men followed them. Then, my luck changed.

Finally, a young woman about Donovan's age got out of her car, unloaded her cart and clubs, and came past the bench where I sat. She was alone. Her embossed leather golf bag looked expensive.

She was a picture. I admired her tall, willowy stance as she teed up her ball, drew back her driver, and swung with force—and missed!

“May I help you?” I asked. “Are you a beginner?”

“That was an easy guess,” she said with a smile. Her eyes got brighter. Donovan's body was doing its job.

“I can help if you'll permit me.”

“Would you mind? You can see I'm pretty much a beginner.”

I moved to where she stood, and her perfume, though not strong, was like smoke from a magic lantern.

“This might be a bit forward, but I’ll have to put my arms around you to show you how to fix your swing.”

“Of course,” she said, “if you’re not allergic.” She let out a small laugh.

My arms reached around her, and I put my hands on hers, gripping the club. Her hands were soft.

“Remember, you’re not aiming for the ball, but you’re swinging your club on a path that goes through the ball, as if the ball was a hologram. The smoother your swing, the farther it goes.”

She took four practice swings before placing the ball on the tee. I backed away, and she swung hard. The ball soared down the fairway, quite far for a woman.

“Lucky shot!” she yelled.

“With that kind of luck, you could win a tournament.”

“Hardly,” she said, “That’s only one shot.”

Sounds argumentative.

I teed up and drove my ball about the same distance she had gone. There were no players behind us, so we strolled down the fairway. It turned out she had not played for a long time and felt the need to get out more, and she was

a widow. “The clubs,” she said, “belonged to my late husband.”

I told her I, too, was a widower, and that I understood her feeling of loss and the difficulty of adjusting. For a second, I thought she was going to tear up, but she took a deep breath, pursed her lips, and took her second shot.

We continued to play and chat as we walked. By the time we reached the ninth hole, the weather had warmed up, and I had learned her husband had died only a short while ago. I said, “Since this is a new activity for you, perhaps you shouldn’t overdo it your first time out.”

“I am tired,” she said, and we sat on the grass in the shade of a giant elm.

“It’s past noon,” I said. “How about we get a bite? There are some good restaurants in this part of town.”

“That’s thoughtful of you, but I couldn’t impose.”

“Since we are both alone, we could get better acquainted,” I said.

She said, “I planned a light snack at home. How about sharing my lunch?”

Was she kidding? I said, “I’d love to,” and followed her car to an affluent part of town near the golf course.

She cut the crusts off her chicken salad sandwiches and placed a pickle spear beside them. A fruit bowl finished the menu. We sat on high stools around a granite-topped kitchen island.

“What would you like to drink? I have a cold beer if you like,” she asked.

”Whatever you’re having is fine.”

“Iced tea coming up.”

After the meal, we sat in silence till she moved her hand to cover mine and looked at me.

I felt aroused, but I needed to be sure.

“Should I go?” I asked, hoping she would say no.

“Please stay,” she said, an open invitation. My venture was about to pay off, and my hormones were raging. Then the worst happened. My brain kicked in, and I made the mistake of thinking.

She was a vulnerable widow, and I was a fake. She needed care and understanding, friendship, before moving to the stage I was contemplating.

I told my brain to shut up. My brain said, “You’ll be gone in a few hours. She needs a relationship, not a roll in the hay. Tomorrow, you’re gone, and what’s she left with?”

I could feel my heart crumbling like a day-old cookie. I faced an ogre of guilt. It was hard, but I forced myself to say, “I’m sorry. I must go. It’ll be better for you if I just disappear.”

She almost pleaded, “Can’t you stay—for a while?”

I had to escape before I weakened. I opened the door, jacket in hand, and turned to see a tear on her cheek. I bolted for my car. My 24 hours couldn’t be over soon enough. I desperately wanted to return to being a lonely old man unwilling to injure someone. I still had standards, and I was better off being myself in the real world and not playacting.

Sunday morning, after I got my own body back, I felt like a sad, noble failure. I had spent a lot of money and all I got for it was a small shred of self-respect.

I was suffocating in the house, so I headed for the golf course, but not to the clubhouse where my friends would expect a full report. Instead, I sat on the bench at the first tee, trying some slow breathing to get back to the real world. Finally, groups filtered out of the clubhouse and began their rounds.

After about 45 minutes, a lone woman more in my age range drove up, unloaded her clubs, and headed for the first hole. She was stately and exuded quality, a classy lady.

As she strolled past me, I noticed her embossed leather golf bag. I waited while she teed up. Her technique wasn’t bad, but she sliced the ball to the far right. Shaking

my head in amusement, I thought, *Some neighbors are probably picking her golf ball out of their pool this very moment.*

I smiled as I walked over to her and said, “May I help you with your swing?”

The Curve

Residents along the dirt road scurried out of its path when the monstrous vehicle roared down the lane, raising clouds of dust and hurling clods of rain-soaked earth. The truck turned into the drive of the largest house on the block, and a middle-aged man emerged from the driver's side.

Across the street from the man's Victorian-style mansion, a new resident of a flagstone house, a blonde with a ponytail, knelt in her parking strip planting a tree. The man strode across the street, and without introduction said, "The cottonwoods you're planting will be a pain later when they start shedding all over the neighborhood."

The blond with the ponytail ignored the man and continued planting her cottonwood tree. He was miffed. He stalked away, thinking, *I'll have to find a way to put that little lady in her place.*

A few days later, the woman with the ponytail drove home a new, silver sedan with a unique feature in its rear axle. She could drive at an unusually high speed around the curved embankment that led from their street onto the roadway into town.

When the man noticed the woman taking the curve, he bought a stopwatch. The same day, stopwatch in hand, he

approached the curve in his SUV. His pulse heightened as he clicked the stem, setting the watch in motion. The needle swept around the face of the watch as he completed the curve. Then he snapped the stem to check his time. He kept trying to improve his time each trip around the corner, if only by a fraction of a second.

The points he chose for timing himself were so obvious he could also time her car, her new car, as she took the same curve.

One day the blond with the ponytail was having coffee with the neighbor who lived at the corner where the street curved. As the SUV drove past, she observed the driver's left hand in the air, holding something—what, she wasn't sure. When he rounded the curve, his hand pumped.

She said to her neighbor, "I believe our neighbor is timing himself. Could he be jealous at how fast my car takes the corner?" *What a putz*, she thought. *First, he tries to tell me what tree to plant. Now, he wants to race. Well, if that's what he wants, bring it on. He can be number one, but only if he can beat me.*

On her way into town later, she rounded the curve at a daring, even reckless speed. Without looking or even seeing the man, she knew he was timing her. Later in the day, she stared as his vehicle took the curve as if it had suddenly become his enemy.

The woman began having coffee with her neighbor each morning to observe his expression. When she

succeeded in besting him, he looked tortured. But once he trumped her, even slightly, he smirked like a bully who had taken over a playground. His smugness provoked her to go even faster the next time, forcing him back into his melancholy.

She studied the curve like a professional racecar driver, practicing the exact moment when to hug the inside and when to accelerate. A few days later, seeing him in his driveway, she gunned her motor. In her rearview mirror, she saw him reach into his pocket. The watch was surely coming out. Her engine growled as she backed out, moving quickly to high gear, rushing headlong toward the turn.

Nearing the corner, she jammed the accelerator to the floor. Her car dived for the inside of the curve, caroming into the outer edge. Her tires gripped the road like tigers' claws. Euphoria swept over her as she straightened out on the opposite side. In a few minutes, she returned, stopped in her driveway, and killed her motor.

Standing in her kitchen, she heard a roar from across the street. He burned rubber as he zoomed toward the curve.

As he shot past, she thought, *I'll give it to him. He's got guts to take it at that speed.*

The second she saw him enter the curve, she gasped. His front wheels leaped over the top of the arch. His SUV shot into the air like a plane taking off. It soared over the embankment, and floated for a second like an iron blimp, and landed with a thud—right side up in an open field.

For an instant, she was concerned he might have hurt himself. She thought about getting in her car and driving to the corner to check on him. Then she heard his wheels zinging, trying to get traction. When she saw his vehicle over the berm, she retreated to the inner sanctum of her house to watch from her window.

He drove past her into his driveway, got out of his car, and placed an object under the rear tire. Then he got back into his car, closed the door, and carefully and deliberately backed over his stopwatch.

The Gift

When the first chords of “Amazing Grace” hit my ear, something touched me. Unable to stop myself, I put down my soup ladle, and a few steps brought me to the side of the grand piano in the corner of the dining room. My heart opened and the sound flowed. The pianist found my key, and the chords he played embraced my voice. I was at home—in the lyrics, in the music.

As I reached the climax, from behind me a high-pitched voice interrupted, “Please, Shayla, could I have some more lemonade?” Looking up at me, a bib covering her chest, Alice sounded like an aged Oliver Twist.

I came to earth in an instant. I was working for minimum wage in a nursing home and was glad of it. In a few minutes, entrées and desserts would be up. The old and lame would eat, then return to their rooms or sit in the hall and watch passersby while I cleared tables and recorded how much each person ate. Good nutrition is critical for the elderly.

