

In a Lonely Place

A true relationship with God can be a very lonely experience. Alone with your thoughts; often alone with your convictions. I liken it to being a soldier on the battlefield. There are times when even a good soldier doesn't want to be where he is. He might not know where he's going or why. He just knows he has to be there for he is serving a greater cause; something beyond his desires. It's not about him; he is just a sentence in a greater story. He goes whether he likes it or not for he is called.

I am a soldier. My battlefield isn't the Mideast and doesn't require training at Fort Dix. My battle is one of spiritual warfare; my confrontations are with non-believers, believers and too often my very own mind. I have been a follower of the teachings of Jesus Christ for the past sixteen years. My devotion to Him has led me down numerous paths, all ultimately for my own good. Now I'm at the beginning of

my final semester of grad school, at a Christian university in a town far away from all I know, studying something close to my heart; theology. I moved here only because I felt a strong calling from the Lord. I always go where He calls. It has been my experience it's a mistake not to.

Don't get me wrong, I have friends or should I say colleagues and acquaintances here in Tulsa, OK. But sometimes I find it hard to be around other Christians. That feeling is even more exacerbated with Evangelical Christians. It often seems there is a game they play trying to 'out Christian' each other. "I don't smoke or drink," one might say only to be triumphed by another claiming "I never watch TV or go to the movies." And then there's "I was twenty-eight and married before I had sex." "Oh yeah," says another, "Well I didn't even hold hands with my spouse until the wedding night." It makes me wonder: *what do Christians*

do? I love the Bible but if all I did was read it 24 and 7 I would go nuts.

I have a strong need to talk and share my ideas with others in civil conversation and not be judged. That can be hard to do in a Christian environment. The Bible states that *'there is no new condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death.'* (Romans 8:1) and *'For God did not send his son into the world to condemn the world but to save the world through him.'* (John 3:17) I guess those are passages many Christians either haven't read or don't subscribe to. For one wrong statement; "I read in *Vanity Fair* that...", or "I don't watch *Fox* but *CNN*," can bring on looks or comments that damn one straight to hell. Crazy, huh. I'm a devoted follower of Jesus Christ yet I found myself not wanting to be around people who can't talk about or recognize anything but Him and the Bible. It

brought me to a lonely place; a place of isolation. Just me, a comfortable apartment filled with books and a TV that has the nerve to have cable in this the ‘buckle of the Bible Belt.’

I wonder if there is a state between happiness and unhappiness. I wasn’t *unhappy* just not happy. The knowledge and experiences I had in my short time at the University have really broaden my horizons. Yet there are days when I feel so lonesome and out of place I could cry. It’s like a shroud of darkness is covering me. And then there is the age gap. I’m twenty-five to thirty years the senior of the undergrads and most of my grad school colleagues. I feel like a wolf among the sheep. In crowds, especially in chapel, when I see friends together or couples paired I want to dive under the seat and hide. I know it’s just me. With the exception of my liberal views, no one says hurtful things or treats me like an outcast; it’s something inside of me. The feeling of being an alien in a foreign land prevails too often.

God's plan for His children is no great mystery. To avoid confusion Jesus summed the books of the Laws and Prophets in one sentence, *'Love the Lord God with all your heart, soul, body and mind and love your neighbor as yourself.'* (Matthew 22: 37-40, Mark 12:29-31) I understand and practice this, yet sometimes I feel something is missing in my life; that my time isn't adding up to anything; I just exist. I have plans---but do I fight with all my heart, soul, body and mind to achieve them or do I just wait on God? No matter what I do, it's all in His timing. Sorry if I sound like I'm feeling sorry for myself. I just feel like I have it all yet I don't have anything. It's frustrating. Sometimes I just don't know.

One thing I do know; you don't have to earn a Master's Degree in Divinity to learn you go where God calls you. I guess that is what my tale is about; following God's call on your life. This is my story. Believe it or not; it's true.

First Semester

The Stuff That Dreams Are Made of

Tulsa is a city that begins its day with an ‘early warning forecast.’ Granted, the weather can be severe; tornados, massive hailstorms, extreme heat. The forecast for this morning in May should have been ‘don’t waste this day; it will be one of the most beautiful in recorded time.’

Walking into the early morning sunshine, I could smell the freshness in the air. The taste of the approaching summer was so pronounced one couldn’t miss it if they tried. As always, the sun was shining warmly against a cloudless blue sky. Unlike my hometown of New York City, there was always calm in the air, an atmosphere of tranquility. I never had to walk with one eye looking behind.

This was the third day of the first week of summer school. On Wednesday morning classes were cut short by an hour so all could attend chapel. The school required us to

attend service; twice a week during the regular semester and once during the summer. Attendance was taken and missing a certain number could lead to dismissal. But who would want to miss it. Many of the top speakers in the country came to preach. People I watched on TV, learned from and admired were now at my disposal. During the summer the speakers came more from the local vicinity than the annals of the greats of television evangelism. Yet I always felt I could learn from everyone; even if only what not to do.

During the Fall and Spring semesters the three-thousand seat chapel was filled to capacity. The summer session found a few hundred students and a handful of faculty scattered about. I slumped in an empty row noticing the majority of students were clustered in groups of friends. Once again I felt like the odd man out. I was the one everyone knew; would wave to, say hello, but never invite out. Ah it's just satan having an attempt at my thoughts. I

said a quick prayer to dismiss the attack then prepared to hear a word from God.

The Dean of Students introduced the speaker of the hour, a young clean-cut minister in khakis that should have been pressed and a striped shirt from Wal-Mart. He took the podium and asked us to join hands in prayer. This instruction was hard to follow sitting in a row by myself. Without turning, the young lady in front of me stretched out her hand. I took it. It was soft and feminine; nails manicured to perfection with French tips. Though the preacher called for all to pray for the sick and unsaved my thoughts were solely on this girl; *what did she look like? what was her name?* Her hair was black and shiny. I thought she might be Asian but her skin was porcelain white not olive or tan. She had curves in all the right places. I love curves on women. Her butt was perfect. This girl had to be a dancer or an athlete or someone who worked out harder than most. She also stood erect like a

ballerina. That was always a turn-on for me. I tried to steal a peak at her face but it was covered by her stylized short hair as she bowed in prayer. Frequently I could make out a delicate chin then a tiny turned up nose. I had to see her face. I couldn't wait for the Amen. *Note to the Reader* please don't be shocked, people do think like this in church. The 'amen' finally arrived. She kept her head bowed and eyes shut as if asking one last prayer. She whispered an 'amen,' opened her eyes and turned to me. Our eyes met and I knew a new chapter of my life was about to be written.

“God bless you,” the blue-eyed beauty whispered in a soft sultry voice.

Her eyes hit me with a piercing look that said more than words. Her face was perfect, more than I imagined; porcelain skin, jet-black hair, deep blue expressive eyes that sang and full lips that came to a pout, forming the shape of a

kissable heart. It was like God took all the beauty He could form and created her face.

“God bless you too,” I replied. I’m glad that came out. Otherwise, I would have stood speechless gaping at her beauty.

She kept her hand in mine as we stood transfixed by each other. From a distance I could hear the preacher calling for all to take their seats. Her friend bumped her shoulder and whispered in her ear. Slowly she released my hand and shimmied in to her seat, sharing a hushed word with her friends. Her back was to me but the magnetic attraction still lingered.

What just happened??????????

Somehow I found my seat. I could hear only sparing words from the sermon, something about Mark 5. Often her blue eyes would shoot a glance at me then quickly turn away

when she caught me looking back. There was something about her; something about *us*. I knew it. She knew it.

Though my thoughts were on the girl, I started to pick up the preacher's message. He was speaking on wholeness, his Scripture; the Woman with the Issue of Blood. After she left Jesus, she wasn't just healed of her infirmity; she was made whole. Putting it in contemporary terms, he spoke of how a person can be healed of an illness but become sick with stress over the unpaid medical bills. Once you receive wholeness from the Lord you lack nothing; even the bills are taken care of. "*Your faith has made you whole.*" The woman believed in Jesus for wholeness, not just healing. All our needs are met through Christ Jesus.

Was this a message from God's lips to my ears? I would soon find out; for chapel was over. I had to meet this beautiful lady. I reached to touch her shoulder but her friends dragged her away in conversation. I thought I noticed some

hesitation on her part but she walked with them. One thing I gathered about women, they never separate from their friends. A guy will leave his best buddy injured in the gutter to chase after a pretty girl who he thought smiled at him. But not women. No matter how fine they think a man is, they stick together. I didn't want to seem obvious and dart over; but a move had to be made. I slowly tailed behind the three.

“Dylan,” a voice called from behind.

It was Victor, a classmate. My sense of discernment knew he was troubled.

“Hey, Victor,” I said turning to him. It was my personal theology to put the needs of others ahead of mine.

“Hey mate, I hate to ask, but do you have twenty dollars I could borrow? My loan hasn't come in yet and I'm busted.”

“Sure,” I said handing him a twenty from a roll I had in my pocket. I hated carrying a wallet. “Is that all you need?”

“That should do it. My loan was supposed to come in this morning, but now they say Friday. Thanks so much, mate. ”

“Hey, I’m blessed to be a blessing.”

“I’ll keep you in prayer.”

“Me too.”

He left smiling as if I had just handed him a million dollars. I had been there when a quick twenty from a friend made all the difference in the world. I turned to find my dream girl. She was gone. I quickly made it to the lobby. I found a few scattered students but not the one I was looking for. My only consolation was during summer session there were fewer students around and I would probably see her on

campus or in chapel next week. Oh my God! I hope she wasn't visiting for the day!

Books are my passion. Though my class load left little time for casual reading, I was still buying them. I promised myself once I graduated I would read everything I could get my hands on, including re-reading many of my assigned texts. I would take my time and ponder the thoughts expressed and not just race through them to complete an assignment. The books I had under my arm fell in that category. The University bookstore always carried a large array of theological works both scholarly and trade. I also picked up some study cards for sign language. That was something I wanted to learn and they would be a great start.

There was a book on the sales table I thought I wanted but really didn't need. 'Why not, it's on sale,' was

always my rationale. I turned from the line to get the book.

The girl from chapel was standing behind me.

“Hi,” I said.

“Hi,” she replied.

Now the awkwardness. I could talk to anyone about anything but was always shy when making the first move to a woman of interest. She looked like she was about to say something but also remained silent. Her eyes were too beautiful for words. Her lips made me wonder what I would have to say to get them to touch mine. I asked God for the wisdom to win this girls’ heart.

“I didn’t know they taught Japanese here,” I said referring to the Japanese study cards she was holding.

“They don’t. I’m studying it on my own. I’m an international business major and knowing Japanese will be a great asset.”

She looked at the books in my hand then motioned something in sign language.

“What’s that?” I asked.

“Aren’t you studying sign?” she asked with a smile revealing two rows of perfectly aligned white teeth.

“Oh the cards? No, I’m just buying them because I want to learn. What did you say?”

“I said my name is Bethany, what’s yours?”

Bethany. I finally knew her name!

“Bethany. How did you say that?”

“Like this.” (She pointed to her hair and made a circular motion) “Well that’s really a shortcut for my name. Hearing impaired people give you a sign name; it’s usually a feature you have. When I was studying sign my hair was curly so that’s how they named me.”

“My name’s Dylan, how would you say that?”

She stuck her finger in her cheek and made a twisting motion.

“Really?” I asked

“Well that’s your sign name. You have a dimple. It’s the first thing I noticed.”

I had to smile at that remark.

“See, there it is, even bigger.”

She made me laugh.

“Next,” the cashier said in a pleasing tone noticing I was engaged in conversation.

I walked over to the register, my eyes still on Bethany. I handed the cashier my student ID which also served as a university debit card. As she rang up my books, the adjacent cashier opened and Bethany went over.

“I’m sorry but you don’t have enough money on your card to cover this,” the cashier said politely. “Would you like to pay the balance in cash?”

“What?” I said anxious to pay and walk out with Bethany. “I just put over two hundred dollars on it.”

Bethany’s card had gone through and the cashier was packing her books.

“I’m sorry, but it says you have only nineteen dollars. When did you put the money on your card? Sometimes it takes an hour to register into the system.”

I looked at Bethany. I think she was oblivious to my plight. I quickly dug into my pocket and came up with fifteen dollars.

“Take what I have from the card and this should do it for the balance.”

“Sure,” the young lady said with a smile. “Oh wait. The trouble isn’t you don’t have enough. You won the Blessed to Be a Blessing Contest. We had such a great year at the store we decided to bless ten people with credit on their debit cards. The computer just selected you. You won

two hundred dollars in student bucks and this purchase is free.”

She found the discrepancy but I lost Bethany. When I turned to include her in my joy she was gone.

Part of me wanted to leave everything and dart after Bethany. But I knew I had to play it cool. I signed a receipt stating I won, took my purchases and left the store hoping Bethany would be somewhere in the lobby. She wasn't. At least I knew her name and that she was studying here for the summer.

Like many New Yorkers, I didn't have a driver's license. Sure I had a learner's permit and with a few apologies to parallel parking I knew how to drive. I just never got around to taking the road test. And what's the old saying, 'Who needs a car in New York City?' My mode of transportation in Tulsa was a bicycle. I lived about a half

mile from the campus and enjoyed the ride no matter what the season. It was a great departure from the crowded subways and streets hidden in the shadows of skyscrapers that I was accustomed to back east. The terrain was one advantage I found here. The other was Bethany. And as I stood in the midst of the perfection of the landscape, there she stood, loading the items she just purchased into the trunk of her car.

“Need a hand?” I asked as I approached then noticed she had finished the task.

Bethany turned with a start. When she realized it was me her eyes widened with excitement. The woman in her didn’t want to appear too anxious, so her demeanor changed to one of cat and mouse.

“I’m okay thank you.”

I opened the car door for her, our eyes never leaving each other’s.

“A gentleman,” she said with a seductive smile as she sauntered over.

Though our eyes never broke the gaze, I noticed every inch of her. I needed Bethany in my arms. I took her tiny waist in my hands and pulled her to me as if she had been mine for years. Our lips met without hesitation. Not a lusty ‘we’re about to do it right here and now kiss,’ but a long, tender, passionate kiss. We kissed and held each other not knowing who the other was, but knowing this was right, that we had to be together and nothing, not a proper introduction, not a parking lot in broad daylight could stop us.

“Bethany,” I spoke as our lips finally parted.

I loved holding her and looking at her. She was so beautiful I didn’t know what to say.

“You’re soft so,” finally came out.

“In case you hadn’t noticed, I’m a girl,” she replied with a smile

That went without saying. I kissed her again. I never held a woman who was so soft to the touch. Her scent was pleasing to the nostrils. Not the fragrance from a sweet perfume or body lotion. She genuinely smelled sweet. I’m not some love struck teen holding a woman for the first time. I had known women. Bethany was different.

“Believe me I noticed. But girls aren’t this soft. Only babies are this soft.”

“You calling me a baby? You think I’m a kid?” she teased, all the time trying to prove how adult she was with her kisses.

“I’m just saying you’re soft. And I could hold you forever.”

We kissed again. It didn’t matter that it was midday at the main entrance to a school where PDA (public display

of affection) was seen as heresy. In addition to being a student I was also a teaching assistant. This could be grounds for a hearing. I couldn't care less. I was kissing Bethany and she was kissing me. A preacher once spoke, "The opportunity of a lifetime may only last for the lifetime of that opportunity." We both seized it. Neither of us wanted it to end.

Her lips were tasty, warm and gentle; her kisses filled with dreams. We studied each other's eyes looking for something, knowing things don't happen this fast. Our final answer; it's real, just let it happen.

"Bethany---" I began.

She put her finger to her lips like librarians used to do when one spoke above a whisper in their domain.

"If all questions are answered there won't be any room left for mystery," she replied. "That's where faith comes in."

Bethany stole one last touch of my lips then gave me that piercing look that reached the depths of my soul. I knew she could feel my arousal.

“When the time is right,” Bethany said, ran her finger along my cheek, circled my dimple and poked it gently. Without another word, she slithered into her car and drove off like it was the end of any other school day.

My apartment in Tulsa didn't have the ambiance of high ceilings and hardwood floors like the brownstone I left in Brooklyn; yet it was comfortable and reasonably priced. Though there were three rooms I more or less resided in the living room, converting the bedroom into a prayer room. For the past three years, the futon in my living room was always open to the lounge setting and always covered with books. My mind was always erratic; when I felt like reading one I would just grab it. When I got tired of that one I would pick

up another. This may sound crazy but that was the way I did things. Surprisingly, I retained the knowledge and received excellent grades.

I finished my evening prayers. Most people I knew got up early, prayed and meditated for an hour. I was just the opposite. I learned a long time ago the state you go to sleep in is the same state you wake up in. Going to sleep worrying about how you're going to pay the bills will just lead you to wake up worrying about how you're going to pay the bills. But falling asleep with the word and promises of God on your mind, well... So my prayer time was the evening. Tonight the greater part of my prayers was devoted to Bethany. I had to make sure she was part of God's plan for my life. I prayed that I would be everything God wanted me to be for her and likewise her for me. I prayed for her happiness; for God to remove anything from our spirit that was not of Him. I prayed for God's will to be done.

Once finished, I plopped on the futon. There was reading to do for my morning class. More important, there was a film on *TCM* I wanted to watch. Regardless of what I chose, my mind would be on Bethany; how perfect she was with her electric blue eyes, dark shiny hair and soft lips. I kissed her and she kissed me. I remembered the taste of her lips. But mostly I remembered her face.

Of course television won out. *Roman Holiday*, one of my favorites, was on. For one day a princess leaves all she was trained to do for something she always dreamed of doing. Audrey Hepburn brought my thoughts back to Bethany. The way her hair carelessly floated about her face, her carefree manner. Now I was in a film of my own; the parking lot, will I see her tomorrow, will it be the same or was it just a dream?

My dream was interrupted by a knock on the door. It was after eleven but this wasn't New York. People come

knocking any time; kids selling candy, Evangelicals inviting you to church. Again this is not Brooklyn, so I opened the door without asking. Bethany was waiting there.

“Hi,” she said, as if expected for a prearranged date.

“Hi,” I replied.

Again our eyes were locked.

“In Texas we don’t leave a caller standing in the doorway. We invite them in.”

“Oh sorry,” I said motioning her to the living-room.

She stood at the door, I a foot or two away.

“You’re from Texas?”

“Ah-huh. You?”

“New York City.”

“Never been; always wanted to go.”

My nocturnal visitor walked in. Her eyes took a quick perusal of my apartment. I took a quick perusal of her. She seemed like a living doll in her form fitting jeans, heels, just

a hint of makeup and lip gloss. A soft, sweet scented evening perfume trailed behind her as she entered. I can be reclusive so I had very little furniture for entertaining. The only place one could sit was the futon which was open to its usual position.

“Do you always keep so many books on your bed?”

Bethany asked in a soft sultry voice. “What if I wanted to sit down?”

“Here you go,” I said clearing a spot.

Bethany slithered onto the edge and thumbed through a book on theologies of the first three centuries.

“Interesting,” she said after reading a few paragraphs as if she were studying all alone. She looked up at the TV.

“*Roman Holiday*. That’s a good movie.”

“You know it?”

“Yeah. I love Audrey Hepburn. What, you think I only know Lindsey Lohan?”

I smiled.

“You smile a lot.”

Bethany stretched out on the bed clearing a path with her arm. I sat next to her. Again the piercing look.

“How did you know where I lived?”

“You can find out anything if you really want to.
Were you expecting some late night company?”

“No.”

“So you dress like this just to please yourself?”

I guess my black silk pajama bottoms and antique smoking jacket did suggest a late night rendezvous. At an early age I was corrupted by and often imitated the sultry Southern male characters from the mind of Tennessee Williams. It didn't help that I was holding a champagne flute.

“I must confess I do have a taste for the elegant,” I said.

“Hmmm,” she grunted trying to size me up. “And what’s that; Cristal?”

“No, sparkling apple cider from France.”

She held her hand out like a dorm monitor checking an unbelievable story. I gave her the glass. She took a sip and found out I was right.

“See. And just how would you know what Cristal taste like?”

“Oh you think I’m some little country girl from Texas that only knows mesquite and pop? You think I’m this baby in blue jeans?”

“No, I think you’re a beautiful woman.”

A light sparked in her eyes as if she had never been complemented. She became a little shy.

“What?” I continued taking a place next to her on the futon “You don’t think so?” I gently ran my fingers through

her hair, pulling it back, away from her face. “Look at you; the quintessence of beauty.”

She actually blushed. I kissed her forehead.

“Why did you kiss me up there?”

“I have a thing for foreheads.”

“You’re weird.”

I kissed her lips.

“Sweet,” she whispered.

I kissed Bethany over and over again. Her finely manicured hand slipped into my jacket. She ran her soft hand against my chest and shoulders then mouthed a silent “Wow” when she encountered my biceps. They weren’t big, but they were firm and toned. She squeezed one and went into ecstasy.

“Dylan,” she said.

“Yes?”

“The time is right.”

We tasted each other for what seemed like an eternity.

“Wait,” I said and moved to the kitchen returning with three scented candles.

“A romantic,” Bethany said after I lit them and turned off the lights.

I took Bethany in my arms and kissed her softly on the lips. Her demeanor changed. At first she came on like a one night booty call. Now we kissed and caressed like we had been going together for months and tonight was finally the night. I took continuous bites from her sweet neck.

“It’s like you’re eating me,” Bethany said when she finally had a chance.

“That will come later.”

We made love numerous times throughout the night with little conversation in between. In the small hours of the morning, Bethany planted her head against my chest and fell

asleep, the sound of my heartbeat as her lullaby. Her hand gently held one of my biceps. I wondered if upon awakening would she think this was all a bad dream or a dream come true. I drifted off but awoke periodically loving the fact that Bethany was at my side. She smiled as she slept. I kissed her softly on her lips. Her smile brightened. I grabbed my beautiful creature by her tiny waist and we made love again.

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The Oklahoma sun pierced brightly through the blinds at 7:00. Bethany was still asleep on my chest. Peace and contentment radiated from her. I stole the first kiss of the day.

“Morning, Dylan,” she said sleepily. “What time is it?”

“Six fifty-eight,” I said reading from the cable box.

“I have to go. I have a class at eight.”

Bethany began to get up, moving from zero to sixty in seconds.

“I’ll make you something to eat before you leave.”

She stopped dressing and broke into a broad smile.

“You want to cook for me?” she said in amazement.

“That’s sweet! But I don’t have time. I have to get back to the dorm to shower and change. Maybe guys can just get up and go but it doesn’t work that way with girls.”

“You live in the dorm. I thought there was a curfew?”

“Not during the summer session.”

“If I can’t cook breakfast for you, let me cook you dinner tonight. We’ll sit and talk and find out about each other. Let’s start this off right.”

“As far as I’m concerned this is the best way to start off. If you think I do this with every boy I meet you’re nuts. You’re the first, only and last. I happen to be mad crazy about you.”

She kissed me on the lips, said, “See y’a,” then left.

Though I also had an eight o'clock class, I slumped back into bed. The perfumed scent of Bethany lingered on the pillows and sheets. I grabbed a pillow and held onto it like it was Bethany, recalling the hours past and dreaming of the nights to come.

Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth. (2 Tim 2:15)

Summer school meant a shorter semester but longer classes. My eight o'clock lasted until noon. Next was an hour for lunch, then I taught an undergrad class in theology until three forty-five. While I held a great love for education, my passion from the hours before was beginning to take its toll. Sleep began to call around nine. I could take a quick nap

during lunch. Would I make it through this day? And what was in store for tonight?

Though I sat with weary eyes my class, *Theology and Contemporary Society* was one I had waited three years to take. If the title and course syllabi lived up to its billing, I was in for a great four weeks. Theology is one of the most important things for a Christian to have. It basically assess what one believes and why. Unfortunately most Christians don't have a theology. Sure they believe in God as opposed to standing in allegiance with Mohammad or Buddha. But to wrestle with issues of Christian thought, (does God cause suffering? Is the Bible literally true? Is God still in the healing business? Etc.) and arrive at an unwavering conclusion just isn't found. One of the main reasons for this; most Christians don't read the Bible. They go to church out of formality and curse those who don't. In most cases they listen to and accept the rhetoric of their pastors' without

question. I have been doing street ministry all over the world and found in many cases Muslims, Jehovah Witnesses, and many atheists knew more about the Bible, Christian doctrine and history, than the average Christian. In a quest to either learn more about their religion or disprove mine they amassed a theological education that would rival a scholared seminarian. No Bible reading, no theology. No theology; well it's been said 'if you don't stand for something, you'll fall for anything.'

There were two objectives of the class; to study the theologies of various denominations (e.g. Baptist, Methodist, etc.) and to help the student develop and define their own. Since my university was in the midst of the Bible Belt, the discussion usually centered on how the Republican Right-Wing sector of charismatic evangelicalism was the 'right' theology and everything else was heresy. The Evangelical theology was simple; everyone needs the Christian God in

their lives and it was their job to see they get Him.

Technically, that is the Great Commission. I just objected to the way it was executed. Their discussion was solely “if you don’t hold the same convictions as me you’re a heathen and will burn in hell.” End of discussion. The way the homosexual, the unwed mother, the pro-choicer, and Muslims were talked about would make anyone hate them. Jesus set an example of love. He fellowshiped with the exalted and the underclass, the clergy and the sinners. The Evangelicals put such a wall between them and the unsaved it might take the Second Coming to undo the damage.

For the past three years I found the same situation in the majority of my classes; the Right-Wing Evangelical students who fit the stereotypical mold to the tee spoke up and agreed with the Right-Wing Evangelical professors, the ones with moderate or liberal views kept quite. Me, I was the stereotypical New York liberal. You could define me as

the postmodern Christian who believed in the Bible as the inspired Word of God, yet also believed in the freedom and civil rights of all Americans to live what they believed. Religion could not be forced down one's throat, morality could not be legislative. God had given all free will. America is the land of the free. I believe God placed us in America to decide, 'if you have the freedom to do anything you want, would you still choose My ways?' All the evangelizing Christian can do is present the option; God and a place in His Kingdom or keeping your ways and current lifestyle. My liberalism was often called heathenism but I didn't care. I knew God had called me to the University for a reason. I would learn from them, they would learn from me. But they would never learn if I remained silent.

For the first year or so I kept my mouth shut. I felt I was there to learn not render my opinion. For what was my opinion against those who had studied in Rome, Jerusalem,

and Israel; those who read all the books and in some cases wrote all the books. Then came a point I had to speak up. For after all, it's only theology. When you get right down to it no one has the definitive answer. So for all the scholarship, titles and books written, when it comes to religious thought my arguments were as good as theirs.

The instructor for this class was Dr. Jarvis, a man I admired. He was a brilliant Biblical scholar, literate writer and an affable guy. His politics, however, were something to consider. Though he was gracious and always had a genuine smile on his face, Dr. Jarvis honestly believed all Muslims were incapable of love since the Koran spoke nothing of it, Democrats were instruments of the devil instituting liberal policies that were against Biblical teachings and Hollywood was initially run by Communists, now by drug addicted pedophiles.

In spite of his politics Dr. Jarvis and I got along well. We shared many a conversation both in his classroom and office. Though we didn't agree on many topics, he treated my opinions with respect for they were backed with data. He was a scholar. If you brought literate knowledge to the table he couldn't back down. And I was a New Yorker. Dr. Jarvis had a love/hate attitude for the Big Apple.

“‘Before I formed you in the womb I knew you,’ God says of Jeremiah. ‘Before you were born I set you apart; I appointed you as a prophet to the nations.’” Dr. Jarvis began. “Many people claim this as a calling. Does everyone have a calling from God? Does God orchestrate every move we make from birth till death? Or does God sit back and hope we do the right thing?”

It's a standard theological question. Professor Jarvis never allowed a standard Christian answer. To begin your statement with ‘I think’ was out of the question. He was

training us to be scholars so all answers had to incorporate Scripture or the ideas of a historical theologian. Based on that, we would surmise with our own thoughts. In most cases I would sit back and let others answer first. Like an Olympic runner, I liked to size up the field before I made my move. This morning sleep was getting the best of me.

Like most thought provoking questions posed at eight-fifteen in the morning it was met with silence. The majority of my classmates were first-termers so I didn't know what to expect. However, Sonny James broke the early morning silence.

"God is omniscient," Sonny began. "I was always told this and I believe it."

"Why do you believe it, Mr. James?" Dr. Jarvis asked.

At first Sonny couldn't believe he heard such a question coming from the mouth of a Christian professor. Dr.

Jarvis just gave him a look stating ‘Give me something to back up your statement.’

“Just read Psalm 139,” Sonny continued. “*“Before a word is on my tongue, you know it completely,’ ‘My framework was not hidden from you when I was made in the secret place, When I was woven together in the depths of the earth your eyes saw my unformed body. All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be.’”*

“That’s how great God is,” jumped in Sarah Leslie. “I was about to say that same Scripture.”

“Just last night I was reading Augustine and Pelagius,” Brent Hutchinson began, “They both deal with free will and predestination.”

I had yet to make out Brent. He was new to the University. He mentioned he was a longtime member of a noted Charismatic-Evangelical megachurch here in Tulsa.

Yet he always prefaced his comments with reference to one of the major Church Fathers or major Christian theologians. I only say this with surprise for intellectual conversation and the Evangelical church don't often go hand in hand. For them, a 'word of knowledge' (when God prophetically speaks directly to one) is more the norm than quoting Thomas Aquinas. When a word of knowledge isn't heard, one resorts to what their 'gut' is telling them. Higher learning is not part of the curve.

"I know they dealt with salvation and if God selects beforehand who is going to be saved and who isn't," Brent continued. "I don't mean to take away from your discussion, but since I was reading this just last night, I wonder how this all comes into play."

"No, you haven't taken away from the discussion," Dr. Jarvis said. "You just jumped ahead. But since you

opened the door let's go in. Anyone, does God have a plan for us both here on earth and in the hereafter?"

DeJuan Marcus raised his hand. DeJuan had just finished his first year. Initially he didn't see the need for seminary; a word of knowledge sufficed for him. But he followed the call on his life to leave Missouri and attend the University. Over the months he slowly began to take an interest in thoughts other than what he gathered from his pastor's pulpit.

"Just last night I was reading Matthew 7:21 *'Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?' Then I will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!'*" Now what does that mean? From what I see, it

means that even if you do accept Jesus, he still has the option of casting you into the lake of fire. Man, that goes against everything I was ever taught.”

“But those words were spoken by Jesus himself,” Dr. Jarvis added. “Now that you have encountered this passage tell us about it. You want to be a pastor. If a member of your congregation came to you with this same question, what would you tell them?”

“If I were the pastor I would do what you tell us to say when we don’t know the answer: Say ‘I don’t know’ then do research on it. Last night I emailed my pastor. He hasn’t gotten back to me yet. But right here and now, I just don’t know.”

“I thank you for your honesty. Can anyone help Mr. Marcus?”

“I can,” I said raising my hand.

“Yes, Mr. Ramsey.”

“Well you can’t just read Matthew 7:21-23,” I began.

“You have to start with verse 15 then go through verse 23.

Jesus is talking about false prophets; people who will come pretending to be men and women of God but are not with him. 15-20 talks about preachers looking and acting the part, but if you look at their fruit, what they accomplished, you notice they are not of God.”

“But how could they perform miracles and drive out demons and not be of God?” DeJuan asked.

“The power of the Holy Spirit is the power of the Holy Spirit. Once you have it, you have it. You can use it for your own desires and not for the will of God. Centuries ago clergy sold indulgences; today people sell prayer clothes and bottles of blessed oil. They fill churches with thousands; heal the sick then go to a motel to cheat on their wives with their mistress or boyfriend or little boy for sale. It happens all the time.

‘But that just brings me back to the original question. Everything is about obedience. Does God have a calling for your life? Yes. Does God plan every move? No. We are free agents. At the end of Psalm 139 the writer states, *‘Search me, O God and know my heart, test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me and lead me in the way everlasting.’* I believe that God did create us with a plan in mind but it’s up to us to follow it.

‘Also Jesus and the man burying his father----The man had a choice; he could have followed Jesus or gone about his business.(Luke 9 59-62) Deuteronomy 30:19 says *‘This day I call heaven and earth as witnesses against you that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses.’* And just in case anyone is too dumb to notice the difference, the Lord is gracious enough to give us a hint by saying, *‘Now choose life.’* There is a reward for choosing life or the Lord, but we always have a choice.”

“I was never into all that free will argument,” Brent said. “Cause if that is true that would mean God knows people will murder, steal, create other gods...”

“Free will goes back to Adam and Eve,” said Sarah. “They could do anything they wanted, just not touch the tree of knowledge. That’s awesome!”

“Awesome, Miss Leslie?” Dr. Jarvis said wanting more.

“I mean, you know, God gave them everything. But Dylan is right, they did have a choice. And think about it, they had everything but were curious about the one thing they didn’t have. That was their fall.”

“So no one thinks God orchestrates every event in life?” Dr. Jarvis reiterated. “If a plane crashes, if a love one dies at an early age, meeting the person you marry, the teachers you have... this all happens haphazardly?”

“In a nutshell,” I began, “God gave man dominion over the earth. So, apart from God, what happens happens. But from Abram to the present day, God wants people to follow Him. A plane is gonna crash but if it’s God’s will for you not to be on that plane and you have decided to become one of His children, either you won’t get on or you will survive the crash. That being said God still gives you a choice. You can hear a voice or feel it in your Spirit not to get on that plane or to marry this one or take that job. Ultimately the choice is yours.”

“Does anyone think God orchestrates every move in your life?” Dr. Jarvis posed to the class one final time.

No one agreed with that statement.

“Does God control any moves on your life?”

The class was mixed on that question.

“And what about the call on your life? Does God have one for everybody?”

We all agreed that was true. Sarah had one final yet important thought to add.

“I agree with that, Dr. Jarvis. But what about people who never heard about Jesus? I was watching this show about Afghanistan. There were people in small villages in the mountains. Generation after generation no one ever left and few people came in. They were Muslim so they had no idea about the Gospel message. How can you say God had a calling on their lives when they never heard of Jesus; at least not in the way we believe in him?”

“Excellent point, Miss Leslie. What do you think?”

“I think they won’t realize their full potential until they come to Christ,” she answered. “Paul was great in all he did, but once he became a follower of Jesus his life changed.”

“I agree with Sarah in a round about way,” I added.

“I have to go back to one of your original questions, Dr.

Jarvis. You asked, 'does everyone have a calling from God?'

I say yes. That includes whether they accept Him or not. To me a calling is a gift, a talent. God gives this to everyone.

Genesis 1:26 says man is made in God's image and likeness.

James 1:17 says: *'Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father who does not change like*

shifting shadows. He chose to give us birth through the word of truth that we might be a kind of firstfruits of all he

created.' It says 'every good and perfect gift'---so if someone

can sing that comes from God whether or not that person has

accepted Jesus Christ as his or her Lord and Savior. Satan

can't create anything; he doesn't have any power. So

anything good has to come from God. This verse also says

that God gave us birth so we might be a kind of firstfruit of

all he created. What does that mean? Go back to the original

plan---Adam; a person like God, a person with a calling from

God. Now the serpent comes along and implants thoughts in

his mind that makes him doubt God's word. This is what happens today. God has a plan for everyone. But we must make a choice; first to be a part of God's Kingdom and then to follow the plan or calling that God has on our life. When I was a kid and read comic books the nemesis of the superhero was sometimes an evil scientist. He always had some plot to destroy the world. I remember hearing, 'if only he used his talents for good this world would be a better place.' Well that is true of us today."

"I don't think that's true," Sarah said. "In the parable of the talents in Matthew 25 and Luke 19 they both talk about a master giving his servants talents and telling them to use them. He doesn't give them to just anybody. He entrusts His talents with people who are already in service to him."

"Jesus is talking to the Jews when he gives those parables. They already knew about God so he's just explaining what will happen to those who use the talent and

those that don't. Like the Bible says '*all gifts come from God.*' Granted people who never heard of the Christian God or don't accept Jesus can't use their gift for His honor and glory. But their gift still comes from God."

"This is great, man," DeJuan declared about the class discussion. "I never thought about half this stuff. You're blowing my mind."

His comments came right on time. It was noon, class was ending but Christian debates go on. DeJuan was right; like him, most Christians 'never thought about half this stuff.' If they did, it would blow their minds as well.

'Missing u already c u 2 nite' was the text I received from Bethany during my lunch hour. Part of me wanted to see her during this time another part knew that waiting until '2 nite' would be even better. I had a quick lunch in my office then prepared for my afternoon class.

Intro to Charismatic Theology was the class I taught.

Though the University was one of the most familiar and noted Charismatic Evangelical university's in the U.S., surprisingly many of its students weren't charismatic evangelicals. This course was designed to present the precepts of the theology as an introduction to some and a deeper understanding for others.

There were assigned readings and topics, yet I often let the discussion veer off into whatever direction the Holy Spirit led. The topic today was similar to the one discussed in my graduate class: the purpose God had for the life of each individual. Is everything that happens in your life, good or bad, an act of God? I posed this to the class. The majority never thought about it. The class was comprised of those who had a casual interest in God and those who had no interest at all. Like the unsaved child or the reluctant spouse, many students were forced to attend the University by their

Christian parents, hoping they would graduate as the next Billy Graham. I intended to get them as close to being theologians as possible.

The class was mainly freshmen; kids wanting to get this class over with so they could concentrate on their major, kids crossing from adolescent to young adulthood; maybe one or two in their very early twenties. For the most part, many never endured hardships. When test and trials arose Mommy or Daddy took up the slack for God. Many thought that as long as one had faith they would never see trouble. Others believed only the unsaved faced hardships.

“With faith everything is perfect,” said Allison, a shy little blonde. This was her first class in college, her first time away from home.

“That’s right,” added Brandon. “The Bible says God will supply all our needs.”

“That’s true; with faith everything is perfect and God does supply our needs,” I added. “But who is defining ‘perfect’ you or God? Is the way God supplies our needs the way you would?”

Many chuckled at that question.

“God!” was the overwhelming response.

“So if you have dreams of being a summer intern at a law firm for one hundred and twenty dollars an hour but the only job you can land is flipping burgers at MacDonald’s you would be alright with that? I mean a job’s a job, right?”

“You could look at that a number of ways, Mr. Ramsey,” said Jimmy Lawrence. “You could learn things’ working at MickeyD’s that you could apply to your future as a lawyer. In my church they always say, ‘He may not be there when you want Him, but He’s always right on time.’ God gives you what you need when you need it.”

“No way,” said Diana Sherwood. “You have to name it and claim it. I’m not gonna be working behind some grill when there are bigger things to be had. Call the job you want into existence and you will see it. *‘Call things that be not as though they were.’* (Romans 4:17) I’ve done it time and time again. We have that power.”

“So, Miss Sherwood, everything you’ve ever wanted you’ve gotten?” I asked.

“Yeah!” she exclaimed. “I’m a child of the risen savior. The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. My daddy in heaven owns the cattle on a thousand hills.”