I turned to get Alice’s lemonade and the pianist said, “You have a nice voice, Shayla. You should sing more.”

I said, “Oh, I can’t sing.”

He said, “You sound pretty good to me. I’ve played for quite a few singers.”

When I got home, I sank into an upholstered chair that had sprung its last spring years ago. Mama reigned from her newer chair to my left. I told my family what the pianist had said.

My younger brother said, “He must be crazy,” and laughed himself into the kitchen. My sister rolled her eyes. Mama sighed and said, “Baby, different folks have different gifts. You’ll find yours.”

I thought, *Could waiting tables in a nursing home be my gift? I like the patients and the people I work with. I make a lot of the patients smile.*

The following day, five minutes before the door opened for lunch, the food was ready, and bibs rested beside each plate. Residents can’t come in until a CNA is present, in case someone chokes on food or has an attack of some sort. Marvin, at the piano, said, “You got time to belt one out?”

I thought, *Why not? What have I got to lose?*

He played the opening chords of “How Great Thou Art,” one of Mama’s favorites. The song swept me along like a bird winging its way through the air.

“I like your voice. Perhaps you could do something with it.”

“Like what?” I asked.

“Like sing.”

I said, “Nobody thinks I can sing.”

Still fresh in my mind were the words of the music director at New Harmony Church. Eight of us were practicing a gospel arrangement, backed by a small band. In the middle of “The Road to Glory,” a message of hope, my voice was moving up and down like a ship in a storm. The leader motioned me aside and said, “Shayla, I’m sorry. You’re not fitting in. You can’t seem to keep the beat.” I was crushed.

I was singing what I felt, feelings I have only when I sing. The choir was dead silent. I was afraid to even look up as I took my coat off the hanger and dragged myself out the front door.

The third time Marvin invited me to sing, I didn’t know what I would sing. I just knew I would do it. After the drinks and soup were out, there were a few minutes before the entrées arrived. I went over to the piano and said, “Marvin, I’d like to try again, but we have to do it quickly. I don’t want to get fired for goofing off.”

Marvin smiled and said, “Fine. Let’s do it.” And his hand swept up the keyboard. I began to sing “Stormy Weather.” Whoever wrote that song knew how a storm on the inside and a storm on the outside are alike.

When the song ended, the patients broke out clapping, like I was doing a concert at Carnegie Hall. I felt proud and embarrassed at the same time.

At home, I told my family about singing and the patients clapping. “Sure they clapped,” said my brother. “They were glad you stopped.”

My sister reminded me old people don’t hear well. “They like anything that makes a sound.”

“Baby, you might not be as smart as your brother, or as pretty as your sister,” and I thought, Here comes a backhanded compliment.

“But you work hard. You know all those old people by name. You style your hair nicely. You know how to dress. You have a sweet smile, and your teeth are the whitest in the family.”

“But what about my voice, Mama? Do I sing as bad as my brother and sister say? You’re a good singer. What do you think?”

“It don’t hurt to try, Baby, but you gotta remember we need all three checks from you kids to keep this house going.” Mama’s eyes were pleading. “Just don’t do anything to get fired.” Medicare only paid for part of Mama’s medicine. Her high blood pressure was hard to control, so we couldn’t scrimp on medicine.

During lunch the next day, I asked Marvin, still seated at the piano, if I could talk to him after the tables were cleared. “How would you describe my style?”

He didn’t hesitate. “Your style is gospel.”

“Gospel? What do you mean?” I asked.

“Traditional singers sing the notes on the page. Gospel singers add notes from their hearts. They sing all over the page. But the good ones also respect the music. They know what they’re doing when they add extra notes,” he explained. “Your style is definitely gospel.”

“‘Stormy Weather’ isn’t gospel.”

“It doesn’t have to be religious. Everything a gospel singer feels emotionally can show up. You could use a little rehearsal,” he added, “and some exposure. I can help you if you want to give it a go.”

We began after work. He taught me how to sing “Amazing Grace,” what he called “straight.” He said, “Tell your heart to take five. Let your mind get a grip on the song as it was written 250 years ago. When you get the bones of the song in place, then you can improvise to your heart’s content.” That’s putting “meat” on the bones, as Marvin put it. “People can still hear the tune within the notes you sing.”

He was right. It took an hour a day for two weeks, but it worked. I could go wherever my voice and heart led

me and still hold onto the melody. Marvin said, “I think it’s time we take this on the road. You think you’re ready?”

I felt more confident. Perhaps he knew of a small church where I could sing. “If you think so, I’ll try.”

“I’ll ask my pastor if I can bring in a soloist. I’ll let you know the date.”

The next day, he told me, “In two and a half weeks, it’s on if you’re free.”

I wasn’t sure if I should invite my family. They didn’t know I had been rehearsing. They might refuse to come, for fear they’d be embarrassed. When the day came, I told them I was going to church, but not which church I was going to.

I had never seen the First Presbyterian Church before. Its size scared me. It was eight or ten times bigger than my church. Their parking lot was filled with row after row of cars, and Marvin walked me in the back door. In royal blue robes with white stoles, a huge choir filed past us into the sanctuary. I waited behind the stage with Marvin until it was time for me to sing. “Butterflies in the stomach” didn’t come close to what I was feeling.

Marvin walked out and sat at the Steinway grand piano. He nodded, and I walked out on the stage and stood at the microphone. The room got deathly quiet. When I looked up, I saw nothing but vanilla, a couple of Orientals

perhaps, nothing Hispanic. Not a black face anywhere, and not a single smile. *Had I accidentally come to a funeral?*

Marvin's long intro gave me time to get a grip and time for the audience to get ready for some music with a beat. I sang only three notes when eyes began to turn to me like searchlights. They zeroed in on me like I was either a stack of gold or the bubonic plague—which, I couldn't guess. I sang "Amazing Grace" the way they probably never heard it. To me, it was like a rich cake with great globs of frosting. I only hoped they were eating it up.

When I came to the end, Marvin lifted his fingers from the keyboard. I couldn't read the faces. I held my breath for a short lifetime, refusing to let them stare me down. Then two hands came together, then four, then 40, then 400. I could hardly breathe. The air sparkled with excitement. I had done it.

After the closing prayer, their choir director said, "You have a wonderful gift. Thanks for coming." A lot of their members came and shook my hand. Marvin walked me to my car and pressed an envelope into my hand.

The road home had the same chuckholes, and I hit a lot of them, but I felt like I was riding on air. Wait till my brother and sister hear. Mama will be proud of me.

"I sang a solo in church this morning," I announced before settling into my chair.

“Oh, Baby. I told your sister we should’ve gone with you.”

My little brother said, “Count me out. I’ve got enough problems without that.”

“Why didn’t you tell us?” my sister asked. “Maybe we could’ve talked you out of it. How do you feel?” I laid the envelope on the table.

“What’s this?” she said, opening the envelope. “This check is from a Presbyterian church.”

Mama took the check. It was for as much as I earned in a full day at the nursing home.

“The church where I sang this morning pays people who sing there. Marvin from the nursing home took me to his church. When I finished, they clapped for me like it was halftime at the Super Bowl.”

My little brother came over and picked up the check. He stared at it and shook his head. “There’s gotta be an explanation. They must’ve paid you before you sang. It’s gotta be a fluke.”

Momma got a determined look on her face. “A fluke? A fluke? We’ll just see. You ask your friend Marvin if he’ll come to our church and play for you. We’ll just see.”

Mama’s been a deaconess at our church forever, and when she asks, you can be sure the pastor listens.

“Let me talk to our choir director,” said the pastor. Later, he called. “Sister, it took some convincing, but we’re willing to trust your judgment. Should we have Shayla sing at the evening service? We have a much smaller attendance in the evening. You know what I’m saying? What do you think?”

Mama said, “Considering the size of the check Shayla brought home from that church uptown, I think, Sunday morning.”

I waited in our parking lot for Marvin, just as he had waited for me at his church. I thought he would come early as I had done, but when the service began, he was still not present. I could hear the hymns and the prayers. I heard the children’s choir sing. They were very animated. Maybe I wasn’t as good as I thought I was. Maybe Marvin chickened out. When the gospel chorus began singing, I knew the offering was being taken. My solo was up next. *Where was Marvin?*

The Gospel Chorus reached the climax of their number as Marvin pulled into the parking lot. “Sorry. I’ve never been in this part of town before. The streets are all unfamiliar to me and I couldn’t find a soul to ask for help. I wasn’t too good at following your directions. But I made it!” he said as we rushed toward the door.

There’s no back door to get into our church auditorium, no secret alcove behind the stage. You have to come in the front and walk down one of the aisles. Everybody can size you up as you make your way. When I

walked in nobody stirred. When Marvin came following behind me, heads turned. A stranger was in our midst.

Before we could sit down, the choir director announced my solo, sounding like he was apologizing for an approaching train wreck. Marvin went straight to the piano. He gave me his prize-winning smile and nodded before beginning his introduction. As soon as the congregation recognized what he was playing, a soft humming began to fill the room. “Amazing Grace” was familiar ground.