“And her daddy in San Antonio owns a minor league ball club, two banks and a TV station,” said Frankie Tyler, my resident jock.

“So what,” Diana defended. “My pastor said if the boss has to give the whole company a raise for you to get one

don't look down on it. I can't help it if my daddy in heaven blessed me with a daddy on earth that gets paid."

"Gets paid enough to buy you that Porsche you got parked out there," joked Frankie.

"Shut up, fathead!" she snapped.

"Mr. Tyler, stop the teasing. Miss Sherwood stop the name calling," I said. "Let's keep this a civil discussion."

"Can I say something?" asked Rene Mason.

"Sure," I replied.

"Diana raises a good point, but I don't know if it has to do with religion. She might get what she wants because, I'm assuming, she was raised in an affluent environment. I don't mean she was handed everything, but being around a successful person like her father, she had to learn something about business savvy. Is it possible that just being in a successful environment caused her to breed success?"

“Is it possible for you to shut up and stop making fun of my father?” Diana barked.

“I’m not making fun of your father. I’m just asking Mr. Ramsey if it’s possible that the environment one was raised in influences how one thinks? If your parents are successful, you’re successful; if your parents are impoverished, you’ll be impoverished. Does that make sense, Mr. Ramsey?”

“It is an interesting point, Miss Mason,” I began.
“But it’s not necessarily true. Environment does have a great influence in helping to establish one’s opinions and system of morals and values. But kids from impoverished parents have come out of the ghettos and become successful while kids from successful parents might take that success for granted and not aspire for anything more than money can buy.”

Frankie cleared his throat. I gave him a look as did Diana.

“That being said,” I continued, “I agree that you are influenced by your environment. But let me ask you all this question, ‘are you your environment?’ ‘Are you your circumstances?’”

“Lemme answer that, Mr. Ramsey,” Frankie said.

“The coach tells us all the time that no matter what the score is don’t stop fighting, you can overcome. At halftime we could be losing, but if we keep fighting or change our strategy we could win.”

“Very astute point, Mr. Tyler. But does everyone apply that to their daily lives? And Miss Mason, you say your question doesn’t apply to religion. I say apply it. What if from an early age your family literally acted out ‘*walk by faith and not by sight?*’ (2 Corinth 5:7) What if you lived in an environment where one reached for the healing power of

Jesus before you reached for a Tylenol? What if you lived in an environment where faith went without say; there was nothing to question, the unseen was just a way of life?"

"I'd say it's impossible," Rene replied.

"Impossible or improbable?" I asked.

"Impossible," Rene continued. "I think you can believe in certain things and see a change. But if something doesn't change or takes too long in coming, you might doubt and give up."

"You probably just describe faith for most people," I said. "That's why Jesus said '*if you believe and don't doubt.*'" (Matthew 21:21)

"Is that how you live your life, Mr. Ramsey?" Rene asked.

"I try. I'm not going to lie and say I never doubted. The best I can say is I never give up on the Lord."

"And He never gives up on you," added Frankie.

Another great note to end a class on.

To the *Dear Reader*; I realized that not everyone wrestles with issue of faith like this. I just wanted to give you a taste of my daily class life as a seminarian. Though discussions of this nature go on for the better part of my day, every day, I will not subject you to it. Now and then I will bring you back into the classroom when it's relevant to the narrative.

*Ask and you will receive and your joy will be
complete (John 16:24)*

It was a little after eight when Bethany stopped by. She had some assignments to complete before spending the evening here. I gathered she wasn't one to mix business with pleasure. Nothing was going to get in the way of her education. At the same time nothing was going to get in the

way of her relationship with me. Separate but equal; in a good way mind you.

As promised I prepared dinner for Bethany, something simple though; chicken burritos. She seemed a bit surprised.

“With you I was expecting caviar,” she joked.

I loved her smile. I loved the sound of her voice. We ate, watched *Fanny* on *TCM*, made love, then fell asleep in each other’s arms.

.....
The next morning I awoke to find Bethany thumbing through my Bible. It was an incredible scene; a voluptuous doll, clad only in a tank top and boxer shorts, intensely studying the Bible. The two greatest things in life; the Word of God and a beautiful woman.

“Morning, Bethany,” I said.

“Morning,” she said never taking her eyes or thoughts from her reading. “You take a lot of notes,” she said referring to the scrawlings I etched on the majority of pages.

“Yeah, it helps me remember things when I preach.”

“I didn’t know half this stuff. Like this; under Matthew 6:33 *‘But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness and all these things will be given to you as well.’* You wrote ‘seek God’s way of doing.’ What does that mean?”

Bethany’s tousled hair fell about her face often revealing only a pair of pouting lips. It suggested a night of passionate lovemaking which, of course, was had. I wanted her again, but opted to address her theological concern.

“Before that line, Jesus was talking about not worrying. In essence he is saying there is nothing to worry about when you do things God’s way. He was in the mountains with only two fish and three loaves of bread, yet

fed five thousand. People were healed, people got more wine, got everything they needed. How was he doing all this? Jesus tells us *'the kingdom of God is within.'* (Luke 17:21) We have the power to do what he did. Jesus said if we do things his way, using our supernatural power, there will be nothing to worry about."

"Wow!" Bethany said.

I grabbed her by the waist pulling her on top of me. Bethany rolled off but kept her body against mine, never taking her concentration from her reading. The Word was in her hand; my arousal was against her backside.

"I've read that passage a million times but never thought about it like that," she said. "That's amazing!"

I took small bites on her neck and shoulders. She continued to read, oblivious of my advances.

“And what about this; Acts 12. You wrote ‘practice what you pray,’ ‘live in expectancy,’ ‘see Mark 11:22-25.’ What’s that all about?”

My kisses to her body never stopped as I explained:

“Peter’s in chains in prison watched by two guards. At the same time his church has been praying all night for him to be released.”

I took a few tiny bites on her earlobe.

“An angel is sent to rescue Peter. Peter supernaturally gets out of prison and comes knocking at the door where the people are praying for him.”

Now a few kisses behind her ear. I let my tongue have a few tastes too.

“First, they don’t let him in. Then they don’t believe it’s Peter at the door. When they finally realize it’s him the Bible says they were astonished.”

Now the neck; soft kisses, again a taste with my tongue.

“If they are praying all night for something, why should they be astonished when it manifest? Mark 11 ‘says *‘not to doubt in your heart’ and whatever you ask for in prayer believe that you receive it and it will be yours’.*”

I led a trail of kisses from her neck to her cheek. I let my face rest against her. Bethany was as soft as anything. I smelt the sweet faint fragrance of yesterday’s perfume and last night’s passion. It was like I was in two worlds; one preaching the Word, the other in ecstasy over Bethany. I don’t know how my words continued. It seemed they were coming from a place unknown.

“Too many people don’t believe their prayers will be answered,” I continued. “For others, when God answers their prayers, for some reason or another, they run from it or don’t accept it, slamming the door in the face of opportunity and

blessings. All you have to do is pray and not doubt and everything you want will be right there. Just don't leave your blessing on the porch trying to get in."

My arm was around Bethany's waist holding her body firmly against mine. I was talking Scripture but pressed against her soft flesh so sensually that I 'spilled my seed' not on the ground like Onan but against Bethany's well-toned butt. I laid drained against her beautiful body. Bethany continued to read; now oblivious of my self-satisfaction. When I finally found the strength I gave her precious neck one final kiss and got up. My explosion was captured on my silk pajamas. 'I hope this stuff comes out,' I thought as I headed to the bathroom to clean up.

"Could you put some coffee on," Bethany called when I came out and headed to the kitchen. "I didn't have one yet."

Bethany was in her own world just as I had been in mine. In the end, we were both satisfied; her fulfillment more lasting than mine.

.....

Friday after class we shared a few hours before Bethany began a prearranged weekend trip to Texas. The night before she asked me if I wanted to join her and a friend for the drive down then stay with her family. I was touched; three days and I'm meeting the family. Unfortunately I also had a previous engagement; I had to attend a teacher's conference on Saturday. There was disappointment in her eyes but she understood. I promised nothing would keep me from her next trip to the Lone Star State.

I was looking forward to this conference. One thing about the University; they gave not only a scholastic education but preparation for all aspects of life. I received training in pastoralship from church leaders, both mega and small, for leading teams on world missions trips, and now

Christian Education. I know God brought me here for a reason. The truth be known I didn't know what that reason was. I just grabbed all the education and training I could. The next step would be on Him.

It may appear that I speak critically of Evangelicals, but in many ways they do exactly what Jesus taught. Though of late this movement has been defined by its allegiance to Right Wing Conservative Republicans, anti gay and Pro-Life sentiments, its initial goal is evangelism; to spread the word and love of God to every corner of the world. This is something they do to a tee. World missions and 'soul winning' (introduce and have people accept the salvation offered by Jesus Christ) emanates from most of its churches. I know people in Tulsa who open their homes to missionaries from all over the world. Sixth graders regularly go on mission trips abroad. White parents send their children to minister in high-crime African-American and Hispanic areas

without fear. My church back in NYC never attempted such feats. Evangelical theology contains the best and worst of Christian actions.

Tomorrow's conference added to that mission. True evangelism is about planting seeds and knowing that in time a harvest will grow. This training session was just a way to throw more seeds into my sack so I would, in turn plant them in my travels.

This Friday evening, like all for the past three years, I participated in the University's mission outreach. From six to nine we would minister and soul win at various homeless shelters or on the streets of downtown Tulsa. Tonight, after my mission group dropped me at my apartment, I cycled to a *Quik Trip* on the other side of town. My objective for this late hour cloak and dagger: purchase condoms. Before Bethany I hadn't been sexually intimate for a number of years. The condoms we used were ones had I picked up at a

health fair a few months ago. I found it funny that out here in Tulsa they would have condoms that featured the New York City Subway System on them. I took them as a keepsake. At *Quick Trip* I purchased a few boxes praying that I wouldn't be recognized, especially by one of my students. The Scripture '*what you do in the dark will be revealed in the light*' (Matt. 10:27) kept running through my mind.

Friday night was also my favorite time of the week. Returning from ministry my usual routine was to have a nice dinner than relax with a night of movies on *TCM*. My mind could rest for nothing was on the agenda for the weekend. All that was about to change. From now on my Fridays would be shared with Bethany. Though I never married I did have girlfriends, live-in and not. I had come to enjoy living alone and was definitely set in my ways. Bethany was the one I was willing to change for.

Bethany was driving down to Texas with Megan, a classmate and fellow daughter of the Lone Star state. The plan was to share the driving and keep each other awake. Around two a.m. Megan fell asleep. Bethany called me.

“Hey Dylan,” she said sounding well awake. “Whatca doin’? Watching TV, eating crackers and caviar?”

“Missing you,” I replied.

“Aw Dylan, that’s sweet. You always know the right thing to say.”

“It’s just true.”

We talked for hours. She told me of her days in Texas and the journey that led her to the University. I told her of my Christian experiences and how they led me to travel the world and see things I only dreamed of before. We shared our dreams and aspirations. Maybe because sex couldn’t get in the way, we talked and learned a great deal about each other.

Dawn was slowly awakening and so was Megan.

“Hey Dylan I think I better go. My battery’s dying and my charger’s in my bag somewhere. And there’s a Denny’s coming up. Last chance to eat before we hit Dallas.”

“Next Saturday breakfast is on me.”

“Dylan, I wish you were here with me now.”

“I’m sorry I didn’t make some excuse for my meeting and go with you. But everything works out in God’s time.”

“Night Dylan. Or should I say good morning? The sun is coming up.”

“No, you should just listen when I tell you how much I miss you and how much I love you.”

There was a silence on the line. I could see her in my mine’s eye; jaw dropping in awe and surprise.

“Dylan you don’t know how you just made my whole weekend. I wanted to tell you the same thing but I didn’t want to scare you off. You’re amazing.”

“You’re mine, Bethany. I want you to be mine forever.”

“I will Dylan. My phone is about to die out. I love you too Dylan. I know we were meant to be. We can do great things together. Have a great time at your meeting. Call me tonight, okay.”

“Midnight, when the parents are asleep and you’re all mine.”

“I’ll wait.”

Her phone finally died out. I looked to the window and saw daylight arriving. I knew my life was complete.

As I looked back on our first week together, it seemed the majority of the time was spent making love. All it took was for me to look into Bethany’s eyes or her to look into mine and it was on. We made no excuses; we wanted each other, so we went at it. When we weren’t physical, we

constantly touched each other; exploring each other's body; what made us laugh, what embarrassed us, what aroused us. We had to be joined as one. It was like we were making up for lost time.

I don't know if I can truly articulate the difference between our lovemaking and what some might term 'lust for the flesh.' Outside of her name, the fact that we went to the same university and she was from Texas, I knew very little about Bethany. But when we were in each other's presence we didn't have to ask questions for the answers really didn't matter. Those matters were secondary. We weren't strangers who were sexually attracted to each other and decided to hit the sack. No, we were two individuals who finally found what we were looking for. Our sexual activity was a natural extension of our relationship. God said '*it is not good for man to be alone.*' (Genesis 2:18) Now, no matter what our circumstances, Bethany and I would never be alone. When

we first met that day in chapel the preacher spoke about wholeness. We found in each other what we needed to be whole. Of course the *Dear Reader* will say ‘he’s taking Scriptures, twisting them around to make them say what he wants just to justify his wrongdoing.’ All I know is these Scriptures have greater meaning to me now. Because of Bethany, I am whole.

I liken myself to Adam. If I say I am whole because of Bethany the reader will say, ‘A man or a woman can’t make you whole. All you need is God.’ But when God said ‘*it is not good for man to be alone*’ all Adam had was God. Adam didn’t run around thinking ‘everyone else has somebody, what about me?’ No, he was happy with his day to day life. It was God who said Adam needed someone. Why would that be, I ask the *Dear Reader*, since all Adam had was God? My answer: God gave Eve to Adam to complete the equation. Just like God gave Eve to Adam to

complete his life, He gave Bethany to me to complete mine. I can truly say now I am whole. What was missing is now in place.

I'm sure of this wholeness for in my past relationships I always felt the girl was looking over her shoulder for someone else. I was just there to fill the time till the 'right' one came along. I didn't get this from Bethany. Her looking stopped with me.

'I hear you Brother Dylan,' you might state, 'but that doesn't justify the sex.' With Bethany I don't have to justify sex, for I don't feel I'm doing anything wrong. I had a bout with internet pornography a while back. Each time I viewed it and did what accompanied the viewing I felt guilty. I knew what I was watching and doing was the very definition of sexual immorality. Even though I relentlessly returned to those websites, guilt prevailed and lasted longer than my gratification. I feel no guilt whatsoever with Bethany.

The conference was everything I expected it to be and more. Of course the top Evangelical leaders in Christian Education were there. Instead of suggesting what books to read they sowed them into our lives. I was also surprised to hear one educator speak on how all Christian educators must become familiar with non canonical books (e.g the Dead Sea Scrolls, the Nag Hammadi Scriptures, The Gnostic Gospels). Most of these are required study for seminarians, but not at the University. Normally Evangelicals believe the canonical Bible is the only word of God, the final authority and stop at that. This speaker stated, the Gospels of Judas, Mary Magdalene, which have always been around and are now coming to light in a popular vain, are texts Christian educators need to have, read and be familiar with, if only for their historical value and the ability to refute their omissions from the canon in a scholarly manner. I thought I was alone

in this type of progressive thinking. I don't know if his idea was accepted by the majority of the group, but like a good Evangelical, he was just planting seeds.

A sleepy Bethany called me at eleven-fifteen.

“That’s alright. You go to bed too. I know you had a long drive last night and a long day today.”

“Great but I’ll tell you about it when you get back.
How’s your family?”

“Well don’t stay. We have a life to start out here.”

“Yeah, I charmed the pants off you.”

“Pig,” she said with a giggle. “But I’m sleepy so I’m going to bed now. I just wanted to tell you I love you.”

“I love you too, Bethany,” I said softly.

“I know. Night.”

She hung up and I’m sure drifted off to sleep.

The TV was on *TCM*. They were showing *The Country Girl*. It was another one of my favorites. But tonight I didn’t want to get involved with a troubled marriage and a lonely man finding love with a married woman. I flicked it off, sat in the dark and thought about Bethany until I drifted off to sleep.

Bethany arrived in town around two a.m. Monday morning and came straight to my apartment.

“Mind if I leave these here?” she said dropping two suitcases on the floor and not waiting for an answer. “You have more closet space here than in the dorm.”

Wearily she gave me a tender kiss and hug. With a last vestige of strength, Bethany pulled herself off me then slowly disrobed, leaving a trail of clothes to the shower. As I heard the water running, I picked up her clothes and neatly arranged them on a chair.

“You picked up my clothes?” Bethany said plopping alongside of me in bed after her shower. I had dozed off so her words came with a start. “My mother doesn’t do that for me.”

“I just like things neat. And you’re tired; you need to rest.”

“That’s nice. Are you cold?” Bethany asked in a state of somnambulance.

“No, why?”

“Take off your shirt. I want to sleep on you.”

Her request made me smile. I flipped off my tee and Bethany rested her head on my chest. With eyes closed, she

reached for one of my biceps. She found it, gently massaged it, then held on. A warm smile erupted on her lips.

“I may not go to class tomorrow. I’ll see how I feel when I get up. You smell good. ‘Night, Dylan. I’m going to sleep now.”

Bethany fell right to sleep. During the summer session we were allowed two absences. If Bethany took one so would I. We did have to make up for time lost during the last forty-eight hours.

Bethany was so exhausted I thought she would sleep through the morning. Yet when I awoke I found her deep blue eyes staring at me. They were the greatest sight to wake up to.

“What are you looking at?” I asked.

“You,” she replied softly.

“Why?”

“Because you’re there. I like looking at you, you’re so handsome.”

“I thought looks didn’t matter to women. You guys only care about support and security.”

“What magazines have you been reading? I want that too but you’re still handsome. I know a lot of cute guys but no handsome ones. My father is handsome, but well, he’s my father. Are your mom and dad good looking?”

“My parents passed away a long time ago,” I began.

“Oh, I’m sorry. I didn’t know.”

“That’s all right. My mom died when I was a kid. I was never really close to my father. He died a few years ago. But to answer your question, yes they were both very good looking. My father was movie star handsome. My mother had a quiet beauty.”

“Do you miss them? Sorry, I guess that’s a silly question.”

“I think about them all the time. It’s funny; I have been alive for more years than I had with my mother. Some people have a lifetime to share with their moms. I had fifteen years.”

Bethany placed her hand on my face.

“I’m sorry, handsome; I didn’t mean to bring up bad things. You may have only had them for a short time, but they raised you right. I’ve never met anyone like you.”

“Bethany--”

She put her finger to my lips.

“And you have me forever.”

Wow was the only word I could think of. Many times I had been in love with someone, but now someone was in love with me.

Bethany kissed me softly on the lips then rested her head on my chest again.

“Let’s not go to class today,” she said.

I took her face in my hands and pulled back her hair with my fingers. I loved looking at her.

“And what would I do that is more exciting than spending four hours with Dr. Jarvis?”

A seductive little girl smile erupted on Bethany’s face.

“I missed having you inside of me,” she whispered invitingly in my ear.

“We’ll have to take care of that.”

I lifted Bethany’s tee shirt over her head and began kissing her sweet neck, meaty breasts and flat stomach. My lips found their way to her moist freshly shaven vagina then connected with the spot. I loved the way her body quivered in my hands and the sounds she made as she moaned in pleasure. My tongue drank from her body and devoured her as never before. It was rare that I did this in the past---check that, I *never* did this. Yet I always wanted my girl to perform

it on me. Bethany was different. I had to please her. And besides, she was delicious. I loved the taste of Bethany.

We made mad love continuously throughout the morning. In between rounds I thought ‘what’s the difference between now and two weeks ago?’ Then I was a lonely man. Now the most beautiful girl in the world was not only making loving to me but in love with me. What happened? I wasn’t looking for this. She came out of the blue. A long forgotten prayer now answered.

I had no qualms about missing Dr. Jarvis’ class but I couldn’t abandon my students. I had a responsibility to them and I couldn’t throw it off cause I wanted to make love to my girl. Bethany understood. We showered and left for the day.

“You know,” Bethany began as we took the short drive to campus, “I never cut a class before in my life.”

and practiced the way Jesus taught, it would change the course of history.

“What do you think ‘the righteousness of God’ means?” I posed to the class.

Shannon, a pretty blue-eyed blonde, always quick with an answer, shot her hand up.

“It means you’re in a right relationship with God,” she spoke. “You do everything according to His word. You help others; go to church, read the Bible.”

“I agree,” said Sonny. “But I would add a real righteous man of God joins the ministry.”

“Ordained or just working with an outreach?” I asked.

“Ordained. The further you go the greater God’s glory on your life,” added Diana.

“Anybody else?” I asked.

A few added to the discussion. Everything they said had to do with doing kind works, servicing your fellow man, going to church and reading the Bible.

“I liked what everybody said,” I summed. “What you said is right for we are ambassadors of God and have to show His love in all we do. God’s love is shown in service to others. That’s why Jesus told his followers they couldn’t have a part of him if they didn’t allow him to wash their feet. But what if I told you you’re all wrong?”

They seemed a little shocked, unsettled. I always encouraged them to speak up. I hoped they wouldn’t stop now.

“So what is it, Mr. Ramey?” Jillian asked.

Jillian was a tiny young girl with large brown eyes. She rarely spoke, but I could tell she was the one person in the class gaining the most. When she did say something it was profound. Her questions were always direct and adding

to her knowledge. In days ahead I wouldn't be surprised if Jillian was running the country.

I looked directly into her questioning young eyes.

"Have you accepted Jesus as your Lord and Savior?"

"Yes," she replied meaning it.

"Then you are the righteousness of God. Just by publicly proclaiming that you have accepted Jesus as your Savior makes you the righteousness of God."

There was an uncomfortable shuffling among the class. They wanted to disagree with me, but I guess their upbringing told them never to question authority. Sonny finally broke the silence.

"So are you saying you don't have to do anything?"

"Tell me, did you have to do anything to be a sinner?" I asked.

Roxandra, a sophomore who always showed just a bit too much midriff matching her too tight blouses, jeans and enticing lip gloss, slipped down in her seat.

“Regardless of what you may think or have done, the answer is you don’t have to do anything to be a sinner,” I began. “Sin was brought into the world through Adam’s disobedience to God. All are sinners because of what he did, nothing more, nothing less. All we have to do is be born and we are sinners. But the same is true of salvation or the righteousness of God. All we have to do is accept Jesus and we are cleansed of all sin. We’re no longer sinners we’re saved. So you can’t work your way into being righteous, for you already are.”

“Doesn’t the Bible say we have to do good works?” asked Fred another student who rarely spoke.

“Works don’t make you righteous. Faith without works is dead. That is another lesson. That basically means if

you have faith you have the power to move mountains. But if you aren't moving any mountains, what good is your faith. What I'm saying is, doing good, going to church, Bible study, praying, fasting---all that doesn't make you righteous. But righteous people do all that."

"But isn't that giving people a license to sin?" asked Rene.

"You don't need a license to sin," I said. "You can sin without one."

"But people still sin once they pray the prayer of salvation," Rene added.

"True. But they're not sinners. Their conduct falls under grace. Once you become saved there is a certain way you should act. *'Love one another as I have loved you.'* *'Pray for your enemies.'* With grace comes the power to do things we couldn't fathom before."

"That's just a license to sin," Rene said.

“You don’t need a license,” I reiterated. “You were born into it. Without proclaiming Jesus as your Lord and Savior you are a sinner, whether you are the nicest, kindest person in the world or a serial killer. It’s all the same. Just as it’s all the same for those who accept Jesus. Their sins are washed away.”

A few students gave me looks of disbelief but remained silent. Rene was their spokesperson.

“But we’re all sinners and fall short of the glory of God,” she continued.

“And what is the rest of that Scripture? It is not just ‘*we’re all sinners and fall short of the glory of God,*’ as many think. It is ‘*There is no difference for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.*’ (Romans 3:22-23) That line sums my argument and my theology.”

“What about sex, Mr. Ramsey?” asked Delany a young woman proud of the purity bracelet around her wrist. “If what you’re saying is true, that would make it alright to have sex before marriage. And that is clearly wrong.”

A few others in the class agreed. All waited for my response.

“Again you are saved by grace,” I responded. “If you choose to still engage in things that go against God, you can always repent and God will forgive you. That’s His promise.”

“So you’re saying it’s alright to have sex or do anything you want as long as you repent?”

“That’s not what I am saying; *that’s* the word of God.”

Again silence, disbelief and questioning looks.

Delany had a look on her face that said ‘taint the Bible one more time and I will cut your throat.’

“Read the Bible for yourself,” I added. “I gave you the Scriptures I came from. Read them and come to your own conclusion.”

“But my pastor always said---” began Brenda.

“Let me stop you right there,” I said. “Too often that’s the trouble. ‘My pastor said this,’ ‘I always heard that.,’ ‘isn’t it in the Bible somewhere that---’ I say read the Bible for yourself then come to your own conclusion. If you have a question, do everything you can to find the answer. Read the Bible, do a concordance check, ask a number of pastors, ask a number of biblical scholars. That’s true theology.”

“Well the Bible I read says not to have sex before marriage; that it’s a sin,” Delany said.

“Two questions,” I began, “Does the Bible really say that? And if you really believe sex before marriage is a sin

and you engage in it, are you a bad person in the eyes of God?”

“Of course the Bible really says that,” Delany shot back.

“Where?” I asked.

She couldn’t believe I asked such a question. The majority of the class was startled. Many of the guys sat with open mouth anticipation, hoping to hear an ‘authorized’ excuse for their late night rendezvous.

“Paul,” she began. “1st Corinthians 6:18 *‘Flee from sexual immorality. All other sins a man commits are outside his body, but he who sin sexually sins against his own body. Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own, you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your body.’* 1 Corinthians 7:9 *‘But if they cannot control themselves, they should marry.’*”

“Excellent Miss Waters!” I said. “You backed your theology with Scriptures. That’s all I ask. Now let me throw a question at you. In that letter what is Paul referring to?”

“Sex,” said a number of students.

“That’s correct. But what type of sex?”

“What do you mean?” asked Sonny. “Like oral or anal?”

“No, Mr. Tyler. I mean adultery, incest, sex with prostitutes. Things like that.”

“What difference does it make?” Delany shot.

“Sexual immorality is sexual immorality.”

“In the context of this letter it makes a big difference,” I said. “Sexual immorality is another way to define fornication. In the case of Paul’s letter he is talking about adultery. Fornication is mentioned numerous times in both the New and Old Testaments, but it is never defined as sex before marriage. Today, if you read any definition of

fornication, it will say 'sex before marriage.' But never is it defined as that in the Bible."

"So are you saying it's alright to have sex before marriage?" Delany asked.

"No, I'm saying I never read in the Bible where fornication is defined as sex before marriage."

"Mr. Ramsey, do you believe in sex before marriage?" Jillian asked.

Again Roxandra slumped down in her seat, not before shooting a quick glance at James, the student sitting next to her.

The class gave a start for I didn't shoot back on cue with the usual answer 'Of course not!' as most teachers would. I had to form my words carefully. I didn't want to lie to them but my truth was something that had to be defined.

"I believe in responsibility. I believe the person you are having sex with you should be madly in love with; would

die for. If a baby is formed from your union, you should have no qualms about sharing your life with that person and taking care of the child.”

A silence filled with questions flowed in the air. Was I preaching the Bible or heresy?

“So you’re saying it’s all right to have sex before marriage?” Sonny asked.

“I’m saying love overtakes all. Treat people the way you want to be treated.”

“What about the Bible?” Delany asked.

“To me that is how the Bible answers the question.”

Again an awkward silence.

“It’s alright to debate me,” I added. “That’s the Jewish tradition. Rabbis encouraged it.”

“I don’t want to debate you, Mr. Ramsey,” Jillian finally said, “But I have a question. If what you say about the righteousness of God is true, then what is the point of Paul’s

letters? Why write about adultery, or idolatry or horoscopes if all is forgiven?"

"Good question. Paul is telling us how to live our lives as followers of Jesus Christ. We have to repent, but repent from what? Paul's letters tell us what we should be doing."

It was time for class to end. I always ended my class by saying 'I hope you got something out of this.' Normally the looks on their faces would tell me some got it, some didn't, others just didn't care. Today they all walk out with looks of wonder. Some got it, some didn't, but they all cared.

Bethany text and asked if I wanted to join her for an hour of prayer in the University's Prayer Garden. I normally went to the Athletic Center after class but replied I would be delighted to. We met at a quiet spot under a shade tree.

Bethany said she always did her hour first thing in the

morning but hadn't had a chance to since Friday. I remembered that Friday morning and how I was in my own world while Bethany was in God's. I felt bad. Never again would I let my amorous endeavors interfere when I saw her studying the Bible, or in prayer and mediation.

I loved to pray in nature. There was something about praying in the elements that God created that made me feel His presence without question. I neither ascribe to panentheism nor pantheism but I do see the Creator in His creations. Afterward, we went to the AC then had dinner at the cafeteria. Bethany grabbed a few things from her room and we were off to my or should I now say *our* apartment.

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"Hey, wake up," I said nudging Bethany.

"No," she replied with her eyes closed.

"Who is Allie?"

"My little sister. Why?"

"You have to call her right now."

“It’s 2:30 in the morning. She’s asleep.”

“She needs you.”

“How do you know? She’s in Texas.”

“I got a feeling that I have to pray for her and you
have to call her.”

Bethany was finally awake. She groggily walked to
the coffee table to retrieve her cell.

“She’s eight years old and asleep.”

“She needs you.”

Bethany took the phone. I began to pray in tongues.

“Hey kitten, it’s me,” Bethany began in a sisterly
voice.

I hear the sobs of a little girl at the other end.

“What’s the matter?”

Her little sister couldn’t believe she was on the line.

From what I could discern then was a severe thunderstorm
going on in Texas. Allie was afraid of the thunder and in the

get more fuel for their arguments. I loved it. One should always defend what they believe in.

“Yesterday we talked a lot about sex,” Phillip began. “But what about murder and other crimes? I think sex before marriage is wrong but in the end so what. To murder somebody or even worse; there are sick people out there; nuts chopping people’s heads off, people blowing up whole neighborhoods, parents killing their children, kids killing their parents. Are you telling me that all they have to do is accept Jesus Christ and even things like that are forgiven? All due respect, Mr. Ramsey; I like you and this school and this class a lot. But I think that is really whac!”

“Why do you think that, Mr. Tyler?” I asked.

“Cause you totally confused me. You went against everything I was ever taught, everything I ever heard. I was ready to drop this class but it’s past the deadline; I would

have lost the tuition my parents paid and still have to take this class at a later date.”

“Well I’m glad you’re still here,” I said. “Even though this is a Christian university and this is a course in Christian thought, it is still an institute of higher learning. Whether it’s theology or history or science, you’re going to hear things that challenge your thinking. That’s a good thing. It’s the only way to grow. Hearing something contrary to your beliefs doesn’t mean you have to accept and believe it. Challenge it; don’t run from it. Stick to your beliefs but always listen with an open mind. Now what is it that confused you?”

“Everything! What you said about it’s okay to keep sinning.”

“I never said it’s okay to keep sinning. I thought I made that perfectly clear. What I say and what people hear or interpret are often two different things. That is something all

teachers and public speaker have to be careful of. What I said was once you accept Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior all your sins are forgiven. Just as you didn't do anything to be a sinner, you can't work your way into not being a sinner. Yes once you accept Him things about your life should change. Jesus walked the face of the earth to show us what to do. But even if you don't change one hundred percent, you did all you had to do to have your sins washed away."

Again silence and questioning stares. Everyone heard this before. It probably never dawned on them just what it really meant.

"It may be hard to understand," I stated. "But believe me I'm not satan. I'm not trying to confuse you. I'm trying to bring understanding. There is a difference. Look, I know many of you go out evangelizing. You meet drug addicts, prostitutes, people clubbing, sleeping with everyone they come in contact with. Don't you tell them 'Jesus loves you'?

Jesus loves the sinner but hates the sin.’ What does this really mean? That’s not a rhetorical question. I’m asking you what does Jesus loves you mean? Does it mean He loves you only if you accept him? Then how do you explain John 3:16 ‘*For God so loved the world...*’ The world. Every homosexual, every Muslim, everyone who said ‘God doesn’t exist; the Bible is just a fable.’ The people Jesus healed never accepted Him; they got their healing and walked away. Everyone you hate Jesus loves. God is love. People don’t go to hell because of sin. They go to hell because they reject the one thing that will keep them from going; Jesus Christ.”

Silence, but I think they were digesting my message.

“The thief on the cross,” I added to my argument.

“We don’t know what he did. He could have been the worst murderer, child molester, robbed from the poor or elderly. The Romans hung Jesus alongside him to show the people what they thought of Jesus. They said ‘Jesus is no better than

him.’ So you know he had to have done something heinous. But the man accepted Jesus. Probably the last thing he did in life. He didn’t have time to stop drinking, stop smoking, reform from his wicked ways. There is no written record that he repented of his sin. He just accepted Jesus and Jesus said he will be with him in paradise.”

“My pastor spoke about that once,” said Delany. “He said how could that man have gone to heaven without being baptized?”

“All due respect to your pastor, but Jesus said he was going to paradise. Church doctrine may say you have to do this, that and the other thing to go to heaven. But hanging on a cross, no time to repent, to change his lifestyle, to tithe, go to church every Sunday and Bible study every Wednesday, he accepted Jesus and went to heaven. His faith in Jesus was all that was needed.”

“Does God love people that much?” asked Wilma, another of my usually quiet students.

“Yes He does. As long as you have breath in your body you can accept Jesus. Once your life is over, well I heard a pastor say ‘God will love you right up to the gates of hell’.”

“I want to accept Jesus today,” Wilma said.

The whole class turned to her. It was a given that everyone at the University was a Christian. That wasn’t always the case.

“Let me explain the steps to salvation to you. First, you must realize you are a sinner, not for anything that you have done but because of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. Second, you must repent; turn from where you are now and to the ways of God. Next, you must confess with your mouth that Jesus Christ is your Lord and Savior. Are you ready to do that?”

“Yes,” Wilma replied with breathless anticipation.

“Repeat after me; Father God I recognize that I am a sinner. I confess that I am a sinner and repent of my ways. I confess and believe that Jesus Christ is my Lord and Savior. I thank you Father God for loving me and accepting me into your Kingdom.”

Wilma repeated the prayer word for word while the class either stretched out or laid their hands on her. Tears mixed with sorrow and joy flowed down her cheeks as I told her the last two steps.

“Wilma you should get baptized for Jesus was baptized and we have to follow in his tradition. Most important, you have to study the Word. Welcome my sister.”

Wilma hugged me and I felt years of sin being released from her spirit. Many in the class also cried. Delany had a huge smile on her face.

Though my apartment complex had a hot tub on the property I never utilized it. Bethany noticed it and suggested we take a dip. Her family had one and she enjoyed spending time in it. Late on Friday after my street ministry and Bethany finished her term paper (two weeks before it was due) we met under the stars for snacks, cold drinks and adoring each other. She wore a modest one-piece pink bathing suit. When one had a body like Bethany's even modest swimwear couldn't conceal the truth. Bethany's body was a work of art. Granted I wished she had squeezed into a tiny white thong. But she was from a Conservative Christian background and I knew that wasn't happening.

The warm star lit Tulsa night was the perfect setting. The hundred degree water might have relaxed our muscles but chiefly just made us sweat. Though Bethany and I had known each other intimately, there was something about the beads of sweat glistening on her tender neck then dripping

down her cleavage that made her more of a sexual creature. My eyes trailed down her breasts, thighs, shapely legs. The pages of *Maxim* had nothing on my Doll. I looked to her eyes and noticed she was checking me out just as hard. I uttered ‘wow!’ a few times under my breath, and I knew she probably did the same.

“You have a hot bod,” Bethany said.

“Thanks. I did a chaplaincy at a seniors’ home and saw what can happen if you don’t take care of yourself. I said ‘I’m not going out like that.’ So I exercised more, started to eat right the things, cut out the bad, drink more water.”

“You’re amazing!”

“Why?”

“I mean most people would say ‘It’s scary what can happen,’ or ‘I’ll pray that doesn’t happen to me,’ but you did something about it. You found the answer and made a commitment to change. And kept it. That’s hot!”

“That’s just me. If I don’t take care of myself, who will.”

Bethany dipped into the tub. I joined her. It was relaxing. The warm pool of water mixed with the warm night air and the strong scent of a Tulsa summer was like Bethany; Heaven on earth.

“Now this is nice,” Bethany said also enjoying the night. She waded over to me and found a seat between my legs. “But this is even nicer.”

Her wet body, hot from the water, rested against mine. Her hair smacked me in the mouth but I didn’t care.

“This is beautiful, Dylan. We could sit here and just relax and forget about papers and grades. When do you graduate?”

We had known each other for close to two weeks and this initial question finally surfaced.

“This is it. I just need a few credits this summer then the ballgame is over. I’m off.”

Bethany became quiet.

“Off to where?”

“I don’t know,” I replied honestly.

Again silence. Some times she made more noise in quiet thought than with actual words.

“Before you met me what was your plan?”

“I didn’t have one,” I answered. “There are good plans and there are God plans. I like to wait to hear from God.”

“But there must be something. Everybody has a dream.”

“I thought about studying abroad for a semester. Maybe Oxford. I thought about mission work in Brazil. I went there one summer and promised I would go back. There’s an underground church in China. They only take so

many people cause they don't want to attract attention to themselves by bringing in too many foreigners. Plus they only want people who know what they're getting into. That sort of cloak and dagger, spy stuff, intrigues me. But what I really want to do is be a military chaplain. I looked into that but by the time I met all the ordination and education requirements I was past the age limit."

"And you said you didn't have a plan."

"Maybe all of that was up in the air so you could come along. Like I said, there are good ideas and God ideas. My ideas are noble but nothing materialized. You did. I think God sent you to be the next stage of my life."

Bethany smiled at that statement.

"When it's a God idea everything works out. '*Many are the plans in a man's heart, but it is the Lord's purpose that prevails.*' (Proverbs 21:91) What about you?"

“First it’s school. God blessed me with intellect. I know I have to use it for His honor and glory. I have two years left. Then who knows. Funny, I’m drawn to China too. I’d like to work there for a while. Or maybe Japan. But then I want to come back to the U.S. and change the economic situation here. I admire what Dr. King did with his bus and lunch counter boycotts. People had to suffer in the short term to win in the long run. That needs to happen today. Our country is a capitalist one, so ultimately it’s all about money, not race, class, or gender. It’s ‘can I make money or am I losing money.’ Dr. King understood that. That is why his boycotts in the South changed things. I want to do the same thing to change our health care system, our dependency on oil, foreign or domestic. There’s a lot I want to do.”

“That’s a great objective. How do you plan to do it?
Run for office?”