He paused and I began. As I continued, faces around the room began to light up like Christmas lights. Hands began to move in rhythm to the music. Eyes turned skyward. Deacons chimed in with warm “Amen’s.” And when I finished, hands clapped, and Mama glowed. My sister sat stunned. My little brother looked around not believing what he was hearing and seeing.

Walking Marvin out to our parking lot, I regretted I couldn’t put a check in his hands as he had done for me. Our church pays our pastor, but not musicians.

Before I could apologize, he said, “I have a bit of news for you. When you sang for my church, we had a visitor from Los Angeles. He’s in the music business. He said he’d like to hear more from you. It might be nothing, but who knows? I think you have a gift.”

And I thought, *Maybe I have two gifts.*

The Only Alien I Ever Met

Looking at my title, your first question would be: *Are you insane?* Many of my fellow writers familiar with the fantasy and sci-fi genre talk freely about aliens, ETs, and creatures from other worlds. I on the other hand have never had the urge to speculate about aliens, their shapes and size, their intellect, or their desire to destroy or dominate the universe.

Therefore, when I encountered a critter, clearly not human and unlike any animal I had ever seen, even in National Geographic, I stared in wonder. Since I am not skilled in providing descriptions (a police officer would say I am a total loss identifying a suspect), I can only say the creature had what appeared to be two eyes. I could not even say it stood because I could not tell if it was touching the earth or hovering. Other than that, I will spare the reader the details of its appearance.

It must have some sort of exotic powers. Where was it from? Was it intelligent? Might it kidnap me and perform weird experiments on me? If it gave me a test, would the test include calculus (not my strong point)? Can we communicate? Did it do Zoom meetings? Would it speak King James English and end its verbs in -eth?

Fairly certain it didn't appreciate the significance of my gray hair, I was not tempted to flash my AARP membership card and ask for a discount. Yet, no longer the 98-pound weakling I once was as a kid, I was ready to defend myself, if necessary, still careful to make no movement that might provoke the thing. Was it waiting for backup, or worse, doing word search for the best recipe for preparing a human entrée?

When it did not move, I wondered if it might be as afraid of me as I was of it.

And how did it get here? I saw no spaceship or vehicle. Did it arrive in a transporter, like on Star Trek? Time and circumstances permitting, I rejected checking out the parking garage down the street, although I strongly doubted it came in a Ford or Chevy.

Expecting it to make the first move, I waited for what seemed like forever. Then without warning, I suddenly *knew* what it was thinking. I had to believe it also knew what I was thinking. Telepathy? Perhaps. Neither of us spoke, but we communicated. *How weird*, I thought.

It turns out his mission was not a hostile takeover of the planet. It was friendly. The visit was not planned, but an emergency. The alien was just passing by and needed a restroom—fast. I pointed him to a store, but he communicated that their restrooms were for customers only. I suggested I go with him and make a purchase while he used the facilities.

“You’d do that for me?” he asked.

“Why not?” I answered.

It worked out fine. The creature was relieved, and I invited it to come again. It promised to return as soon as it accumulated enough comp time. “Would it be okay if I brought a friend?” it asked.

The Rabbit and The Fox

There was a baby rabbit whose mother and father had died. He was all alone in the world. The baby rabbit did not know he was a rabbit, so he set out to discover who he was. He hadn't gone far when he heard a sound. His ears shot upward. He stood up on his hind legs, eyes fixed, still, and silent.

Down the road came a fox, smiling smugly. He looked smart to the little rabbit.

“Good morning!” said the fox. “What are you doing in the road at this hour of the day?”

“I have no mother or father. I'm alone,” confided the baby rabbit, “and I don't know who I am.”

“You don't know who you are?” said the fox to the rabbit. Seeing a chance to have some fun, the fox said, “You're a spider.”

“A spider?” said the rabbit. “And what do spiders do?”

“Spiders spin webs, like that one over there,” said the fox, pointing to a beautiful web on a nearby plant.

“Thank you,” said the grateful rabbit, moving to take a closer look at the web. The fox smiled, shook his head, and ran off into the forest.

The rabbit searched for strands to make a web, but he found only long stems of grass. He worked hard trying to weave the stems into a web but failed. Disheartened, he began to nibble on the grass and scratch in the ground when along came a spider. The spider asked, “What are you doing?”

The rabbit replied, “I’m trying to spin a web. You see, I’m a spider.”

“You’re no spider,” laughed the friendly spider. “I’m a spider. Watch. I can spin a web in no time at all,” and he did.

The spider decided to amuse himself. “I saw you scratching the ground. Perhaps you’re a bird. Birds scratch the ground, and they fly in the air.” And the spider went back to spinning his web.

The rabbit liked scratching in the ground. He soon had a hole that was warm and comfortable. Then he decided to flap his ears up and down as fast as he could, to see if he could fly.

A passing sparrow saw the rabbit and lit on a nearby branch. “What are you doing?” chirped the curious sparrow.

“I’m a bird. I’m trying to fly,” replied the rabbit, still wildly flapping his ears.

“You’re no bird,” said the sparrow. “I’m a bird. See how easily I can fly?” And he did.

Said the rabbit, “A fox told me I was a spider. A spider told me I was a bird. If I am not a spider and not a bird, can you tell me who I am?”

Said the kind sparrow, “Who you are is a question you must answer for yourself.”

Moral: If you let others tell you who you are, you will waste your life doing tasks for which you are not well suited. You must look within and find your own true nature.

And let’s face it, if you’re taking advice from a fox or a spider, you should be examined by a qualified psychologist.

The Trial

Our children have graduated college and moved to the city, so it's just my wife Rose and me. We live in a small village settled by our ancestors who fled the Great Potato Famine in the 1840s. They came to Rhode Island because it was a state that tolerated Catholics. Our faith and customs have remained the same over the years.

Each Sunday, Rose goes to mass; I go to The Boar's Head. The two are similar in three ways. First, they both offer fellowship with people of similar tastes. Then, you get a nip of the old brew in both places—more than a nip at a bar. And, if you believe God is

everywhere, then He's at the bar just like He's at mass. The wife and I get home about the same time and spend the rest of the day together.

One Sunday, I asked her as usual, "How was mass?"

She said, "Mass is mass. Mass never changes. Everything we did last week, we did again today. Everything we did today, we'll do again next week. Everything the same at the pub?"

"Well, I'd say a little bit different."

“Oh?”

“A fight almost broke out.”

“A fight? At the Boar’s Head? For heaven’s sake, what could you boys possibly fight about?”

“You’re not gonna believe this. It was about God.”

“God? A fight over God? In a bar?” She laughed out loud.

“Laugh if you want, but I’m not kidding.”

“Did some Protestant sneak in and say something wrong?”

“No, it was Pat—Pat Robinson. He was hitting it pretty hard and started spouting off about the shape the world’s in today, the homeless, the environment, corruption. He kept saying God was doing a shitty job. The whole bar could hear him. He went on and on, not blaspheming, but sort of insulting God.

“When he mentioned abusive priests, that ticked off some of the guys. We don’t go to mass often, but we’re still Catholics.”

“So, why didn’t you put him in a taxi and send him home?”

“We tried, but he refused to leave. He kept hanging onto his drink and saying, ‘We should do something.’ Then his eyes got so big you’d think he’d seen the Virgin.

“‘I got it!’ he said, still shouting. ‘I say we put God on trial—for mismanagement and gross negligence.’ Then he started blubbering. He wiped his eyes and his nose and got very serious. He said, ‘Let’s put God on trial.’

“Finelli said, ‘Pat, you’re crazy. How could you put God on trial? First off, who’s got the nerve to judge God? And where would we find a jury of His peers?’

“Pat said, ‘We can have a trial without a jury. We only need a judge.’

“Finelli kept on. ‘And who’d do that? Not an atheist, and a religious person wouldn’t be impartial.’

“Pat was drunk, but he thought for a moment. ‘How about Marty?’

“He looked at Marty and back to us. ‘He’s the best barkeep in Rhode Island, and he never takes sides. He’ll be fair.’

“Marty jumped in. ‘Hey. If this is about God, leave me out. I don’t want to be in the middle of it. I’ve got enough troubles without that.’

“Pat was slurring a bit, but he said, ‘No, Marty. You’re the only one who can do it. You’re fair. You look at both sides. We all trust you.’

“Marty said, ‘You’re asking me to run a trial with God on the dock? Are you kidding?’

“Some of the guys shrugged like it was okay with them. A few brave souls said it might be fun.

“I told the boys that to shut Pat up we should agree, but I warned them, ‘Keep it quiet. If word gets out, we’ll have Father Francis on our tails, and we’ll be the laughingstock of the whole town.’”

Rose interrupted, “Excuse me, but it sounds to me like you all had too much to drink, and Pat’s the worst of the lot. A bunch of silly old men.”

The following Sunday, when she left for mass, Rose grinned and said, “Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do, like put God on trial.” Then she waved as she drove away with a big smile on her face.

The parking lot at the bar had more cars than usual. The lights inside were turned up, and a crowd was chattering away. Marty was doing a land-office business. Pat greeted me, “Glad you’re here. You know how to organize things.”

Pat was right. I’ve had experience organizing things, but not a trial, and not a trial for God. Pat yelled. “Listen up. Mickey here’s gonna help us get started.”