“I don’t know yet. I guess you’re right; God has to give you the idea. One thing I do know; politicians can’t accomplish the type of change I’m talking about. They only create policy. The type of change I’m talking about has to come from within. Jesus had the right answer. But not everybody is a Christian. The question is how do you get people to practice the teachings of Jesus without them knowing it?”

“Are you sure you’re from Texas? That’s very liberal. I think like that.”

“I don’t like labeling people. I know what’s right, what’s wrong; what will work and what won’t. Jesus Christ is the answer. But I’ve seen a lot of people get turned off by his name, when in reality they believe what He says. Don’t you think that’s true?”

“Very much.”

“Do you want to marry me, Dylan?” Bethany asked without any segue.

How do you ask a question like that after two weeks of knowing someone? There wasn’t a questioning in her eyes; just a need for acknowledgement.

“I’m serious, Dylan. I already think you’re my husband.”

“I never met a woman I couldn’t live without until I met you.”

Bethany smiled as a tear dropped from her eye. At that moment I knew that I knew that I knew we were meant to be together forever.

“I never felt this way about a boy. All my friends at school, at church, that’s all they talked about; ‘when I get married this is gonna happen,’ or ‘I’m gonna meet my husband in college,’ or ‘I should switch churches cause all the cute guys go there.’ I was never like that. Yeah, I wanted

to get married, and I knew some day I would, I just never thought about it. And then I met you. Something happen to me. Even now, just having your arms around me, you don't know what it does. It's scary. I'm feeling things I never felt before."

"They're good things, right?"

"Yeah, but----where did they come from? And it happened just like that. In a second my life changed dramatically."

"That's gonna happens a lot. It did for me. That's why I pray and keep in the Word. I always try to make the right decision."

"But what about our different agendas, how does it all work out? That's where God comes in, right?"

"Yeah. We have to fulfill what God has ordained for us. But we both said we know what we want but we didn't have a plan. God intervened and brought us together."

“So what do we do now, adjust our goals?” Bethany asked, knowing the answer in her spirit.

“No, we continue to love each other and pursue them and pray and see. We’ll know where God leads us. God is a god of ‘more than enough.’ If He wants, you could be in China and me in Brazil. With Him it would work it out so we still have a happy marriage; everything we dreamed of is accomplished”

“I like that,” she said with a smile. “*Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than we ask or imagine, according to the power that is within us,*’ (Ephesians 3:20) I was always taught. I’m willing to go along for the ride. How ‘bout you?”

“I don’t think I have a choice. I always do what God tells me.”

With that our conversation ended for the evening. The night was too beautiful to interrupt with thoughts of the

future; of what might or might not be. For now, we had each other, a warm summer night and a hot tub all to ourselves. For this moment, that was more than enough.

I love the sound of rain as it falls against the grass during an early Saturday morning. I love the sound and I love the fact that I didn't have anything to do. I could stay in bed and listen to the sound of the rain or I could get up and walk in it. It was my day. I usually enjoyed this sound alone. This morning the one I loved and the one who loved me was asleep in my arms. I listen to the rainfall and looked at my Bethany. She was the dream you remember when you wake up smiling. And that dream gets more intensified for it is now reality. Sometimes she wakes early and I find her eyes focused on me; as if she is thinking me into awakening to make love to her at dawn. Other times I awake in the middle of the night and watch her as she sleeps, marveling at her

beauty. Her blue eyes made all the difference. With her eyes closed, dreaming a dream of our lives together; my heart skipped a beat.

I watched Bethany as she slept and realized where songwriters get their inspiration. She was a song with beautiful lyrics that rhymed unbelievably clever rhymes, backed by tender string and haunting coronets. Her face made me smile knowing all is possible. Life's greatest tragedy is not to be loved. Though my lifestyle was obedience to God, in many respects I was set in my ways and living life on my own terms. That ended with Bethany. She entered my world and I was willing to share everything, change my ways, open up. It was no longer just me; it was me and Bethany.

"Good morning, Miss Bethany. I love you," I whispered to my beautiful friend.

A smile erupted on her lips.

“Talk to me when I’m awake not when I’m sleeping,”
she said still somewhere between waking and somnambulant.

I took a quick bite of her precious neck.

“I’m sleeping,” she purred.

I took another nibble.

“That’s alright, you’re not bothering me.”

Bethany raised a fist and slugged me in the bicep.

“I’m sleeping.”

“Sleeping beauty.”

She put her forefinger to my lips.

“No talking. It’s sleeping time.”

“I can’t help it. There’s a beautiful woman in my
bed.”

Again a sock.

“I’ll stop.”

“You better.”

Bethany drifted back to sleep, I rested my forehead against hers and listen to the rain.

What was it about our relationship? We really didn't do anything special. I cooked dinner, we watched old movies, read, studied, laid in each other's arms, took walks, went to the gym. We weren't afraid of anything. We talked to each other, we touched each other; we loved as if we had known one another for a lifetime, not two people who in reality just met. I guess that is what it means to wait on God. I didn't ask for anything. When it happened I knew it, Bethany knew it. Who could ask for anything more.

"You're so handsome," Bethany said when she finally awoke. "Were you ever an actor or model?"

"No, but I did work in television."

“Really!” she said with a start. “I’ve never knew anyone who worked in TV.”

“Well it wasn’t all that. I did research for local and national morning news programs in New York. You would be surprised at how much time and energy goes into preparing a six-minute segment. But I love doing research and it paid well. Then I got an offer for a job in San Francisco; a show called *By the Bay---By the Way*. It was local politics and special interest features. It was a great job--for a season.”

“Did you meet any movie stars?”

“Plenty. Mainly I was behind the scenes.”

“How long did you live in San Francisco?”

“Just a year. The show only lasted six months. I did a little freelance work on other shows and for a small newspaper. My money was running out and all my real connections were in New York so back I came.”

“And you went back into TV?”

“Yeah. That and doing freelance writing. That’s how I came into the ministry.”

“I don’t follow.”

“Well I was always spiritual. I believed in a higher power but I didn’t practice anything. I was always reading about religions and visiting churches and temples and sacred places, more out of intellectual curiosity than anything else. Slowly I was drawn to the teachings of Jesus. I went to church and loved it, but I wanted more. I had questions that the average Sunday service or Bible study doesn’t get into.”

“Like what?”

“Well--- like--- who is King James. Christians put all their faith into an omnibus of books and letters finalized by this man. I just wanted to know who is he to be telling us this. The first rule of research is ‘check the source.’”

“So what did you do?”

“I prayed for direction and the Lord led me to seminary. I enrolled in a two-year certificate program at New York Theological Seminary which I loved.”

“Did you get all your questions answered?”

“Not really. I found out more about King James and the formation of the Bible through time. It’s really fascinating stuff.”

“But what made you a firm believer?”

“Nothing I learned in school. My prayer life, the results I’ve seen based on my relationship with Jesus, that’s what convinced me.”

“So what’s wrong with the Bible?”

“Nothing. But I based my life on what Jesus said:
*‘love the Lord God with all your heart, soul, body and mind
and love one another as I have loved you. On these two
commandments hang all the law and the prophets.’*

(Matt.22:37-38) As long as I'm doing that, I believe I'm fulfilling all God wants me to do."

I could sense Bethany was a little uneasy with my conclusions.

"Plenty of people disagree with me," I added.

"Especially out here. What do you think?"

"I've never met a Christian who questioned the Bible."

"You're kidding."

"No really. Everybody I know is a Christian that believes the Bible is the inspired Word of God. I met people who don't believe in God but I don't know them personally."

"And then there's me."

Bethany smiled.

"They told us about people like you. Postmodernist who are so liberal they want to please everyone. Moral relativism 'If it makes you happy do it'."

“I thought you didn’t like to label people,” I joked.

“Is that what you think I am?”

“I don’t know. I know you’re a kind, loving person; a man who prays and reads the Word daily. Everything you do shows the love of God. But---”

“But what?”

“That’s just it. I don’t know. Your spirit is just like everyone I’ve known in Christian camp, church. Maybe more so. So I don’t know how you can say the Bible isn’t true.”

“I never said that. I believe in Jesus Christ. I live my life every day trying to be an imitator and an ambassador of Him in all I do. If you ask me if every word of the Bible is literally true, I would have to say ‘I don’t know.’ But I do believe in a loving God making every effort possible to bring His people back into His Kingdom. In essence that is everything the Bible talks about.”

“Interesting,” she said like an analyst acknowledging a patient.

“You think I’m a heretic?”

“They teach us that to have a good business sense you have to make a decision and stick to it. ‘Never waver,’ a professor of mine used to drill into us. But I can’t make a decision here.”

“What are you stuck on?”

“How you can be everything I ever dream of in a man yet go against everything I was taught for the past eighteen years.”

“Maybe you have to take another look at what you were taught.”

Bethany left it at that. I couldn’t undo everything she had seen and learned since her days as a child in Christian camp. I didn’t try, she didn’t pursue.

I was deep in a dream about a springtime walk in Central Park with Bethany. The real Bethany climbed on top of me.

“Hey Dylan, what church do you go to?” she asked.

I groggily looked at the clock. It was six-thirty.

Sunday was my day of rest.

“I don’t,” I replied.

Bethany was shocked. For all my talk of theology and the ministry, it only seemed logical that I would spend the better part of the Christian Sabbath in church. My answer was the last thing she expected to hear.

“You don’t?” she finally said.

“Not really. I’m in school all week talking about God and the Bible. That’s my church. I go to Kingdom Builders when I feel like it.”

“Church by default,” she whispered.

That was a phrase used on campus. A true Christian goes to the church they are led to by God. I went to the church directly across the street from campus, five minutes from my apartment. Church by default.

Again she went into her thinking mode.

“Come with me to my church. It’s great! After we can go out and eat with my friends. I want them to meet you. They can learn a lot from you.”

I felt her sincerity. Bethany didn’t sound like a nagging wife dragging a reluctant husband to do something he didn’t want to. She really wanted me to join her.

“OK,” I said.

“I have to get some clothes from the dorm. I’ll be back in an hour.”

“Take my keys,” I said.

Bethany took my keys from the kitchen counter.

“Hey,” she said noticing my key chain from Brazil.

“This is nice. I never saw it close up before.”

“Keep it,” I said. “I have another set.”

Her smile erupted.

“You’re the best, Dylan.”

She jumped on the bed kissed me on the cheek and let her face rest against mine.

“I love you, handsome, but I gotta go.”

“I love you too, Bethany,” I said.

She kissed me again, jumped off the bed and left. I had another half hour to sleep and dream about a life with Bethany.

The church was called Fellowship of Saints. It was one of those state of the art churches hard to distinguish from a concert hall. Granted, this was their youth church. The ‘adult service’ was on the same plot of land about a half-mile

away. The plush seating was filled with congregates mostly in their young twenties and late teens, perhaps a young married couple scattered about, a child or two. Many knew Bethany from campus and greeted her warmly. They embraced me, welcoming me to their fellowship. I recognized a few, some I knew by name, and a few were present and former students.

Service had yet to start. All were gathering to talk and fellowship. Though I was with Bethany and accepted by her more than congenial classmates, I still felt alone. I always felt like I was shrinking when in the midst of a crowd. It seemed everyone was together and I was an outsider. It was a feeling I couldn't shake. I always felt more comfortable apart from the crowd or in front of it, never a part of it. Bethany sensed my uneasiness and did what she could to comfort me; she put her arm around me, took my hand; everything to reassure me things were alright.

I wonder how my traditional Protestant church back in NYC would view this church. Like most contemporary churches, this 'venue' seemed more appropriate for a rock concert or Broadway road company. The seats were plush and grander than the ones at Radio City Music Hall. The lighting board could have come from Radio City too. A Christian rock band opened the 'set.' They were dressed more for CBGB's in it's heyday than a Sunday morning service. Through all their blaring electric guitars, smoke and lighting effects, the lyrics of their praise song were poignant and well versed in doctrine. Me, I wasn't a Hendricks fan, but this hard rock sound attracted dedicated young Christians.

The pastor Billy Joe Ferguson took the stage. He was an incredibly handsome African-American, with a sparkling smile that originated from the love of God in his heart. As he took the stage, the large, predominately Caucasian

congregation, (I almost said audience) cheered as if he were the current teen idol. His wife, a young fashion model pretty woman, sat proudly front row center holding one of their two small children. Her assistant, a young white girl, sat beside her holding the other. Pastor Ferguson spoke for forty-five minutes on loving one another the way God loves us and being a servant to all. Everything he said could have come from my own mouth. I preached the same message to deaf ears and smirks back in NYC. Perhaps my audience was too old and rooted too deeply in years of tradition to appreciate the content. Here the congregation followed along in their Bibles and took serious notes. I could testify that the members I knew personally practiced this message beyond the walls of the church.

After service Bethany and I joined a few of her friends at IHOP for brunch. Some at the table were former students. One in particular, Anthony a young man in his late

teens who didn't shed his skateboarder regalia for Sunday Service, stood out. I remembered he hung on every word of mine in my class. I witnessed him doing the same to Pastor Ferguson.

"Yo, Mr. Ramsey," Anthony began, "I haven't seen you here before. Your first time? Isn't Pastor Ferguson awesome?"

Anthony sat before an enormous stack of hot cakes, draped in bacon and sausage. For an appetizer he swallowed down a Mexican omelet. Everything on his plate looked so delicious I could scream. I wanted to have the same but my days of eating like that and not adding four inches to my waistline were long gone.

"Yeah, I enjoyed it," I replied without exaggeration.

"Sweet!" Anthony continued. "You know I only started coming here 'cause Susan (another student of mine also at the table) told me Pastor Ferguson was just like you!"

I took that as a great compliment. Pastor Ferguson was continuing education.

“What did you think of the teaching today, Mr. Ramsey?” Susan asked.

“I thought it was great. Most of what Pastor Ferguson said is my own personal theology.”

“Like what?” she asked.

“Two things resonate from the Bible for me; obedience to God and being in service to your fellow man, oh excuse me, and *woman*, my apologies to the ladies at the table, to show God’s love.”

Their eating slowed as they listened to my words. I hadn’t intended, but since I had their attention I thought I would plant a seed in their lives.

“I was the team leader on a mission trip to Brazil a few years ago. Part of our itinerary was to spend a week at a farm in the country where a man and his wife took in

orphans. The ladies on the team helped the wife, tended to the children and cooking and cleaning, the guys did all the yard work and anything that required heavy labor. Since we arrived there the man, his name was Benzi referred to me as Pastor Dylan. One day we had to level his driveway. I'm a city boy so I really don't know much about handling shovels and pick axes. I guess my inexperience showed 'cause Benzi kept saying I wasn't doing it right. Finally he said to me 'Pastor Dylan, let me see your hands.' I showed them to him. He said, 'You're no pastor, your hands are too clean! A pastor's hands have to be dirty!' I think God sent me to Brazil just to have Benzi say that to me. Those words changed my life. Not just a pastor, but anyone who calls themselves a Christian must have dirty hands. Your hands must be callous, at times covered with blood, sweat, tears. We have work to do; hard work. Just going to church and reading the Bible isn't enough. Being a servant to your

fellow man is just one of two things God sent me to this university to find, to change my life for the better. I like missions. I like to travel the world spreading God's love. That may not be what God has called you to do. One thing I do know; God has called you to serve. So whatever capacity it is, serve."

They sat in awe as they meditated on my tale. Bethany did too. This was the first time she saw me in my element; teaching and preaching to young people. She reached out and grabbed my arm, rubbing it with strong approval.

"Mr. Ramsey, you have so much wisdom," began Colette, a young girl who I didn't know, "What advice would you give to the young people at this table?"

"Enjoy life moment by moment. Life is about moments. If you're lucky, you create one that last a lifetime. Don't let anything pass you by."

They seemed astonished by that comment. So I added:

“Maybe you thought I was going to say read the Bible everyday or join the Mission and Outreach Department. They have their merits. But my greatest regrets in life were letting things pass me by; not grabbing something while it was there for my taking. Most of the things I regretted weren’t the things I did, but the things I didn’t do. Don’t fall into that.”

They were silent as they digested my words and their pancakes.

“Mr. Ramsey, you said God sent you here to discover two things,” Susan said. “What was the other?”

“That I will share with you at a later date.”

I was drained of all power. After we parked, it took all the strength I had to walk across the parking lot and upstairs to the apartment. Once inside I went straight to the

prayer room, quickly threw off my shoes and shirt then lied on the floor, unable to move.

“What’s up with you?” Bethany asked, thinking my actions were a little too melodramatic.

“I’m drained, doll. I just prayed with the students, I’ve been teaching the word of God all week, doing outreaches; all that eventually catches up.”

Bethany looked at me digesting all that information.

“Remember Jesus and the woman with the issue of blood?” I remarked. “Jesus said ‘*some of the power has left me.*’ (Luke8:46) That’s how he knew a healing had taken place. Well, it’s happening to me now. It’s the same with anyone who lets God use them. I have to replenish myself with His word.”

“What can I do?” Bethany asked.

“Pray my strength in the Lord.”

“Okay,” she said and silently rested her head on my chest, curling up besides me. Instead of placing her hand on my bicep, she placed it over my heart.

“Bethany can you do me a favor? Hand me my Bible and turn on the radio.”

While praying under her breath, Bethany got up, retrieved my Bible from the coffee table and flicked on the radio to its preset Christian station. She then returned to the spot she held before as I began replenish myself in the Lord. I always held in the Bible in my hand as I recharged. I was literally too weak; to thumb through the pages and read passages. I felt like a truck had hit me and all I could do was lie in the road. Bethany took my limp arm and wrapped it around her waist.

“You have everything you need,” Bethany whispered,
“The word of God and me.”

“You mean I have everything I love.”

She smiled and stole a quick kiss on my cheek.

I recited Scriptures in my head. *“What is impossible with men is possible with God.”* (Luke 18:27) *“Everything is possible for him that believes.”* (Mark 8:23) *“Have faith in God...if anyone says to this mountain, ‘Go throw yourself into the sea’ and does not doubt but believes in his heart what he says will happen, it will be done for him.”* (Mark 11:22-23).

I don’t remember falling asleep but I did. Bethany was now leaning against me, her laptop in tow.

“Welcome back, handsome,” Bethany said.

“Hey,” I replied. “What time is it?”

“Six-thirty. You were out for about an hour. Where did you go? You had the biggest smile on your face.”

“I don’t know.”

“Feel any better?”

“Yeah. But I need food.”

“I thought so. I made you some chicken burritos.”

“You’re the best,” I said stealing her line.

“Does that happen a lot?”

“Yeah. This happens to everyone who preaches, teach and evangelize. You get drained and have to fill yourself up with the Gospel. Sometimes preachers fill up with the wrong things; food, alcohol, drugs, sex. Soon they get more focused on them than on God. That’s one reason you read about them going astray.”

“Why are you so smart?” Bethany asked.

“You’re the smart one. I know things cause I lived through them.”

“I want to be like you. You know things I never even thought of.”

I found that surprising. I always wanted to be like Bethany; rattle off different languages at the drop of a hat, have a great business and economical sense, etc.

“Funny, I want to be like you. I guess we need each other. Is that alright with you? Would you like to stay with me for awhile?”

“I think that can be arranged.”

“My friends love you,” Bethany said later that evening as we relaxed in a warm, scented bubble bath.

I had to smile for I knew it was true. Though I was about the same age as their parents, I didn’t look it. They placed me in my thirties, some ten plus years older than I actually was. They think I’m their age, but they know I’m not, so they respect my wisdom. It reminded me of the film *To Sir with Love* when LuLu says to Mr. Thackeray something like, ‘*You’re like us, but than you’re not.*’

“It’s just my gift from God they’re seeing; my blessing.”

“Well I’m blessed too. They only have you for a few hours. But you’re mine all the time.”

“I’m yours ‘cause you were crazy enough to come knocking at my door at eleven o’clock at night.”

“You treat me so mean, but I still love you.”

Bethany pulled my lips to hers and stole a kiss.

“I never saw you like that before. You were awesome!”

She stole another kiss.

“You really like to travel,” she said then rested her cheek against mine.

“I was always somewhat of a vagabond. Even back in New York, I would constantly switch apartments. I lived in the East Village, Coney Island, a brownstone in Brooklyn Heights, San Francisco. Maybe cause I don’t have a family I wasn’t worried about leaving anyone behind.”

“Do you still want to travel?”

“I have you now. God put you in my life for a reason.

A man has to settle down sometime.”

“You didn’t answer my question. Is traveling still in your system?”

“Maybe not. But you are.”

“What are you looking for?”

“What makes you think I’m looking for something?”

“Because you have to keep going until you find it.”

“What do you think I’m looking for?”

“Love.”

“Love?”

“Yes. You look for it in Christianity; you look for love in study, in buying all these books and expensive clothes.”

I had to think about that. Looking for love; trying to find love by comparing my life to others; buying books,

clothes, often just to have and never use. Was this just quick self-gratification?

“You don’t think I have it?” I asked.

“I think you overlook it,” Bethany replied with confidence.

“What did I overlook?”

“Just accepting yourself for who you are. That’s all.”

“And you think I don’t?”

“I’m not saying that. I’m just saying you don’t have to look anymore.”

“You mean I have you?”

“Better than that, you have you.”

I added some more hot water. Bethany’s insight had to seep into me like the stream seeping into my pores.

“Don’t think, just accept,” Bethany said.

I tried my best to do just that.

After our bath I went to the prayer room for my usual hour. As I flicked on some quiet worship music, Bethany slipped in the room. Normally at this time, she would study or listen to her Japanese lessons. Tonight she prayed with me for the better part of the hour, later slipping out to the terrace where she continued under the moonlight. Bethany returned later took my hand and we spent the time praying for each other.

My Doll rested her head on her arm and watched me as I tried to sleep. Her inquisitive stare made me smile.

“You’re not a failure, Dylan,” she spoke out of the blue.

“Huh?” was all I could muster.

“At service you seemed so uncomfortable. It’s like you wanted to dive under your seat and hide. I’d never seen you like that. I knew it wasn’t the church; you were all right

during worship. So I prayed about it and God told me there's a part of you that thinks you're a failure. Sometimes you see people who have things you want and you think you'll never get, so you feel out of place. It's like they have everything and you have nothing. But God wants you to know you're not a failure. Everything you dreamed of and asked for in prayer is already here. Some things haven't manifested yet others have. He said 'don't look around at others, look up at Me.'"

I didn't know what to say. It did appear that everyone was happy and I was alone. I would see young people, so alive, so vibrant, with so much promise for the future. They could accomplish things in their youth that I wanted to but never did. I had only dreams, not deferred but unfulfilled.

"I don't think you're a failure either," Bethany added.

"Thank you, Bethany," I said silently.

She rested in my arms as a smile rested on her lips. I should have been the one smiling. I had never known love like hers before. I always loved but no one ever loved me back. She did. Bethany brought hope and a strong belief in all that I did. I finally had someone to share my life with. I loved her and I loved God for bringing her to me. Thank you Father God.

“Bethany, remember when I said how God sent me here to discover two things that would change my life for the better? You know what the second one is?”

“No, what?”

“You.”

“Wow!” was all Bethany could say. She laid silent for a time then began to speak: “Dylan I wondered why I was called here too. Did I tell you I passed up Carnegie Mellon? I was already at Rice for two years when I felt a strong calling to transfer here. At the same time Carnegie called. They

wanted me to attend a special program over the summer then continue my degree there. I turned it down. We must have something really special.”

“We do,” I said. “It’s ordained by God.”

“The inerrancy and infallibility of the Bible,” was all Dr. Jarvis said to open the class. His eyes roamed from one student to the next looking for an answer. Though his opening sentence was fragmented we all knew the question; *Is the Bible inerrant and infallible?*

“All Scripture is the inspiration of God,” Justin declared in a tone that indicated the discussion has ended.

“Go on, Mr. James,” Dr. Jarvis said.

Justin seemed taken aback by this statement. What more needed to be said, he probably thought. But he continued.

“All Scripture is given by inspiration of God and is profitable for doctrine, reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work.” (2 Timothy 3:16 NKJ) This proves that the Bible is the complete and accurate word of God.”

Most of the class smiled and nodded in agreement. I didn't.

“Mr. Ramsey, the look on your face is speaking louder than your words,” Dr. Jarvis said. “Would you care to articulate your thoughts to the rest of the class?”

“Well, to a point I agree with Justin's use of 2 Timothy 3:16. But it's not the right Scripture to address your question.”

“Why not?” Justin asked. “All we know about God is through the Word. I’m sure you’re familiar with the Scripture, *‘Faith comes by hearing and hearing by the word of God,’* (Romans 10:17). So what we hear has to be the truth. Jesus said *‘I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the father except through me.’* (John 14:6) *‘In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God.’* (John 1:1) *‘The Word became flesh.’* (John 1:14) Jesus was the living embodiment of everything the Old Testament talks about. So it has to be true.”

“You’re talking about two different things,” I began. “I agree Jesus is the living embodiment of the Word of God. And all the Scriptures you gave to lead up to that point were excellent; I’ve made that same argument myself. But you cannot use 2 Tim in that argument or to answer Dr. Jarvis’ question.”

“I can’t wait to hear this,” Justin said with sarcasm.

The majority of the class were in agreement with him as they waited for my rebut.

“Point one, 2 Tim isn’t talking about the Bible as we know it. Granted Paul is talking about the Old Testament but he could also be referring to the Torah, Nevi’im, Ketuvim; the Jewish books of the Law, the Prophets and the Writings. It is estimated that 2 Tim was written around 67 A.D.

Though some of the Gospels were written by that time, there is no evidence that Paul read or was referring to them. And most of the New Testament is composed of his personal letters to small churches. The cannon as we know it today wasn’t comprised until centuries later, so the words of 2 Tim aren’t talking about the canon we’re familiar with. Point two, Paul may have been referring to other Hebrew writings like those found in the pseudepigrapha and other apocalyptic

writings. If that were that case, how come we don't read and refer to those writings today?"

"The Bible is the inspired Word of God," Justin declared. "When it was canonized, God supernaturally instructed what was His word and what wasn't. Look at the Septuagint. Seventy-two Jewish scholars were kept in separate chambers to translate the Torah from Hebrew to Greek. In seventy-two days they came up with the exact same translation. Impossible?---not with God. This is where faith, not science, comes in. I know there are Hebrew texts and Catholics have their own version of the Bible. But God put everything He wanted in the authorized King James Version. It's a miracle. I believe that."

"I heard that argument before, I just don't buy it," I replied. "The word Bible itself is derived from the Greek meaning 'little books.' In ancient libraries these books

weren't read collectively. They were viewed as a collection of scrolls with various genres of literature not as history."

There was a small gasp from some of my classmates. For Justin had just articulated the major fundamentalist argument for the inerrancy of the Bible.

"I will never understand how someone can call themselves a Christian and not believe in the Bible," Justin said.

"I believe in the Bible," I said. "I just find it hard to believe that documents translated from different languages, recalled sparring centuries from oral records to a written one, could come out without one mistake."

Another gasp.

"So you just pick and choose what you believe and what you don't?" asked Carrie Sanders, a new student whom I only exchanged a few greetings with.

“No,” I defended. “Historians might say it wasn’t the Red Sea but the Reed Sea. I don’t get involved with that argument. I just know God parted the sea to provide an escape for the Israelites. Is the Book of Jonah true or a fable? I don’t care. I just believe in a god who would send a non-caring person to give non-believers a prophetic word of salvation. To me, if something is historically inaccurate it doesn’t make the story invalid. Every word of the Bible doesn’t have to be correct in order for me to know who God is. People spend too much time debating points like this, when they should be doing what Jesus said; *love God with all your heart, body and mind and love one another. This sums all the laws and the prophets.*”

From the look on Carrie’s face I knew I had made an enemy. ‘Another agent of satan implanted among the true believers trying to confuse them with scientific and historical heresy,’ seemed to be what she was thinking.

“For we did not follow cunningly devised fables when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but were eyewitnesses of His majesty. For He received from God the Father honor and glory when such a voice came to Him from the Excellent Glory: “This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.” And we heard this voice which came from heaven when we were with Him on the holy mountain. And so we have the prophetic word confirmed, which you do well to heed as a light that shines in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts; knowing this first, that no prophecy of Scripture is of any private interpretation, for prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit,”” (2 Peter 1: 16- 21NKJ)

Carrie recited from memory.

I wished I could bring forth Scripture like that. I knew it came from one of Peter’s letters, that was about it.

“I agree with that, Carrie,” I said flipping through Peter’s letters to find backup for my rebuttal.

“And you should also read 2 Peter chapter 2,” she added.

I had just come to that passage.

“Once again I say,” I started, “that was written to a select audience. Reading the epistles is like reading someone’s personal email. Our mistake is we apply what we read to ourselves no matter what the real context is. Peter is not talking about the Bible as we know it, but how *he* was a personal witness to Jesus when he walked the face of the earth.”

The class recognized my logic but still believed what they wanted to. Then again, this is what the class was about; forming one’s own theology.

“The Bible is God breathed. Every word of it is true,” Carrie said without question.

“I believe that too,” I said. “It’s just my definition of ‘true’ is different. Is it true that God created the earth? Yes. Did He do it in six days as we would recognize a day? No. Why is that? God didn’t create the distinction of day and night until the third day. And to quote from the very letter of Peter you cited, ‘*With the Lord a day is like a thousand years and a thousand years like a day.*’” (2 Peter 3:8 NIV)

I think people hated my theology for it made them think. It might have been better if I were an atheist. Then they could try to convince me of their beliefs. In this case we believed in the same thing but our interpretation was different. Since Satan is the author of confusion, any chink in their theology is considered heresy. Technically it is. For the true definition of heresy is simply ‘different.’

As I walked down the hallway I notice Bethany seated on a bench and Augustine, a former student of mine,

standing above her trying his best to ask her out. I watched from a short distance as she politely avoided his advances.

“Everybody goes to Rick’s,” said Augustine. He was tall, shaggy haired and dressed in the latest fashion. Attractive girls were always trailing him like lovesick puppies. Now he wanted to add one more to the litter.

“I’ve been there,” Bethany said. “It’s a great place to hang out.”

“Let’s go tonight. A group of us are going. Come on. It would be a lot of fun.”

“I can’t,” Bethany replied spending more time arranging her books than with Augustine.

“Hey Mr. Ramsey,” Augustine said to me as I came alongside, “I asked this beautiful lady to go out with me and she won’t. Help me out here.”

“I wish I could, Mr. Kovic, but affairs of the heart isn’t a course I teach.”

“Tell her we would have a great time together.”

“She’s sitting right there, you tell her. I’m sure Miss Taylor knows exactly what she wants.”

“Bethany you need a man who is gonna treat you right.”

“I already have one,” Bethany replied.

“You do?” Augustine barked in shock and surprise.

“Who is he? Does he go to this school?”

“I know you’ve seen him around,” Bethany said with feigned innocence.

“That guy is the most blessed man in school. He better treat you right or I’ll come after him. You tell him I said so.”

“I will Augustine.”

Bethany shot a quick look at me.

“Mr. Ramsey, can I have a word with you?” Bethany said rising.

“Of course, Miss Taylor.”

“Hey Bethany, wait---”

“Well, it’s about---” Bethany began as we walked down the hall cutting Augustine off from the end of that statement and knowledge of who ‘the man who better treat her right’ was.

It was our last class before the final. Like all my classes, there were some students I would remember more than others, some that gave me a hard time, some that I could see had a prominent future. In the end I knew I would miss them all. I wanted to collect their term paper, review for the final, then release the class early. Since I was only a teaching assistant, I couldn’t make that call. We had to go the full

three hours. We finished the review than I asked if there was anything they would like to talk about.

The class also thought they were going to get out early. For a second or two all looked around, not really wanting to put their brains in a classroom mode. Then Allison's hand shot up.

"I have a question, Mr. Ramsey," said Allison. "We never discussed it in class, but I was thinking since America is a Christian country, how come prayer was taken out of school? If you look at history, once prayer was taken out, kids started becoming juvenile delinquents, getting pregnant, listening to rock n' roll, Elvis Presley, gangs."

"What do you say to all that, Mr. Ramsey?" Frankie asked jokingly.

"Wow," I said. "Do you really want my answer?"

"Yes," many of the students said. Others shook their heads in agreement.

“Where do I begin? First, prayer was taken out of public schools in the early sixties. By that time, Elvis was making middle of the road Hollywood films and rock n’ roll was Frankie and Annette in *Beach Blanket Bingo*. The age of rock n’ roll being equated with juvenile delinquency was the late fifties. The issue of prayer and public schools was first brought to light with *Engel v. Vitale* in 1962. The big cases were *Abington School District v. Schempp* and *Murray v. Curlett* in 1963. That’s where the Supreme Court ruled that public school sponsored Bible reading was unconstitutional.”

“That doesn’t make sense,” said Amy Green. “If America is a Christian country, how could reading the Bible be unconstitutional?”

“What makes you think America is a Christian country?” I asked.

We had been together for four weeks. I thought, by now, the class would be used to my opposing statements.

Still, on the last day of class, they were startled by my question.

“Settlers came from Europe to flee religious persecution,” said Allison. “Christianity was practiced here when we were just colonies. Then the Founding Fathers, who were all Christians, decided to make this one nation under God and live by the rules of the Bible. The Bible was used in schools to teach people to read. The Ten Commandments were put up in City Halls. Christianity is what makes us different from Iran or Iraq, Muslim countries, or Asian countries where they practice Buddhism.”

“I have to take apart everything you just said piece by piece,” I said. “People believe the United States was created as a Christian nation but that is not really true. Before there was a federated government, America was a group of colonies. These colonies, for the most part, were under religious rule. Quakers, Dutch Reform, Puritans, religious

groups like this more or less ruled their regions. In many respects they ruled to the detriment of the colony. It was a theocracy more than a democracy. When you read stories or see movies of the Salem Witch Trials, floggings or women wearing scarlet letters, this was the religious regimes punishment for violation of religious laws. Part of the ideology for the formation of a federal government was to give citizens the freedom of choice for their religious views.”

“But this is one nation under God,” Amy said with a question in her voice.

“Not really,” I answered. “The First Amendment prohibits that from happening. Also that line ‘one nation under God’ wasn’t in the original Pledge of Allegiance when written in 1892. It was added in 1954, more to equate U.S. patriotism with religion and to distinguish us from the Soviet Union than to profess a love for God. It’s mainly the

Religious Right that claims the Founding Fathers created America as a Charismatic Evangelical government.”

“But I always heard that Adams and Jefferson and Franklin wanted a Christian nation,” Amy continued.

“Many of the Founding Fathers believed that Christian thought brought morality to the people. So in that respect they wanted it to continue. But people who weren’t believers were forced to pay taxes to support a church they didn’t have allegiance to. Jews and Catholics were tolerated but faced bigotry.”

“But don’t you agree that if prayer was back in school there wouldn’t be so much crime, kids wouldn’t get pregnant, grades would be higher...” Allison asked.

“People can still pray in school,” I answered. “It’s just in public schools a teacher can’t say to the class ‘now we’re going to pray in the name of Jesus Christ.’ You can still pray as an individual.”

“No you can’t,” said Davina. “I heard this story where two kids were expelled from school for starting a prayer group.”

“Yeah,” agreed Daisy, “They’re taking the Bible out of school and public libraries.”

“Those are either urban legends or there is more to the story,” I stated. “It’s a constitutional right to pray when you want. And public libraries don’t ban books. This isn’t Nazi Germany.”

“They hate us,” said Allison.

“Who are ‘they’?” I asked. “Federal government? State or local? The Supreme Court? They are the only ones who can legally prohibit any American from doing what they believe is right. And all they can stand on are existing laws.”

“I don’t know who ‘they’ are,” said Allison. “I just know people don’t want Christians to practice Christianity.”

I always hated the ‘they’ against ‘us’ mentality. It just fostered Christians to retreat to a place that really didn’t exist. An imagined sanctuary where they resided with the absolute truth while the world outside tried to destroy them and their beliefs. I tried to suppress my anger as I told my students the following:

“Look, this was a great class and I really love each and every one of you. If there is one thing I want you to walk away from this class with it’s: study the issue. You have heard me say time and time again, ‘do the research.’ I don’t want Christians to be these isolated people who live in a world of their own where they think they have all the answers. I don’t mean about faith, I mean: the world is only six thousand years old, dinosaurs never existed, the Founding Fathers drafted the Constitution from the Bible, the media is trying to destroy Christianity. Statements like this couldn’t be further from the truth. To keep repeating them makes us

seem like morons. I want Christians to be intelligent, well-studied people; reading everything, so we will be able to discuss issues intelligently and not just go with a ‘gut’ feeling.”

I knew my comments required a rebuttal, but class was over. That was the final word.

“So go out and study,” I said changing my spirit from hostility to encouragement. “Be the changing force of the twenty-first century.”

In lieu of a midterm and final, my grad class was assigned to write a twenty-five page paper defining our theology. Our instructions were to take any five theological issues (healing after the apostolic age, premillennialism/postmillennialism, inerrancy of the Bible, etc.) and discuss our opinion on each in four to five pages. My trouble was I really didn’t care about any of these, at

least not enough to fill four to five pages. Granted a theologian must have a position on topics concerning Christianity. In defining my theology none of these topics came into play. As stated before my theology was summed the same way Jesus and the Jews summed theirs; The Shema: *'Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one.'* Jesus: *'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself. All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.'* (Mark 12:28-31 and Matthew 22:37-40)

The thesis for my paper came from the very thing Jesus said; if you uphold these two things you are doing everything necessary. Our greatest concerns should be geared toward serving God and our fellow man, not issues that in his three year ministry on earth Jesus didn't discuss.

One must also note that in both items, ‘love’ must be performed. The only factor that should truly distinguish a Christian is love. We are commanded to love. If this isn’t being exhibited in word and deed, does it really matter if one can factually prove the ‘flood theory?’

I summed my paper by illustrating the journey of Paul. He confessed in Acts 22 that under the teaching of Gamaleil he possessed a spirit so zealous it led him to persecute followers of Christ. Once the Spirit of the Lord came upon him, he was able to write the poignant words of 1st Corinthians 13 also known as the love chapter. I believe Paul is speaking about the love of God he found when he wrote, “*When I was a child, I talked like a child; I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put childish ways behind me.*” Children can be selfish wanting just their needs satisfied. Maturity realizes the feelings of others must come into play. “*And now these*

three remain: faith, hope and love. The greatest of these is love.” Coming away from his old mindset and into the mindset of Christ, he found love was the key.

My case for this argument was so strong I filled twenty-six pages. I would throw in my views of the given topics briefly. I guess my creative writing spirit always balked when I was told a paper had to be done a certain way for it to be right. Anyone could have written it the standard mundane way, just following instructions and receive an A. I did it my way and received an A+.

With the first session over, I was six credits closer to completing my Master’s and venturing into a land that I knew not of. Bethany had completed her first class at the University. She passed with honors but grades didn’t faze her. Besides it was our anniversary. One month together. I decided to kidnap Bethany. My instructions were to throw a

few things in a bag and just come with me, no questions asked. With my limited driving skills, I took her to a lakeside resort just outside of Tulsa. Every time it was advertised on TV Bethany's eyes would light up. I knew this would be a nice getaway. We dropped our bags in the room, took a quick perusal around the grounds then had a nice shrimp dinner in the dining room. Afterward, we took a late night walk to the lake.