People looked at me, and I looked around. No one was laughing. I wasn't sure where to start. Marty had finally agreed to be the judge, but that was all we had.

“All right,” I said. “We have a judge, and there'll be no jury. So, we only need someone to ask questions and witnesses to testify. I'm thinking maybe two or three for the prosecution and the same for the defense. Pat should be the lead-off witness for the prosecution since this is all his idea.”

Finding witnesses to defend God should be no problem in a Catholic town but finding people who want to testify against Him—not so easy. And since Pat started all this ruckus, I told him to find another witness and left it with him. A week would give Pat time to find a witness or change his mind. We'd work out something about lawyers. The following Sunday, when I got home, I said to my wife, “Turn on Fox News. They interviewed Pat. He was sober and dead serious.”

...This is Bobby Burns for Fox News, coming to you live from the site of a most unusual event. To give some background, some men in a bar called the Boar's Head got into a heated argument about God and ended up deciding to put God on trial for malfeasance. They have organized a trial, and bar owner Marty Matthews is to serve as judge. Unfortunately, there's no room for our camera and equipment inside, but we've interviewed people leaving the bar.

Pat Robinson, the man who started the affair, gave us some details...”

Mr. Robinson, let me ask you. Was it your idea to put God on trial?

It was. I have questions. The world's going to pot, and not the marijuana kind. If God is so great, why all the mess?

What do you think might be the outcome of the trial?

I've no idea. We'll have to wait and see. I doubt if it will be "Lock Him up."

Rose continued cutting the lettuce for a salad. “I thought you and your buddies would have forgotten about it before now. Turn that nonsense off. No wonder nobody watches news anymore.”

The following Sunday, I left for the pub right after breakfast. Half the town was there. The reporter was talking into the camera:

...Ambulances have taken away a couple of people who fainted due to the press of the crowd, but the people are orderly. There is no evidence of police presence or any other sort of crowd control.

Ye gods! I thought. This has turned into a circus.

I had to go around to the back and still had to get past the security. Marty was behind the bar, busy as a hamster. He ordered more supplies for the curious who came to see the place where God was on trial. And he arranged two tables like an American court, for the prosecution and the defense. One of the chairs on the defense side looked more like a throne.

“Marty, what’s with the fancy chair?”

“Out of respect, you know. All this makes me nervous. I’m anxious to get this over and done with and get back to normal. I’ll tell you one thing. If it turns out bad, I’ll personally package Pat and send him someplace where he doesn’t even speak the language. See if he can talk his way out of that.”

The onlookers were whispering like they were in a mortuary or at the bedside of a sick person.

Marty picked up a gavel, moved just to the left of the beer taps, and banged on the bar. “Okay, folks, settle down. We’ll begin with a reading of the charges and follow with testimony from the side bringing the charges. Then the defense will have a chance to—to defend. Then I’ll give you my decision.” Marty came up with a Bible, which he placed on the bar.

Pat walked to the bar and put his hand on the Bible. “I swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help me.”

Marty said, “You mean, ‘So help me God,’ don’t you?”

Pat said, “No. I mean I’m going to tell the truth.”

Marty shrugged and said, “Okay. So, who’s gonna question Pat?”

A middle-aged man in an expensive suit came out of the crowd. “Your honor, I’m Justin Farrington of the law firm of Brown, Baker, Lithgow, and Farrington. When we heard about your situation in Providence, I called Mr. Patterson to see if we could assist. Since this is an informal court, I see no reason to produce my credentials, but I can if necessary.”

Pat looked a little smug, like he had pulled off a coup. A murmur came from the spectators, and Marty said, “Okay. Get on with it.”

Farrington began, “Mr. Robinson, please state your name and give your city of residence.”

“I’m Pat Robinson. I was born and grew up in this here village. I spent two years in the military and two years in college. Other than that, this is my home and will be till I die.”

“Mr. Robinson, you’re charging God with malfeasance. Do you know what malfeasance means?”

“Yes. It means holding an office and not carrying out the duties properly.”

“You say you have evidence God is not carrying out his duties. What do you believe those duties to be?”

“The Church teaches us God has all power, knows everything, past, present, and future, and He’s just and good.”

“So, you don’t disagree with what you were taught? You’re only alleging God is not doing His job, correct?”

“Correct.”

Farrington said, “Then would you explain your allegations?”

Pat took a notebook from his jacket, opened it, and looked at his notes.

“First, what about Kerry’s son over in Providence? When my son did some wheelies down by the off-ramp, the patrolmen brought him to my front door, said I should talk to him, got in their patrol car, and drove away. When Kerry’s son was stopped, not by one but two patrolmen, for what they said was a broken taillight, they got him out of his car, gave him a sobriety test, took him to the station, and fingerprinted him. His dad had to go get him out, and they had to pay towing and storage to get his car out of impound. Black lives matter, you know. Where’s the justice?”

Farrington said, "Pat, are you blaming all injustices on God? Do you think God should run everyone's life?"

Pat said, "He should stop injustice, yes. Unfortunately, it appears more like He's hiding in a corner."

Some of the crowd looked at each other and nodded as if Pat were speaking for them.

"Is there more evidence you want to give?"

Pat continued. "Well, we all know Bobby McEwan, James and Jenny's only child. He was six and doing good in first grade. He got sick, then he was gone.

"Some of the McEwan's neighbors nodded and whispered to each other.

"Quiet, please," Marty said. "We're not taking sides. We're taking testimony."

Pat continued, "Bobby will never grow up, marry, have a family, or grow old with his grandchildren around him. So, why didn't God protect him? What's the use of a child living only six years?"

Farrington said, "We'll all die. So, why should it matter when we go, young or old?"

"When we get old, we've had a turn at-bat. We've had a life. But why is a kid born if he's only going to live six years? Taking a six-year-old is not right."

Farrington said to Pat, "So you think we should never even get sick?"

"Not necessarily but dying so young is wrong. God has the power to protect Bobby, and He didn't."

Farrington led Pat on. "You have one more case where you charge God with malfeasance. Please explain."

"What are we reading about the Kurds? Our country took them on board. Now we're making them walk the plank. Why has God allowed us to betray them and potentially wipe them out? Aren't they the good guys? Yet, on newscasts, we see men in city streets firing automatic weapons. What must their wives and children be going through? What did they do to deserve being caught in the crossfire? I call it malfeasance."

"Is this your personal experience?"

"No. How does it happen that I have an easy life while people in other parts of the world get abused and shot at? I bet they're as good as I am. They have families, just like me."

Farrington asked, "Do you have anything more to add?"

"One last thing," said Pat. "I have petitions here sent to me by post and over the internet in the last weeks. There are a lot of people, thousands, who are asking the same questions. They think God could do a better job policing the

world.” He handed a stack of papers to Farrington, who passed them on to Marty, who laid them aside.

Farrington said, “Thank you, Mr. Robinson.” Then he turned to the other table and said, “Your witness.”

Barney McGill, a local lawyer, had just risen from his chair at the defense table when a strong jolt shook the building. Some ducked under tables. Others near the door ran outside. Most looked frightened, not knowing what to do. We waited. A second shock never came, and everybody took a deep breath.

“No harm done,” said Marty. “There might be an aftershock, but it won’t be as strong as this one. This is a good place to stop. We’ll take up here next Sunday.”

By the time I got there the following Sunday, everything seemed in place and ready to go. Marty said, “Pat’s still under oath. Let’s get on with the defense.”

Barney McGill rose and approached Pat. “Mr. Robinson,” he said, “Do you admit to being human?”

Pat smiled. “I’d have to say I do.”

“Then,” said McGill, “your knowledge is limited.”

“It is.”

“So, no matter what the big picture is, you are not capable of comprehending the entire operation of the world. Is that correct?”

“True.”

“Is it possible God is acting properly, and you simply do not understand what God is doing?”

“Possibly, but I’m not blind. I can see what’s going on here and around the world. People are starving, taken into slavery, treated like cattle.”

McGill said, “But do you admit there could be a higher purpose you are not aware of?”

“My father told me, ‘If you want to feed your family, don’t rob a bank; get a job. How you do something is just as important as what you aim to do.’ God should look to His methods. How could anyone say the death of masses of people contributes to a greater good?”

“Pat, do you believe in free will, where a person is free to make bad choices as well as good ones?”

Pat said, “I do, but I don’t think Bobby Hurt made a bad choice at age 6. I don’t think Kerry’s son Bobby chose to be black. I don’t think millions of Armenians, blacks, and Jews who were exterminated made bad choices.”

Pat sat down, and Farrington said. “Call Jason Jones.”

Jason came forward and took the oath correctly, “so help me, God,” and stood to Marty’s left.

“Mr. Jones,” said Farrington, “are you in agreement with the charge of malfeasance? Is it your testimony that God is not doing a good job managing the world?”

Jason said, “It is. It seems like God treats the world like a child playing with toy soldiers. He puts us in situations where someone always gets hurt and He shows no signs of feeling for us. Why doesn’t He do something—anything? If we don’t get an explanation, what are we to think? Does He want us ignorant? Can’t He communicate with us, or is He incompetent?”

Farrington said, “Thank you, Mr. Jones.” Then he turned to Barney McGill and said, “Your witness.”

People began to talk among themselves, but Marty shut them down. “Order! Quiet!” McGill said. “Mr. Jones, we all know you. You’re in mass as much as any man among us. Are you a man of faith?”

“I’d say yes. I am a man of faith.”

“Then do you believe in life after death?”

“The way I see it, there has to be. Good people should get a reward, and bad people should be punished for the wrong they’ve done. So, yes. I believe in life after death.”

McGill said, “Then why are you here, testifying that God is guilty of malfeasance when you believe in the end, justice will be done?”

“The world suffers a lot of pain and evil while we wait in hope life will someday be fair and just. I hope it’s true, but what if we’re wrong?” The quiet chatter suggested Jason had voiced concerns held by several of those listening.

Marty said, “I think we’ve heard enough for today. We’ll finish the defense next week. So, drink up and go home. Happy Sabbath.”

When I got home, I turned on the TV news. The reporter was saying:

...Bobby, bring us up to date. What’s going on?

Yes, the trial continues. Last Sunday, an earthquake shook the building, and people almost panicked. It only lasted seconds, but some people wondered if it might be a sign.

Right, Bobby. We felt the quake. Some people outside the bar also took it as a sign. However, we live near a fault. A quake now and then we take in stride. So, when will we get the next installment of our drama?

They expect to conclude testimony next Sunday.

The following Sunday, when Rose was putting breakfast dishes in the dishwasher, she said, “We’d better go

early, or we might not get inside. Father Francis will understand.”

Like before, I parked about a block away, and we walked down the alley to the back entrance. Marty had doubled the security. Only a small rectangle of the floor was visible in front of the bar. Marty was in high spirits. People whispering produced a steady hum. Marty greeted people and served behind the bar. When the time came, he gave the room to order.

“All right,” he said, “let’s get started. Today it’s time for the defense.” Emerging from the crowd came Father Francis in a black robe with a biretta covering his bald spot. When he gave Rose the eye, she looked like a kid caught taking money from the collection box. He walked past her to Marty’s left and raised his hand.

“I swear to tell the God’s awful truth and nothing but.”

...the God’s awful truth...: Maybe someone else should say this line. It’s a good one, but disrespectful and unlikely to come out of a Father’s mouth.

Marty said, “Father, aren’t you forgetting?”

“I’m forgetting nothing.”

“Sorry, Father. I thought—“

“We’re not here to listen to what you think. Get on with it.”

“What do you have in mind, Father?”

“I don’t need McGill to question me. I know the questions.”

Marty said, “Then please, Father, proceed.”

Father Francis began, “We all know and love Pat Robinson. He has not always attended mass, but he always pitches in when we try to raise money for the church. Pat’s troubled because things in the world seem chaotic—and rightfully so. Nobody’s disputing that. The question is: what responsibility does God have for the chaos? And the answer, of course, is none. God is a God of order, not chaos. We see it plainly with the movement of the stars and changing of the seasons. The entire universe is like a giant computer with its parts moving in perfect order.”

Pat, emboldened by his recent time in the spotlight, nudged Farrington, who said, “Begging your pardon, Father, but we’re not talking about the universe. We’re talking about the earth and the mess the world’s in.”

Father Francis was unaccustomed to being challenged and slightly flustered. “Right. Well, what appears like chaos on earth is chaos from a human perspective. The divine perspective is different.”

Farrington again, “How do we know that, Father?”

“We know it by faith,” Father Francis said. “There’s no other way.”

Farrington had a look of wonder on his face. “So, Father, there is no other way? It’s faith or nothing?”

Father Francis said, “That’s about the sum of it. You believe, or you don’t.”

“There’s no real evidence we can depend on? Just faith?”

“Faith. That’s the final answer.”

“I rest my case,” said Farrington.

All eyes turned to Marty. He said, “We’ve heard the testimony. We can’t deny the facts. But we also don’t know what the end of the story will be. Will there be justice later? Is there “pie in the sky by and by?” Pat and Jason made good points. The world is full of injustice and chaos. Father Francis’ answer takes the long view held by many people. God has been silent. He neither defends Himself nor offers explanations. We can’t deny the reality of the world around us, but there’s always the unknown, an element of mystery. And we have no answers, except, like Father Francis says, faith. Lacking more evidence, I say we have a mistrial on our hands.”

Pat jumped out of his chair. “I object! Just because God doesn’t come to His own defense doesn’t let Him off

the hook. The world needs serious fixing! Saying God is going to fix it someday is not enough!”

The people in the room got excited and began to argue.

To my surprise, Pat’s face turned from anger to stone. Jaws clenched, he walked to the bar. “Two cases of whiskey,” he said and dropped a wad of cash on the bar. Marty hesitated then hoisted them from under the bar. Pat said, “I’m going fishing.” He marched out of the room, a case under each arm. As he passed, he spoke to his wife. “Don’t worry. I’ll be back when I get back.”

Fox News reporters stopped Pat on his way out. As he stalked past, Pat said, “I’ve nothing to say to you. We can’t even acknowledge the state our world is in or admit God’s doing nothing about it.”

He dropped the cases of whiskey in his pickup, pulled out of the parking lot, and drove the short distance to the dock. We watched as he loaded the cases of whiskey on his skiff and headed out to sea. His boat disappeared over the horizon while we watched in silence.

The following day, Pat’s wife called me and said his boat had been sighted in the bay, and the only thing on the boat was a half a bottle of whiskey.

We formed a search party and organized so no part of the nearby sea would go unsearched. The weather was ideal, the sea was calm, but we found no debris or any sign

of Pat's body. Police helicopters swept the area for hours. Finally, after searching and crisscrossing the area all day, near sunset, we came in for the night. Had we seen the last of Pat? His well-known propensity to drink too much, his state of mind, and his feelings about the trial didn't give us much hope.

Wednesday evening, as we discussed a plan for a service for Pat, sorrow was as constant as drops from an IV in a hospital room.

"He was a good man despite his faults."

"He was a good father to his children."

"He was always a man with strong convictions."

"He shouldn't have got so upset. For what?"

"And I remember, even when he disagreed, he stated his opinions like a gentleman. We'll miss him."

"Now, Molly must manage on her own. We'll have to look after her."

Even Father Francis pointed out Pat had more doubt than faith, more questions than answers, but more courage than most of us, and after all, he said, "He was religious."

Rose was waiting for a report when I arrived home. "What did you boys decide?" she asked.

“When we were about to finalize the details, a fight almost broke out.”

“A fight! You must be kidding. How can a fight break out during preparations for a wake?”

“We were nursing our drinks, recalling stories about Pat. We agreed to wait a respectable time. Marty was putting the money we collected in his safe at about 9:00 when the door swung open. In came an elderly man, followed by none other than Pat Robinson. His clothes were a little soiled, but he was carrying his purple life jacket we all recognized. We jumped up and surrounded him.

“Pat! Man!”

“We thought you were dead!”

“Where have you been? What happened?”

We listened while Pat told us, “First, I want you to meet my new friend and rescuer, Fred. This good man and his wife hauled me off the beach, put me to bed, and took care of me. Well, you know how upset I was after the trial. As usual, I tried to drown it in drink. When I was turning to come in, I fell overboard. My lifejacket kept me afloat, but I was too drunk to get back in the boat. The harder I tried, the sleepier I got. Before I knew it, the boat had drifted away, and there I was, floating like a cork.”

Marty put a beer in Pat’s hand, and Pat continued. “The tide took me north, but eventually, I washed up on the

shore by Grover's Cove. I was out of my head for a day or two. After that, they wouldn't let me up to **do anything.**" ~~do a thing."~~

The meaning of this is unclear: After that, **they wouldn't let me do a thing.**" After being out of his head for two days, they wouldn't let him do what?

"Why didn't you let us know you were okay?"

"They have no telephone, and they're not even on the highway. I suppose I could have got back a little sooner," and he smiled his broad grin, "but knowing this crowd, I thought if I gave you an extra day, you'd have me canonized. Then I could come back a saint. Was I right?"

"Right?" said Marty as the men rose like they were ready to dogpile Pat.

"You no-good son of your father! You have no idea what you put us through. You're not a saint, you—!" He gasped for breath. "You're a rat!"

Rose smiled sweetly and said, "Knowing the boys, I'm sure you forgave Pat."

And in time, we did forgive Pat. I can't speak for God.

This Old House

Living in a house for 45 years, one collects memories galore. One week was filled with galore.

Tuesday morning, the ice cream in our fridge was getting soft. I went into panic mode and hurriedly called a well-advertised repair service.

“We can’t get to you for two days,” they said.

I made an appointment for Thursday, but I kept looking for someone who could come sooner. Several phone calls later, I found a repairman who could come on Wednesday.

However, later Tuesday during a telephone call to my brother several states away, I mentioned our problem. He said, “When did you last vacuum under your refrigerator? It’s not complicated, and it might save you a service charge.” It was worth a try.

To clean under the fridge, I had to remove a series of hexagonal screws that held the back cover on. After a brief search, I found the right screwdriver and removed the back, revealing a whole warren of dust bunnies.