The water ruffled softly against the shore as we sat at the lake's edge watching the dark starlit sky. Every now and then a warm summer breeze would give us a reprieve from the hot Tulsa night. Enfolded in my arms, Bethany smiled as she recalled times passed.

"My family used to go to Galveston. We would drive down on a Friday night and pitch a tent at the shore. You know we only went 'cause I told my dad how much I loved going to the shore at Christian Camp."

“You mentioned before that you went to Christian Camp?”

“Yeah every summer since I was seven.”

“What do you do at a Christian camp?”

“Are you serious? You didn’t go? They don’t have them in New York?”

“Not really. A church might have a summer camp but they’re like any other day camp; they take kids to the beach, museums, the park. But you went on mission trips and studied the Bible, things like that, right?”

“Yeah. We’d study the Bible, visit low income families, senior citizens homes, adopt a block street clean up. But we would always wind up at the beach. We’d sing song, fellowship, make smores...”

“I didn’t know what a smore was until I came out here.”

“You had a deprived childhood living in New York City. That’s why you had to meet me. So I could show you things.”

“You fill in what I was deprived of, I fill in what you were deprived of.”

“Pig,” she said with an elbow to my stomach. “But I loved Christian camp and coming to the beach. Sometimes we’d sleep out there too. That’s why my Dad would take us. I told him how much I loved it so he brought the whole family out there just to make me happy. We would go to the Coast at least three weekends during the summer. Is that why you brought me to this lake, to make me happy?”

“Yes. I like the beach too and I thought it would be a nice way to relax and get away from school. But now that I know that it has a special place in your heart, Miss Bethany, we’ll go to the shore every chance we get.”

“You’re the best Dylan,” she said with a smile.

Her eyes enjoyed the moonlit sky, perhaps thinking about times past, perhaps thinking about days to come.

“I always wondered what it would be like to sit under the stars with a boy,” Bethany said. “This is nice.”

“What about guys before me? They didn’t take you out?”

“What guys? There was no one.”

“Oh come on; a girl as beautiful as you. You can’t tell me guys weren’t tripping over each other to get to you. Your Dad probably had to beat them off with a stick.”

“No. I didn’t date. Okay there was one guy. I was the captain of the Debate Club; he was the president of the Lawyers of the Future Club. He was cute and we did go out a few times and I know he liked me...but something was missing. I know I should have liked him, people were always saying we looked like the perfect couple, but somehow I knew he wasn’t it. I don’t know if I can explain it.”

“I know exactly what you’re talking about. I think in most of my relationships I was trying to force something that wasn’t there. I always felt it could be ‘there’ if we just let the relationship run its course. But it never worked out.”

“But we did. Just like that.”

She kissed me softly on the lips.

“At the end of my first year here I was walking along the road on campus. Off in the distance I saw a young girl pushing a hand truck with three big boxes on it. I knew she was heading to the rear parking lot. I looked over and saw her car and thought I would see a couple of people to help her, but there was no one in sight. School had been over for a few days, so campus was empty but she kept pushing. And she was a tiny girl. I kept thinking how is she going to get those boxes into her car. The Spirit of the Lord said to me, ‘I sent you.’ ‘Yeah,’ I said to the Lord, ‘but she didn’t know I would be there.’ He said again, ‘I sent you.’ I finally met up

with her at the car and offered a hand. The boxes were big and heavy so I asked ‘how were you going to get these boxes in your car all by yourself?’ She said she knew someone would come along. She knew everything she needed would come along at the appointed time. The Lord orchestrated my moves so I could be there at the exact time to help her. From that moment on I knew if I just kept walking in faith whatever I needed, even though I couldn’t see it, would be there when I needed it. Just like you. I kept walking and there you were.”

“Wow! That’s amazing. I love to hear stories like that. This is just like Christian Camp. Dylan, I know you probably had this romantic evening planned with candle light and bubble bath and all that. But could we do something--- well, you see when I would go on retreats or stay at hotels with my family, we would stay up late and watch DVD’s under the blankets in our pajamas and eat pizza or Chinese

food and chocolate cakes. Could we do that tonight? Just stay up late and do fun things?”

Granted I saw Bethany more in a tiny silk teddy from *Victoria's Secret* and stilettos than floppy slippers and baggy pj's. But her happiness had to be my happiness. We had known many nights of swinging from the chandeliers. If DVD's, double cheese burgers and fries at midnight made her happy, it would have to make me happy too.

“Anything for you, Bethany,” I said.

We drove to Blockbusters at a nearby strip mall. Bethany ran to select her favorite films, *The Preacher's Wife* and *Angels in the Outfield*. Of course my choices ventured into the genre of black and white. I found the little known classic, *The Next Voice You Hear* and one of my all time favorites, *Lillies of the Field*. Next we raided a pizzeria, a hamburger joint and Wal-Greens for all the popcorn and Entenmanns's cakes and cookies we could carry. Back in the

room we changed into our pajamas plopped into bed, popped in her DVD's and laughed and ate and joked and had more fun and food than I had in a long time. Around four am Bethany wanted to go back to the lake to pray under the stars. We found a small hill, read Scriptures by flashlight and prayed in tongues till dawn. It was one of the greatest nights of my life.

A little after six we returned, bleak-eyed, to our room. We slept for a few hours waking just in time to catch their country breakfast of flapjacks, biscuits and gravy, cornbread and ham. Next was a hike with Bibles in tow, where we found another small mountain top and read our favorite Scriptures to each other. Bethany took me to 2 Samuel 21:10 and the story of Rizpah.

“This is one of my favorite stories in the Bible,” Bethany said. “Miss Rizpah cared so much for her children that even in death she wouldn’t let anything happen to them.

I want to be the same way; help those who can't help themselves. One of the pastors I had in Christian Camp told us we should always have a Scripture that defines how we want to live our lives. This is mine. Do you have one, Dylan?"

"Mark 11:22-25."

"That's the one that says to have faith in God; that whatever you believe for if you don't doubt you will have it."

"Yeah. And that's how I live my life."

Bethany just smiled at me with stars in her eyes.

"What's it like in New York, in Brooklyn, where you're from?"

"Exciting. Everything I love is there, the libraries, museums, shops, restaurants. You could just walk the streets with no particular plan and run into a hundred and one things to do."

“Do you wish you were there now? I mean instead of us meeting here we met at NYU or Columbia.”

“No. It’s nice to get away and not just visit other places but live there for a while. And I actually enjoyed my time here.”

“I’d like to visit New York. I think I would enjoy all the things you mentioned but I would get tired of it. I need to see grass, blue skies, riding in a jeep, hiking...”

“Dallas is metropolitan. You make it sound like Dodge City.”

“You have to go outside of Dallas/Fort Worth but it’s all there. I love riding. You ever been?”

“Horses?”

“No elephants. Or maybe you have been on an elephant or camel, Mr. World Traveler.”

“I’m just starting to handle the wheel of a car.

Imagine me trying to control something with a mind of its own and four fast legs.”

“Let’s go riding. They have a stable here, let’s rent some horses.”

“I knew you would ask, so I already did,” I said with a gulp.

“You’re the best!”

I was the quintessential drugstore cowboy. Though I envisioned myself as John Wayne in *Fort Apache* as I sat atop Kennedy, a beautiful brown mare, all I could think of was, ‘Boy am I high off the ground!’

“Come on, Brooklyn!” Bethany yelled as she galloped across the countryside like Dale Evans, on a horse named of all things, Texas Lady. “You’re doing fine!”

The wrangler had shown me the basics and I did manage a small gallop from Kennedy. Though I was a little nervous, it was fun and I was doing something I always wanted to. I was the cowboy of my youth; riding the dusty trails of Oklahoma. Another dream accomplished thanks to the grace of God. But I got more pleasure watching Bethany. I saw the child in Bethany arise, the woman in Bethany, the freedom in Bethany. I hope everybody at some point in their lives enjoy the freedom Bethany possessed at this moment.

She had her moment then slowed down her pace to be with me.

“Dylan you’re holding on too tight.”

“Yeah I don’t want to go flying.”

“You won’t go flying if you hold on like that. She’ll feel too much pressure and stop. Hold on too tight you won’t go anywhere. Hold on loosely and you have more freedom. Then the two of you can really fly.”

I loosen my grip.

“More,” Bethany said.

I gave the rein a little less slack. As I loosen my grip, my whole body began to relax. Everything, including Kennedy, seemed free from tension.

“The Brooklyn Kid,” Bethany ordained me. She snapped a few pictures of me riding the trail.

I followed Bethany on a fast pace. After a while she again slowed down just to please me. For the most part we just held a slow trot, enjoying the landscape and each other.

After our trek along the mountainside, we decided to check out the seascape and rented a sailboat. My days in San Fran left me with some sailing experience. We drifted on the lake watching the sun get closer and closer to the horizon.

‘The summer is a great time to be in love,’ I thought. Warm, star lit nights to share your hopes and dreams with that certain someone. Sharing a look or a kiss with the person

who loves you just as much as you love them. Sure, I had been in love before. Each time I met someone I thought ‘this one is different. It will last.’ With Bethany this was finally true.

I loved Bethany and wanted to spend the rest of my life with her. But outside of undying love what did I really have to offer her? The only thing I was sure of was I would be attending school for the next eight weeks. I had enough money saved for myself for possibly three years. I didn’t have a job; I lived off student loans...

“Stop thinking so much,” Bethany said breaking my thought. “Remember what I told you about riding? Those words don’t just apply to horses. Hold on loosely and you travel much further.”

“To people or ideals?”

“Both.”

She was right. As we watched the sun sink below the horizon, we said little, leaving the soft sounds of the lake as our soundtrack. Bethany was the quietest girl I had ever known. But with saying so little, she said so much.

At dinner we shared a table with a retired couple who talked about the greatness they saw in us. We told them about the greatness of Jesus. They agreed then asked if we were married. Replying no they just smiled. Perhaps their Christian walk had a similar experience; unmarried yet slipping away from it all just to be alone and let nature take its course. And here they were forty-six years down the line still happily married.

Another night of DVD's and sweets was planned. But after our 'warm bubble bath by candle light' that Bethany mentioned as my idea of a good time, sleep started to

overtake me. *Lilies of the Field* ran as I dozed off enwrapped in Bethany arms.

“That was a great movie,” Bethany said when I awoke to the end credits.

“Yeah. I love Sidney Poitier.”

“Who?” she asked turning off the TV.

“Sidney Poitier, the star of the movie.”

“Oh that was that guy’s name. I never saw him before. He was good. And handsome too.”

“You never heard of Sidney Poitier?”

“No,” Bethany said looking at me as if I were speaking about Barack Obama.

“And you thought I had a deprived childhood. You probably saw *Guess Who*, right?”

“They ran it years ago in my dorm. It was funny.”

“See the original with Mr. Poitier. There is no comparison.”

“But this movie was great! I loved how that head nun lady just knew that God would provide. Everything she wanted God sent Homer to do.”

“I preached about this movie saying how Homer wasn’t exactly what they were looking for but he gave them what they needed. He wasn’t a churchgoer, he loved tequila, he fought them tooth and nail and at one point even leaves. Sometimes what you want doesn’t come the way you want it. Ultimately you still get everything you need.”

“Wow! I never thought about God working like that but I guess it’s true.”

“Sure, look at the Bible. The apostles cast lots to find someone to take Judas’ place. They came up with what they thought was a good choice, Matthias. But God sent them Paul, a man who at one point would have stoned them, but eventually takes the gospel message even further than they did *and* writes most of the New Testament. David was the

least likely candidate to kill Goliath. But he did and that was just what the Israelites needed to get the Philistines out of their way. I could go on and on about God sending the seemingly wrong person to do the right job. And then there is you and me.”

“What?” Bethany said with a quizzical look on her face. “You don’t think we’re right for each other?”

“No, I think God got it perfect this time.”

A huge smile erupted on Bethany’s face.

“Why are you such a charmer?”

“I’m not a charmer. Just because I charmed the pants off you don’t think I can do it with every girl I meet.”

“And why are you such a pig?”

“Because you’re too sexy for words.”

“Pig.”

Bethany sleepily snuggled up to me resting her head on my chest. She was exhausted from the long weekend and

so was I. We seemed like an old married couple, falling asleep in front of the TV, too tired to fool around.

“I like that guy Homer,” Bethany said after a few moments of peaceful silence. “What did you say his name was?”

“They call him Mr. Tibbs.”

“Huh?”

“Just a joke to myself.”

“Well tell me tomorrow. I’m too tired to remember. I’m going to sleep now.”

Bethany dropped off to sleep. There was something about Bethany. I guess that’s what every man says about the girl he’s in love with, ‘There is something about---’. It was true about Bethany. The way she dressed, the way she moved, the way she walked, the things she said, the sound of her voice. I loved everything about her. I prayed over her as she slept in my arms. For a second the trepidation I felt

before surfaced again. My prayer combated it. Bethany was mine. What happens from here is in God's hands.

Second Semester

The beginning of a beautiful friendship.

For the new semester I enrolled in an independent study. I waited till the last possible minute to take this required class for I had strong reservations about it. I love classroom repartee; meeting other students, sharing and debating thoughts. Independent study meant I had one class session a week where we discuss the progress of our ‘independent study,’ a thirty-page research paper. The time outside class was ‘supposed’ to be spent researching and writing. On the other hand there were many topics not in the curriculum that I wanted to tackle. For a degree in divinity, we never studied the works of the Church Fathers or major and minor theologians. I wanted to read and discuss Augustine, Ignatius, Reinhold Niebuhr and Howard Thurman. An independent study would fill that niche. My topic: *The Twenty-first Century Christian*. Based on the

Bible and the thoughts of the aforementioned, I would surmise a mandate for Christians for the new millennium. Though we weren't required to write a thesis for our program, this would serve as mine.

Bethany was taking *Marketing Research and Statistics*. She came out of the bedroom wearing a tailored white oxford shirt, jeans and heels. Her poise gave her a business sense but in many ways she reminded me of a little girl getting dressed up for the first day of school.

"Stop looking at me like that," Bethany barked as she collected her laptop, books and bag.

"Like what?" I asked.

"Like I'm some little schoolgirl getting all dressed up for the first day of school."

"I wasn't thinking that."

"Liar. I know your looks."

"My 'looks?' What 'looks' do I have?"

“Well I’m a licensed driver so it’s all legal. We’re only going a half mile with hardly any traffic. I liked it when you drove. I want my man to drive me around.”

“Well excuse me, Miss Thang,” I said buckling up in the driver’s seat.

“I didn’t mean it like that. I just think it’s time you drove.”

“Ok,” I said starting the car then backing out of the parking space.

Bethany was right. It was time I went the whole nine. Driving had come back to me over the weekend. Out here people respected the rules of the road. In New York drivers tended to make up their own.

“You know, I think I will start driving more and take the road test in a few weeks.”

Bethany just smiled. I guess that was her ‘that goes without saying,’ look.

Again I was teaching *Intro to Charismatic Theology*.

This class was smaller than my first semester; just twelve students instead of twenty. This meant one of two things; I would either spend three hours lecturing and having my questions met with silence or they would challenge me at every crossroad. After a half hour of lecturing, I discovered I was faced with the latter. It was during day three I realized my students weren't really debating me. They were just asking questions they always had but never had a venue to express.

“Why is it called charismatic theology,” asked Amy Helms, a bright first semester eighteen-year-old. “I always thought charismatic meant someone’s personality. Most of the time when they’re talking about charismatic theology they’re talking about a megachurch. Does charismatic refer to the pastor?”

“Anyone want to help out Miss Helms?” I asked.

I was greeted with eyes that quickly dropped to the ground or off to the side.

“Anyone here go to a charismatic church?” I added.

“You know this is a charismatic university.”

“I heard this is a charismatic school,” offered Hank Simmons, a strong contender for the wrestling team who also had an eye on pastoring a church. “But I don’t know what that means.”

“Charismatic is derived from the Greek word χάρισμα or *gift* which is derived from the word χάρις which means *grace* or *favor*. When one speaks of charismatic theology, they’re talking about the gifts of the Holy Spirit; miracles, healing, prophecy and glossolaia or speaking in tongues. These words are found in 1st Corinthians chapters 12-14. Charismatic churches and schools believe in these gifts and use them.”

“Do you believe in them, Mr. Ramsey?” Hank asked.

“Yes I do.”

“I think it’s crazy,” Hank continued. “I hear people in chapel and the dorms talking all that mumbo-jumbo and callin’ it praying. Crazy! I mean I believe in God and the Bible but if all that stuff really worked why are people still dying of cancer?”

“I can testify that God is still in the healing business,” said Dottie Roberts. “My mother had a brain tumor. My pastor prayed in agreement with her that she would be cancer free and totally whole. He told her to get every Scripture on healing she could find and read it over and over and pray in tongues. She went back to the doctor the following week and that tumor was gone.” Dottie broke into a heartbreaking sob. “I can’t help but think what my life would be like if God didn’t heal her.”

She cried uncontrollably. I went to comfort her but Hank beat me to it. He placed his arm around her shoulder, his hand on her arm.

“I’m sorry, Dottie,” he said sincerely. “I didn’t mean any disrespect to you or your mother. And I apologize if I offended anyone else in the classroom. It’s just I was raised in a church that didn’t believe in healing. I didn’t mean to make fun.”

“Hank, you’re not alone in that thinking,” I said. “Many Christians believe that miracles and speaking in tongues died out with the apostolic age.”

“What does that mean?” asked David.

“It means some believe all the supernatural things Jesus and the apostles did ended with the apostles.”

“What?” said Amy. “But the Bible says Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and forever. So how could people believe that?”

“There is a school of Christian thought called cessationism,” I said.

“What Scriptures do they base it on?” Amy asked.

“Hank, would you like to help us out?” I asked.

“1st Corinthians 13:8 *‘Love never fails. But where there are prophecies they will cease, where there are tongues they will be stilled, where there is knowledge, it will pass away.’* Paul says right there that all this is gone. He says *and now these three remain*, faith, hope and love. Those are the things we’re left with. That’s what we have to work with.”

“To add to his argument,” I added, “Cessationist also cite Ephesians 2:20 interpreting it to say the early works of the church were only foundational and not an office or continuing. They argue that if healing still occurs why is disease still prevalent, why does evil seem to rule over the works of God.”

“So what do you have faith in?” asked Ginger Rossi a fellow Brooklynite.

“That Jesus Christ is my Lord and Savior. That he died and rose for our sins,” Hank replied with pride.

“What about miracles?” asked Sandy Perez. “Don’t you believe they can still happen?”

“Sure I do,” he continued. “It’s just not the norm. People rely too much on supernatural things and forget that God told us to minister. When Jesus first started preaching he came from Isaiah and said; *‘The Spirit of the Lord is on me because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.’* (Luke 4:18-19). He was anointed or chosen by a divine election. At one point Jesus gave *the apostles* the power to heal. So they had it. He left us with a Great Commission to be witnesses for him and

to show his love. He didn't say anything about miracles.

Jesus wants us to spread the salvation message; that through him no one has to go to hell for eternity."

"But Jesus said; *'anyone who has faith in me will do what I have been doing. He will do even greater things.'*"

(John 14:12), Amy defended. "Jesus raised the dead, even came back from the dead. Through the Holy Spirit that was given to us as part of the Great Commission,(Acts 1:7-8) we can do what Jesus did and more."

"When was the last time you brought back someone from the dead, Amy?" Hank asked. "When was the last time you walked on water or through a wall? That can't be done. But what can be done is to spread the Gospel in ways Jesus couldn't. He had to walk everywhere. His evangelizing was limited. Now we have TV, the internet, cell phones, texting, airplanes, cars. That's the 'greater things' we can do; spread the gospel to more people than Jesus could."

“What do you think, Mr. Ramsey?” Amy asked.

“Everyone was defending their positions so well I didn’t want to interrupt,” I stated. “I do have an opinion and I’ll state it. First, let me say; this is a university, a place for higher learning and development. If I say something contrary to your beliefs it doesn’t make me right ‘cause I’m the teacher. You don’t have to stop believing what you believe. We have to learn from each other even if the only thing we learn is why someone believes what they believe. That being said I believe the Holy Spirit gives us the power to heal. It has manifested in me and I’ve seen it work in others. I pray in tongues all the time. Back in New York I belonged to a mainline Methodist church but my theology was charismatic. They thought I was crazy. People would talk about how bad their arthritis was and I would tell them they don’t have to submit to it. They thought I was uncaring even though they

all heard sermons and sang songs about a sacrificial lamb who took all our infirmities.”

“Why don’t people believe in miracles?” Amy asked.

“In America we’re too intellectual. Many people believe in God ‘cause they were raised to. You go to church on Sunday morning; you were told Christ was born on Christmas Day. Many Americans are Christians as opposed to Buddhist or Hindu. But to really believe, I mean really, that God parted the Red Sea or Jesus fed the multitudes with a few fish and loaves of bread, I think they think it’s kinda crazy.”

“That’s not true, Mr. Ramsey,” Hank added. “I believe in miracles. God can do anything He wants anytime He wants. That is why He is God. But we are under the Age of Grace. The fact that God loves us even with our sinning ways is all we need.”

“You’re right, Mr. Davis. That is part of the theology,” I added.

“But you believe, don’t you Mr. Ramsey?” asked Amy.

“I believe in miracles,” I answered. “But I also believe in preventive care from doctors, and health insurance. Your first option shouldn’t be a miracle. You shouldn’t have to pray for God to take your diabetes when a regular checkup could have detected early warning signs. God blessed us to live in a country where there are countless doctors and hospitals. I have been to countries where they’re not as fortunate. After we’ve been to the doctor and taken all the medical tests required in the natural, if the doctor says the prognosis is negative then we go to the Lord for the supernatural.”

“I believe something similar to that,” agreed Hank.

“Like I said, God is God and He can do whatever He wants to.”

“But aren’t we under a covenant agreement?” asked Dottie. “My pastor said that’s why my mother was healed. She read the promises. Exodus 15:26 *‘If you listen carefully to the voice of the Lord your God and do what is right in his eyes, if you pay attention to his commands and keep all his decrees, I will not bring on you any of the diseases I brought on the Egyptians for I am the Lord who heals.’* Or Proverbs 4:20 *‘My son pay attention to what I say; listen closely to my words. Do not let them out of your sight keep them within your heart for they are life to those who find them and health to a man’s whole body.’* I read them with my mother. It worked.”

“I would have done the same thing,” I agreed. “But even though we are under a covenant agreement that doesn’t

mean we're not going to get sick or lose a job. The Bible says, '*No weapon formed against me will prosper,*' (Isaiah 45:17) Weapons will be formed. If you have faith, they won't succeed. We don't live lives of perfection, we live lives of faith. The Bible tells us to '*walk by faith and not by sight.*' That means sometimes when you look around things might be grim. But since you're under a covenant agreement, your faith in God as your supplier will get you out. All your needs will be met by His riches and glory."

"You're amazing, Mr. Ramsey," Amy said with a bright-eyed look I sometimes get from Bethany.

"I agree," said Hank. "You make me think."

"I just read the Bible and have faith in God," I said. "I want to bring understanding, but I also want you to bring your questions and if you disagree with me say so. I'm telling you right now in no uncertain terms if you disagree or question something I said, raise your hand and tell me. I want

you to learn and but I also want to learn from you. Do we have a deal?"

The class nodded and smiled in agreement.

A lot was going through my mind; Bethany, my paper, finishing school in a few weeks. Mainly, it was the construction of the paper. I had some ideas and started to work on them at home instead of the library. I sat at my desk, laptop and a few books at hand. A few paragraphs came out then *it* happened. I noticed dust on the coffee table. Somehow when I was working, I would notice something that wasn't in place. My concentration would focus on the ill-aligned book on the shelf, the smudge on the kitchen counter. I grabbed some cheese cloth and *Lemon Pledge* and attended to the dusty table. Then I decided to vacuum. I loved vacuuming and did it every day. It relaxed me. I sprinkled the *Arm and Hammer Carpet Deodorized* then let it

sit while I filled out two more pages of notes and text. When I returned to vacuuming Bethany walked in.

“You’re vacuuming?” she said somewhat surprised. Though we had been together for close to five weeks, it seemed I always did the cleaning when she wasn’t home.

“Yeah. You think the apartment cleans itself?”

“I thought I left my mother back in Dallas/Ft. Worth,” she replied with a bit of an attitude.

“You let your mother do the cleaning?”

“I didn’t ‘let’ her---she just did it.”

“You missed out on all the fun. I like cleaning; it helps me think.”

“That’s ‘cause you’re weird.”

“I’m not weird. And if you don’t mind, take off your shoes. I’m vacuuming.”

“They’re just flip-flops. What harm could they do?”

“They can bring dirt and allergens into the house.”

“Oh brother!” she said and flipped off her flip-flops.

“Can I put my bag on the desk or did you just dust? Oh my God! You did!”

“Yeah but it’s okay. This isn’t the first time I cleaned. Didn’t you ever notice how neat the place is?”

“Not really.”

“I clean every day. That’s how I relax.”

“Well I was going to the gym, that’s how I relax. I came home ‘cause I thought I left my sneakers in the car. They’re not there. Do you know where they are?”

“In the wash. I found your gym bag in the car and threw everything in the machine. They should be ready in about an hour.”

“An hour! I want to go to the gym now!”

“You can go later. I’ll go with you. Now have something to eat. I made Mexican Chicken Salad.”

“I’m not hungry. I want to go to the gym.”

“The gym is open till eleven. Eat, relax, take a dip in the pool. There’s a lot you can do.”

Bethany took a seat at the desk.

“I know what I can do. I can help you write your paper.” She began to type: “Dylan is a neat freak and he’s weird. He likes to wash my things when I want to go workout.”

“Do you always act like this when you don’t get your way?”

“What’s wrong with the way I’m acting,” she said with a playful defiance. “You think it’s childish? I’m not childish.” She took the box of Arm and Hammer and dumped it on the floor. “That’s childish. Now what are you gonna do, put me over your knee?”

I shut off the vacuum and gave her a look saying that’s exactly what I was going to do.

“Dylan, don’t touch me!” she said seeing I meant business.

She smiled and started to run. I reached out, grabbed the waist of her jeans and pulled her to me.

“Get off me you bully,” she cried struggling.

“Now this is going to hurt you more than it does me,” I said when I finally had the fighting Bethany over my knee.

She laughingly tried to get away. I had a firm grip on her jeans and began to pat her softly on the butt.

“I thought people from New York were tough. I was hit harder when I played in the girls basketball league in the fourth grade.”

“Bad Bethany, bad Bethany,” I said with each pat to her butt. “I will never come into this house with a bad attitude again.”

“Okay, okay.”

I stopped spanking her.

“Well since you think you’re my father maybe you should have a few gray hairs.”

Bethany crawled out of my lap, picked up the carpet deodorizer, poured it on my head then ran into the prayer room. I followed.

“Dylan, don’t touch me!”

She fell on the floor. I fell on top of her and held her arms down.

“You’re mean!” she said.

“I’m not mean. And just to show you I’m not gonna spank you, I’m gonna tickle you.”

I held both her arms with one hand and tickled her ribs with the other. She laughed and tried to wiggle her way free. She finally broke free and delivered a right to my ribs. To use a baseball term, it had English on it.

“Hey!” I yelled.

“Good for you!” she cried and delivered a left.

“You don’t play around, do you?” I said.

“Not when some crazy man is trying to tickle me to death.”

I tried to rub the sting out of my sides.

“That’s what you get.”

“You know how to hit. That hurt.”

“Oh brother! You’re such a baby. Here, let me kiss it and make it better.”

“Please.”

I lifted my tee shirt. Bethany started to kiss my ribs gently. Then she bit me.

“Hey!” I yelled again.

“Oh boy. You can’t take it. My dad told me ‘don’t start something you can’t finish.’ Let that be a lesson to you.”

“You’re a wildcat!”

“And you let a girl beat you.”

“This time. But watch your back. From now on, sleep with one eye open.”

“Oh I’m so scared.”

We looked in each other’s eyes and smiled. Our lips locked as if drawn by a magnet. She ran her fingers through my hair.

“You don’t look bad with gray hair.”

“And you’re hot when you’re a brat.”

“I’m not a brat.”

“Yes you are.”

I kissed her again then rolled over to lie by her side.

“Dylan you’re crazy. I can’t believe you put me over your knee.”

“You deserved it.”

Bethany rested her head on my chest.

“Dylan, I hate this class I’m in,” Bethany confessed quietly. “It’s boring and a waste of my time.”

“It’s still another A.”

“Whatever,” she replied dismissing it for the time.

“You wanna lay out in the hot tub, since I can’t workout? Or do you have to steam the drapes?”

“Don’t tempt me. Sure, I’ll lay out with you,” I said really wanting to get back to my paper.

“Question.”

“Yes.”

“Do you really clean every day?”

“Yeah.”

“You’re weird.”

The sun had another few hours before it set which meant the temperature was still hovering at one hundred. The hot tub was too hot for this late afternoon rendezvous so we opted for time in the pool. Someone had left two rubber rafts which we utilized. My Doll, looking stunning in a white two

piece swimsuit, was quiet for a time. Maybe that's what she needed. There aren't enough books written about fasting conversation. Silence, especially solitude can do wonders for the spirit.

"I hate this class," Bethany finally spoke. "It's so lame; I'm not learning anything."

"After four days? Give it some time."

"I have. The professor is weak; I don't know where they got him from. I know all this stuff already. Before I came home today I finished my term paper. All my work is done; I'm through with the class. The next three weeks I'm just gonna work on my Japanese."

Bethany was an intellect. She loved absorbing knowledge and exposure to new things. Her class was greatly about analyzing demographics and statistics.

"I've had classes like that," I said. "I just breeze through the work and focus on my other classes."

“I told you about Carnegie-Mellon. I spoke to my friend Alexis who did go there this summer---I can’t believe the courses she’s taking. They sound amazing and she loves everything about it.”

“But you came here because you said God called you.”

“Yeah---I guess. My first class was alright---but---well---maybe I made a mistake coming here. I don’t mean about meeting you. I mean about coming here to learn.”

“Did you pray about it?”

“Yeah. You wouldn’t believe how happy I was when I got the call from Carnegie. But I prayed about it and felt I had to come here.”

“I’m the same way. Everything was set back in NYC; my job, perfect apartment, finances. I gave it all up to get a degree that unlike any other degree doesn’t assure a high paying job. All because I heard the voice of God.”

“But why? Why did we give up assurance?”

“For blessed assurance.”

“You sound like a sermon.”

“What else is there to say? The Bible says ‘*without faith it is impossible to please God.*’ (Hebrews 11:6) We just went on faith. So, if God and His promises are true, which I believe they are, there has to be a great reward at the end. It’s promised. ‘*Anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.*’”

“Since you started preaching don’t stop.”

“You say that you’re not learning in this class. I agree you can learn more at Carnegie-Mellon than you can here. To most it would have made more sense and been more impressive on your resume. People might have said it was a foolish choice to go to ‘that Christian university.’ The Bible says ‘*God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the*

strong. ' (1st Corinth 1:27) You would have gotten an excellent education from Carnegie-Mellon, but here, in addition to scholastic knowledge, you're getting something more useful, the wisdom and the power of God. What does Paul say about life through the Spirit: '*---in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.*'"(Romans 8:28)

"I like having a live-in preacher."

"And you're gonna like all that God has in store for you."

"What about doubt?"

"Hey they all doubted, John the Baptist, Peter, the apostles. Do you think I came here willingly? Who in their right mind leaves Brooklyn to live in Tulsa, OK?"

"I always thought you were crazy. Now I know."

"Crazy about you and the Lord."

“Do you think maybe I’ll go next year? God just said to come. I didn’t hear Him say I had to finish my degree here.”

“We’ll see.”

Bethany’s spirit seemed to lighten. A shroud was visibly lifted from her.

“You wanna get something to eat?”

“No, I wanna make love to you.”

“Dylan! I can’t believe you. You just finished preaching and now--- You’re such a pig.”

“What about you? You’re the one coming out here lookin’ all hot and all--”

“It’s just a bathing suit. And you look hot too but you don’t hear me talking like that. My momma told me the woman is always the mature one in the relationship. I guess she’s right.”

“We’ll see about that.”

I rolled off my raft and onto Bethany's making us fall
in the water.

"Boy are you crazy!" she screamed.

I held onto and kissed her. Bethany returned my kiss
with passion.

"Dylan, we're outside. People can see us."

"Shy?"

"Well I just confessed my doubts in front of God.

Why should I have any shame in front of regular people. Oh
my God, I'm beginning to sound like you."

"Nice, isn't it?"

"Hmmm."

I held her for a bit then led her back to the rafts.

"Let's just lay out for a while," she said.

"Okay."

We just floated, watched the sunset on Tulsa, said
little, and enjoyed each other's company even more.

“Don’t worry,” I said after a time of silence, “I’ll still gonna work that body.”

“You can’t leave well enough alone, can you? You have to be a pig,” Bethany said with a sly smile.

We stayed in the pool for a while, eventually ate the Mexican chicken salad under the summer sky, then retired to the apartment where I kept my promise to her.

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Bethany got even prettier when she smiled. Her smile began with her heart then touched her blue eyes and pouting lips. It’s one thing to look into the eyes of a beautiful woman. It’s another thing to look into the eyes of a beautiful woman and know that beautiful woman is in love with you. It’s hypnotic. I wanted to grab and kiss her passionately.

“Could you stop looking at me,” Bethany said with a mouth full of toothpaste as I kept sneaking peaks at her in the bathroom mirror. We had just finished our evening shower.

Her hair was wrapped in a white towel; her body naked and wet. I had never seen a lovelier sight.

“I can’t help it. You’re too beautiful for words.”

“That’s sweet but you’re driving me nuts.”

I took a quick pinch on her firm butt.

“Hey!” she cried. “Are you sure you’re a preacher? You’re too much of a pig to be a preacher.”

“Why ‘cause I’m crazy about you?”

“No, cause every time you see me you want to jump my bones.”

“What’s wrong with that? I love you, would die for you--”

“So what? You’re still a pig. But I’m glad you’re only a pig with me.”

“Well since I’m such a bother to you, I’m going to leave you alone and pray for my hour.”

“Hey, I’ll join you tonight. I gotta figure out what I’m gonna do about school.”

“Beauty and brains. My dream girl.”

“Pig.”

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Yeah Bethany called me a pig and thought I wanted to ‘jump her bones’ every second of the day. And by now the Dear Reader may also have reservations about me. But let it be known that I do love the Lord. My time with Him is special. That’s why I love praying at night. I look to the dark sky, seeing only the stars, the Moon, maybe a planet, a shooting star and I know I’m talking to God. I can’t explain it. Once again I see the Creator in His creations.

Bethany joined me with Bible in hand. We prayed alone, we prayed together. At the end of the session I felt the peace that surpasses all understanding.

“Did the Lord tell you anything?” I asked Bethany.

“‘Keep studying’ was all I heard. That’s what I’m gonna do.”

“I want to sleep on you,” Bethany always announced then climbed on my back or melted onto my naked chest. Sometime our cheeks would touch, her hand slowly finding its way to my biceps, caressing it. In a short while she would fall asleep; always with a smile on her face. Her smile made me smile.

“You’re a living doll,” I whispered as she tried to fall asleep.

“I’m not a doll,” Bethany replied with eyes stilled closed. “A doll is an inanimate object; mindless without function.”

“Maybe to you, Miss Wikipedia. But to me a doll is every beautiful feature of a woman put into one body; a person that seems too beautiful to be real.”

A smile tried to find its way on her lips. I think she was flattered that words like that would be applied to her. At the same time to her a doll was a dummy, a mannequin.

“I’ll have to think about that,” she said then fell asleep.

The early morning was Bethany’s prayer and study time. She would either remain in bed resting on me as she read the Word or sat on the terrace for alone time with the Lord. Another consistent was her morning cup of coffee. I wasn’t an everyday coffee drinker but I did keep a premium blend of decaf in the fridge. A few days into our relationship she discovered it and began each morning with her Bible in one hand and a large soup bowl size cup with a smiling monkey face in the other. Like me, she sweeten it with honey instead of sugar.

I had my arm around her waist as she leaned on me reading. As promised, I never disturbed her time with the Lord. I would sneak a peak then pretend I was asleep. I loved to watch her study. The words of any book always took her to a distant place and she was interesting to watch. Also I still couldn't believe how beautiful she was. Bethany seemed to get more beautiful with each passing day.

"Dylan," Bethany began once her meditation was over, "I know you're a pig, so I know how you're gonna answer this, but tell me the truth, where in the Bible does it say that sex before marriage is wrong?"

"Do you think we're doing anything wrong?"

"No, but that's not what I asked. I know I should feel guilty but I don't. So where in the Bible does it say it?"

"I'm not trying to corrupt you or anything but technically it doesn't. In 1st Corinthians 7:2 Paul writes that to avoid fornication one should get married. In contemporary

times, fornication is believed to be sex before marriage. But fornication really means sexual immorality. And sexual immorality is clearly defined by God to Moses in Leviticus 18 as incest, rape, homosexuality, bestiality, adultery, or going to a prostitute. I find nothing immoral about making love to you. Outside of Biblical law, if you were twelve, or if I only slept with you only cause I thought you were hot but really couldn't care less about you, or I was sleeping with you and a few other girls, to me that would be immoral. But I love you Bethany. So in Biblical or secular terms, I can't find anything wrong with what we do."

Bethany chewed her lower lip as she thought about these words.

"So why is it that all preachers say it's wrong but you're the only one who says it's right?"

"The commandments that God instituted and what Paul is expressing is how to live a moral life. Religious

organizations are just following suit. I agree with living a moral life. What I'm saying is that nowhere in the Bible does it say fornication is sex before marriage."

"But why do preachers say that? In Christian Camp, Christian schools and churches, that's all they talk about: You can't have sex until you're married."

"Because they have come to believe that fornication means sex before marriage. In fact, in Corinthians Paul is talking about a form of incest, a son has sex with his father's wife, clearly a violation of Deut 22:30."

"His father's wife? You mean his mother?"

"No, actually it's a case for bigamy. If a man had more than one wife, his son from one wife couldn't sleep with any of the other wives."

"But couldn't Paul have been saying to the man 'you're committing fornication cause you're not married and you're having sex?'"

“All Paul had to go on was the Deuteronomic laws. Like I said, they don’t define fornication as sex before marriage.”

Bethany read the Biblical passages. She went silent as she thought about my words and the words of the Bible.

“So what do you tell your students when they ask about this?”

“I tell them wait until they’re married.”

“But---”

“Many of my students are still teenagers. I tell them sex can lead to pregnancy which means they may not get a chance to finish school, which in the long run, affects their lifestyle and earning capacity. What I believe can be interpreted as ‘it’s all right to have sex before marriage.’ That’s not what I’m saying. I believe in love, responsibility and commitment. For me to have sex with a woman I have to be in love with her and love her so much, if an unplanned

baby came, I would marry her and take care of them both, without question. There is nothing frivolous about that. That's love and commitment. I also tell my students not to take my word for it. I know my theology is different from what they're taught so I tell them to do research. Read scholarly texts not just books by popular TV evangelists. The school library has some of the greatest books on Judaic-Christian thought. Do you think it's wrong?"

Bethany paused, taking time with her words.

"I was a strong advocate of abstinence. I wore the purity bracelet and everything. But the minute I saw you everything change. I had to be with you. It didn't feel wrong. I didn't have any guilt about it, but I should have. I know we're not supposed to feel this way, but I was more concerned with what my Daddy in Texas would say than my Daddy in Heaven."

"Are you saying I was your first?"

Bethany seemed surprised.

“If you’re talking about that, I’m a Texas girl and what they say can happen to girls riding horses is true. And I told you that first morning, I didn’t do this with every boy I meet.”

“But you were so good! You knew what to do.”

“I was just following you. Everything seemed so right and felt so good I just went with it and let it happen.”

“Well Biblically if I’m your first then we have to get married.”

“Now where does it say that?”

“Read Exodus 22:16.”

She quickly flipped in her Bible to that passage. A broad smile erupted across her face as she read.

“Well, we can’t argue with the Bible. You’re stuck with me.”

“No the sad thing is you’re stuck with me.”

“Dylan, you’re crazy!” she said with a smile.

It hardly rains in Tulsa, Green Country. But when it fall, it falls hard. Unfortunately this rain fell on a Saturday night. We had planned to soak in the hot tub but that had to wait for another night. I prepared a nice lamb shish kabob for dinner. We ate on the terrace enjoying the rain while under shelter. Then we shared a hot bath, prayer time but little conversation. I came to learn that when a difficult question came Bethany would first have to formulate something in her mind before she asked. Bethany normally wore a tank top and boxer shorts to bed. That made me desire her. Tonight our time would be spent with theology and questions on life.

“Another question,” Bethany began.

“Bethany you’re getting to be one of my best students.”

“No I’m serious. If we had a girl and she went off to college and called home one day and said she moved in with a boy, what would you do?”

“I’d kill her and castrate him.”

“Dylan!”

“I’m serious.”

“But that’s so hypocritical! What about what I did?”

“First of all, our daughter wouldn’t call me she’d call you; just like you probably called your mother and not your father. Men think sex, women think love. You told your mother you met a guy, fell in love with him and he fell in love with you. Your mother knows you and what you’re like, so she understood the situation. She probably went to your dad and broke it to him gently. If you called your dad his first thought would be some loser is out for your body.”

“And you would think the same thing?”

“Yes. That’s how men are. But then you would settle me down by saying you got me the same way and look how long we’ve been together.”

“Sometimes I could just strangle you. You seem to have all the answers.”

“No, you’re the woman, you have all the answers. You just happen to be at a transitional point in your life where you’re starting to make sense of it all. My answers come from experience. One day this will change.”

“No, it’s different. You do research; you know how to argue logically. Did you ever think about being a lawyer?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“Because I always look for the truth. You may not find the truth in laws.”

Bethany gave me a look stating ‘I can’t wait to hear this one.’

“Elucidate counselor,” she said.

“Look, you have a set of laws that are needed for society to function in a humane and civil way. But those same laws can be pushed to the limit to nullify another broken law. A man murders another but at trial it’s discovered the police retrieve the weapon without a search warrant; or they get a confession without Mirandoring him. The truth of the matter goes out the window. He did it but they can’t use the facts, so he goes free. Because of double jeopardy, even if they find uncontested evidence he can’t be tried again. The truth is he murdered and there is more than enough evidence to prove it. But according to the laws there isn’t any evidence at all. The records have to state it’s an unsolved crime. But really it isn’t.

‘Or a defense attorney with overwhelming evidence against his client can still find a way to get him off. The truth may be he did what he is accused of, so the question is

‘based on the laws that are already there, how can I get him off?’ A prosecuting attorney may have circumstantial evidence against a defendant yet still do everything he can to get that person locked up. It’s not about truth and justice but doing everything you can to use the law to win. Not for society at large but an individual victory for the lawyer and his client. Justice is not always just.”

“That’s the most pessimistic thing I ever heard.”

“That’s the way it is. A woman says she was raped. If the accused is the popular captain of the football team, movie star handsome and the pillar of the community, the accuser is a whore and a liar. If the girl is white and the man black, he is guilty before opening arguments begin. Bigotry and perception can pervert what is real. For many the truth isn’t what is true but what’s believed to be true. As a lawyer I could never deal with that. I deal in the absolute truth. And so did Jesus.”

“Jesus?”

“He was in favor of the oral tradition.”

“What’s that?”

“An interpretation of the written laws given to Moses by God. The Pharisees believed in this and Jesus said they were right for doing so (Matthew 23:1). Jesus only wanted the truth. When the adulterous woman was brought to Jesus, legally they had a right to stone her. Jesus didn’t say they couldn’t, he said *‘let him without sin throw the first stone.’* That was the truth of the matter. That is why everyone left.”

“But according to your theory wouldn’t Jesus have been guilty of perverting the truth? If the law said the penalty for adultery was stoning and the woman was caught red-handed didn’t Jesus pervert justice?”

“Jesus’ truth was if you stone her for adultery, which they had every right to, then they would have to administer punishment on every one who violated any laws, which

probably was everyone in the crowd; including the woman's partner. The Bible does say she was 'caught in the act.' That means they found the *two* of them doing their thing."

"Not bad," Bethany said seeing my point. "Is there more to your theory, my esteemed council?"

"I don't believe in a utopia, but if Christians just lived by two truths there would be a substantial difference in the world as we know it. The two truths are; one: to love your neighbor as yourself. Meaning treat people the way you want to be treated. Two: '*As long as the earth endures seedtime and harvest will never cease*' (Genesis 8:22) or as Paul put it, '*God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows.*' (Galatians 6:7). As Christians, no matter what somebody does to us, must love and forgive. Maybe I'm reflecting my 60's upbringing but if we plant seeds of love our harvest will be love. That's how it works. I understand '*the one who sows to please his sinful nature from that nature will reap*

destruction. ' (Galatians 6:8) So if someone murders then gets murdered either by the state or the hands of another, I can't be surprised. A seed is a seed. But when it comes to laws and a jail system, I think I'm a Quaker by nature. "

"Maybe I am too. The penal system is one of the biggest moneymaking industries in Texas. I couldn't understand why. So I 'did the research' as you put it. From that I was surprised to learn the origins of the prison system. It was started by the Quakers; William Penn and his Holy Experiment in Pennsylvania. The word penal comes from the word penance. Penance is derived from an Old Latin and French word where the root means both to 'punishment' and the 'desire to be forgiven.' I think we should see more of that today. Criminals have to be punished for what they did. But they have to be forgiven too. I would take away all the basketball yards and free weights and replace them with mandatory education programs and counseling. I really

believe that the majority of people behind bars would come out different if they had the right training on the inside.”

“So do I. But I’m a typical New York liberal.”

“I’m not talking about having a tea party. William Penn replaced the workhouses with dungeons. The Bible says, ‘*Rebuke your neighbor frankly so you will not share in his guilt.*’ (Lev 19:17) I would get rid of parole. I want people to be afraid of going to prison in the first place. Any infraction in prison would lead to more time.”

“That sounds great.”

“All this would be based on God’s love. I saw these documentaries on TV; one on skinheads, one on Mexican gangs, one on Evangelical Christians in America. As organizations, they were all structured the same way. I noticed a common thread for a lot of the members wasn’t really the message of the group but a sense of belonging. Some skinheads and gang members came from broken

homes, they lived on the streets. They were recruited by people who gave them friendship, a sense of family; they took them to parties, they met girls. The message of the group wasn't as important as having friends, being a part of something. That's true for a lot of Christians too."

"Yeah, everybody wants to be loved."

"Right. I want these inmates to have a sense of belonging not to a prison gang based on who's black, white or Spanish. But to a set of moral values then bring them into the family of God. At first it would be just a small experimental prison. Maybe just a section of an existing prison. All the staff would be Spirit-filled Christians. They would be trained in corrections and police science so they would know what to expect. But they would be Spirit-filled so their attitudes would be different. It'll be the love of God in the prison staff's spirit that will help change the inmate's lives."

“That’s beautiful. I really like that idea. When they come out they’ll be different people; contribute to society, not tear it down. But that’s what the truth is; the love of God. To me that’s what’s always right. When you stick with that you can’t go wrong.”

“And I also want group homes and organizations to help them when they finish their bid.”

“Their bid? Where did you pick up terms like that? Do you have some deep, dark secret you want to share with me?”

“No, I just did the research. And you’re not the only one who does outreaches. Back home I used to go with my church to a women’s correction facility to talk with the ladies.”

Bethany’s phone rang. It was her mom returning her call. Bethany called her family everyday. I always overhear her saying, “Dylan’s right here,” or “Dylan’s fine.” I found

her Mom's candor about me strange for I never met her nor spoke with her over the phone. They spoke for an hour or so. I spent the time working on my paper.

"Bethany, your mother sounds like she knows me," I said when she finished her call. "Just what did you tell her about me?"

"Everything."

"Everything?"

"Everything. You know how girls talk. I called my Mom right after I met you in the bookstore. I told her I met the boy I'm gonna marry. I said I think he likes me but he's really shy so what should I do?"

"I'm not shy."

"Yes you are. You don't know what to say around girls. My Mom always told me the wrong guys say all the right things, but the right guys don't know what to say. So I knew you were the one. From time to time I would ask her

about boys but never about a specific boy. So when I told her about you she knew you were special. She told me to pray about it but make the next move.”

“She told you to come over to my apartment for a late night booty call?”

“A booty call? What’s that?”

“You don’t know what a booty call is?”

“No.”

“It’s when a girl calls a guy up at twelve, one o’clock at night and says she has a scary DVD she doesn’t want to watch alone can you come over or she heard a noise can you come to check it out. The guy goes over and before you know it, they ‘know’ each other in the Biblical sense. I didn’t get a phone call; I got you in the flesh.”

“I just came over that night to talk, get to know you better, maybe watch some TV. You were the one who lowered the lights and lit candles.”

“Oh Miss Bethany, please!”

“You’re such a pig, Dylan!”

“You’re such a doll, Bethany.”

We laughed and she fell into my arms.

“I told my Mom what we did that night and every night since. She knows I love you and you love me. She said just be careful.”

“You’re mother’s awfully liberal.”

“She trusts me. And that’s how she got Daddy. He was a lead singer in the choir at their church. She wanted him, she got him. They’ve been married for twenty-five years. You don’t know what you do to me, Dylan. I don’t act like this. I never drove to a boys’ house late at night to spend the night.”

“Spend the night? You never left.”

“See, you treat me mean and I still take it. What have you done to me, Dylan Ramsey? I do things with you I never

dreamed of doing. You sure you're Christian? You sure you don't practice witchcraft? 'cause, you got me under your spell."

I looked into her beautiful blue eyes. They were so hypnotic they put *me* in a trance.

"It's not witchcraft," I replied, "it's the anointing. All I have to do is look in your eyes and know something special is happening."

She was being playfully. Our relationship was something real; our effect on each other something she couldn't deny. I kissed Bethany gently on her soft sweet lips.

"You wanna see a picture of my mother?" Bethany said after a moment or two. "I don't know why I never showed you one before."

She went to the application on her phone and showed me a picture of herself and her mom arm in arm in what

looked like their living room. I always thought Bethany was drop dead gorgeous. Her mother was ten times as beautiful.

“Wow your mom is hot!” I said probably with my eyes bulging out of my head.

“Dylan, I can’t believe you’re going after my mother. That’s disgusting! You’re even more of a pig than I thought.”

“I’m just saying if this is what you’re going to look like in twenty years I can hardly wait.”

“Yeah right!”

“You have anymore pictures of her?”

“No, I’m not showing you anymore!”

“You’re jealous of your own mother and you’re calling *me* a pig?”

“Stop twisting this around!” she said through a laugh.

“You’re the pig!”

I took the phone from her hand and scrolled through her pictures; Bethany, all the while, struggling to get her phone back.

“She is hot!” I said finding another picture of her mom.

“Give me my phone!”

I found another.

“Wow she’s a living doll!”

“Hey I’m your Doll!”

Bethany finally retrieved the phone from my hand.

“You’re such a pig. Not even my own mother is safe from you.”

She turned from me. I fell on top of her.

“Come here,” I said with lust in my voice.

“No way! I’m never having sex with you again.

You’ll be having sex with me but all the while thinking about

my mother. I read about sickos like you in my abnormal psych class.”

“Come on you know that’s not true. But could you start wearing your hair like your mother does.”

“What a pig!”

We laughed and laughed.

“Dylan,” Bethany said through a giggle, “Why do we have so much fun. I never laughed so much in my life.”

“Because---” I stopped in mid-sentence.

I got up from the bed and went to the closet returning with a small box from Tiffany’s.

“I was looking for the right time to give this to you.”

Her eyes widened.

“Dylan!”

“It’s for you.”

“Wow! I never got a present from a man before.”

Bethany stood in amazement at the carefully wrapped box.

“Open it,” I said.

“It doesn’t matter what’s inside. Just the thought that you would buy me something.”

“What do you expect? I’m in love with you.”

She smiled from her heart.

“Let’s see what’s inside.”

Bethany carefully unwrapped it. Her jaw dropped when she found a sterling silver bracelet with two charms on it; one a treasure chest the other a heart.”

“The Bible says, *‘For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.’* (Matt. 6:21) That’s you, Bethany. You’re my treasure and you own my heart.”

She looked at the gift in amazement.

“I don’t know what’s more precious; the fact that you thought about giving me this, the bracelet itself or you.”

I smiled.

“Put it on,” I said.

“Help me.”

I fastened it around her wrist. Bethany twist and turned her wrist as if she were modeling.

“I love it, Dylan. It’s beautiful. Thank you so much.”

She gave me a loving kiss on the lips. We ended in a caress but her eyes went back to the bracelet.

“Can I wear it to bed?”

“It’s your. You can wear it anytime you want.”

She couldn’t take her eyes off of it.

“I have to call my mom,” she said.

Bethany took her phone and hit her mom’s number. I closed my eyes knowing this could be a lengthy conversation. I heard a little of their talk. I dozed off as Bethany was sending a photo of the bracelet to her mom.

“Hey Dylan,” Bethany said awakening me.

The lights were off. I guess I had been asleep for a while.

“What’s up?” I asked though still asleep.

“Could you do me a favor?” she said sweetly.

I thought she wanted to show just how thankful she was for the bracelet.

“Sure, Doll.”

“Could you get me my socks? My feet are cold.”

“Socks? It’s the middle of June. How could you be cold?”

“I am. Maybe with the rain and you have the AC blasting. Could you get them please, handsome? It’s my white socks in my gym bag.”

“Ok,” I agreed and sleepily found my way to the walk-in closet in the prayer room to retrieve them.

“Here,” I said handing them to her upon my return.

“Thanks,” she said slipping them on. “You’re a sweetie.”

I slumped back onto my side of the bed eager to return to sleep.

“Hey!” Bethany cried out.

“Huh?” I asked. “Oh” I said realizing the error of my ways.

I slipped my arm around her waist and held her tight.

“Now I can sleep,” she said smiling. “Night, Dylan.”

Who says you need a license to be married.

Pastor Dalton Gray was noted for his antigay remarks and stressing family values in sermons and press interviews. He was literally the poster boy for the Religious Right. So, there was a great sense of irony when ‘America’s Number One Homophobe’ as he had been labeled by some, confessed his guilt to allegations that he had a continuous homosexual

affair with a male prostitute. I wasn't a fan of his but Bethany had mentioned him a few times. She had visited his thirty-thousand plus church in Houston on a several occasions and was an admirer of him and his family. I asked her what she thought of the situation. She really didn't know what to think of it. I sensed she didn't want to talk about it and needed more time to ponder why this man of God would do something so ungodly.

While the mainstream media had a field day, the Evangelical statement, including the University's was, 'We are keeping the Pastor and his family in prayer.' In many respects what else could be said. However, to me that wasn't enough. The undergrads were at a crossroads. Like Bethany, most of the students at the University were reared in the Conservative Christian church and educational system. Many were homeschooled. The majority were indoctrinated with the thought that there are only two types of people:

Evangelical Charismatics and everyone else. The trouble stems from the fact that Conservative Christians tend to see things in black and white. There are no areas of gray. Most students, as I expressed above, had not seen any type of faith doubting hardship and were sheltered from the harsh realities of the world. For a prolific member of their movement to go astray might seem confusing. I know they had to be asking, ‘how could someone so faithful and Spirit-filled do something they know is an abomination to God?’ No one was talking; until now.

“I’ve heard people in the hallways and in the deli talking about Pastor Gray. Have there been any group discussions in the dorms?” I asked.

The class was silent.

“Nothing organized,” Albert Glaser finally spoke.

“Some guy was reading about it in on a blog and a few of us started talking about it.”

“What did you folks say?” I asked.

“We really didn’t know what to say,” Albert began.

“We knew attendance in his church would drop and it did.”

“How do you feel about him personally?” I asked.

“You mean do we think he’s a bad person?” inquired
Ginger Perez.

“Maybe not so much a good person or bad but did
you ask yourself how did this happen? I’ll give you a direct
question: How do you think this happened?”

“It could be a conspiracy,” said Amy. “The liberal
media hates Christians so they could have planted the story
to destroy him and his church.”

“Yeah. A lot of kids on campus have been saying
that,” added Dottie. “Pastor Gray has more than thirty
thousand people in his church. He’s on TV; he writes a lot of
books, politicians always ask his opinion. If you destroy him,
you destroy the church and what people think of Christians.”

“And you really think the media would go to all that trouble, risk their own creditability, lawsuits, just to get a preacher, that with all due respect, most of mainstream America never even heard of?” I asked

Many in the class nodded in agreement.

“Why?” I asked

“They hate us.”

“They do it all the time.”

“They never want Christians to succeed.”

“Do you really believe that?” I asked

“Believe it? It’s true,” surmised Amy. “If Oprah gives out cars everybody praises her and think she’s great. She doesn’t care about people, she’s not a Christian. She only does it for ratings just like Angelina Jolie and Madonna adopting those African babies. At my church we sponsored a family when their house burned down. You don’t read about that in the papers.”

“Do you read papers or watch the news?” I inquired.

“No, my pastor speaks a lot about political affairs,”

Amy said. “He’s a prophet from God. He knows the truth.”

“Yeah,” added Albert. “I stopped with the media a long time ago. My pastor is also a prophet. And there are plenty of Christian blogs and websites to get the real truth, not what you hear on *CNN*.”

“The *700 Club* is the only TV news I watch,” Dottie said.

“What do you think, Mr. Ramsey?”

“I worked in television and print in New York and San Francisco, probably what the Right Wing would call the liberalist of liberal media and I can testify there were Bible reading, Spirit-filled believers in those newsrooms. As for celebrities helping others, they do care about people. They do have love in their hearts and want to share their fortunes and resources with those in need. And if the media did make all

this up why didn't Pastor Gray deny it? Don't forget, he admitted everything was true."

"But the media is tricky," reiterated Amy. "They know how to distort things. They have power to make it seem credible."

"Yeah and they're always saying that pastors are crooks who steal money from their congregation," said Ginger.

"That's usually Congress that looks into their finances," I added. "The media just reports it. Some aspects of the media can be tricky. But all in all they're not crazy. Every media outlet in the country wouldn't go out of their way to destroy a Mid-West preacher. Pastor Gray destroyed himself."

They seemed taken by my remark.

"So nobody thinks that he willfully went into this affair? That he's solely to blame?" I asked.

Again silence. Finally Dottie raised her hand.

“I was always taught that if you are possessed with the Holy Spirit you can’t be possessed by the devil,” she said. “So how could Pastor Gray do something that is so of the devil?”

“I was thinking; maybe it’s like Job. Satan asked God if he could trick Pastor Gray,” said Perry.

“Yeah like in Luke 22:31, where Jesus tells Peter that satan asked to sift him like wheat,” added Dana.

“How ‘bout in the Garden of Eden where the serpent just asked a question and they fell?” I asked. “In life we always have a choice. Pastor Gray made one he has to live with it. It’s that plain and simple. No matter how much you pray, read the Bible, go to church, what your position is in the church; every day when you get up you make a choice; what god are you going to serve? Everything you do in life is based on a choice. True the more time you spend with God

the better your chance of making a Godly choice. But never forget; it *is* a choice. There are consequences to pay; the wages of sin are death.”

“But it’s hard to imagine Pastor Gray doing those things,” said Ginger. “His wife is so pretty; his son preached at a Youth Conference at my church back home. He had everything.”

“Sometimes people do things they later regret,” I said. “Don’t think he doesn’t love his family or God or his church any less. Do you think he doesn’t love God?”

Again silence.

“It’s hard to say,” said Dwight. “I saw him on TV and he repented of his sin. But why would he sin in the first place?”

“Haven’t you guys ever done something you knew was against God’s wishes?” I asked.

“Maybe, but not that bad,” was the consensus.

“So is it a matter of what one does?” I asked. “Is one sin worst than another? In Catholicism there are venial sins and mortal sins.”

“What are those?” asked Amy.

“A venial sin is something that is not of ‘grave matter;’ it is not committed with full knowledge, or deliberate and complete consent. In other words it’s either something not that bad or you did it but you really didn’t mean to. Maybe you were there when someone else was doing something wrong; it wasn’t your idea but you did nothing to stop it. Venial means forgivable so you’re not separated from God; you won’t go to hell. A mortal sin is something grave; you knew exactly what you were doing when you did it; it was your decision; your knowledge and consent were deliberate.”

“No, I don’t believe in that at all,” said Hank.

“Sin is sin,” added Amy. “But Catholics are pagans anyway. They worship saints and images.”

“That’s a discussion for another time,” I said.

“Yeah, where did they get all that?” Hank wanted to know.

“From their reading of the Bible,” I said. “Look at 1st John 5:16-17 *If anyone sees his brother commit a sin that does not lead to death, he should pray and God will give him life. I refer to those whose sin does not lead to death. There is a sin that leads to death. I am not saying that. All wrongdoing is sin and there is a sin that does not lead to death.*”

“So are there two types of sin?” asked Hank.

“Are there?” I asked. “What is the sin that leads to death?”

“Blasphemy of the Holy Spirit,” said Amy.

“Right,” I stated. “And what is the sin that does not lead to death?”

“All other sins that we ask forgiveness for and repent of?” said Ginger with a question in her voice.

“Right.”

“So there are two types of sin?” asked Ginger.

“No, for the past thousand years there is only one sin: not accepting Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior. The sin that doesn’t lead to death is not accepting Jesus once you have knowledge of him. Everybody knows someone like that. They know of the Bible, church, Jesus, but for some reason they don’t want to go the whole nine. Why does this not lead to death? Because you’re already dead. Read Ephesians 2:1 *‘As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sin...’* Jesus came for sinners. That’s why John says to pray that God will give him life or the knowledge of His Son and they will want to be part of His

kingdom. The sin that does lead to death is, like Miss Helms says, blasphemy of the Holy Spirit. If you reject the one thing that is going to save you, how can you live? But if you want to look at this letter in its original context, John is writing against Gnostic teachings. Gnostics denied that Jesus was both man and God incarnate. The whole letter is critical of Gnosticism.”

“Going back to your original question, Mr. Ramsey,” Hank began, “look at line 18. It says, *‘We know that anyone born of God does not continue to sin; the one who was born of God keeps him safe and the evil one cannot harm him.’* How does Pastor Gray fit into this?”

“He’s not sinning anymore, is he?” I stated.

“What does that mean? Do you think God did this to him?” Hank wanted to know.

“I know that God loves him,” I continued. “If you are one of His children, He will do anything to keep you safe. Pastor Gray isn’t seeing that male prostitute anymore.”

“Does God really do things like that?” asked Amy.

“In my opinion, yes. Jesus said *‘if your right eye or your right hand causes you to sin cut them off. It’s better to lose part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown in hell.’* (Matt. 5:29-30). I believe if you have a problem, you’re praying to God about it, and you can’t handle it yourself, God will. Pastor Gray is not longer engaged in that behavior. He can continue to serve God without any hindrance.”

I guess the class thought I was going to tear into the pastor. But they smiled with assurance on that statement.

“I’m going to sleep now,” Bethany announced in her usual manner. “Don’t talk to me while I’m sleeping, don’t

touch me, and I'm going to sleep on you," she added then plunked her head on my chest leaving me just a head of hair to look at.

I gave her decree a moment or two then pulled her face to mine and kissed her lips hard and passionately. She kissed back even harder.

"Pig," Bethany whispered when our lips finally parted.

"Doll," I responded.

She gave me a quick peck on the cheek then rested her cheek against mine. She then reached over placed her hand on my bicep and fell asleep as if on cue. Who was this girl? She could bark out orders with a sensual femininity that made me desire her even more. She was like a grown up little girl. I loved this lady so much it wasn't funny.

“Are you going to the Navy?” Bethany asked noticing numerous letters from the Navy and other branches of the service mixed in with syllabuses and financial aid forms on my desk.

“I wish. I thought I had a calling to be a chaplain.”

“That’s right, I remember you telling me. But you didn’t say why you didn’t go.”

“When I first applied I didn’t have the necessary requirements. When I finally got them I was past the age limit. They don’t make exceptions.”

“Why can’t you be a chaplain at a hospital or someplace else?”

“It would be a greater challenge to minister to men and women on the field of battle. To counsel soldiers about God’s love when everyone around them is teaching them numerous ways to kill; to preach on God’s love when everyone around hates you and is willing to prove it with a

bullet through your eye or an explosive to your chest, is the toughest thing the clergy can do. If you get through, you know it's only the power of God."

"That's awesome! You always come up with these new insights. I know if God wants you to go you will no matter what the rules are. But to go to war---wow!"

"Soldiers need a stabilizing force. I don't believe in war and killing at the drop of a hat, but in some cases it is necessary for a greater good. Once the conflict is over, what do you have, what are you left with? I believe the teachings of Jesus is that stabilizing force. You ever see the movie *Sgt. York*?"

"See it? I never heard of it?"

"It's about this man, he's an expert marksman and hunter, but doesn't want to go to war when he's called because of his religious conviction. He finally decides to go and becomes a hero after killing a large number of Germans

to save his men. When he returns to the U.S. people want to exploit his heroism; put him in the movies, on the stage. He rejects it when he realizes he is only considered a hero because he took people's lives. Do what is necessary but don't gloat. At times you have to be rough. Jesus violently threw the money changers out of the temple. But if love is the overwhelming force in your life, you will know right from wrong."

"I believe in war. I don't know if I would say that if I had to serve. It's one thing to applaud war from afar. It's another to be in the midst of it; to see your friends die or get maimed right in front of you. People come back traumatized; their families suffer. God is needed there. It's not like taking a bag of groceries to a poor family."

"No it's not. But even taking a bag of groceries isn't enough. Poverty is a spirit. It will only change with the renewing of the mind. The same is true of combat. Basic

training teaches you to kill. You need something when you come out. Spiritual warfare is spiritual warfare. The mindset of war is an extreme level---but in reality it's the same thing as poverty. A mindset is a mindset."

"And you think this is possible?"

"It has to be. All is possible to him who believes."

"But it's not that easy."

"I didn't say it was easy. I said it was possible."

"'Poverty is a mindset.' Thanks, Dylan. I can use that for my economic plan."

Bethany went to her laptop and began to jot down some notes.

"I need to borrow your brain," I said once she finished with her typing.

"Sure, hon. What's up?"

“I was reading a book on atheism. They believe there is no moral progression. That makes them think Christians are deluding themselves into believing with God life will get better. What do you think about moral progress?”

“Moral progression? Do they mean that people ultimately lack any sense of morality? That people are bad?”

“In a way. Their argument is that man progressed scientifically but morally remained the same.”

“That’s probably true if you stop at original sin. But I still think man is good not evil.”

“What about something as simple as a computer. You can tap into all the great libraries of the world. Research anything you like. Yet most people use it to chat, shop and view pornography. With all the progress in science, we’ve really remained primitive.”

“Dylan, that’s horrible.”

“But true. If you look at history through recorded time it’s the same thing over and over; war, pillage, weapons made from sticks, now weapons that can cause mass destruction.”

“So you think it’s true? What about things like civil rights or equal rights for women? The Nazi regime only lasted twelve years because ultimately love and truth prevailed.”

“I don’t believe in a lack of moral progress but how do I argue my case?” I argued. “In some cases love and truth prevail for only so long. Yeah, look at civil and equal rights. At one time African-Americans and women were treated like second-class citizens. Now, hatred and discrimination is focused on the homosexual. These things come about because, for some, there always has to be a scapegoat. Some weak-willed person or groups of people have it set in their

minds that civilization as we know it will come to an end as long as a particular group gets their way.”

“Evil exists because of original sin. As long as that’s in the world anything can happen. That’s why God sent Jesus to rectify that.”

“I agree. But what of His message: *Love one another as I have loved you.* (John 15:12) Plain and simple.

Sometimes organized religion is the worst offender. They get so bogged down with rules and regulations and trying to influence political platforms that the message of love is either eclipsed or forgotten completely.”

“I know Jesus warned *‘you have forgotten the commands of God and are holding on to the traditions of men.’* (Mark 7:8) All I can fight with is the Word. What do you suggest?” Bethany asked than chewed on her lower lip.

“I’m asking you.”

“Maybe just show the love of God in all we do. Don’t be judgmental; take care of others.”

“Let our light shine?”

“Yeah. That’s all Biblical. So why doesn’t it happen--
-people let satan plant things in their minds to corrupt them.”

“Which is exactly my point about no moral progression. But ‘*greater is He that is in me than he that is in the world.*’” (1 John 4:4)

“I have to think about all this, Dylan.”

Bethany went quiet. She was the ultimate processor. My Doll wrapped my arm around her, maybe for comfort, maybe for support, maybe to try to siphon some knowledge from me.

Every Friday for the past three years I participated in community outreach with the University. Every Friday since I had known Bethany I would invite her to participate and

every Friday she declined. Missionary work should be done by all Christians so I felt I had to extend the invitation. She had done missionary work at Christian camp but ultimately it is a calling. If that wasn't her calling who was I say anything? And besides, we spent so much time together Friday evening may have been her time to catch up on her life apart from me. So I was surprised on Friday morning when she asked if she could join the group that evening.

This was our Friday to ministering at the Women's Shelter in downtown Tulsa. Bethany had no trouble mingling with the residents. She played games with the children in the Family Ward and talked freely and openly with the residents. A shelter for the homeless often has a spirit of hopelessness and despair. Unlike most state run shelters, this one was painted in bright colors and had new furniture. Still a heavy spirit of darkness permeated the air. Though all Spirit-filled believers have the authority to cut through this darkness, that

power was never as evident as it was in Bethany. She beamed like a ray of light; the city upon a hill.

There was one woman in particular I wanted Bethany to meet. Barbara was an African-American woman who had been a resident at the shelter for the past eight months. Rarely speaking to anyone, she sat on the laurels of a hard life in a soft chair by the bay window. Her only speech to us was, "Got a cigarette?" Realizing that no one on our team smoked, Barbara now just acknowledged us with a closed mouth smile or a slight nod of the head. She then returned to the window and the tales only she knew. I did get her to admit she once believed in God. Hardships in life made her doubt. Her gaze was constantly fixed on sights colored by sunlight during the day and moonlight at night.

I had taken an interest in Barbara. Her face still contained the beauty of her youth. I liken her to an IT Girl that didn't make it. Every generation has its IT Girl. But for

every IT Girl that makes it, there are thousands, just as beautiful, just as talented, that don't. Where the IT Girl of the moment works hard, struggle for years then eventually finds victory, the others don't. They are met with no after no, raw deal after raw deal. For every applauding hand the reigning IT Girl receives, the others get a slap in the face. So they end up in low paying jobs, talking about what might have been or what could have been or what should have been. All the 'could have beens and should have beens' ended at the shelter for Barbara. Sure her face also spoke of drug addiction, bad relationships, heart break. Maybe it was my wishful thinking but I still saw a tiny glimmer in her eyes that spoke of 'if I just get one more chance...' It was also easy to see the spirit of defeat had won too many battles. I always spoke to the Barbara of 'one more chance.' Satan is a liar!

It didn't dawn on me but as we walked over to Barbara, Bethany and I were holding hands. It was probably out of habit for we were always joined at the hip. I only mention this for couples were not allowed to show any PDA on outreaches. It was the first thing Barbara noticed.

"Hi Barbara," I said as we approached.

She my greeting but couldn't take her eyes off our hands joined tenderly together.

"This is a Bethany."

Barbara eyes slowly rose to meet ours.

"Hi," Bethany said.

"This is her first time with us," I added.

Barbara just eyed Bethany.

"Is this your sweetheart?" she finally spoke in a voice sounding older than her mid-forties age.

"Yes," I replied with a beaming smile.

“Nice,” she said gently nodding her head in agreement. “Young people should be in love. Take care of each other, that’s the most important thing.”

Her words were spoken like a last decree. Again Barbara eyed us. Perhaps she saw something in Bethany and I that reminded her of the past. Maybe she wanted to wish us well, but was so conditioned to believe things never work out she was reluctant to speak. After a moment or two she nodded then returned to her window.

“Thank you for those beautiful words for me and Dylan,” Bethany said after an awkward moment. “I know they could only come from wisdom and knowledge. Miss Barbara, you’re a gifted woman. There are still great things in your life to be had. Don’t let the past be a hindrance to your future.”

I was surprised at Bethany’s candidness. With little introduction, Bethany was forward and direct. Yet I knew her

words were spoken through the Spirit and with love. Though Barbara's eyes spoke of a self-imposed immunity to sentiment, she didn't fight the tear that rolled silently down her cheek.

"You don't know what I've been through---" Barbara began.

"I don't need to know," Bethany said cutting her off. "I just know you're beautiful both inside and out and God created you for a purpose."

Bethany dug into her bag and removed a piece of paper and a pen. She carefully wrote something on it.

"My father owns a company in Texas. Call him and tell him I said to call. If you can find your way to Texas, I know he can give you a job and a new beginning. But you have to meet him half way by getting there on your own."

She took the paper and read it.

“Get there,” Bethany said. “You may think what happens down there is a miracle but it’s not. It’s just you walking in the authority God has already given you.”

Bethany sounded as if she issued a decree. She stared into Barbara’s eyes while Barbara eyed the notepaper. Maybe time and time again she was handed a note of hope but found despair. She wanted to believe it but the odds she witnessed in life were against it.

“There’s nothing to fear,” Bethany said softly squeezing Barbara’s hand.

Bethany then took my hand and led us away.

“You let God use you,” I said as we walked away.

“I’m just trying to be like you,” she said through a small smile that wanted to hide her tears. Her eyes raced around the room looking to settle anywhere but with mine.

“That was the real thing---not an imitation.”

“Kiss me,” Bethany said with a light in her eyes.

“We’re on an outreach.”

“They need to know that love still exists; that it’s real. Kiss me.”

I grabbed Bethany by the shoulders and brought her lips to mine. We awoke from the kiss to see the room filled with women smiling at us. They knew our kiss wasn’t about lust or sex but dreams and hopes and promises fulfilled. Tears filled the eyes of some; others smiled and wished us well. Bethany took my hand and looked into my eyes with an expression saying, “Our job is done.”

It didn’t take long for our kiss to become the talk of the campus. My grad colleagues heard about it from the other grad colleagues, my students heard about it in their dorms. The girls in the hallways looked at me the way they look at a man they know is in love. There were stars in the eyes of some, lust in the eyes of others.

I loved to be surrounded by books so no matter where I lived I always found sanctuary in a library. University life was no different. I had two favorite spots; one a table in the rear where I did serious study, the other a great leather chair facing an eighteen foot widow that overlooked the campus. There I would sit and read a page or two of an assignment then chat with passing students. It was also a place where, prior to Bethany, I would pray to have a ‘chance’ encounter with a classmate of mine, Shivaughn Washington. Shivaughn was a bronze goddess. Really not taller than 5’6, her well toned legs, always found themselves in a tight fitting pair of jeans or black tights and stiletto heels that made her appear six feet tall. Though she was an M. Div student, her dress was always incredibly sexy, yet not over the line for the conservatives out here. I often joked that she had to be related to Beyoncé. They were both from Texas; and Shivaughn was an unintentional dead ringer for the

entertainer. The truth be known before Bethany I had a strong interest in Shivaughn. We did lunch a few times but it never went any further. Any hint I would drop was met with smiles and tales of being too busy with school and church duties. My only consolation was I never saw her hand in hand with another man, nor did she speak of a love back home.

I only give Shivaughn this big buildup for as I sat hidden in the rear, laptop at my fingertips, two yellow legal pads at my side, various reference books scattered around me, there she was casually browsing the shelves.

“Hey Shivaughn,” I called to her.

“Oh hi Dylan,” she said as if surprised. “I didn’t see you there.”

I knew she had seen me. She just wanted me to make the first move.

“What’s up?” I asked.

“Oh nothing. We didn’t have a class together this summer.”

“Maybe next semester.”

She looked at me and smiled. I smiled back. I guess she was waiting for my usual complement. I always had something nice to say about her hair, or shoes or what she was wearing. I could have said a thousand things today. Shivaughn was still too beautiful for words. But I belonged to Bethany.

“I miss you Dylan,” she began in an enticing manner. “We used to have lunch together and talk all the time. It was fun.”

“Yeah, I always had a great time too. It was always a pleasure to be with you.”

She smiled revealing porcelain white teeth and noticeable dimples indenting each cheek. There were times when I would have given anything to taste her full lips,

twenty-three-year-old breasts, flat coco colored stomach and what was below. Today things were different. Maybe Shivaughn sensed it too. I guess that look of ‘I have to have you’ was no longer in my eyes. That scent was off me. I felt she was trying to get it back. Maybe she knew about Bethany.

“You know I drove by that little Spanish restaurant you used to mention. It looked so nice. I’m free this afternoon if you want to check it out.”

She knew about Bethany.

“I’m kinda booked,” I said indicating the work spread around me.

“Oh! Well you still have my number. Call me. You’re finished this summer, right?”

“Yeah.”

“And then are you staying in Tulsa or you don’t know your plans yet?”

I looked deeply into her alluring green eyes. She stared back never breaking the gaze.

“I know exactly what I want to do. I always go where the Lord leads me.”

Again the broad smile.

“We should get together. What if you left and I never saw you again?”

That sounded like something I would have said ---two months ago.

“I’m sure we’ll run into each other,” I said.

“Okay. Let me let you get back to your work.”

Shivaughn leaned down to give me a tight hug then a sensual peck just shy of my lips. It seemed I always initiated the hug. But fall in love with someone else and you get a hug AND a cinnamon flavored kiss. Her eyes dug into mine as she backed away disappearing among the shelves of books.

All I could think of was one of Bethany's favorite terms,
'Wow!'