The needle-nosed vacuum attachment sucked the fuzz from under, over, and around every visible surface. My wife and I retired Tuesday night, hoping that the freezer would be working normally in the morning. On Wednesday morning, the ice cream was still soft.

A few hours later, a repairman pushed our fridge away from the wall, pleased that the back was already off. He knelt to get a better look. I stood behind him, shining a flashlight over his head into the dark cavity. The farther he bent, the lower his belt crept, until finally another dark cavity came into view. His butt crack smiled up at me like a . . . well, like a butt crack. I said nothing.

His examination complete, he rose, hiked up his pants, and announced: “Either the heater, or the fan, or the computer chip has malfunctioned. I don’t work on any of those. You’ll have to call someone else.” He left without charging for the call.

The following day, the repairman who was slated to arrive between 3:00 and 5:00 showed up about 6:30, without apology and demanded payment up front. After pocketing my check, he glanced at the freezer and announced that the frost build-up told him which part had failed.

“We don’t have that part in stock,” he said. “I’ll have to order one. I can install it Saturday.” He congratulated us on our nine-year-old refrigerator. “Your lucky yours has lasted so long. Most fridges need new parts after only five years.”

When I saw his estimate, I said, “Maybe it would be cheaper to buy a new one.”

“No,” he insisted. “Your design is a style that’s no longer being manufactured. It’s the best ever made.” He

added, “If you defrost the freezer yourself, that might save some labor costs when we install the new part.”

With little time to spare, our son from across town hurried over, and in short order, drove away with the contents of our freezer in the trunk of his Mercury.

The repairman’s defrosting instructions were simple: “To defrost the fridge, unplug it. Catch the water as the ice melts.” What he failed to mention was that water would drain from several different spots, at random times, hour after hour, all through the night. Every time we spotted a puddle, we caught it with a towel so as not to damage our floors. By morning, every towel in the house was wet.

As I was gathering wet towels to put in the dryer, my wife came in from the laundry room and announced, “Our dryer’s broken.”

“What? Do we have a service contract for it?”

“No,” she said. “We don’t.”

Hoping to save money, I called the repair service. “Can the repairman due back on Saturday, replace the heating element in the dryer at the same time?”

The clerk said that for an additional charge he could look at it—not fix it, just look at it.

My son who had saved the ice cream advised that replacing the heating element in a dryer was easy. So, using my online list of businesses, I began calling.

Again and again, I heard the words: “The parts would have to be ordered.” Surely, I thought, in a city of a half million population, parts should be available locally. At last, a clerk asked, “Is there any heat at all?”

“The unit gets warm, but not hot enough to dry clothes.”

He said, “The heating element in a dryer is like a light bulb. It’s either on or off. There’s no halfway. If there is a little heat, then the problem is not the heating element. Have you cleaned the lint trap lately?”

Was he kidding? We religiously cleaned our lint trap after every load. Still, I disconnected the vent pipe and looked in. It didn’t look dirty from my end. My wife removed the lint trap in the dryer door and poked around. She said, “I feel something soft,” and kept on poking. I went back into the kitchen and closed the door behind me.

A few minutes later, she dashed into the kitchen and slammed the door, looking like she had just walked through a giant spider web.

“What happened?” I said.

Out of breath, she stammered, “ ... I turned the dial ... and pushed the start button ... I heard a small rattling

sound ... Suddenly lint and dust shot out of the dryer ... The laundry room walls are covered with dust ... and lint is hanging ... from the ceiling.” I helped her un-decorate herself.

To fix the dryer meant replacing the tube that ran from the back of the dryer through the garage wall into a flowerbed outside. To do that, it was necessary to enter the garage from the front of the house.

Opening the garage door proved to be almost impossible. One of the giant coiled springs that held the door open lay broken on the garage floor. That necessitated a trip to Home Depot to purchase a vent tube for the dryer and a spring for the garage door.

At Home Depot, the clerk directed me to aisle 9 for the vent, aisle 21 for the spring. I picked up a tube for the dryer, then went in search of a spring.

I learned that there was no “one size fits all” for springs. Did I need the 28”, the 30”, or the 32”? I took a chance and bought a 30”. Arriving home and placing it beside the broken spring, I saw another trip to Home Depot in my immediate future.

Installing the 28” spring required two people, one to hold the door open to a height of about eight feet, the other to attach the spring. My son came to our aid for a third time. I held the door up; he attached the new spring. It worked perfectly.

He also attached the new vent tube to the dryer in only a few minutes. We started and stopped the dryer a few times^[SEP]till the noise of tumbling debris died out.^[SEP]It worked fine.

By Saturday afternoon,^[SEP]the refrigerator repairman arrived to do install the part and collect^[SEP] a check for the original estimate—all without acknowledging our all-night vigil—and finally, after four days, our refrigerator was restocked, the towels were dry,^[SEP]and we celebrated^[SEP]by opening and closing the garage door several times—just for fun.

Travel Insurance

Mabel had expected to fly to Hawaii for their honeymoon, but as the limousine drove away from the church, Herb announced he had reserved a suite at the luxurious Ahwahnee Hotel in Yosemite National Park.

Mabel said, “I thought we were going to the islands.”

“I wanted to surprise you,” Herb said. I’ve booked the honeymoon suite in the most beautiful place on earth. You’ll love it.”

Mabel had always loved his enthusiasm and his manly way of taking charge, but his unilateral decision surprised her. She had packed her snorkel equipment and looked forward to sunning herself at the ocean with an umbrella drink. Now they were off to the mountains.

They spent two weeks enjoying Yosemite Falls, Bridalveil Fall, and Half Dome, as well as El Capitan, the granite monolith rising one half mile almost straight up from its base to its peak. Yet when he **decided** ~~made a decision~~ without consulting her, Herb had placed a tiny burr in Mabel’s mind.

The day after they returned from their honeymoon, after Herb left for his office, Mabel called her best friend

Rosemary. "Let's do lunch." Rosemary jumped at the chance to hear about the honeymoon.

Mabel asked the waiter to seat them in a quiet corner. "Rosemary, I hope you know how much I value our friendship. You're helped me over a lot of bumpy territory, and I appreciate it."

Rosemary gave a slight smile and a nod. "Thanks. What's this about 'bumpy territory'? The way you sounded on the telephone, I couldn't guess whether the news was good or bad."

Both ordered salads with vinaigrette dressing. The waiter poured their coffee and left. "So, good news or bad news?" Rosemary repeated.

"I'm not sure," Mabel began. "It was a wonderful two weeks, but . . ."

"Go on," Rosemary intoned.

"I have no complaints about the honeymoon. We ate in the restaurant where Queen Elizabeth dined a few years ago. We were waited on like royalty and picnicked by the Merced River in the moonlight. But there is one thing." Mabel told her about Herb's honeymoon switch.

"You thought you were going to the islands. Instead, you had a good time at Yosemite." Rosemary shrugged. "What's the problem?"

“Last night after the lights were out, we were lying in bed. Out of nowhere Herb began talking about choosing a name for our first child, as if it would be a boy.”

“You’re pregnant?” Rosemary exclaimed. “I thought you didn’t want to have kids. As long as we’ve been friends, I thought, surely, you’d tell me before you told Herb.”

No, I’m not pregnant,” said Mabel. “I don’t need an anchor to drag around day and night for years.”

“So, Herb is pushing you?”

“Yes, he’s making assumptions, as if I had no opinion. He decides and moves on.”

Rosemary said, “And he expects nothing more than a nod from you?”

“That’s it in a nutshell.”

“That’s a side of Herb I never saw. A lot of our dorm sisters would’ve been thrilled if the senior class president only looked at them. I guess you never know what’s inside until you break the shell. That sounds a little bit quirky.” She concluded, “Look, Mabel. If a husband runs over his wife, he can only do it if she lets him.”

Lunch ended with a final word from Rosemary. “All you have to do is stand up to him, and it ends there. Herb controls his actions. You control yours. The sooner you realize that, the happier you’ll be.”

Mabel thought about it but decided not to confront Herb. *After all, she thought, he's the breadwinner. Perhaps that entitles him to a larger say in what we do.*

Mabel tolerated Herb's alpha male behavior until one night two years later, as they watched the evening news on TV, Herb used the same words he had used previously, "If our first child is a boy, what name would you like?"

What? Mabel thought. *We've still never had a serious discussion about having a family.* "Herb, you've never asked me if I want to have a baby, or if I want to be a mother. You've gone past me, again, as if what I think doesn't matter."

"Oh, I did?" He seemed surprised but rushed on. "Well, eventually we should have a family. How about it?"

Mabel recalled vague memories of her own father, that he was the decider, but his early death put an end to that. *At least, she thought, he's not totally running over me.* But she never seemed to see it coming.

* * *

Ten months later, identical twins Toby and Thomas were born. Their friends called Herb and Mabel "twice blessed." Mabel thought, *Twice is right—double the fun, and double the work. Two mouths to be fed at the same time, two bottoms needing diapers, and two little bodies with a temperature at the same time with little or no support from Herb.* When the "Terrible Two's" hit, if there was mischief

available, they got into it. If there were no mischief, they found some. When one threw a temper tantrum, they both did. If one broke a toy, they fought over the one that remained.