Is it a scent men give off or *stop* giving off? For there is something about a man in love that attracts women. I noticed many colleagues, students, or just women in passing being flirtatious. Where was all this attention when I needed it? A single man can beg, plead, grovel for a woman's attention and that woman will run from him. But have that same man find another and be in the midst of a serious relationship; that woman who ran from him will now run to him.

"Who is she?" Bethany asked after I sat next to her on the futon.

I hadn't been in the apartment more than a minute when Bethany began her interrogation. Her blue eyes that I

loved so much now seemed to be staring a hole into the depths of my soul.

“Who?”

“The girl you’ve been hugging. You smell like Chanel. That girl had on too much perfume just for class. That’s ‘I’m gonna get me a man’ perfume.”

“I ran into Shivaughn in the library. She gave me hung.”

“Shivaughn? Who’s Shivaughn?” Bethany asked.

“Shivaughn Washington.”

I could see her brain working hard to picture Shivaughn.

“We had a few classes together---” I continued.

“Wait! She’s that pretty girl! That model-looking chick! She’s gorgeous! I’m gonna kill that bitch!”

Bethany went charging toward the front door.

“Bethany!” I cried lunging after her. But she was moving too fast. My girl was on a mission.

“Bethany wait!”

“Wait nothing! Who does she think she is kissing on you? I’m gonna break her neck!”

I threw my arms around Bethany in a bear hug and dragged her back to the couch. She was fighting me all the way. I held her tightly in my lap as she continued to struggle.

“Let me go Dylan!”

“No. Relax.”

“Who is this girl and why is she kissing all over you?” Bethany cried still trying to wiggle her way free. She had more determination than strength. But one false move on my part and she would be out the door. I held on tight.

“She wasn’t kissing me; we hugged hello. I’ve known her for about a year and half. To be honest, I did like her and we had lunch a few times but she never wanted anything

from me. She probably saw us together and now, all of the sudden; I'm the object of her affection."

"Yeah but she's pretty. I know how you like pretty women."

"She's not you."

"Yeah but--"

"Point one; I'm not stupid. You are everything I ever dreamed of in a woman. I'm madly in love with you and wouldn't do anything to hurt you or destroy our relationship. Point two; I'm not stupid. If I did go running after her, she would leave me in a matter of weeks. She doesn't want me; she just doesn't want you to have me. I'm giving you all the attention I used to give her. She wants it back, that's all."

"You don't know women. She'll do anything to get you."

"I may not know women but I know me. I want you, not her; bottom line!"

I held Bethany even tighter. She continued to try to break free.

“And why the hell are you so strong? Dylan, I can’t move!”

“And why do you keep cursing?”

“Hell’s not a curse. It’s in the Bible.”

“So is ‘*what God has joined together let no man pull asunder.*’” (Mark 10:9)

“But she’s not a man, she’s a woman. And when a woman is after another woman’s man not even God can stop her. My mother told me that! Now let me go!”

“So you can do something you’ll later regret.”

“Believe me, I won’t have any regrets.”

I had never seen Bethany like this before. She was both a woman fighting for something she believed in and a pouty eight-year-old that didn’t get her way.

“Let me go!”

“No.”

Bethany slammed her heel on my foot. She had the right idea but not enough force. I held her tighter then kissed her softly on the back of the neck. That was one of her passion spots. She lunged forward with a force almost breaking my grip.

“Dylan, that’s not fair,” she said trying to keep her anger.

“All is fair when my love is at war.”

I kissed her again. Then took quick nibbles and an occasional lick. Slowly the passion won over the anger. She squirmed away from my grip and turned to hug me. She was squirming so much we fell to the floor, Bethany on top of me. She held me by the biceps.

“You know I hate you Dylan!”

“Why do you hate me, Miss Pretty?”

“Cause you always make sense! It makes me sick!
And I happen to be in love with you! God gave you to me
and nobody is taking you away. You’re mine! And if this
Shivaughn chick thinks she can--”

I took Bethany’s head in my hands. Her blue eyes
stared directly into mine. At that point I knew without
question, nothing could ever take me away from Bethany and
those eyes.

“I’m not going anywhere. I’m yours, Bethany.”

I don’t know what made her believe me, but
Bethany’s demeanor changed. A reluctant smile pushed its
way through her anger.

“I know, I was just mad,” she said then collapsed into
my arms. “You know I don’t hate you, handsome. I just hate
it when you’re right and I can’t fuss anymore.”

We shared a sweet kiss. The anger had subsided into
the warm, passionate Bethany I was familiar with.

“Let’s just stay like this for a while,” Bethany said as we embraced. We both knew no person on Earth could ever break us apart.

“Sure, Doll. Then I’ll let you treat me to some marble slab ice cream.”

“No way, you’re paying.”

“Okay.”

We kissed again.

“Dylan, what am I gonna do with you!”

I loved the taste of Bethany. The taste of her tongue, her lips, her neck, her breasts. There wasn’t a part of Bethany’s body that my lips hadn’t touched. I enjoyed tasting her just as much as she enjoyed receiving it. It gave me pleasure to pleasure her. Kissing her smooth flat stomach, her toned legs. I loved kissing behind her knee for it made her giggle and got her in the mood. Every preacher would

come down on me for saying it, but she was a true goddess;
my goddess. There are beautiful women in the world but
Bethany is a work of art.

“Uh-oh, you’re doing my hair,” Bethany moaned as I
pulled back her hair to reveal her beautiful face.

Her cheeks were red from her just finished shower;
her body perfumed from her bath soap. Bethany was the
prettiest thing I ever saw in my life.

“I’m not ‘doing your hair,’” I replied, “I just want to
see that beautiful face.”

“But I know what that means. First you do my hair,
then you kiss me” which I had started to do, “then you---”

“I what?”

She giggled then we pleased each other in every way
possible.

True I had become set in my ways of the single life. For the longest time, marriage was a distant, if not altogether forgotten thought. Now, here I was happy, content, sharing my life with Bethany. Her scholarship included board so officially she had a dorm room on campus. Unofficially (officially to us) she had moved in with me. All her belongings now shared a place in my closets and cabinets. We were happy living together, cohabitating, if you will--- living in sin others might call it. We called it blessed. Living patterns were beginning to be established. Chores were shared; the laundry, cleaning; budgeting money for grocery shopping and gas. This morning I ironed our clothes for the day while Bethany was doing her final primping. She shot out of the bathroom and over to the coffee table to gather her books.

“You’re going out like that?” I said perhaps with a little too much emphasis.

“What?” she asked taking a quick look at her apparel.

“I just ironed the blouse you laid out last night.”

“Thanks, but I changed my mind. I feel like this one today. It’s not my fault you don’t like it.”

“I like it, it’s very pretty. But it’s wrinkled. Give it to me. It will take a second to iron.”

“So what, nobody will notice.”

“I noticed.”

“That’s cause you’re weird.”

“I’m not weird, now give me that blouse.”

“My mother isn’t this neat.”

“Well her daughter is going to be. Give me.”

Bethany gave me a look of ‘you’re crazy and I’m only doing this ‘cause I love you.’

“You drive me nuts sometimes!” she said.

With defiance she unbuttoned her blouse, took it off and threw it at me. Like a petulant child, she plopped on the couch and pouted.

“Thank you,” I said with a sarcastic tone.

“Pig! You probably just wanted to see me in my underwear.”

“Brat!” I shot back.

Now that she mentioned it, Bethany did look sexy sitting there. Her childish pout became all the more accented by her deep red lipstick. The lacy red bra tried it's best to contain my well-endowed Doll. I had never seen her dressed like this. Her curvy and voluptuous body clad in just a bra and jeans aroused me.

“Stop looking at me like that,” Bethany said as she caught me watching her with a leer in my eye.

“You don't know how sexy you are,” I said.

She almost let a smile slip through her feigned anger.

“Well, you can forget about it. I was already running late and now that you had to iron—Don’t let it go to your big head, but you do look good standing there, no shirt, ironing. You look like a man, my man. That’s hot. You been going to the gym without me?”

“There are other ways to workout than just going to the gym.”

“Pig,” she said with a shake of her head.

“Well, I’m finished.”

“Good. Now give me my blouse.”

I shut off the iron.

“No.”

I walked over to her, my arousal outlined through my pajama pants.

“Dylan! It’s a quarter to eight---”

“Bethany, you didn’t have breakfast. You need to eat something before you leave.”

“That’s the same thing you served last night.”

“But this is more than warmed-over leftovers.”

“I see.”

She reached her arm around and started to undo her bra.

“Let me do that,” I said.

“Such a pig,” she whispered as I began to unfasten it, letting the straps fall just off her shoulders, the cups just below the nipples. That was the way I wanted her.

“I hate walking in late. Everybody looks at you.”

Bethany said as I took tiny bites on her perfumed neck.

“You won’t be late if we both come on time.”

“Such a pig,” she repeated, a smile erupting from her heart as she pulled me on top of her.

It was the first time I made love to the sounds of the *Today* show. I wonder what Al Roker would think if he knew what was going on in our neck of the woods.

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I arrived at my weekly class thirty-five minutes late. They were in the midst of a discussion on how it's a Christian's duty to take time to satisfy the needs of others. I would have shared my testimony of moments past but it would have been grounds for dismissal. The discussion was great but not really necessary. In Tulsa being in Christian service to others went without saying. At the University the overwhelming majority of students, whether they were in seminary or the arts and sciences, participated in community outreach and missions in some form. It was not only the theology of the Evangelical movement but a practice. Back in New York this type of ministry was few and far between. There were churches that offered soup kitchens and clothed the homeless. But leaving the walls of the church to minister to the needs of the people was something hard to find. In my experiences it seemed that church was either a social club; a place where people went on Sunday mornings and cursed

those who didn't, a place to meet up with friends and be entertained by great music or a political area, where church members vied for leadership and Democratic candidates would visit when running for office.

This was one session where everyone was on one accord. People even agreed that Christians must 'reach across the aisle' and help those who aren't Christians. Service must extend to all in need even if they think the Christian message is hogwash. Exhibiting the love of God is the foundation of service, not proselytizing. I walked out of the class feeling uplifted. Plus, it didn't hurt that I had ended the night and began the morning by making love to the one I loved and the one who loved me.

I never met a group of young people that knew so much about the scientific aspects of abortion and stem cell research. Maybe if everyone; male and female, teen and

adult, knew the harm the operation does to the fetus and potential harm to the mother, they might think twice about having one and engaging in circumstances that might result in an unwanted pregnancy. That being said, their extensive knowledge did nothing to prevent them from seeing that, once again, there can be a gray area. Again I was on the offensive to the Religious Right. I am Pro-Choice but that doesn't mean I want to see abortions performed at the drop of a hat. I take the position, 'rare, safe, and legal.' The class position---no abortion whatsoever.

"If people just waited 'till they got married, there wouldn't be all these abortions," Amy began.

"People still get abortions after they're married," I said. "What do you think about that?"

"That's disgusting," Hank said. "At church last Sunday the pastor talked about this lady who had an abortion

‘cause a child would interfere with her career.’ That’s what it’s come down to. A baby isn’t convenient, get rid of it.”

“What about rape?” I asked.

“The media and politicians use rape as an excuse,” said Amy. “I know rape is a horrible thing but you could still give the baby up for adoption. Did you ever see how they rip the baby out of the womb? They use something like a vacuum to suck the fetus out the uterus. I don’t care what anybody says, that’s taking a life. No matter how early you have an abortion, it’s still murder.”

The class agreed.

“Read the Bible,” Amy continued. “When Mary’s cousin Elizabeth saw her when she was pregnant, the Bible says her baby leaped in her womb. (Luke 39-43) That proves the fetus is alive.”

“The Bible doesn’t say what trimester she was in,” I offered. “It could have been her last.”

“It doesn’t matter, Mr. Ramsey,” Hank said. “To abort a fetus is murder. Don’t you agree?”

“I believe it’s wrong,” I said. “But I also believe in personal choice. Abortion has to be legal. If someone chooses to have one, it should be done with the best medical care available.”

“But don’t you think it goes against God to have one?” Amy asked.

“I don’t know how to answer that. There’s no biblical stance on this issue.”

“What does that mean?” asked Ginger.

“It means the Bible doesn’t have a clear answer on this matter.” I replied.

I knew that remark threw a monkey wrench in their theology. I continued.

“If you call abortion murder, then you can go with the argument that it is against the commandments of God. But if

you believe God is a loving god and after prayer and contemplation you still decide to have an abortion, I believe God will forgive you, if you ask.”

“So are you saying it’s right or wrong?” asked Hank.

“Right or wrong is the individual’s choice. Someone can think it’s wrong but still have one. If they go to God, He still loves them. So it’s not an issue with God, it’s an issue with the individual. Having an unplanned child can be a blessing or a burden. Only the individual can decide that. I want to live in a country where the government doesn’t make that choice for me.”

“But God made the choice for us when He said *‘thou shall not kill,’*” said Amy. (Exodus 20:13)

“God never makes the choice,” I began, “He gives us the option. And if the real point is killing, then how does a Christian justify war or capital punishment? How do we explain God wanting to kill Moses or drowning the

Egyptians in the Red Sea? How does it look when a Christian bombs an abortion clinic or shoots an abortion doctor?

There's always a bigger picture. I'm not trying to convince you to come to my way of thinking. Do the research and stick to the conclusion you come to. But you asked opinion so I gave it."

"I never knew a Christian who wanted people to get abortions," said Hank.

"You should get out of the house more often, Mr. Simmons," I said. "I don't mean that as an insult. When you travel on roads you haven't taken before, you will see the love of God at work in ways you couldn't even dream imaginable. And I don't want people to get abortions. I'm not in favor of abortions; I'm in favor of Pro-Choice."

Unfortunately, class time was up. I know my remarks left a sour taste with most of the students. It is almost a given a Christian is Pro-Life. Again this goes back to my argument

that Evangelicals deal in black and white. So to say that one is Pro-Choice you're considered a baby killer; someone with no regard for human life. Abortion is a very touchy subject; one I never feel comfortable discussing in any of my classes; both the ones I teach and the ones I'm taught. As I stated in class, the Bible doesn't speak directly about it. It is a silent argument. I know God doesn't want anyone to have an abortion. It does go against His wishes. He created man in His image and told him to be fruitful and increase in numbers. That being said the God I pray to keeps no record of wrong, is slow to anger, easy to forgive. (1 Corinth 13:5) Should one decide to have an abortion they can come to the Lord in repentance and He will forgive.

There was a forlorn look in Bethany's eyes.

"What's wrong?" I asked

“I miss my family. I just spoke with my mom and she was getting ready for the barbeque. We have them most Friday nights. I miss that.”

“You wanna got out and do something nice? My outreach was canceled tonight.”

“It’s not that, Dylan. I miss being home.”

“You should. You have a loving family. Nothing takes the place of that. But you’ve already been away from home.”

“It was a state college. I was only an hour or so away. I use to go home all the time on weekends. Dylan, I heard you can’t go home again. That when you go back things start to change. Is that true?”

“I never had a home to go back to. But the things I was familiar with didn’t seem the same.”

“Why?”

“Cause I’d left home. When you go back things are different from the way you remembered them. Sure some things will be the same. But you’ve grown. The way you look at things will be a little different. You can never go back to the way things were.”

“That’s weird.”

“It’s already started.”

“That’s scary.”

“That’s life.”

“It’s true but I don’t want it to be.”

“Things aren’t over. They’re just beginning. You still have great memories of the past and great things in the future.”

“Gee, thanks Dad,” she said.

The sense of melancholy that gripped me from time to time now hit her.

“‘It’s for this reason a man or woman shall leave his father and mother,’” I said. (Ephesians 5:31) “I’m just the next man.”

Bethany looked as if she wanted to cry but didn’t. She grabbed me and held tight.

I knew our conversation was over for the evening. Tonight maybe a tear would fall in her silence. Tomorrow she would be stronger, more knowledgeable. Bethany had learned a lesson I was taught a long time ago. Things changed dramatically in my life; some forever not for better as a Liverpudlian poet once sang. It often brought me to tears too. I move on, most often going into the unknown. Bethany was blessed with a loving family now a loving man. She knew where she was going. All she had to do was accept and step into the blessing.

I held onto Bethany, perhaps more tightly than she held onto me. I realized that I needed her more than she

needed me. She could walk away from me and still have a loving family. I would have only emptiness and a calling to go where God directs me.

“Let’s go out for ice cream,” I said breaking the mood.

“No, I don’t feel like it.”

“Then just take a ride with me. Get away from the house...you’ll feel better.”

It was either something in my voice or a look in my eyes but Bethany relented.

My driving greatly improved but I still didn’t like driving at night. Traffic was light and the journey wasn’t that long.

“Why are you buying so much?” Bethany asked at the counter when I ordered enough ice cream for a family of six.

“You’ll see,” I replied.



“Let’s go for a drive,” I said once back in the car.

“The ice cream will melt,” she replied.

“Trust me, it won’t.”

“What are you up to?”

“Just trust me, Texas.”

Instead of heading back to South Tulsa I headed north to the ‘other side of town.’ South Tulsa was bright, with clean streets and expensive well kept homes. North Tulsa was just the opposite; dark sometimes trash littered streets with smaller homes hidden behind heavy armor.

“This reminds me of the outreach trips I used to take when I was a kid,” Bethany said as we passed the ominous streets.

“I know what you mean. But just like those favelas in Brazil, once you go inside you sometimes find the nicest people. Like here---”

I pulled the car up to a tiny house. It was probably built in the 1920's and looked like not much work had gone into it since then save the iron gates encasing the front door and windows. The night air was filled with sounds of angry dogs barking and in the not too far distance a gunshot.

“Do you know people here?” Bethany asked, looking around.

“Yeah and you will too. Help me with the ice cream.”

After retrieving the ice cream, I rang the doorbell.

“Yeah!” cried Jamel from behind the locked door and iron security gate.

“Hey, Jamel it's Dylan. Is your mother home?”

Jamel, a heavyset nine year old ripped open the door.

“Yo, Dylan, what's up,” he said.

“I thought your mother told you to never open the door without her?” I said.

Sherie, Jamel’s mother came to the door.

“Boy, you crazy flyin’ open the door like that!” she cried, her wide eyed nine month-old daughter, Nyla in her arms.

“Ma, it’s just Dylan.”

“I don’t care if it’s Barack and Michelle Obama; you do what I tell you.”

“Aw Ma.”

“Dylan!” Sherie yelled. “How are you? What brings you out this way?”

“Hey Sherie,” I said giving her a hug and kiss on the cheek. “This is Bethany.”

“Hi,” Bethany said with a bright smile.

“Well ain’t she pretty. Hi Bethany, I’m Sherie. Come on in.”

We entered the small living room. Sherie had three more children. Three-year-old Kushawn was asleep on the couch next to the fraternal twins; brother and sister Ti-Ti and Jo-Jo who fought while playing a video game.

“Wake your brother up so our company can have a seat!” Sherie barked.

The kids scattered from their game, Ti-Ti grabbing a still asleep Kushawn.

“It’s all right, we don’t need to sit,” I said. “We aren’t staying long. We were out getting some ice cream and thought you might like some too.”

“Well ain’t that sweet of y’all,” Sherie exclaimed.

Sherie awkwardly tried to take the bag of ice cream from Bethany.

“Let me take the baby,” Bethany said.

“Thank you, baby,” Sherie said exchanging the bag for the bundle.

“Nyla. And she ain’t no trouble. She’ll probably fall asleep in your arms.”

“Oh she’s gorgeous!” Bethany said. “And Nyla- that means ‘of God.’”

I helped Sherie dish out the ice cream to the older kids while Bethany played with the baby. After the ice cream, I sat and talked with Sherie. Bethany played video games with the twins. She was in the middle of doing Jo-Jo's hair when I felt it was time to leave.

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“Dylan, you know I hate you,” Bethany said on the drive home.

“Why is that, Miss Texas?”

“Cause you knew I was feeling sad and the best way to overcome that is to help others. I’ve heard that sermon a million times but you made me live it. It did make a big difference.”

“I only know it’s true cause I had to live it myself.”

“One of these days we have to sit down and have a long talk; you and me. I want to know everything you’ve ever done from A to Z.”

“What is it you once said to me, ‘If all questions are answered there won’t be any room for mystery. That’s where faith comes in.’”

“Wise guy!”

“Doll.”

“Brooklyn.”

“Texas.”

“But why did we bring ice cream? I’m not trying to be funny but ice cream is the last thing they need. Sherie and her kids are so overweight.”

“You’re right. But how could I trick you by buying a carload of wheat grass. We could come back sometime with a home cooked low fat dinner wonderfully prepared by you.”

“I was thinking the same thing except you do the cooking. We could also draw up a menu for the shelter too. Certain foods cause stress or can lead to depression. A change in diet can lead to a change in attitude. I know I said all that but I feel like a cheeseburger now. How ‘bout you? My treat.”

“You know it’s Swiss burgers I like.”

“Oh I forgot, Mr. Fancy Pants.”

“But this is Tulsa, not New York. It’s after eleven, everything is closed.”

“Then let’s go to Mickey D’s.”

“You don’t eat that stuff.”

“We eat good all the time. It won’t hurt if once in a while we’re a little bad.”

“My sentiments exactly.”

“Pig.”

“I want Dunkin Donuts for breakfast,” Bethany spoke sleepily as she started to awake on Saturday morning.

“You don’t eat junk food,” I replied. “MacDonalds at midnight, Dunkin Donuts? You’re not pregnant, are you?”

“Crazy,” she replied with a dreamy smile.

“Yeah you would love to have a little boy. I know how much you like muscles; you would probably take him to the gym before he could walk.”

“What about you? If we had a little girl, you would spoil her rotten. I know how you treat me. Imagine having a

pretty little girl, wearing pretty little dresses, making cute faces, hair fixed nicely with ribbons saying sweetly, ‘Daddy, could I have this? Daddy, could I have that?’ I wouldn’t stand a chance. You’d probably never touch me again, being too busy spoiling her.”

I thought for a moment about having a pint sized version of Bethany. A little girl to hold and read to; take to the park and show off to friends. A little angel, sitting on her mother’s lap in the audience, while I preached.

“You see,” Bethany said waking me from this wonderful dream. “She’s not even here and already she has all your attention.”

Bethany turned from me in feign anger. I put my arm around her.

“Don’t touch me! Go sing a lullaby to Little Bethany. Big Ole Bethany will just sit here and rot.”

“Aww what’s wrong with Big Ole Bethany?” I said
kissing her.

“Save your kisses.”

I stole a few more.

“I’ll buy you a donut if you’ll be my friend again.”

“Two! Both chocolate and cream filled.”

“You got it.”

I kissed her again this time on the lips. She accepted
it.

“Dylan, you’re such a pushover. I better start hiding
money now cause Little Bethany is going to charm every last
dollar out of your pockets.”

“Donuts first,” I said starting to rise from the bed.

“Then we’ll talk about Little Bethany.”

“No, first we work on Little Bethany, then donuts.”

Bethany grabbed me by the back of the neck and started to kiss me. This chocolate and crème wouldn't be coming from Dunkin Donuts.

“Don't you have things like normal people?”

Bethany asked as she went through the cabinets in the kitchen.

I dropped the box of Dunkin Donuts on the table and went to her side. Bethany normally just went to the cabinet that housed the dinner plates, coffee mugs and water glasses. The other cabinets contained wine and martini glasses, desert and parfait dishes and the like. Like I said earlier, I have a taste for the elegant.

“Like what?” I asked.

“Like this,” she said holding a sherbet dish.

“That's a sherbet dish.”

“It looks like a glass to me. And what’s all this junk?”

“A waffle iron.”

“A waffle iron? What’s that?”

“It makes waffles.”

“I figured that much. You never heard of a microwave?”

“Oh you kids today,” I joked. “And you say I had a deprived childhood. Sitting next to it is a crepe maker.”

“What’s a crepe?”

“Bethany! Something you don’t know? You speak twenty-eight different languages and you never heard of a crepe?”

“Don’t be such a snob. What is it?”

“Let me make you some. Go---relax in the hot tub. I’ll whip up some and bring them out.”

“Sure,” she said willing to try anything. “I never need an excuse to lay out in the hot tub. But bring the donuts in case I don’t like the crepes.”

“Brat! Sometimes *you* drive *me* nuts.”

She giggled as she went to retrieve her bathing suit. I never had so much fun in a relationship.

Bethany was on the phone with her mother when I brought out the salmon and brie filled crepes. For desert I made plain crepes but had powdered sugar, strawberries and hot applesauce on the side.

“I love these, Dylan,” Bethany said truly enjoying each bite. “I have to tell my mom about these. How come you’re such a good cook?”

“I just like to experiment. When I find something I like, I learn how to make it. This way I can have it any time I want.”

“You’re weird.”

“Why?”

“Cause you don’t do things the way everyone else does.”

“That would make me unique not weird.”

“Wiseguy! Are you gonna finish yours?”

“Take it. I can always make more. But I’m gonna eat your donuts.”

“Take ‘em. Who needs Dunkin’ Donuts when I can have you whip me up some crepes anytime.”

Bethany quickly took my plate and began to finish my crepe.

“So good!” she exclaimed. “Do they make them in New York?”

“Yeah. There are plenty of French restaurants. And sometimes they sell them at street fairs.”

“Wow! New York sounds fantastic. If we flew to New York for one day where would you take me?”

“One day? Without question; the Statue of Liberty and Ellis Island. Those are places everyone in the country should visit. ”

“Hey,” Bethany replied amazed, “I always wanted to go there. They’re filled with pride and history. Where else? Something that’s fun and different.”

“FAO Schwarz.”

“Wait! That’s that big toy store. You think I’m a baby?”

“You are a baby. But Schwarz is an experience. Then lunch at Serendipity 3, more for the chocolate deserts than the hamburgers, a Broadway show, of course.”

“What do you think I would wear to the show?”

“A form-fitting black dress showing off those curves; sleeveless and backless.”

“When have you ever seen me dressed like that?”

“Every night in my dreams.”

“That’s why you’re a pig!” She smiled.

“You would be dressed to the neighs. Simple but stunning.”

“What about accessories? Since I’m this stunning knockout with a killer bod, I have to know how to accent everything just right.”

“Small turquoise earrings to show off your bohemian side.”

“I know what you would wear. Something expensive, of course. The latest from the pages of *GQ* or something you saw some movie star wearing and just had to run out and buy.”

“So you think I’m extravagant and pretentious?”

“Oh come on! Look at your closet. We’re living in the land of Wal-Mart and Payless and you’re still Mr. Saks

Fifth Avenue. Your sports shirts are Italian linen. Your bracelet is from Tiffany's."

"See, the way you know all those things about me is the same way I know you have a slinky black dress."

"You're just saying that cause you're a pig."

We kissed.

"You're telling me you don't have a clinging black dress?"

"Well, Mr. Big Head, I do. And for your information, I was going to wear it to the theatre. My Dad got tickets to see *The Lion King*. I came downstairs in this black backless dress that Mom and I picked out. He took one look at me in that thing and shouted 'Absolutely not!'"

"So what did you wear?"

"I threw a jean jacket over it, the Texas girl that I am. And that ended that. Plus my Mom really liked the dress so

she sided with me. Dylan, how come we know so much about each other? It's weird."

"Not really. We were brought together for a reason. Things don't normally happen this way, unless God wants them to."

"So God sent me someone and all He could come up with was you?" she said falling into my arms.

"What about me? I was holding out for Mariah Carey."

"Well I'll leave and you can keep praying for her."

"You do and my broken heart will never mend."

We kissed.

"Dylan, you're the best," she said and went off into that silent world where only she and God knew what went on.

Bethany thought I had expensive taste. And I did. But since I started tithing I ran into sale after sale. The Spirit of God would tell me today is the day to go into *Banana Republic* or some other store. Some will say that's too materialistic and ostentatious. But if God can lead me to ride a half mile out of my way and find a student on the brink of suicide, why can't His powerful voice lead me to a 40% off sale at the Armani Exchange. As a child of God, I look good and the two hundred and fifty dollars I saved goes back into His Kingdom. I'm blessed to be a blessing.

For three years I lived some two hundred feet from the swimming pool and never used it. Now it seems I spend the greater part of my time wading on an inflatable raft or sitting in the hot tub. The temperature on this mid June Saturday afternoon was over one hundred degrees. Two or three hours at pool side was just the thing needed. Of course

my greatest incentive was Bethany. She loved the water and I loved being with her. And her swimsuits were getting tinier and tinier.

We drifted on inflatable rafts; me writing notes for my paper, and every now and then stealing a peak at my Doll who worked on her Japanese.

“Would you love me if I were fat?” Bethany asked.

“You wouldn’t be the same person you are now. So I really don’t know.”

“What kind of answer is that?”

“I mean one’s appearance has a great deal to do with who they are. A tall man get’s more respect than a short one. Overweight people face discrimination. That has to dwell on the psyche. So for you to be exactly as you are now, with the way you think and act, you have to look exactly as you are now.”

“That’s ridiculous.”

“On the outside you could have a physically beautiful man or woman. On the inside that person could feel inadequate due to things that happened in their past. How many blonde bombshells just use their body and looks to get what they want and never feel a need to develop their minds? By that same token, a scholarly blonde bombshell might feel people don’t see beyond her looks and never take her seriously.”

“And how do you know so much about blonde bombshells?”

“I have one come over when you’re in class.”

“Pig! You don’t like blondes. Shivaughn’s more your type.”

“Brat. But it’s true. If you were obese, you wouldn’t be the same person you are right now. You might be self-conscious cause I go to the gym every day. You wouldn’t dress the way you do, think the way you do. You would be a

different person. You are you because of everything that happened to you. That is what I fell in love with. If I were in love with someone obese, I would love her for that same reason; because of who she is.”

“So you’re saying if I were fat I would be a totally different person.”

“Not totally, but to a great extent yes. You might be self-conscious; you might have low self esteem--”

“Dylan, you’re not only a pig, you’re pig-headed. How can you reduce someone to a stereotype?”

“It’s not a stereotype. It’s more of a generalization. I think it’s a given that if you’re overweight as a child, you get teased, later on members of the opposite sex aren’t really attracted to you. That has to do something to your self esteem. That carries over into everything you do. And that’s not just true of weight; it’s true of race, class, sex,”

“But you’re reducing people to a stereotype. I knew plenty of overweight kids. There was nothing wrong with them.”

“You’re a business major. It’s like demographics. You know who your target audience is. You know what they’re going to buy. Not every white female teenager is going to like a particular product; but in most cases you can guarantee that eighty percent will. That’s all I’m saying.”

Bethany went silent to think.

“I feel like I’m in class when I’m with you,” she finally said. “Why do I have to be in love with someone with all this wisdom? It makes me look silly.”

“Silly? I wish I could be more like you.”

“Oh yeah, how?”

“I don’t have your concentration. You can sit and read for hours without interruption. After ten minutes I have to move around. Not only are you a scholar but you’re still a

country girl. You know books, you know horses and fishing. I like that. Maybe I need to stop saying how pretty you are and start saying I love your intellect.”

“You do say ‘I need to borrow your brain.’ I like it when you say that. It makes me feel special.”

“You are special to me.”

“A thousand girls can be pretty. But you want my opinion. That’s special.”

I never realized that.

“But tell me this,” Bethany began, “would you still love me if I was fat?”

There was a smile in her voice.

“Bethany you’re driving me nuts!”

“That’s my line----brat!”

Though not planned, we spent the whole day at the pool. Under the moonlight, I surprised Bethany with a light

dinner; a half pineapple carved out and stuffed with assorted fruits and jumbo shrimp. She said I spoiled her but vowed one day she would cook for me. The apartment complex was large and the day and evening was hot. Yet we had the pool to ourselves for the entire time.

“If you could take me anywhere in the world where would it be?” Bethany asked as we drifted under the stars.

“Didn’t you ask me that before?”

“No, that was New York. Now you can take me anywhere. Where do we go?”

“I would rent a yacht and we would sail off the coast of Spain or maybe Greece. At night we would dine on the finest food, drink the best wines then make love under the warm Mediterranean moonlight. By day we would stop at every port, find the poorest part of town to minister the Gospel. We’d feed the poor both spiritually and physically.”

“You’re so weird. You’re like two people; a really spiritual person who is a true ambassador of Christ and a straight up slut. Sometimes I don’t understand.”

“What’s there to understand?”

“‘cause in the same sentence your biggest fantasy went from the decadent of decadence to the holiest of holy. And I know you’re serious about both.”

“I am.”

“But isn’t that--” Bethany stopped not finding the right words to defend her argument.

“What?---wrong?---strange?---weird?”

“Well---yeah.”

“Look, God is a god of love. I’m one of His ambassadors. I love God with all my heart, soul, body and mind and I love you the same way. There is nothing phony about what I believe or what I’m doing.”

“I want to say you’re right, but--” again she stopped.

“Let me ask you a question. Would you go with me?”

“Yes, of course.”

“Then what’s the problem? All I know is I love God and want to do His will. And I love you.”

Though she was silent, I could hear her thinking. Yes, she believed there was truth to what I said. But sex was not something mentioned so casually in Christian conversation, especially its enjoyment and participation before marriage. Nobody talked so openly about it like I did.

“Why would you go?” I asked. “Why did you come here that first night? It’s because you know we have something special; something that was always meant to be. I know it, you know it.”

“Maybe I’m weird too. I know I’m totally different since I met you. It’s like it’s me ‘cause I still have the same dreams and ambitions, but it’s not me. I never let a man touch me the way you do; it wasn’t even something I thought

about. But wow--- when you touch me----! I can't believe I'm saying this. When I use to hear people talk like this I would say 'come on---get over yourself.' I guess you have to experience it for yourself, 'cause it's true. That first day in chapel I was so drawn to you. It was like a magnet; you know when magnetic north meets magnetic south there's such a force between them; you can feel the pull. That's how I felt when I saw you. I can't believe I'm talking like this. I'm such a girl. How silly is that?"

"It's not silly at all. It's the anointing."

"Why do you call it an anointing?"

"An anointing is the power to do something. Some people can sing with ease, design buildings, bridges, be a leader. With us there were no games, no playing around. We both knew what was happening and we acted on it. That is the power of God."

"I didn't know love worked like that."

“Everything works like that in the Kingdom of God.
The Bible says *‘faith without works is dead.’* (James 2:26)
Everybody gets something great from God. The only
question is ‘do they take it when it comes or do they stand in
fear.’”

“After saying that I feel like going out and
conquering the world.”

“You will.”

“No, we will.”

My girl was the most beautiful woman on the face of
the earth. I watched her as she slept beside me. That pretty
face always seemed deep in thought, even when she slept.
Her eyes slowly opened and caught me looking at her.

“What are you looking at?” she asked.

“An angel in my bed.”

She smiled and shut her eyes. I slowly ran my hand along her side. Bethany had such a great figure. She was so perfect. It made me smile.

“What’s funny?” she asked.

“You have curves.”

“How many times do I have to tell you; I’m a girl,” Bethany said; her eyes still closed.

“Are you getting fresh with me?” I said pulling my Doll closer then stealing short kisses on her lips. She kissed back.

“Nobody says ‘fresh’ anymore. You sound like my father.”

“Well I have something that says I can talk to you any way I want.”

I entered Bethany.

“You’re a pig,” she said kissing me. “Naughty, naughty, naughty. You think you can do anything you want to me.”

“Anytime I want.”

“I’ll show you who’s boss.”

Bethany held me by my muscles and rolled on top. She worked me as if she were a man teaching a woman a lesson.

“You like that, pig! You like that!” she said with each thrusting motion.

Bethany’s satisfaction arrived before mine. All along it was like she was using me for her own carnality. My satisfaction followed soon after. I enjoyed seeing the ecstasy on her face as I fired into her. Bethany collapsed on top of me then took my head in her hands and tasted my lips. Her hands trailed down my neck, my shoulders and stopped at my muscles which she lovingly massaged.

“You’re lucky you have nice biceps. If you didn’t I would have been gone a long time ago.”

“Are you getting fresh with me again?”

“Yeah, but there is nothing you can do about it this time.”

She was right.

“Just wait a few minutes.”

“Pig,” she said then rubbed her tongue against mine.

Pastor Ferguson was away and Bethany didn’t like his replacement. Many people are like that. Truthfully the word of God is the word of God no matter who is bringing it. But people do have their favorites, myself included. So we went to the eight o’clock service at my church by default. By ten-thirty we were free for the day. Once home Bethany told me to relax, she would fix lunch. I guess messing around with the pots and pans yesterday gave her a few ideas. She

stood in the kitchen chopping away at vegetables; silent as usual. Yet, from across the room I could hear her thinking. Her mind had to be focused on digesting something she had read or a problem in logic....

“It’s Japanese,” Bethany said, without turning to look at me.

“What?” I said somewhat surprised.

“It’s Japanese. I know you’re sitting there checking me out and thinking, ‘she’s so quiet? I wonder what she’s thinking about.’ Well, it’s my Japanese lessons. Most people sound out a language, I have to do it in my head.”

“And what makes you think I have nothing better to do then to sit here checking you out?”

“Because you’re a pig. You’re always checking out my butt when my back is turned. You do it all the time.”

“I do not.”

“Yes you do. And you think I’m this brainiac who knows everything. But I have to work hard at it. Language doesn’t come easy for me.”

“You speak four; three more than I do.”

“I learned most of them when I was a kid. My dad had all these language CD’s and I used to play ‘em. I was just saying what I heard like somebody learns a song. Before I knew it I was speaking and understanding French, German, and Italian. Kids process things differently. I can’t do that now. And to add to your worship of my brain it’s five languages not four. I picked up Spanish from my friends.”

“Speak to me in a different language.”

“Dylan, you’re so weird it isn’t funny. I’m really beginning to worry about you.”

“Say something.”

“Me partir seul quand je cuisine!”

Her body moved with the rhythm of the language.

“That’s hot! Say something else.”

“Partirmi solo quando cucino!”

“Again.”

“Verlassen Sie mich allein wenn ich koche!”

“Wow! What did you say?”

“I said ‘leave me alone when I’m cooking.’”

“You’re a brat!”

“Stop calling me a brat! That’s so rude. I’m slaving in the kitchen making you a nice lunch and all you can do is stare at my butt and call me names. Rude, rude, rude. You better take me out for ice cream tonight to make up. I want marble slab.”

“That’s why you’re a brat. ‘You better do this, I want that!’”

“If I’m a brat, than you’re a pig. And if you want to keep on being a pig, you better do what I say.”

I walked over to her.

“Don’t touch me while I’m cooking, Dylan,” she said backing away from me.

“I have to taste the wares to see if they’re worthy of taking you out tonight,” I said taking a small cube of cheese Bethany had sliced, “and to see if I want to keep on being a pig.”

I stole a quick peck on her cheek then ran out of the room.

“Cochon!” Bethany yelled as I fled. “Maiale, Schwein!”

Bethany loved to read my books. She would take two or three down from the shelf, read one keep the other two at her side as we laid enwrapped on the futon. She was reading a book on the history of Christianity. By now I knew that look on her face said she was in a world of her own. A word,

a touch, a kiss on the cheek would not affect her. I just watched her eyes as she absorbed the words.