Yet Mabel enjoyed showing off her “Two T’s” wherever she went. The minister cooed like a dove when they were christened. She dressed them in identical clothing, and while others had trouble telling them apart, she never did. They never crawled, and both learned to walk on the same day. Herb and Mabel watched as they wriggled and waved their arms together when salsa music came on the television or radio.

On their first day in kindergarten, Mabel shed a tear. Their blond curls and clear blue eyes seemed to charm Miss Milam the minute they entered the classroom. The serious work of learning and playing seemed natural to them.

When Mabel returned home, the house was too quiet. The boys’ bedroom was like an empty cavern. She wasn’t sure she could stand it. *Call Rosemary*, she thought. She was reassured when she heard Rosemary’s familiar laugh.

“I can feel it when you hit a rough spot.”

“You know me too well,” Mabel responded.

The waiter saw them coming. Without a word he guided them to “their” table and opened menus for them. After they ordered, Rosemary said, “What’s up now? I hope you’re not pregnant again. You just got rid of the boys. I

know—you love them. I also know you wouldn't want to take that job on again any time soon."

"Like, never, would be soon enough," said Mabel. "It's not children. It's the silence. The boys are at school. And Herb, sometimes I think he doesn't even know I'm alive." Her voice rising, she said, "I'm exhausted. The only thing Herb has ever done at home is hire a gardener. He said if we ever sell, curb appeal adds a lot of value. I take care of the bills, the house, I take care of the boys, do all the shopping, all the cooking, serving, and cleaning up."

"Rosemary, will I ever listen to you? I know the only person who can **stand up to him** ~~take action~~ is me. But every time I'm ready to put my foot down, Herb blindsides me, and we're off again, in a direction *he* chooses."

Rosemary said, "At least find a way to get out of the house. Volunteer. How about helping where the twins go to school? Schools usually welcome qualified help."

"That's a good idea. I can do that during the day and Herb won't object."

"Whether Herb objects or not, diversify," Rosemary concluded.

When the twins were ready to leave elementary school, Mabel was recognized at a school luncheon. "For help above and beyond the call of duty, John Muir Elementary School and staff want to thank and honor Mabel," said the principal. "She began years ago, working a

few hours a week in the office. From there she moved into the classroom as an aide. Then she switched to Special Ed, serving students we know to be among the most vulnerable. Time and time again, she's earned the respect of administrators, teachers, and students. We thought about flunking her boys so we could keep her longer, but we feel sure she has greater things in her future."

Herb was away at a convention.

* * *

When Toby and Thomas were in Middle School, Mabel became indispensable to their teachers, like when their class decided to visit the Hershey's Chocolate Factory in Oakdale. Mabel reserved the buses, arranged for sack lunches, enlisted parents to chaperone, and then double-checked everything.

The day after their field trip, when she and Rosemary were having what they had come to call their luncheon/therapy session, Mabel said, "Rosemary, I don't know how long you can tolerate my dumping on you, but Herb did it again!" she said. "The last activity at our picnic was a group game. Herb arrived right in the middle of the three-legged race. While the boys were still hopping along, Herb parked the car and ran fast enough to meet them at the finish line. He grabs them in his arms and the cameras are snapping. Guess whose picture made the newspaper. You know, he's in every photo they ever took, smiling as if he had something to do with their successes."

“Mabel, I’m your best friend. I always will be. But let me be your friend by asking, Where’s your backbone? You sound like a volcano ready to erupt. The sooner the better, I’d say.”

* * *

When the boys left for college, Herb drove them to the university. “I’ll get a chance to schmooze with the administration. Networking is the name of the game now,” Herb said. Watching the car disappear around the corner, Mabel thought, *Finally, I’m my own boss. I can relax, arrange the day around my schedule, think about myself a little bit. The boys’ rooms—what should I do with them? An office? A sewing room? A home gym? Should I treat myself to a day at a spa like my friends do regularly?*

When Herb returned from getting the boys settled in their dorm room, he burst into the house with a grin across his face. He rushed over to Mabel and lifted her off the floor in a bear hug. “News!” he said. “Your Herb got a promotion with a huge raise. I found out a week ago. I’m the new manager of the Houston office.”

“Houston? All our friends are here.”

“The opportunity came at the perfect time. With the boys in college, we can start a new chapter. But that’s not all. I want you to use your organizing skills. Be my office manager.”

Mabel's head was spinning. *Move? Office manager?* She was feeling desperate. "I'm off to visit Rosemary," she told Herb. On the phone she said, "Rosemary, I've got to see you before I go off the edge of the universe."

Three hours later, Rosemary said, "Calm down. You look awful. Are you sick? It's Herb, again, isn't it?"

"He wants us to move to Houston, and he wants me to be his office manager. I'd be with him all day. I thought I would finally have some time for myself. He's planned my future, all without a word to me—except to push me to get in line."

"I see," Rosemary said. "With the boys gone, you'll have to rediscover who you are. And until you stand up to Herb, you'll never get on that train."

"You must be psychic. You're right. So, what do I do now?" Mabel said.

"Go, if you want, but going to Houston doesn't solve your problem. It only moves it. We can still get together regularly. But please, look for a chance to escape. It might come when you least expect it," Rosemary counseled.

* * *

Mabel accompanied Herb to Houston and organized his office so that it hummed like a new Cadillac. She

focused on the workplace atmosphere first. She treated employees with respect, and they repeatedly told her how much they enjoyed working for her. Two years in, she was caught off guard one day when Gregory, one of Herb's former employees, showed up and asked her out to lunch.

Over lunch, Gregory pointed out the skills she had demonstrated working for Herb. "I'm not here by accident," he said. "I do head-hunting for the IRS. How about coming to work for the government?"

"Me? Work for the government? Doing what? I don't even do our income tax reports."

"That's probably irrelevant. If you can make one office hum, you can do it anywhere. I think you would be a great fit, and if you prove to be as effective as I think you are, in a year's time, you'll be bringing home as much as Herb does."

Now, there's a thought. Could this be the escape hatch Rosemary foretold? "I'll meet with your staff and look over the situation," Mabel said. The cage door was open, and out she flew. "Herb, I'm turning in my badge."

Herb had a blank expression, like a hunter whose favorite dog had just deserted him. "What do you mean?"

"I mean I've accepted a position with the IRS. I start in two weeks."

"What am I supposed to do?"

Mabel looked him straight in the eye and without smiling said, “You’ll figure it out.

Mabel organized her corner of the IRS Center and began setting records for output. She molded her staff into a loyal team. Promotions came as quickly as regulations permitted.

* * *

At Mabel’s retirement luncheon, she and Herb sat at the right side of the Director of the IRS from Washington, D. C. He came to recognize her 25 years of outstanding service. “Mabel is one rare individual. I can’t describe how well she handled personnel, how she made all her staff feel appreciated, how she helped those who were struggling with their tasks.”

He went on to mention her computer skills, another factor in her rise to her executive position because, as he pointed out, “Most of the work in the entire building is data entry, a job that requires both skill and judgment.” During her tenure, Mabel suggested changes in forms and procedures that made their way into the forms Americans now use when filing our taxes. She climbed the executive ladder one rung at a time and retired as one of the top administrators at the Center.

As the speech and testimonials continued, Mabel felt the curtain falling and thought, *Ye, gods! I’ll be spending all day every day with Herb.*

On the drive home, Herb was silent. They parked and she unlocked the front door. Inside, his first words were, “Let’s really celebrate. We could hire a band, have a dance, get some catered food, decorate the backyard with paper lanterns.”

After 45 years of marriage, we still can’t agree on much of anything, Mabel thought. “I can’t understand why your idea of celebrating is getting tipsy and dancing the night away. There must be a better way. Why not add another room to the house? We could both have a work room or an office.”

“A dance with friends here would be more fun than spending our nest egg on a larger house for the sole purpose of having separate ‘offices’ so we don’t see much of each other. How about a compromise—say a nice trip?” asked Herb.

Mabel thought, *Can it be that we might finally agree on something? A trip doesn’t sound too bad. We could visit relatives out of state and renew family ties.*

Herb, who didn’t get along with her family, thought, *Cross the country in a small motor home and visit America’s natural wonders. Take a cruise and see the world. We could visit all seven continents.*

Their conflicting ideas of a trip provoked a warmer than usual discussion. Mabel gave in to “see the world,” as Herb put it. But she had a caveat: “If we travel, we’re going to make it a real vacation.”

“What do you mean 'a real vacation?’” Herb challenged. “Haven’t we always traveled in style?”

“Not really,” she said. “You traveled in style. I handled all the arrangements. I bought tickets, made reservations, selected itineraries, reserved tours, did the laundry and cooking. This time if we go, someone else will have to tackle the details.”

“Hold that thought,” Herb pressed on. “Why not see a travel agent?”

Monday morning Herb led Mabel into the Moderne Travel Agency, “*First Class Trips, Our Specialty.*” Doris Doolittle greeted them with a blinding smile. She cooed, “Where would we like to go?”

“I’m thinking London, Paris and Rome,” Mabel blurted out.

Herb jumped in, “Or the Orient—China, India—or Australia.”

Mabel said, “That’s too many third world countries for me. I prefer places where I can wallow in luxury.”