“I like to watch you think. It’s sexy,” I said when I found a break in her thoughts.

“What did I tell you about being a pig?”

“I’m crazy about you.”

“I’m just reading a book and you think it’s sexy.

That’s weird!”

“That’s just the effect you have on me.”

“Anyway, do you ever read this stuff?”

“Yeah,” I said with a sarcastic tone. “I love church history.”

She went back to her reading and silence.

“I don’t believe it,” Bethany said after a time.

“What?”

“All this stuff.”

“When Jesus returned to Heaven all he left us with were a few commands about love and some parables,” I began. “People thought he was coming back immediately. When they realized he wasn’t they started to ask questions; ‘to follow Jesus do you have to be circumcised, do you have to become a Jew?’ The Jerusalem and Nicene Councils created a set of creeds and rules on being a Christian. They helped establish what we now call the Christian church. The question I ask is ‘are all these rules and regulations needed?’ Sometimes people are so careful about following the laws of their church they forget Jesus’ message of love.”

“Rules are necessary.”

“I’m just saying that Jesus didn’t lay down any regulations. He told us how to live. At the University we sign an Honor Code that forbids us from drinking alcohol. What if I were at the Last Supper? I couldn’t drink the cup of wine because I might be expelled? What would Evangelicals say:

‘Sorry, Jesus I can’t take this cup of wine from you, it’s against my religion?’ Jesus is our religion.”

“But don’t laws keep people in check?”

“Yes, they are necessary in society. Without them you have nothing but lawlessness. So why are there laws in the church? In many cases they’re there to place fear.”

“Fear?”

“Yeah. You don’t pay your tithes---you’ll never be rich. You missed Sunday service, your whole week will be in disarray. You don’t wear a suit and tie, you’re dishonoring God. Jesus never brought that message. Thomas Jefferson published his own Bible. He took out all the supernatural acts of Jesus and left only his teachings. Imagine if that was all we had to go on today? I love the supernatural aspect of Jesus but what would life be like if all we did was feed the poor, clothe the naked, and not judge others but only ourselves.”

Bethany was quiet. I knew she was digesting my information.

“So what do you think of all this?” I asked.

“It makes me think. I can’t say I agree with it all but it does have some truth. There was this nice couple in my church back home. People found out that the wife used to work as a dancer in a strip club before she was married. A lot of people really took offense at her even though she stopped doing that way before she joined the church. Though the pastor never said anything about them, some of the elders didn’t want her in the church. A lot of members felt the same way. The couple started to feel uncomfortable and eventually didn’t come back. I always thought that was wrong. The church should be a place of forgiveness.”

“It should be. A church is nothing but a house of reformed sinners.”

“I agree,” Bethany said casually thumbing through the book.

“Most of what we profess isn’t in the Bible; God in three persons, the Rapture. Christianity became a set of creeds and conventions instead of a force to enlighten the individual to their greatness through the power of the Holy Spirit.”

“So you’re against organized religion?”

“No, I’m against what it has become. You need rules. But I would rather see the things Jesus talked about enforced than the enforcement of the doctrine of the denomination. In Brooklyn there is practically a church on every corner; especially in African-American neighborhoods. Imagine if every church took Jesus’ message seriously and actually carried it out. Crime would drop dramatically, so would drug addiction. Homeless people would be taken care of. If you leave Brooklyn and do this everywhere, America would be a

different place. Instead of preachers jumping up and down about family values, they would talk about housing the homeless, making sure everyone has access to doctors and hospitals, that everyone is treated fairly. That's more in line with Jesus' teachings."

"Wow!" Bethany said. I think I had preached so much I made her head spin.

"I didn't mean to preach," I said. "It's just that I feel strongly about this."

"But Jesus left Peter to establish the church. He said to Peter '*upon this rock,*' meaning Peter, I will build my church? (Matt. 16:18) I'm sure Peter had some set of rules."

"I'm from the school that believes that Jesus wasn't talking about Peter but what Peter said."

"What was that?"

"The conversation starts when Jesus ask Peter '*who do people say the Son of Man is?*' then '*who do you say I*

am?’ Peter replies, ‘You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.’ Jesus says ‘upon this rock I will build my church.’

People say rock means petra or Peter. That’s true. But it also means foundation. I believe that Jesus was saying, not upon Peter but upon the foundation, the foundation that, ‘Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah, the one we have been waiting for,’ is what Jesus was telling Peter to build the church on. That’s all we need to know. Another thing that always bothered me was, ‘since Jesus sets his foundation with Peter, why does the church adhere so much to Paul?’”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean we get so hung up with what Paul says in his letters, we forget this conversation with Peter. If we believe that Jesus built his church with Peter than why don’t we focus on his letters? He evangelized to churches too. Yet most of the New Testament is composed of the writings of Paul.”

“It’s always fascinating listening to you. I don’t know if I agree but it does make me think. I never heard that argument before.”

“I knew a pastor that would from time to time say ‘this is a sermon you may have to put on a shelf,’ meaning you may not be ready to accept it right now but don’t discard it. Put it away and one day when you’re ready to hear it take it down. I think I’m the same way.”

Bethany just nodded her head. She didn’t agree with me but I knew my case set a foundation in her.

“So are you saying that Peter didn’t have to build a church?”

“No what I’m saying is the church or dominations in many respects have taken over from the original message of Jesus. In Acts people went to the temple and prayed all night; they pooled their resources and gave to those that didn’t have. This is what Jesus preached. The followers of Jesus did

assemble; that is where Paul's letters come in. Like I said, you need organization. But the most important thing is to know who Jesus is and to do the work he told us to do."

"That makes me think of Jesus and the woman at the well. He said that true worshippers must worship him in spirit and in truth. God is spirit."

"Exactly. You don't need to be in a hallowed building to be in concert with God. He's all around."

"Wow. I'm really going to enjoy spending my life with you."

I watched Bethany as she put on lipstick. Every move she made was so delicate, so feminine.

"You're such a lady," I said as Bethany strutted across the living room.

"And that's a bad thing?" she asked with a sarcastic twist.

“No, it couldn’t be more perfect.”

“I said it before and I’ll say it again; you’re weird and you drive me nuts!”

“You love it.”

She saw the look in my eye. Bethany came right up to me, grabbed me by the hair and sat on my lap.

“You don’t know what you do to me,” Bethany said then kissed me passionately on the lips. “The way I love you and the way you love me, we would never leave this apartment. So one of us has to be strong.”

She shoved me back against the futon, stood up, touched up her lipstick then dramatically walked to the door.

“I’ll be in the car,” she said and walked out the apartment.

“You’ve got to stop watching those Bette Davis movies,” I said collected my bag and followed her out the door.

I really loved campus life. As I stood at the entrance to the main building looking over the grounds, I knew I was in my element. Though I wasn't expecting her, Bethany was at the bottom of the stairs. She had a look in her eyes that I had never seen before.

"You look like such a man standing there," Bethany said when she came to my side.

"And that's a bad thing?"

"No, you're hot---like a movie star posing for one of those cool looking pictures you see in the magazines."

She massaged my bicep in a way that was normally reserved for the bedroom late at night. Holding on my muscle, she pulled herself closer to me. I could smell her soft perfume and sweet cherry lip gloss.

"You're so hot," Bethany purred in my ear. "I'm glad you mine!"

She took a bite of my ear lobe and let her cheek brush against mine. My arousal stiffened. Our eyes met and we let our tongues take a quick touch.

“Hey Dylan,” Rob Stevenson shouted as he came up the stairs with a smile. He was always smiling.

In appearance, blonde, handsome as anything, a friendly smile, and philosophy, Rob was the poster boy for the Republican Religious Right Evangelical Movement. With him was Ted Nelson, a dark-haired stand-in for Rob at the poster shoot, and Jamal Robinson, the quintessential inner city hip-hop African-American, to show that Republicans were reaching out. Rob had been a classmate of mine for the past two years. Though I would spout my liberal views in class, he never opposed me directly. But in his on-campus speeches as president of the Young Republicans Club, I could hear my arguments opposed in everything he

said. Still, I liked and learned from him and I knew he liked and learned----well he liked me.

“Hey Rob,” I replied. “What’s up?”

“Oh, nothing,” he said. “But I see something is up between you guys.”

Oh, if he only knew.

“This is Bethany,” I said. “Bethany---Rob, Ted, Jamal.”

International business student that she is Bethany reached out to shake hands. As she took a step to Rob, her backside brushed against my erect nature. A naughty smile erupted across her lips but she quickly regained her composure to greet the three.

“So you’re Bethany,” Rob said.

“Yeah,” Bethany said. “What has Dylan been telling you about me?”

“Nothing really. All he ever talks about is his beloved New York City. You’ve got a silent one there, Bethany. I love him though; he’s my brother in Christ.”

We exchanged a few more pleasantries. They finally left with Rob and Ted giving their usual smiles but knowing the real story. Jamal went along with the others but had a look in his eyes that said ‘given the chance I would f---k her myself.’

A candy fed ADD child had nothing on me. I had positioned myself in the rear of the library, ready to tackle my paper when my mind started to wander. Fortunately Rob, Ted and Jamal approached. Maybe one would voice an opinion that I could rebut in my paper.

“Dylan, we need to talk to you,” Rob began.

“Sure,” I said offering them a seat at my table.

“Before we start we want you to know that we love you and what we’re about to say is said in love,” Rob continued.

“Go ‘head,” I said.

“You have to stop seeing Bethany,” he declared. “She has to move out of your apartment and you two have to stop sleeping together.”

“And what right do you have first to insinuate this,” I said fully taken aback but ready to stand my ground, “and second, if it is true, to ask me to stop?”

“Dylan, it’s all over campus about you and Bethany,” Rob continued. “I’m not going to say that your classmates, your students, look up to you and you’re a role model. This is about you. Bethany is a fine girl but no one is worth going to hell for. Dylan, for your own sake stop this.”

I wanted to say I couldn’t believe I was having this conversation. Then again I shouldn’t have been surprised. I

think the forwardness of it offended me. Their argument was predictable.

“I know where you’re coming from,” I replied, “but why are those my only options? Why not say ‘get married?’”

Rob was taken aback by my statement.

“You know what I mean,” he replied. “Either stop sleeping around or wait till you get married.”

“But that’s not what you said.”

“Okay, maybe it didn’t come out right,” Ted interjected. “You know what we mean. Living together, sex before marriage; it’s wrong. That’s all we’re saying.”

“Again, two things; first what if I say no? Do you lynch me? Have a shotgun wedding? Force me to wear a scarlet letter and say rude things behind my back?”

“Oh, please,” Rob said. This was the first time I’d seen him somewhat annoyed.

“Second, what if I told you we feel like we are married. I love Bethany with my entire being and would give my life for her. She feels the same way about me. We both believe God brought us together. I don’t want any other woman; she doesn’t want any other man. What more do we need?”

“A license,” Rob shot out.

My Bible was on the table. I shifted it towards them.

“Show me where it says you need a license,” I said.

“The four of us believe this is a covenant agreement and we have to do everything it says. I want to get married, so show me the Scriptures where it says how to. God creates Eve from Adam’s rib and the next thing we know they have Cain and Able. When did they see a preacher? When did they go to City Hall? Moses rescues Zipporah at the well so her father says ‘take her, she’s yours.’ Jacob wanted to marry Rachel. Her father says ‘work for me for seven years and you

got a deal.' The only wedding Jesus goes to he serves wine. If my wedding served alcohol you probably wouldn't attend."

"Come on, Dylan," Rob said returning to the conversation. "You know what we mean."

"But do you know what I mean? I'm not talking about what your pastor says or even what state laws say. I mean based on this book, show me where it says to get married in a church then spend thirty thousand dollars on a reception. Show me where it says to go down to City Hall. Show me where it says to go to Vegas and get married by an Elvis impersonator. Show me where it says to jump the broom. It doesn't."

"So what's your point?" Rob said his agitation showing through his smile.

"My point is nowhere in the Bible does it tell you how to get married. Yes in twenty-first century America we

have a way of doing it. But is that what the Bible says? No. The Bible really doesn't say anything about this."

"Dylan, why do you always have to twist things around?" Rob demanded.

"How am I doing that? I just asked a question. Can you show me a passage in the Bible that explains what constitutes a marriage? If you go by Adam and Eve, God gave a woman to a man. That is exactly what happened to me. Now if you can't show me in the Bible how to get married or where it says it's wrong to have sex before marriage then we have nothing more to discuss. You can find more of an argument for polygamy by using the Bible than you can for a twenty-first century American marriage."

"Dylan, no offense, but you're older than Bethany," Rob argued. "You have more experience as a Christian both spiritually and as a scholar. You should know better."

“You’ve been watching too many cop shows. What am I supposed to do now? Say ‘Bethany made me do it,’ go for a plea, put everything on her and get a lesser sentence?”

“Dylan, we love you, man,” Ted said trying to cut the tension in the air. “We just want you to do the right thing.”

“I am doing the right thing,” I stated. “Now if you don’t mind I have to get back to this paper.”

The trio saw this round was fruitless. They left still smiling, vowing to keep me and Bethany in prayer. Their viewpoint: ‘maybe I didn’t win this round but at least I planted a seed.’ I actually wished I could have spent more time with them, I enjoy a good debate. But I really did have to get back to my paper. And they give me fodder. I would examine issues that Christians have strong opinions on that aren’t clearly defined or simply don’t exist in the Bible. The notion of the ‘rapture’ or eschatology’ is one such example. Though it’s a popular subject preached in many

contemporary pulpits, this theology didn't come about until the late 1800's with the teachings of John Darby. Abortion, life support, contraception, are also topics I could include.

All things work together for those that love the Lord.

"Can you make me some pancakes?" Bethany whispered in my ear as she laid on top of me.

"It's too early," I replied my face still buried against the pillow. "Isn't this your prayer time?"

"I got up early and did my hour already. Now I'm hungry. And I know how much you love me and would do anything to make me happy, so now it's time for you to get up and make me breakfast."

"You make breakfast. You know how to cook."

"Yeah but your pancakes are better than mine. They're bigger and fluffier."

She took a quick bite out of my earlobe and drummed her fingernails on my biceps.

“I have a half hour left to sleep.”

“But I’m hungry now. So you have to get up.”

“Bethany, if I get up you know what’s happening to you.”

“We don’t have time, Mr. Pig. There is just enough time for you to make pancakes, me to eat them, then go to school.”

“There is such a thing as a quickie.”

“A quickie? Where do you come up with these names?”

“You never heard of a quickie.”

“No. What is it?”

“No foreplay, just going at it.”

“A quickie for pancakes?”

“That’s the deal. You’re a business major. You have something I want, I have something you want. My offer is on the table.”

“More like your offer is under the sheets.”

“You know, I did just buy some of that syrup you like.”

“Dylan!”

“And the biscuits too. I was going to surprise you with breakfast on Saturday. But since you can’t wait...”

“My counteroffer: Quickie for pancakes today and breakfast like you planned for Saturday.”

“Deal.”

“Deal you no good pig. I’m not going to school for nothing, you know.”

I rolled over. Bethany fell off my back and onto hers.

“You’re already big,” Bethany said seeing my arousal protruding through my pajama pants.

“When are you going to realize that all I have to do is see you and I’m ready? Now take off your pants.”

“So demanding.”

“Quiet,” I said silently and accented it with a quick kiss to her lips.

Bethany shimmied out of her pajama bottoms.

“Condom please,” I said.

Bethany reached over to the night table and retrieved one from the drawer.

“Put it on,” I instructed.

“You ask a lot for this little plate of pancakes.”

I stole kisses as she pulled down my pajama bottom and rolled the condom on me. I grabbed her by the back of her head and climbed on top. Her blue eyes widened with excitement as I entered her with ease.

“I’m big and you’re already wet,” I said. “Maybe this is what you really wanted for breakfast.”

“Shut up and do what you want,” Bethany said with playful anger.

“Don’t tell me to shut up.”

“You told me to be quiet.”

I loved a girl that stands up for herself. We kissed passionately then I returned to her eyes. I don’t know what was giving me more pleasure; pounding into Bethany or the look in her eyes with each stroke. I held her waist tightly as I drilled deeper and deeper into her. Like the name, it was a quickie. I shot into her within minutes. Bethany was satisfied at the same time. I layed helplessly on top enjoying my precious angel in my arms.

“Hey,” Bethany said pounding her fist on my back.

“Pancakes! Up! Off! In the kitchen!”

I looked up, returned to her eyes and ran my fingers through her hair. Her tenacity excited me.

“Bethany, *you’re* the best!” I said.

“Kitchen,” she said with a lustful smile.

What could I do but clean up then make Bethany her breakfast. A deal is a deal.

I wish I could approach my studies the way Bethany did. Though she was ‘through with her class,’ she would still sit in the library for four to five hours each day in strict concentration studying Japanese CD’s and books. I had no concentration whatsoever. It was twenty minutes of quality time then my mind would wander. I would get up from my spot in the library, text Bethany, look for another book on my topic, go to the deli for a Diet Pepsi, chat with classmates. I’d come back, do another twenty minutes then wander off again. After two weeks of piecemeal working, I did have more than twenty pages of my thirty-page paper. For the most part, it was still in need of editing and proofreading. I wanted to be like Bethany and have the paper completed

ahead of time. My plan was to spend all of Saturday in the library and not leave until I was finished. On Saturday morning I arrived early and worked for ninety minutes straight. Around eleven-thirty all inspiration stopped. Though not finished, I knew my work was over for the day and returned to the apartment. Bethany figured this would happen. She had a picnic lunch prepared. We would retreat to our favorite spot at the lake.

Before hitting the lake, we stopped at a *QuikTrip* to gas up and buy some additional refreshments and snacks. I hit the line while Bethany dealt with the shopping. Ahead of me I noticed two of my former students, Anthony and his girlfriend Megan. Anthony was the one notorious for eating the giant meals at IHOP. Here was no different. His hands were filled with three supersized chili dogs, a root beer large

enough for a family of four and a giant bag of potato chips.

Dangling from his fingertips was a box of condoms.

“Anthony,” I called to him.

They turned. A look of great delight came across his face. His admiration for me was no secret.

“Hey, Mr. Ramsey, what up!” he replied.

“Hi Megan,” I said acknowledging her.

“Hi, Mr. Ramsey,” she said shyly.

During my hello to Megan, Anthony realized he was holding condoms. My interaction with her gave Anthony enough time to shuffle the condoms behind the chips. Maybe subconsciously I wanted him to do that so I wouldn’t have to talk about their little secret rendezvous.

“Yo, Mr. Ramsey what you doing way out here?” he asked. “Not many people from campus drive out this far.”

“Bethany and I like to sit by the lake, have lunch, talk.”

“Are you two dating?” Megan asked then realizing she may have been a bit too forward. “Oh, I’m sorry Mr. Ramsey.”

“No, it’s alright Megan. I have nothing to hide. Yes, Bethany and I have been together for a few months. We’re getting married soon.”

Her jaw dropped in awe and surprise.

“Sweet!” Anthony said.

“That’s so romantic,” Megan said with stars in her eyes.

Bethany joined us. Megan went over and kissed her on the cheek.

“Congratulations,” Megan said to Bethany.

“Yeah, awesome,” Anthony added.

“Thanks,” she said joining in on the excitement.

“What have you guys been talking about?” She posed the question to all but looked directly into my eyes.

“Mr. Ramsey told us you’re getting married,” Megan said bouncing with excitement.

“Oh, that,” Bethany said knowing there was something more to this conversation. “Yeah, I figured if I don’t marry him no one else will. So I’ll give him a break.”

Megan went over to Bethany, tugged on her arm then gave her a lasting hug. She took her aside and they began to talk. I went over to Anthony as he was about to ring up his charges.

“Sweet, Mr. Ramsey. I just met Bethany this summer but I think she’s awesome.”

“Anthony, I love and respect Bethany. I always do right by her. I never do anything with her that I have to think twice about or will regret later. She means everything to me and I’ll never hurt her. I’m responsible to her. Understand.”

“Yeah, I guess but---”

“No buts. No matter what you may see or think, Bethany and I are in it for life. I’m not walking away from her for anything. That’s all I’m saying.”

“Gotcha’ Mr. Ramsey,” he said shaking his head, trying to digest what I just told him. They paid for their purchases, said their goodbyes and left the store.

“Hey, babe, what’s up?” Bethany asked as we walked to the car.

“Oh nothing,” I replied.

“Dylan,” she spoke grabbing my arm and resting her head on my shoulder, “People are always gonna do what they want to do.”

I don’t know if Megan had spilled the beans or Bethany had just caught on. I knew she was right but I couldn’t let it go.

‘You can’t do this in the winter,’ I thought as a warm breeze hit. It was the height of summer and the day defined that to a tee. In a few months, in the same spot, it would be too chilly or too cold to do exactly what we were doing now. So it has to be done at this moment. Sometimes things only come along once in life; you have to enjoy them while they are there.

Each time we came to the lake our favorite spot for picnicking was always empty just waiting for us to occupy it. There were a few other people there, picnicking, riding bikes, reading. For the most part there was a tranquil silence, just the rhythm of the lake as it rocked back and forth, leading nowhere yet getting there on its own time. I had Bethany’s hand in mine as we joined the silence. In the distance the song ‘*True*’ by Spandau Ballet began to play on a radio at the snack bar as if a soundtrack to our day.

“This is one of my favorite songs,” I said.

She put her finger to her lips.

“Yeah, I heard it before. I like it too. Listen; let it happen. This moment will never come again.”

The day was everything it needed to be. There is something about being in nature, especially around water, that always brought balance to my life. Excuse me, *Dear Christian Reader*. I didn't mean to get too New Age. Jesus always retreated to nature and, not to be a heretic; Thoreau suggested we do the same. It was always in nature that I saw God on a greater level. The bottom line is it always relaxed my mind and renewed my spirit. Now with Bethany in my arms, my life was complete, whole. For here, I knew I was in God's hands and Bethany was in mine.

As much as I loved the tranquility of the day, in the back of my mind was still Anthony and Megan. I knew I was an influence on Anthony. Did he think it was alright to sleep around because of me? He was in class when we had a

discussion on sex before marriage and I gave my usual theology on the matter. I know it's around campus that Bethany and I are together. It's hardly a secret that she lives in my apartment. These are college students. They can put two and two together. But I'm not the boy's father. I'm a Democrat he's a Republican. I'm Pro-Choice, he's Pro-Life. So he chose this one facet of my life to emulate. Why not all the others? He made the choice.

“So?” Bethany asked without my saying a word.

“Sew buttons,” I replied.

“Dylan, let it go. It's not that big a deal. I've heard you say time and time again people have a choice. They made theirs.”

“Yeah, but did I have a play in it? I'm their teacher. They're gonna do what I do.”

“Nobody's that powerful. Let's just enjoy the day.”

“They made a choice and so did I,” I said trying to convince myself. “All I can do is live my life based on the theology I have come to understand.”

“Good, now let’s drop it.”

Bethany was right. Choice was a reoccurring theme in my teaching and preaching. After all is said and done, people are gonna do what they want.

I liked the effect Bethany had on me. She kept me in check. No one had ever done or cared to do it before. I loved Bethany.

“Every now and then I think about going into politics,” Bethany said as we sat adrift in a row boat. “But then it seems I could do much more outside the political area. Forget I mentioned it. I don’t want to talk about the future right now. I don’t want to clutter my mind with too many thoughts.”

“I can’t think about that right now, I’ll think about it tomorrow,” I teased.

“I’m not Scarlet O’Hara. I used to watch that movie all the time when I was a kid. My mother thought I was kooky. I didn’t watch kids stuff. I liked to watch a woman single-handedly change the face of a changing antebellum. People use to say I was going to grow up to be this great woman’s libber cause I loved people like Marian Wright Edelman, Aimee Semple Mcpherson, and Maya Angelou. They looked at them as strong women; I just thought they were people who saw a change that needed to be done and did it.”

“Marian Wright Edelman, Maya Angelou? Since when do they teach them in Christian schools?”

“Dylan, you have got to stop being so bigoted. Intellect doesn’t end at New York City. Yes, I went to Christian Academies and maybe they never heard of Maya

Angelou or thought she was a communist. But I also spent time in libraries, bookstores, museums. Even TV like the *History* and *Discovery* channels are great. My mind wasn't on *TBN*. That's your department."

"Sorry. But since I've been out here the only female authors people talk about are Joyce Meyer and Paula White."

"I've read them too. But I need to know everything."

"I guess you're the opposite of me. I'm a liberal learning from conservatives. You're a conservative learning from liberals."

"I don't like all those labels. A good idea is a good idea. Maybe that's why I can't go into politics. My ideas are too broad for any one party."

"You could start a third."

"Believe me, I thought about that too. But I don't want to think anymore. Let's just enjoy the day."

Maybe that was one of her secrets; giving her mind a rest. I spend so much time in thought that it takes me forever to get things done. Bethany could put her thoughts on hold and relax her mind. I've got to start doing that.

"You'll change the world," I spoke softly. "And you're right, let's just enjoy the peace and quiet of a Saturday in the park"

I wished every day could be this beautiful. But, as I told Bethany things change, they don't last forever. Maybe we only get one warm Saturday afternoon on the lake; one sunset so beautiful it brings tears to your eyes; one kiss so tender, so sweet, you remember it years after it happen. That is why you love so intensely at the moment. What was it a preacher once said, "The opportunity of a lifetime may only exist for the lifetime of the opportunity."

I remembered an episode of the *Twilight Zone*. A troubled middle-aged man enters the twilight zone goes back

in time and meets himself when he is an eleven-year-old boy. At eleven the child is playing baseball, having fun with friends, enjoying carefree rides on a carousel. In his mid-forties he has nothing but troubles. The adult wants to tell the boy to enjoy everything now for the future holds nothing but despair. His father stops him saying let the boy enjoy his childhood; *'we only get one summer at age eleven'*. Like that boy, everything is perfect now. Maybe I only get one summer with Bethany

There I go; thinking too much.

Shivaughn wasn't the only one with a seductive smile, a deep stare and hands that always seemed to be touching me. Some of my students began to adapt the same behavior. Chelsea, a pretty eighteen-year-old pretending to be twenty-five blonde, was one student in particular. She

always gave me adorning looks as I taught, always tried to come up with the answer she thought I wanted to hear, and had my back when other students took issue with my words. All this culminated one Thursday. She came up to me after class with a walk that said I am approaching and stalking. The look in her eyes spoke of ‘tonight is the night’, not ‘I forgot my assignment can I bring it in tomorrow?’

“We have to talk,” Chelsea said in a direct manner. She sneaked a glance at the few scattered students in the room. “Is there someplace we can go?”

When a woman spoke those words to me it usually meant our relationship was about to end. I think Chelsea wanted one to begin.

“My office in ten minutes,” I said.

“Okay,” she replied with a spark in her eyes.

Her eyes never left mine as she walked out of the room.

I had a small office down the hall from the classroom. It was in a rather secluded location. I hoped one of my colleagues would be working in one of the two small offices next to mine. But no; just me, a small office in an isolated hallway and the nubile Chelsea. She slithered into my tiny office and tried to close the door.

“Leave it open please,” I said.

“Afraid?” she said with an intoxicating look in her eyes. “What do you think I’m going to do?”

I noticed she had touched up her lipstick and makeup.

“School policy. A male teacher cannot be alone with a female student in an enclosed area unless another teacher or administrator is present.”

“You sound so official. But that’s just what I want to talk to you about.”

She took her time sliding into the chair next to my desk.

“It’s okay if I sit down?” she asked enticingly. “I don’t want to do anything you don’t want me to. Anyway you want me is fine.”

“It’s okay.”

“Like I was saying, I love the way you speak. You’re so intelligent. You’re so wise---you know so much.”

“I don’t know about all that.”

“You are to me. I listen to you in class and you know something about everything. I want to be like that. I was hoping you could teach me.”

“You learn by reading and studying---”

“But I don’t know what to read. There’s this big bookstore by my house. We could go and you could show me what books to buy and read.”

“If you make a list of what interest you, I could make a list of what you should read---”

“But I wouldn’t know where to find them. That place is so big. My parents won’t be home this weekend. We could go to the bookstore then you could come by my house and I could fix lunch. We could sit by the pool and read or go swimming---”

She noticed my silver bracelet and reached out to touch it. She slid it up and down my wrist.

“This is so nice. But you know things like that; what to read, what to wear. I’ll bet this is expensive too.”

“Chelsea, I---”

“You’re so smart. I’ve never known a man like you. You could show me things.”

She leaned closer to me. Her blouse was unbuttoned a button too much.

“And nobody has to know,” she panted. “Nobody.”

Part of me wanted to laugh. For all the makeup, suggestive talk and seduction all I really saw was a little girl

playing a part she had seen all too often on *Lifetime*. I gently removed her hand from my wrist.

“Like I said, if you’re really interested I could make a list of books for you to read. Granted my office is small, if you like, we could sit and discuss them in the coffee shop.”

“But all the kids would be around. Don’t you think it would be nice if it were just the two of us?”

Her eyes gave just the right mix of seductiveness and helplessness. I didn’t want to shatter her but I couldn’t lead her on.

“Honestly speaking, my weekends are booked.”

“My parents leave on Friday afternoon. We could go Friday night---”

“Chelsea, you’re an intelligent young lady. That’s why you know it can’t happen the way you want it to. I’ll help all I can, but on school grounds.”

She became silent, her eyes downcast.

“Now, if there isn’t anything else...”

“You must think I’m some silly little schoolgirl. I have experience. But it was only cause everybody else was doing it. You’re different, Mr. Ramsey. I would really want to do anything for you.”

What would Jesus do? Chelsea is not a woman my age that I have a mild interest in. She’s a student; a young, vulnerable girl who has feelings that I can’t just dismiss with a curt, “get out of my office.” I prayed for the wisdom to say the right thing; the words to let her down but not hurt her.

“Chelsea, you once said in class that you want to manage political campaigns.”

“You remembered that?”

“Yeah, I found it interesting that you didn’t want to be a politician, but orchestrate their campaigns. Not many people think like that. You have the talent to do that. From things you said in class and your papers I see those gifts in

you. But politicians and the people who work for them can never have any skeletons in their closets. They can't be in the public eye hoping things they did five, ten, fifteen years ago come to light. You can attain that dream, but don't let anything get in the way of destroying it. Let that be your only focus. Seek first what God created you to do and everything else will fall into place. Even if you don't get everything right now, keep working for God's kingdom and you will have the desires of your heart."

Chelsea's demeanor changed. Her eyes brightened; no longer filled with lust but with ambitious dreams of the future.

"Do you really think that's true?"

"I believe it."

With a small question in her eyes, Chelsea nodded in agreement. I didn't know if she was thanking me for taking

her down gently or for the inspirational words. But there was a glow in her eyes.

“See you tomorrow in class,” I said hoping this would end everything.

“Yeah. Have a great day, Mr. Ramsey.”

Bethany appeared at the doorway.

“Hi Bethany,” Chelsea said. “Thanks again, Mr. Ramsey.”

Bethany gave Chelsea a quizzical look as she went bouncing out my office.

“What’s up with Blondie?” Bethany asked.

“Oh, nothing,” I answered.

“What did she want? I know she likes you.”

“What makes you think she likes me?”

“She never wears makeup, but now she is. And girls just know these things.”

“Well we didn’t have sex or anything. Out here they don’t consider oral sex sex, right?”

Bethany’s jaw dropped then she landed a hard right to my shoulder. She weighted about a hundred pounds but it hurt.

“Oh come on,” I added. “”You know I wouldn’t do a thing like that---at least not with the door wide open.”

My notebook went crashing down on my head.

“Texas, you know I’m only playing.”

A fist to the chest.

“I trust you but I don’t trust women. They’ll do anything to get a man once they see him treating his woman right. And one more thing...”

Bethany landed one last shot to my chest.

“That’s so you act right the next time this happens.”

As she left my office only one thought ran through my head:

BETHANY IS FANTASTIC!!!!!!.

“Hey Mr. Pig,” Bethany would begin sweetly when she wanted to instigate an amorous session. I knew what was next.

I kissed Bethany. Her lips had the flavor of chocolate. I kissed her again and again loving the taste of her lips, face and neck.

“You’re kissing me different,” she said.

“You taste like chocolate.”

“It’s my lip gloss---mocha. I wanted you to know what it’s like when I kiss you.”

“You’re bad.”

“Well you’re chocolate. I love touching you. You’re so soft and smooth. Is that wrong for me to say? I mean I don’t want you to think I’m prejudice.”

“You have no complaints from me.”

“You know what I mean. People say one thing and it’s taken another way.”

“I know what you mean. I know you love me when you touch me, when you kiss me.”

“You’re the best.”

I moved closer to Bethany but got stabbed by her bracelet.

“Don’t you ever take that off?”

“Not really, just to shower and at the AC. It’s so beautiful I don’t want to destroy it. But you know what, Dylan. I want to buy you something nice too; something you really want but never got?”

“You don’t have to...”

“I want to. I know you buy yourself a lot of nice clothes and jewelry, but there must be something.”

There was something, but I was embarrassed to tell her. Noticing my hesitation Bethany looked deeply into my eyes as if the answer would speak to her from there.

“I always wanted a Maltese Falcon.”

“A what?”

“A Maltese Falcon.”

“That’s that movie you were watching the other night. You want the DVD? You could just buy that. I want to get you something bigger.”

“No, I wanted a replica of the falcon; the statue they were looking for in the movie. I wanted one for a long time. As a kid I used to watch movies by myself ‘cause my mother worked all the time and my father wasn’t around. One night my mother came home from work. She was tired but I missed her and asked if she would watch this movie with me, *The Maltese Falcon*. She nodded off a few times and probably wanted to go to bed; but she stayed up anyway. I

always loved that movie but when my mother died it gained a special affinity. A few years later when I went to live with my cousin, she asked me what I wanted for Christmas. I saw in the paper that a store was selling a replica of the Maltese Falcon. I said that's what I want. She thought it was a stupid idea and refused to buy it. Years later when I got my first job, I went to that store to get it; but they stopped making it. I wanted one ever since."

Bethany was silent. She just looked at me either understanding a little bit more about me or thinking I was even weirder than she imagined.

"Ok," she finally whispered.

She turned her body to rest against my chest.

"You'll have it," she added then went silent.

Tulsa held a tranquility I rarely found in NYC. There was one spot somewhat comparable; the steps of the

Brooklyn Public Library, the crossroads of the world---or maybe just the crossroads of Eastern Parkway and Flatbush Avenue. Oddly enough on those steps I would dream of times like this; being a world away from everything, in a beautiful setting with a beautiful woman, who was all mine.

We took a rare midweek trip to the lake. As always the setting was serene. The beautiful spirit of the land was darkened by a young woman. She walked to the railing overlooking the water not appreciating the surroundings but dwelling on the apparently heavy thoughts in her mind.

I recognized her as one of the cashiers at the Wal-Mart by my apartment. Her name was Tredessa. Though she worked directly across the street from a Religious-Right Conservative Christian school, she made no bones about the fact she was gay. Students would preach to her in hostility and in God's love. Tredessa was in love too, with her partner, with her lifestyle, with who she was. I often saw her with her

lover; I believe her name was Gwen, here at the lake. They walked hand in hand, kissing much to the chagrin of others. I guess the absence of Gwen was the cause of Tredessa's despair.

"Go ahead," Bethany said knowing the Spirit of God was telling me to speak to her.

"Come with me," I said.

Bethany followed me as I followed God.

"Hey you work at Wal-Mart," I said as we stood before Tredessa.

"Yeah," Tredessa spoke though a feigned smile.

Her hair was short and slicked back; she wore black jeans, a white oxford shirt and military dress shoes. The smell of tobacco hit my nostrils.

"I'm Dylan and this is Bethany."

"Tredessa."

"Hi," Bethany said giving a friendly greeting.

“We come out here all the time,” I began. “I think I’ve seen you here with your friend.”

“Yeah,” Tredessa replied saying little but alluding there was more to the story.

“Is everything alright?” I asked.

“No, but what do you care?” she shot back.

“I care. You look as sad as can be. If we can do anything to help---”

“Like what? You people don’t exactly approve of my lifestyle. I’ve heard it so much from you guys I can quote it: Lev 20:13 *‘If a man lies with a man as one lies with a woman, both of them have done what is detestable.’* Or how ‘bout this Romans 1:26 *‘Even their women exchanged natural relations for unnatural ones.’*”

“You never heard that from me,” I stated.

“Yeah but you all believe the same thing. You’re right, Gwen isn’t here with me---she split. I’ll bet you guys

prayed for this to happen. Well you won. You should be happy.”

“How can I be happy when you’re out here so miserable?”

“What do you care?”

“I care ‘cause you’re suffering. You wanna quote the Bible, how ‘bout, *‘I was a stranger and you invited me in. Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.’* (Matt. 25:31-46) But I didn’t come here to quote Scripture; I came to offer whatever help I can. I don’t want you to be unhappy. Decisions based on an emotion state are always bad ones.”

“You got that right. But I know you’re gonna tell me I can’t be happy without God in my life.”

“God doesn’t deal in happiness, He deals in joy. The world deals in happiness. You have money you’re happy, you lose it you’re sad. You have a love in your life you’re

happy, they leave you're depressed. Joy comes from grace and grace is a gift; a gift that can't be taken away. If you ever want to learn more about that, I'll be happy to tell you."

"So why can't I pray to God to get Gwen back?"

"I never prayed for Bethany. I prayed that God would send me the person He wanted me to have. I work on God's plan not mine. Nothing can stop you from praying that way too."

"But I want Gwen."

"You may want her, but what you really need is someone who is right for you. I don't know what your situation is but you should want someone who loves and respects you and treats you the way you want to be treated. If you're not getting that from Gwen, maybe she's not the person for you."

"See, you're saying I need to be with men."

“I didn’t say that, you said that. I said you need to be with a person who will love you like you love them. Look a breakup’s a breakup. We’ve all been through it and it hurts. When I look back over the girls who left me, I start to see all the hurtful things they did. I don’t mean fights, all couples argue. I mean disrespect. Tredessa, you deserve to be with someone who wants to be with you. If someone leaves, let them go. It will make room for what life really has in store for you.”

“I know all that, but---hey, you two wanna go somewhere and get a drink? I know a place---”

“How ‘bout lunch.”

“No, I don’t have much of an appetite. Maybe I just need to be by myself---think things out.”

“OK.”

“See y’a.”

Tredessa walked away, part of her burden lifted.
Sometimes people just need to talk.

“Dylan, I’m confused,” Bethany stated when
Tredessa had disappeared in the distance. “You talked to her
like ---”

Bethany halted her words.

“Like what---anybody else?”

“Well no, I didn’t mean that, well oh, I don’t know.
But I was always taught they need God in theirs lives to get
straight. You almost sounded like you were condoning what
she does.”

“No, I know the Bible says homosexuality is an
abomination to the Lord. I couldn’t tell her that. She’s
depressed enough as it is. All I told her was to get over it and
find someone new. People deserve to be happy.”

“But what if the new person is still a woman? That’s not right.”