“Don’t be a stick in the mud,” said Herb. “Let’s get off the beaten path.”

“Off the beaten path,” said Mabel, “sounds like camping to me.”

“Live a little, woman. We can see Europe in travelogues at the library and get a gut full of places tourists have ogled for a thousand years.”

Mabel’s voice took on an edge. “You always do this. You finagle your own way, and I end up getting dragged to places I don’t want to go and have no interest in.”

“Our life is so hum-drum,” Herb pleaded. “How about seeing a part of the world that’s strange to us? Be a little bit surprised?”

Mabel seemed to relent. “What do you have in mind?” she offered.

“Malaysia,” he answered quickly.

Mabel coughed and turned red in the face, but not Doris. Her mind leaped into action. “A fascinating choice,” she chanted, “from its ancient capital, Kuala Lumpur, to forests that have a greater biodiversity than almost any place in the world outside the Amazon rainforest, of course.”

Mabel eyed Herb. “I’m not going on a forced march through a jungle so you can see an exotic bird or a weird flower.”

Ignoring her glare, Herb said, “You agreed to go. Let’s move on.”

Doris, thinking of her commission, gently nudged. “Let me draw up plans. I’ll have a package that will let you

travel in comfort on tours that provide easy sightseeing. One last thing,” she added. “Our trip insurance covers all contingencies: airfare in case you have a change of plans, hotel accommodations if there are any unforeseen problems, coverage in case of lost luggage, medical attention if you get sick—the works. We can insure any problem or destination you can imagine.”

“How much does that add to the cost?” asked Herb.

Doris, behind her sparkling fixed smile, was winding up her pitch. “We can add trip insurance for about 10% of your total package.”

Herb winced.

Mabel had just passed the outer limits of her patience. “So, you *could* insure a trip to London? To Paris? To Rome?”

“Yes! Yes! Yes!” Doris was ecstatic.

“That settles it then. I’ll take all three when I’m good and ready. Herb, *you* go to Malaysia. Slog through the jungle, get eaten by mosquitoes, ‘ooh’ and ‘aah’ at strange birds and flowers, but count me out.”

Herb placed his hand on her arm. “Mabel, don’t be like that. Where would I go without you?”

When have you ever gone along with me? she thought. Smiling, she addressed Doris, “Could you provide insurance for a trip from here to home?”

Doris grinned and went along with the joke. “I think we could insure even a trip home.”

“Well, that’s where I’m going. As for you, Herb—you can go to *hell*.” Turning to Doris she asked. “Can you insure a trip like that?”

Doris, eyes dazed and only half smiling, conceded, “Sorry, I don’t think we have insurance for a journey like that.”

Waiting

He had spent a lot of his life waiting. He waited for his first-grade classroom door to open, proud to enter and take his seat, instantly in love with Miss Milam and her blond hair, intoxicated by the fragrance of her talcum powder.

He waited four months for a report card in seventh grade, and even though it had a humiliating “D,” the lowest grade he had ever received, he took it home dutifully. At least he had passed.

He had waited for the “nickel bus” to take him to school each day, and while waiting, memorized “How do I love thee? Let me count the ways.”

In lines in a gymnasium where the professors of the small college sat behind tables enrolling students for the opening term of the year—he waited. He waited in line for the dormitory dining hall to open, but not because the food was gourmet. On spaghetti night, Bill, who went on to become an astronaut, dished out spaghetti to those inching through the line. “Get your live fish bait right here!” Presentation was not big in the men’s food service.

Four times he had waited in cap and gown to hear his name called, to march across a stage, to receive four pieces of paper which he still had somewhere.

He had waited in the anteroom till the usher said, “It’s time.” He took his place, and the wedding march began.

In she came, floating down the aisle like an angel. She had been his savior in ways he had never imagined, absolutely worth waiting for.

He waited five hours, beginning at 2:30 A.M., watching Pacific waves dashing on rocks beneath a huge picture window till the birth pangs were over, and he had another love in his life.

When his mother died, he had waited in the viewing room. Friends and acquaintances came to pay their respects. He wondered where everyone was. Then it occurred to him that she had outlived most of her friends and acquaintances. Her heart was large enough to embrace the world, but she was not a public person. No one was going to come by representing some club or church. The family only, plus a few people he didn't know, all waited together.

Waiting with colleagues, marching in heavy rain, he struck for smaller classes. Others struck for more money. They didn't get smaller classes or more money. But they had stood up to power. They possessed a dignity they had never felt before.

I'm still waiting, he thought, in Room 103. I don't think we check out by room number. Leonard was in 104 but younger than me. One day he was there, the next he was gone, and Franklin's in his room. Now he's waiting along with the rest of us.

Aggie loved to play Bingo, and she could keep three cards going at the same time since each number was called

several times. She was lucky and the prizes were not bad—a candy bar, a small stuffed toy, or a knitted hand warmer someone had donated. They rolled the gurney past my door last night, and even with the sheet pulled over her face, I knew who it was.

So, what's next? he asked himself. *The leap, that's what's next. The leap to the head of the line, the leap into . . . into what?* He wondered where the idea had come from that there's something beyond death.

He thought of the funeral of one of his Hmong students who had gone home ill one day. The next day Lao Moua had jumped to the head of the line. Alone, he had an epileptic seizure, fell off his bed, struck his head on the metal frame, and bled to death.

The one indisputable fact is that we go. We might wait 100 years, or far less, but ultimately, we go, in war, by accident, in the quiet of our home, or extracted from our room and hidden from view on a gurney.

He finally admitted to himself that notions of an afterlife—resurrection, heaven, purgatory—were all guesses that sprang from hope. The culture declares that saints reach heaven; sinners are assigned to hell; and wee sinners pass through purgatory where their souls do a turnaround. Perhaps none of that is real.

Over the years he had gradually laid aside all ideas about life after death. *Why speculate,* he asked himself, *when the answers never rise above the level of speculation?*

Priests and ministers, specialists, do not agree because they, too, are mere speculators.

Whatever happens after a person dies, he was content to leave in the hands of Other, his designation for divinity. But he took comfort in the fact that people who die live on—in our memories. People he had loved, people he had feared, people he might have only known casually, all lived inside his mind.

He still conjured up the phantoms of his mother and father. The smell of his father's aftershave. His mother, queen of the kitchen, waiting for the "third" table, the "women's" table, after the men, and then the children had filled themselves with the holiday feast. He still heard the sweet voice of his blind Granny as she waited in her dark world, "Who's there? I know it's someone," when all along, she knew it was he.

He closed his eyes, wondering if this might be the last time he would close them. *If it is, he thought, then so be it.*

Who is Sylvia?

As evening neared, I sat alone at the grand piano in the dining hall of the First Presbyterian Church in downtown Fresno, warming up on a Steinway grand piano in preparation for entertaining 300 dinner guests. Through the hall's open double doors, a woman of about 45 or 50 entered wearing battered tennis shoes and soiled clothes. Gray hair jutted out on either side of a stocking cap she wore in unusually warm weather. She wove her way toward me, through the 30 large tables covered with white tablecloths with fine China settings. Passing the empty podium, she stopped at the piano.

Without preface she asked, "Would it be all right if I eat with you?"

I thought, *She'll stand out like a sore thumb among the guests, some of the most influential citizens in the city. They were Christians, but would they feel uncomfortable with her in the same room, let alone at the same table? How would they treat her?* I was embarrassed, partly because I wasn't sure what I would have said if I were in charge. *Why is she asking me? This is not my party. I'm only a guest.*

Relieved to be free of the burden, I told the lady, "Ask her. She's in charge."

Sylvia had entered the dining room from the kitchen. With glistening black hair, pageboy haircut, and clothes of the latest fashion, she glided across the floor with the poise and demeanor of a queen.

The woman turned and headed across the hall to Sylvia, who had spotted her and continued in her direction. When they met in the center of the hall, the lady talked. I could not hear her words nor understand Sylvia's replies, but Sylvia listened. Her expression never changed.

I held my breath and waited, looking for some sign in Sylvia's expression about how she would handle the uninvited street person into a semi-formal, high-class, sit-down dinner.

When the lady stopped talking, Sylvia never hesitated. In one grand motion, she smiled, put her arms around the woman's shoulder, and escorted her to a seat.



Wayland Bryant Jackson, born in 1931 in southern Oklahoma, migrated to California in 1952. Married 62 years to Betty Jane Hollandsworth Owens (1930 – 2016), they had five loving children, six grandchildren, and five great-grandchildren. A graduate of Oklahoma Baptist University and Golden Gate Baptist Theological Seminary, Wayland is a retired public school teacher living in Fresno, CA.

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Also by Wayland Bryant Jackson:

- *When God Disappeared...and Where God Turned Up*, 2020, a Memoir, 246 pages, 9" x 6", illustrated,

paperback in B&W, eBook in color. Available wherever books are sold.

- *Do Not Marry for Love*, 2018, Poetry, 74 pages, 8½ x 11”, illustrated in color. \$15 includes shipping.
- *Rootstock 2011*, a 626-page family history. Out of print.

If you feel like responding to any of my writings, please email me: waylandbj@gmail.com. I will write back.