“I never told her to find another woman. I said to find someone who will treat her right. In 1st Corinthians 9:19 Paul talks about how he becomes like the person he is preaching to, to win them over to the gospel. I was just talking about a loving relationship. She might find another woman or get back with Gwen, that’s not for me to say. But one thing I can say, she will remember that a Christian took the time to listen and address her problem. I respected her. We had an open dialogue. Who knows where that could lead?”

“I still think you’re wrong.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know.”

“Bethany it’s just theology in action. Everyone who calls themselves a Christian and reads the Bible faithfully will have times when their sociology doesn’t match up with

their theology. But ultimately we make a choice. You can stand on all the Scriptures that say homosexuality is wrong and end it at that and you would be right. I know it's against the commands of God, but I have to reach that community some way."

Bethany went silent in a way I had never seen before. I don't know if she was mad at me or just at a crossroads with her theology.

"You wanna get something to eat?" I asked.

"Sure," she replied and walked away.

Bethany picked at her salad, hardly made eye contact with me and said very little. I knew something was up but I was afraid to pursue.

"Are you mad at me?" I finally asked.

She quickly shook her head 'no.'

“I’m not mad at you Dylan. It’s just----well I don’t know. It sounded like you were twisting the Bible to say what you want it to say.”

“It’s not twisting the Bible, it’s reading it. We’re ambassadors of Christ. We do what Jesus did. And what did he do; He went out of his way to talk with a Samaritan woman. The Bible says even his disciples were surprised at this. When I found out the history of that story, based on how the disciples viewed things, they had every right to believe Jesus was in the wrong. He was talking to a woman in public something a rabbi wasn’t supposed to do. She was a Samaritan. Jews and Samaritans went out of their way to avoid each other. When they did meet it often ended in a fight. Jesus goes out of his way to meet her and they have a civil conversation. He did that for a point. He was breaking conventions, going beyond the norm to reach another person. And that woman went back and told her friends about Jesus;

even introduced them to Jesus. He broke conventions to spread his message and look what happened. That's all I'm trying to do."

"That's not the same thing. Hatred of the Samaritans was man made. The Bible says God detest gay life. To follow your logic as an ambassador, we have to detest it too."

"I'm not in favor of it. The Bible also says they should be put to death. I love God but I'm not going to pull the trigger. Are you?"

"No, but you said we're ambassadors. An ambassador represents some one or some thing. When the Secretary of State travels abroad they represent the positions of their administration, not their own political beliefs. If it's God's word that being gay is wrong how can you, as an ambassador of God, condone it?"

"First of all I didn't condone it. What I did was show God's love to a person in distress. That's something I will

always do. Would you say that Jesus was condoning the woman caught in the act of adultery? The people did have a right to stone her, that was the law.”

“But Jesus told her to go and sin no more. Why didn’t you?”

“I just can’t condemn people; *‘judge not lest ye be judged’*. (Matt. 7:1) Besides, others will do that. Paul compared the church to parts of the body, each having a different function, none more important than the other, but each needing the other to function properly. My function wasn’t to tell her to repent. Others do that. And really, you can’t have one without the other.”

“I plant, Appolos waters,” Bethany said with sarcasm.

“Yeah.”

Bethany took a few bites of her salad. We had often discussed theology but this was the first debate we had. I hope it wouldn’t turn into something ugly.

“Look, I pray about these things. If I’m wrong, God with tell me. If you think this is bad, there was a time when I didn’t believe that Jesus was the only way to God. I found it hard to accept that a loving God could condemn people to hell, good people, just because they didn’t accept His Son. I told people how I felt. I studied and prayed about this and the Spirit revealed to me that Jesus is the only way. I went back and told all my friends I was wrong. That’s how I operate. I have to stand one hundred percent behind my convictions.”

“Tell me this; would you officiate a gay marriage?”

“No. A Christian church cannot recognize a gay marriage.”

“So if Tredessa and her little ‘friend’ came to you to get married you would look right in their eyes and tell them you wouldn’t marry them?”

“Yes. I’m a Christian but I refer to myself as a follower of Jesus. I don’t associate with any denomination

for there is too much politics and things I disagree with. I'm a follower of Christ but also a US citizen. I want to see equal rights for everyone and will fight for those rights."

"But wasn't this country created on principles of the Bible?"

"Yes and no. When the first colonies were established they were under religious rule; Quakers in Philadelphia, Dutch Reform in New York, Puritans, etc. Rule was more of a theocracy than a democracy. When the colonies decided to federalize the question was 'what denomination would rule?' Many founding fathers respected Christian thought but also gave the people the right not to believe. The civil right *not* to believe gives us the right *to* believe and practice what we do. Equality is what makes America a great country."

"How does civil rights apply to gays?"

"Take marriage---marriage includes matters of estate; you legally become part of your spouse's family. Matters of

health insurance, wills and other intellectual property and holdings all come into play. I don't believe in a church marriage but I believe in a civil union. People shouldn't be cheated out of those benefits. What do you think?"

"I think if they weren't gay in the first place they wouldn't be having those problems," Bethany said standing her ground. "And all of America can't adjust it's belief system to accommodate a few. The majority wins--- even taking a Christian worldview out of the picture, that's how America operates."

"True. But when the majority wins someone still has to look out for the minority. So if America, Christian or not, believes that a marriage is between a man and a woman, keep that, but let a civil union exist."

"And by encouraging that behavior you're just planting seeds of destruction to God's kingdom here on earth."

“I don’t think like that,” I replied. “I speak to gays, love them with the love of Christ, but if they ask is their lifestyle against God, I have to say ‘yes.’ I would rather talk to them face to face, then behind a picket line.”

“I don’t do that. At my church back home we would fast and pray that they would change.”

“Prayer works but my style of ministry is face to face. I want to be a living example of the Bible to people who haven’t read it. Jesus did things that made his disciples and religious leaders think he was crazy. I have critics too. But I have to do what I believe is right. I just want to keep the lines of communications open. They need someone to answer their questions and not be hostile.”

“I’m not being hostile. Oh just forget it.”

Bethany went silent again.

For the most part, Bethany is a quiet person.

However, for the past few hours I learned the difference between quiet and silence. She seemed so distant from me during the ride home. We took a shower together then afterward Bethany went to the prayer room and shut the door. I lounged on the futon with book in hand, trying to research my paper. Something was wrong and I didn't know how to fix it. I didn't know if I could. All I did was what the Lord had called and instructed me to do and I was in trouble. The words in my book were meaningless. I stopped, closed my eyes and said a prayer, believing in God to heal this situation.

When I opened my eyes Bethany was standing in the doorway. My jaw dropped upon seeing her. My Doll looked like a doll. She was wearing a tiny red teddy, heels and enticing cherry lip gloss.

“Put your eyes back in your head, Dylan,” Bethany said in a soft sultry voice. “It’s just me. I know you always wanted me to dress like this. So I figured tonight I’d give you a treat. I’m just using worldly wealth to gain friends for myself. I know nothing is more precious to you than my body. So it’s all yours.”

“It’s not just your body I love. It’s your mind, your intellect. Put them together and that’s what drives me wild. It’s your mind that makes you sexy.”

“Liar.”

Bethany came over to me, her legs astride my lap. I felt the warmth of her body against mine. Her hair was lightly scented with a soft perfume. I slipped my hands under her thong and grabbed her waist. I needed to feel her soft flesh without interference.

“I thought you were in there praying,” I said softly.

“I was.”

“And God told you to come out here dressed like this?”

“Nooooo. I called my mother.”

“So your mother told you to dress like this?”

“A while ago she told me to buy something short for makeup sex. Sorry about my shoes on the bed.”

“Believe me it’s quite alright. But makeup sex? We didn’t fight.”

“I was short with you. You don’t deserve that from me. I was confused back there.”

“You don’t have to explain---”

“I want to. I was brought up to believe that certain things are not of God and must be avoided. I was told one thing about gays and lesbians but also told that God loves everyone. He hates the sin but loves the sinner. You’re right about God’s love. I never thought about it in this context.”

I took her head in my hand brushing back her hair. I was met by two penetrating blue eyes. I loved looking into them; they were so hypnotic. The truth be known, all Bethany had to do was look at me with those eyes. They could always hit me more where it counted than any sexy nightie.

“I can’t lose you, Dylan. You’re everything to me.”

“You not gonna lose me cause we don’t agree on something. Look, there are always going to be differences. We’re from different backgrounds, different generations. There will be times when you’ll want to hit me with the nearest chair or I’ll be thinking ‘there’s no getting through to this girl’ But that’s just part of marriage. The thing is, after all the differences we still love and support each other. One thing I know, no matter what goes down, I’ll always run to you, never away.”

A tear fell from Bethany’s eye as she smiled.

“And you’re probably just being prepared,” I continued. “God is going to use you to travel the world; do business in many different lands. You don’t have to go far to find out the world isn’t like this school or those Christian camps. You have to learn how to do business with people that theologically and sometimes morally go against everything you believe in. It’s better to find out how to do it now than when you’re on the battlefield.”

“You’re probably right,” she whispered. “But could you stop sounding like my father when I’m dressed like this? It’s creepy.”

“Come here,” I said.

I brought her pouty lips to mine. They were sensual and filled with love. I gently ran my fingers along the back of her neck.

“Pig,” she whispered knowing the mood I was putting her in.

“Me? You’re the one comin’ out here in that tiny little thing and heels.”

“I’m just doing what my momma told me,” she purred seductively with a Texas tone.

“Ever want to do something your momma didn’t tell you?”

She smiled that mischievous smile that only I was privy to.

“Dylan, you’re mine and don’t you ever forget it,” she whispered as she grabbed the back of my neck.

For the rest of the evening we were as God meant us to be; together as one, in more ways than one.

The story of Jesus feeding the multitudes in John’s Gospel was a passage I had read numerous times. For the first time line 6:6 *‘He asked this only to test them for he had already had in mind what he was going to do,’* jumped out at

me. This tale is normally credited as one of the miracle stories of Jesus. But it is really a tale of how Jesus was training his disciples to do the work he had been doing. This just adds to my theology that all Christians are here to do the work that Christ showed us. Being a Christian is more than just going to church and not smoking, drinking or using profanity. It is doing exactly what Jesus did when he walked the earth in ministry for those three years. What a revelation! I would have to incorporate this into my paper. I hoped I could somehow work this into my class discussion tomorrow.

My eyes turned from the Bible and met Bethany's. She had been lying by my side staring intently at me while I read.

"What are you looking at?" I asked in a teasing manner.

“You’re always looking at me. How does it feel to be at the opposite end?”

She made me smile.

“Where were you when you were reading? I was watching you. You were in another world. You do it all the time. What are you thinking about?”

“I’m just reading,” I replied. “I don’t think about it. Whatever book I’m reading whether it’s the Bible, Sherlock Holmes or Truman Capote, I give it my full attention.”

“Not true. I watch you. You’re different. So what does He call your attention to?”

“Probably the same thing He calls to yours.”

“No, I’m not called to preach and teach. I read it ‘cause I love Jesus and want to get as close to him as possible. You read it for yourself and the people you’ll be preaching to. So there has to be a difference. Tell me about it. I want to know.”

Bethany was serious. She wanted to know more about God through me. I prayed for wisdom to articulate my thoughts.

“God does reveal things,” I started. “Right now He showed me that I need to be doing everything Jesus showed and taught us to do.”

“What else?”

“Well sometimes I read the Bible just for edification. You know; *‘have faith in God,’ ‘believe that you will receive,’ ‘without faith it is impossible to please God.’* Other times it’s to learn what God wants from us. I can read it as a historical document or as a word study but it always comes back to the spiritual meaning.”

“And what’s the spiritual meaning?”

“Simply; how do I apply what I’m reading to my life. Jesus said *‘anyone who has faith in me will do what I have*

been doing. He will do even greater things than me. ' (John 14:12). So I need to know what He did then go beyond that."

Bethany absorbed my words in silence. Now her eyes expressed a world where I wanted to know what she was thinking.

"I never had such access to a pastor," she said.

"I'm not a pastor."

"Yes you are. You feed the sheep. It might be just one, me, but the Bible says the shepherd will leave all the other sheep to find that one lost one."

"Everyone has a ministry. Yeah what I do is more of a traditional ministry; teaching, working with outreaches and going on mission trips, but you have a ministry too. You represent God. Your job might be more difficult than mine. In most cases you won't be able to literally preach the word of God; you have to live it. You have to be a shining example of the gospel in all you do. There is an expression, 'I'd rather

see a sermon walking than hear one talking.’ You have to be a sermon in action. You can’t jump up on a table in a boardroom and start quoting Scripture. Your actions have to be the living embodiment of the Scripture, your zeal has to be of one who would jump up on a table and start preaching. You’ll be going to places where they never heard of Jesus; places where it’s against the law to preach the gospel. But being a child of God you will. That’s your mission. Wow, I don’t know where all that came from. Then again maybe I do. Sorry you asked?”

Bethany took her time answering.

“No,” she finally said when convinced.

I rested against the headboard; drained as if I had just preached. Bethany rested her head against my thigh and said no more. Eventually I returned to my Bible. I went back to that place that only God can take me to. Bethany was at my side.

“You’re very talented,” Bethany said to me.

“Thanks,” I said not knowing what she was referring to but taking the complement.

“I mean it. I was looking through some of your journals. You touched my heart in places. You’re sensitive in your words and thoughts.”

“Those were just things I wrote down. Nothing special; just private thoughts.”

“You may say they’re private thoughts, but deep down you want the world to read them; to know who you really are, what you’re really about. Like when they publish letters and journals of famous people. They may be private but they have to be on display. You learn more about them that way.”

“My books are nothing more than a lonely man trying to make sense of it all. Yeah I know everybody from

Tennessee Williams to Lee Harvey Oswald have letters and journals. Ever read 'em? Sometimes you can't tell who's the artist and who's the lone nut. I don't know if I want everybody reading my email."

"You can play it off but I say you're talented."

No one ever said that to me. I keep journals for private use. For a while I tried to get a few things published. But the only one that had confidence in my writings was me. After a while that wears thin.

"Thank you for saying that," I said choking back tears.

"I'm just recognizing your gift from God. You know your gift isn't for you. You have to use it so others can benefit."

With that, Bethany went back to her book and didn't utter another word.

“Outside of wanting to jump my bones every second of the day you seem like the perfect Christian man,” Bethany finally spoke without provocation.

“You and the administration would say differently if you could see me back in New York. I didn’t mind a nice Scotch at a noisy bar on a Saturday night or a slow brandy in a quiet jazz club.”

“You did not!”

“I’m not a fallen down drunk but I do like a taste.”

“Why?”

“You really want to know?”

“That’s why I asked.”

“Well with all the praying and studying and flying to this country and that country, life can be lonely. When prayer isn’t enough, an Amstel Light with a Dewars on the side brought on the click.”

“What click?”

“The click that makes everything alright. The click that Tennessee Williams wrote about.”

Bethany chewed her lip as she thought about this. I didn’t see condemnation in her eyes just a look of how to make this right.

“You put too much on theology and not enough on God,” she finally said. “I believe in the Bible but I still enjoy life.”

“So do I.”

“But I don’t sit around waiting for God. Sometimes you have to move first. If it’s a wrong move, He’ll let you know.”

“But don’t you wonder what it’s all about; what’s true and what isn’t?”

“No.”

I was a bit surprised. “You don’t?”

“To me it’s not that complicated. I don’t rack my brain trying to figure out the complexities of life.”

“As a theologian that’s my life.”

“There are no absolutes in life. Math is my favorite subject. There you have absolutes; one and one will always equal two. Everything else is up for grabs.”

“Even this?” I asked referring to my shelves of Bibles and books on theology.

“Dylan, I know God is proud of you. You have done all He has asked. What more do you want? What are you looking for?”

“You sound so sure.”

“I am.”

“Sometimes I’m not.”

“You think too much.”

“I think too much? You’re the one who’s always reading.”

“Yeah but what I read isn’t theory. It’s faith that guides you. Your faith creates theology. One could believe anything, find Scriptures to back it up and for them it would be right. That doesn’t make it the absolute truth. That’s what’s been happening for two thousand years and is still happening today. You say that all the time. I don’t know why you’re making such a fuss about it now?”

“Did you think like this before you met me?”

“Not really. I’ve just been reading your books. That’s where I found out all that history stuff I just told you.”

“It doesn’t confuse you? You once told me you never met a Christian who questioned the Bible.”

“I’m not questioning. I know what I have to do and I’m doing it. That’s where we differ. You keep looking for an answer. For me it’s been there all the time.”

“And how are you so sure?”

“Two things. Wow, there I go sounding like you again. First, nothing worth knowing will even be understood with the mind.”

“Wow!”

“Oh come on, Mr. Brooklyn, New York. You should know that line. We were watching that movie *Manhattan* and that guy Woody Allen said it. Second, maybe I did just accept what I was told without really thinking about it. I knew God would take care of me so I just went about my business. True being exposed to you and your books has made me think. But all in all I don’t need a systematic theology. I just know God provides, so I don’t have to worry.”

And what was I supposed to say after that?

After church and brunch with the ‘gang,’ Bethany and I left the car at home and took a long bike ride along the Arkansas River. The trail led us to a small park where we stopped to enjoy the afternoon. As always, it was an extremely hot Tulsa afternoon. Bethany looked exceptionally sexy wearing a backless midriff with spaghetti straps and formfitting jeans. To top it off, she had her ever present Chuck Taylor low tops.

We sat on a grassy slope listening to the river as it bounced against the shore. Bethany was enfolded in my arms. It was close to one hundred degrees, we had just finished a three-mile bike trail but Bethany still smelt like a rose. I took small nibbles at her naked neck and shoulders. Bethany moaned in ecstasy. If we had been on the futon in the living room, well I’m sure by now you know how we operate.

“Dylan,” Bethany exclaimed.

“What?” I said. “I’m just loving you.”

She turned and kissed me with her soft lips.

“Dylan, we’re outside.”

“So?”

I accidentally on purpose brushed my arm against her harden nipple. Again Bethany moaned then bit me softly on the neck as I kept the back of my hand against her soft breast. Her kisses became harder. I returned her passion.

“Dylan,” Bethany said looking directly in my eyes.

Those beautiful blue eyes held a fire I had never seen in the sunlight. She dropped her head against my chest, maybe to cool the passion or maybe to decide whether or not we should find a secluded spot. Our lips brushed against each other’s, not really a kiss, just the elongation of foreplay.

“Pray with the little girl,” the Spirit of God spoke to my whole being.

Like a magnet drawn to the source, my head whipped around to the left. Immediately I spotted a little blonde girl playing some type of game with a ball and a string. She was in a wheelchair, her mother sitting on the grass at her side. Bethany noticed my fixation and followed my gaze.

“Dylan?” she asked wanting to know what was up.

“Mrs. Peel, we’re needed,” I replied.

“Huh?” she said not getting the reference.

“We have to pray with her,” I answered.

We got up from our endeavors to do the work of God. I hoped my arousal wasn’t revealed but I didn’t have time to check. I was on an assignment and had to move regardless of any embarrassing protrusion.

“Hi,” I said to the young girl’s mother as Bethany and I approached them. They were sitting under a shade tree enjoying the day.

“Hi,” the mother replied giving us a quick glance over. Apparently we passed for she offered us a spot in the shade.

“I have a question,” I said getting right to the point. “The answer is only yes or no. Do you believe in the healing power of Jesus?”

“Yes,” she said with a smile.

“Can we stand in agreement that God will heal your daughter?” I asked.

“Yes,” she replied as if anticipating this moment.

“May we lay hands on her?” I asked.

This time she couldn’t speak. She nodded her head yes, her spirit giving us the assurance of agreement.

Bethany and I walked towards the little girl and laid our hands on her forehead. I began to prayer aloud, Bethany silently in tongues.

“Father God, Your Word says your son Jesus *‘took our infirmities and carried our sorrows’* and *‘by his stripes we are healed.’* (Isaiah 52:4-5) Jesus said, *‘if two or three come together and ask anything in my name it will be done.’* (Matthew 18:19) *‘Ask and you will receive and your joy will be complete.’* (John 16:24) We stand in agreement with Your Word and we stand in agreement with this child and her mother that all pain and affliction shall go from her body and she shall be totally healed, totally whole because of You and You alone. We thank You for this healing and we thank You that she shall be everything You created her to be. In the mighty name of Your Son Jesus we pray.”

“Mommy!” the little girl cried once we finished.

“Come here, Sally,” her mother said.

Without hesitation Sally raced from her wheelchair and into her mother’s arms.

“Mommy look!” she exclaimed realizing what she had done.

Sally shot a look at me trying to figure out who I was. I broke from her penetrating look and focused on Bethany. She was giving me the same look as the little girl.

“To God be the glory,” I said to the three of them.

The mother kissed my hand and embraced us both as Sally danced and jumped around with joy.

“Thank you, thank you!” the mom cried over and over.

I slowly released her grip.

“Not me. Thank Him. To God be the glory. We’re just instruments.”

I smiled at them, took Bethany by the hand and quickly left.

We rode the trail home in silence. I had passed these hills a dozen times alone and with Bethany. Today they felt like the same hills Jesus and his disciples walked through. I would steal a glance at Bethany when I knew she wasn't looking. Her eyes were filled with questions. I knew we had to stop and talk. We pulled off to a spot featuring a plaque dedicating its historical site. Today would mark a new landmark.

"Bethany," I began giving her an opening to end her silence.

"I've known of people who got healed of cancer or a tumor was removed supernaturally, but I never saw it happen right before my eyes."

"God showed He is a healing god. He also showed that He will use whoever wants to be used and will drop everything they're doing to be obedient to His call."

She didn't have a reply. I guess everything happened so fast.

"He uses people regardless of the situation," Bethany finally acknowledged; witnessing it, now wanting to believe it.

"Yes He does."

"But before all this happened we were thinking about--"

"Yeah, but we responded to His call. I've done street ministry where people with alcohol or crack in them came to the Lord right on the spot. Prostitutes repent right then and there, on the street corner, no matter how they were dressed or what they had just come from doing. When God calls, you can act in love and do what He wants, in turn help others or act in selfishness and help only yourself."

I could see that thought rattling in Bethany's brain. She wanted to speak but the words got caught in her throat.

“No matter what’s happening God always gives us a chance to do His will,” I added. “Take it.”

A slight smile appeared on her lips.

“I think I was healed today too, Dylan,” she spoke softly.

I knew exactly what she meant.

I had enough of the library so I decided to sit outside on the steps of the entrance. Once that warm midday air hit me, I could breathe again. ‘Why couldn’t I be a horticulturist,’ I thought. I love to study, I hate being cooped up inside. Why not study the great outdoors. Life should be so easy.

“Dylan,” cried a familiar voice which I couldn’t immediately place.

I looked up and was met with a great sight; Ed and Cindy Monroe two friends from the past. One could not find a more handsome or a more Christian couple. My first semester here was their last. They met as undergrads and within two years married. After a year in grad school they followed their calling to the mission field which started for both at youth Christian Camp. For years various countries in Africa and South America were their homes before returning to the University to complete their degrees. That's when I got to know them. It was their work on the mission field that encouraged mine. When email allowed I kept in touch and contributed financially. I had no idea they were in town.

“Eddie,” I said hardly getting his name out.

Both were close to thirty but still looked like teenagers. They radiated with the love of God. I stated before I had many acquaintances. Ed and Cindy were true friends. We exchanged hugs and talked of times old and new. They

enjoyed being on campus again. It's intoxicating. However, their time in Tulsa was brief. In a few hours a 10:30 plane would take them to Houston for a connecting flight to Haiti.

"I can't tell you how good God is. We knew we would run into you," Eddie said.

"Yeah, the Spirit told us we'd see you before you graduate," Cindy added. "And to give you this."

She removed an envelope from her purse and handed it to Ed.

"We need twenty thousand dollars for a project in Haiti," Cindy began. "We could only raise what's in this envelope. It's not the twenty so we're sowing it into your life, knowing the harvest will come for the entire amount."

I didn't need it but I knew I had to take it. She was right in her theology of sowing and reaping. Sow a seed to fulfill a need.

“Here,” Eddie said handing me the envelope. “You’ll need it for what God has planned.”

I saw Bethany in the distance and waved her over. Ed and Cindy looked at Bethany then looked at me. Smiles erupted from their hearts.

“Dylan is this your---” Eddie started to ask.

“Yes,” I said answering his question with pride

“Wow, God has certainly blessed you!” he added

They stood in awe of Bethany when she finally arrived.

“Hey,” Bethany said. “I recognize you guys; Eddie and Cindy. Dylan only has a few pictures in his apartment and the ones he does has you two.”

Eddie couldn’t take his eyes off Bethany. Not in a lustful manner but one of happiness for me. They often said I should find someone to share my life with. Though I played

it off, they knew my truth. Now not only did I have someone who loved me, I had the best of the best.

“Dylan, you’re sure blessed,” Eddie said. “She’s a living doll.”

“I see why you two are best friends,” Bethany said.

“I think you guys will make each other very happy,” Cindy said with assurance.

“We already are,” Bethany replied.

“I could see from a mile away you two were meant to be,” she added in the Spirit.

“Do you have time to come back to the house?” I asked.

“Yeah,” Bethany added. “Dylan’s a good cook.”

“Bethany you certainly changed Dylan,” Ed said. “I knew Dylan for a year and never got an invitation to the apartment.” He chuckled. “I love you to death, man, but you’re a very private person.”

“True, I can’t lie,” I said. “But back then I didn’t have furniture.”

“He still doesn’t,” Bethany said. “But we get along fine with what he has.”

Their eyes widen on that remark.

“Yeah, I have more than enough pots and pans to cook for the lady,” I said not really lying.

“We have to take a rain check on that invite,” Eddie said. “We promised our host we would get back for a quick bite then it’s off to the airport. We really didn’t have time to walk across the campus. But something told us to and that’s when we saw you.”

We took a slow walk back to their car. It’s funny, you have so much to say to someone you haven’t seen in years but you don’t know what to say. I think the fact that I had Bethany said it all for them. They saw a big part of my life was complete. Eddie stood between Bethany and me, his arm

around each of us. There were no words of wisdom or patches of marital advice. He was like a conduit to God for us. Through his touch he was imparting in us all that God had imparted in him and Cindy. Bethany asked about their trip. Cindy explained it was at a school in Haiti; their first time going there. They were excited to do God's work.

“You sound like Dylan,” Bethany said.

She wanted to sow a seed into their ministry. Eddie told her to wait until they got there, for often sending material goods from America was more valuable than cash. They would email us their information once they were settled.

We exchanged hugs and tears as it was time for them to drive off. We prayed together in the parking lot; Bethany and I prayed for their trip, they prayed for our lives and relationship. Watching them drive off was another time for

melancholy. It seemed a good part of my life was saying good-bye to people I love.

“Don’t worry, Dylan,” Bethany said taking my hand.

“It is well.”

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“Where’d you get all that?” Bethany asked with excitement as I filled out a deposit slip at the bank. The envelope contained twenty-six hundred dollars in cash.

“Eddie and Cindy sowed a seed.”

“All that.”

“Yeah.”

“Wow! What are you going to do with it?”

“It might be for you, it might be for me, it might be for us. I’ll let God decide.”

She smiled in agreement.

After the gym we packed a picnic dinner then drove to a secluded spot to eat under the stars. Our relationship was funny. Sometimes we would laugh and joke. Other times we would trade off each other's intellect. Most often we were quiet. Just being with each other said it all. Tonight we fell into the latter. Bethany and I just lied on our blanket, our eyes toward the heavens.

"I was always the quiet one," Bethany said without my asking. "My Dad and Mom thought I was crazy, cause I never talked. I would just sit and read or stare at the sky."

"What were you thinking about?"

"Just things," she replied, her eyes telling more of the story than her words wanted to say.

"What are you thinking about now?" I asked staring into Bethany's blue eyes as they stared into the night sky.

"Just things."

“Like what?” I wanted to kiss her. Her intellect was so stimulating.

“Like, did you ever look at the sky and see how blue it is and how many stars there are.”

“Yeah, but it only makes me think of how loving God is. God created all this. He is love. I think of love and I know what love is ‘cause of how much I’m in love with you. What do you think?”

“I don’t know. Make love to me, Dylan. I want you to do it as if I didn’t matter; like you just wanted to please yourself.”

I was a little surprised at Bethany’s request here wanted to do it in the open. Perhaps the night did it to her. I rammed in to my Doll and she accepted it. She moaned as if I were a stranger and held me as if I was her greatest love. Pleasing her the way she wanted, our pleasure arrived at the same time.

“Now that is what it’s all about,” Bethany said not looking at me but enjoying the sky.

I kissed her and she kissed me back.

“I love you, Bethany,” I said while I was still inside of her.

“I love you too, Dylan,” she said meaning it.

We remained as one for hours, loving the sky, the heavens and each other, knowing that God made it all possible.

My completed paper was due in a few days. Maybe I was too anxious or just thinking too much but I couldn’t sleep, I couldn’t think, relax. I flicked on the TV hoping to find something to soothe me into sleep. Bethany was never one for TV but tonight she decided to watch with me. Also on my mind was a Haagen Dazs Chocolate-Double Chocolate bar I had in the freezer. I had been fighting off the

urge to eat it for I didn't want to consume 250 calories then go to sleep. The urge finally won out.

"Don't eat that now," Bethany said when I returned to the bed with the ice cream in hand. "You'll get nightmares."

"That's an old wives' tale and you're an old wife," I barked.

"Alright, you'll see! Don't come crying to me if you get stomach cramps or dream about chupacabra coming to get you."

"I have a hedge of protection around me. There isn't a monster on Earth that can scare me," I replied through licks of my nocturnal delight.

"We'll see."

Bethany found her usual spot on my chest and drifted off to sleep as I continued with my ice cream and *The Fresh Prince of Bel Air*. My mind began to settle down a bit. The treat and the Prince did the trick. It was my turn to hit LaLa

land. Tomorrow I would spend the day at the library and finish the paper. TV off, Bethany in my arms and the peace of mind knowing I would have with my unfinished thirty paged paper completed to my satisfaction.

With the semester ending in two days, I wasn't surprised to find the library bustling with activity at eight in the morning. I wasn't the only one scrambling to finish a paper. All I needed was an hour or two of concentrated thought and editing and I would be through. I found my usual spot, set up my laptop and legal pads, now I just need the few reference books I had been working with.

As I went to retrieve them, I saw Shivaughn approaching. I loved to watch her slim figure and the ultra feminine wiggle to her walk. As she got closer, I noticed an engagement ring with the hugest diamond I ever saw bling-blinging it's way down to me. The aisle was so tiny; I knew

it would be a tight squeeze when she passed. Shivaughn's smoking green eyes never left mine as she approached. They were filled with love and commitment.

"Hey guy," she whispered to me, wrapping her arms around my neck and pulling me in for a passionate kiss.

I loved the taste of her warm full cinnamon flavored lips against mine. I held her soft body in my arms and pulled her closer. Shivaughn slipped her tongue against mine and let it wrap around. I loved having her in my arms and loved the fact that she was wearing my ring and we were finally together.

'But what happened to Bethany?' I thought.

BETHANY!!!!

I woke with such a start it shook Bethany.

"Dylan what's wrong?" she sleepily asked.

"Nothing," I gasped between heavy breathes.

“I told you not to eat that ice cream. Maybe next time you’ll listen to me. Old wives’ tale!”

Somewhere between sleep and spirituality Bethany laid her hand on my stomach and began to pray:

“Father God, it is written *‘by His stripes we are healed.’* We stand on Your word and know that Dylan is healed of any indigestion or stomach cramps. We take captive of every thought that is not of you. Satan you are a liar and deceiver and you have no authority. Go back to the pit of hell where you belong. We pray in Jesus name.”

On that last line Bethany went back to sleep. I took her arm and wrapped it around me like a blanket. In the darkness I could make out her delicate fingers. I took Bethany’s hand in mine and declared she would be wearing my diamond ring. There is no way I would ever want to lose her.

My paper was completed on Thursday afternoon. I was getting better. There were times when I had a ten-page paper due at three o'clock and only six pages at one. This paper wasn't just finished; it was something I was proud of. It was in my spirit to elongate this paper into a book; *The Twenty-First Century Christian*. It would be a mandate on where Christianity should be headed and what our focus should be for the next hundred years. Each era had a number of people who shaped the thought of their time; why couldn't I be one? Maybe that was the plan God had for me. I would stay in Tulsa; write the book while Bethany finished her two years at the University.

Funny, my theology was actually capsulized by something I heard an atheist say on TV. To paraphrase he

stated ‘the trouble with Christians is they think they’re Jews. They focus all their energy on the Ten Commandments when they should be doing the Beatitudes.’ How profound I thought. First, that goes along with my theory that atheists have more of a theology than most Christians. Second, he was absolutely right. Call it the Beatitudes, call it the Sermon on the Mount, this was Jesus’ theology for those who followed him. The argument from this atheist stemmed from the fact the Religious Right always seemed to be strong proponents of the death penalty, hostility toward homosexuals, torture during war, and war itself. The laws that give credence to their stance are found in God’s decrees to Moses found in Leviticus and Deuteronomy. But Jesus explicitly tells his followers this isn’t the way things should be done. (Matthew 5: 38-48). If there are things that are an abomination to God, what Jesus said in the Beatitudes may seem like an abomination to human nature; *‘turn the other*

cheek,’ ‘if someone wants to sue you and take your tunic let him have your cloak as well,’ ‘do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you.’

To the reader who may ask ‘if these laws are in the Bible, shouldn’t we follow them?’ Two thoughts come to mind; First, the laws found in the Hebrew Bible are numerous and most are forsaken by contemporary standards including Christians standards. Deut 22:11 *‘Do not wear clothes of wool and linen woven together.’* Deut. 15:1 *‘At the end of every seven years, you must cancel debts.’* One could argue the law is only for the Children of Israel. However, because of Jesus, anyone who comes to him has the right to become children of God. (John 1:12) So wouldn’t the law apply to both Jews and Christians? *‘For once baptized in Christ there is neither Greek nor Jew but Abraham’s seed.’* (Galatians 3:26-29) If one were strict to the laws they would have to enforce all of them and not a select few.

Second, it is because of Jesus that Christians don't have to pay strict attention to these laws. Jesus freed us from the laws of sin and death. Before Jesus, one was on his own when it came to obeying and fulfilling the laws. Jesus is our redeemer. '*Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law.*' (Galatians 3:13) We are no longer under the law but under grace.

The Sermon on the Mount isn't the only passage that Christians must follow. I researched what some call Thomas Jefferson's bible or *The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth*. Jefferson didn't believe in the supernatural aspects of the Bible so he redacted the Gospels extracting all the miracles including the resurrection. Only the teachings were left. If one was to ascribe to this theology, they would follow a person that constantly walked in love and service to his fellow man. I believe in the supernatural aspects of Jesus' ministry but must argue that Jesus himself warns of getting

too caught up with them. In Luke 10:20 Jesus tells his disciples not to rejoice in their power to drive out demons, but to rejoice over eternal life. And in John 21:15: “*When they had finished eating Jesus said to Simon Peter, ‘Simon, son of John, do you truly love me more than these?’*”

Although it is readily accepted the word *these* refers to the other disciples, I believe it refers to the fish they were eating. Before Jesus poses this question, Peter and the disciples were fishing all night but hadn’t caught anything. The next morning Jesus appears onshore, calls out telling them where to cast their net. They do and find more fish than their nets can haul. (John 21:1-6) So Jesus is asking ‘do you love me or the supernatural things I can do for you?’ People can love the things God has given them more than they love God. When Peter replies Jesus is the true object of his devotion, Jesus tells him to take care of and feed his sheep. One who truly loves Jesus will provide for others. That is our main

objective. 1 John 4:19-20, *“If anyone says ‘I love God’ yet hates his brother he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God who he has not seen.”*

My paper received an A+. My professor noted I should elongate it into a book. That confirmed my post grad school assignment. For the class Bethany hated and said was ‘through’ with after the fourth day, she also received an A.

Third Semester

*In your own way you were fighting for the same
thing.*

After three years, it was finally here; the first day of my last class. My final class was *A Survey of the Bible*, a rudimentary but required course usually taken the first term. Crazy me, I took all the hard classes first, then coasted home with the elementary ones. Bethany was taking another class she wasn't looking forward to *Research Demographic*. Like her class of the previous semester, she thought this one was also going to be boring.

There are sixty-six books in the Bible and it was the objective of the class to give a brief overview of each one. This was an interesting course for a graduate program. Even at this level of Christian experience there are still many who never read the entire Bible. And then there are others like myself, who focus on one aspect of it. I find myself reading

more of the New Testament than the Old. Ask me anything about the Gospels or the letters and I will have no trouble. Ask me about Boaz or the names of Job's companions and I would have to think twice or look it up. No great analytical debates would be found in this class; just a cursory outline of each book.

As predicted, Bethany was disappointed with her new class. Again she vowed to do all the required assignments in the first week then "find something better to do." My class was also lame for my standards. *Intro to Charismatic Theology* wasn't on the schedule this semester. At noon I was free for the day. An undemanding morning class; afternoons with nothing on the agenda. More time to savor my remaining days on campus, more time to think about my days ahead. I would enjoy these days then move on.

When Peter saw him, he asked, “Lord, what about him?”

What constitutes real faith was the message of the speaker in chapel. He explained that while on the mission field his wife was gang-raped then murdered before his eyes. Though he continued his mission work, he couldn't understand how he could give up everything for God then have someone he loved, not just taken, but defiled and butchered while he stood bound and gagged, unable to help or receive intervention from God. In his heart he knew that God's mission for him was greater than the love for his family. He told us:

“For four years I prayed, cried, was ashamed of my hostility toward God. I read James chapter one about trials and temptations. I read Job. I thought about Peter in John 21:17-23. Jesus tells Peter, *‘When you were younger you dressed yourself and went where you wanted; but when you*

are old you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go.’ In essence Jesus is telling Peter his days ahead will be filled pain and suffering. Peter sees John; the one Jesus loved, and asks, *‘What about him?’* Jesus says don’t worry about John; just do what I tell you to do. I thought about this line for months; *‘What about him?’* What about all the others that don’t suffer? Do they get to witness grisly acts against their loved ones or is it just me? Those were the thoughts that controlled my mind.

‘It wasn’t until I heard a sermon on Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego that a peace began within me. The story found in Daniel 3 tells of the Hebrew students who were told by King Nebuchadnezzar if they didn’t bow down to his god they would be thrown into the fiery furnace. It’s always preached their faith got them rescued. But what was their faith? Daniel 3:17: *‘If we are thrown into the blazing*

furnace, the God we serve is able to save us from it and he will rescue us from your hand. ' Most preachers stop there and the whole church hoops and hollers for they know the outcome of the story. But listen to what else they say; line 18: *'But even if he does not, we want you to know, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up.'* 'But even if he does not.' That's where true faith lies. They thought 'even if I burn to a crisp. Even if I die, God is still the God of my life.' I wasn't thinking like that. I didn't get what I wanted. No angel came down from Heaven to rescue me and my wife. Nobody came and said don't take that road, take another. No. What happened happened. And it happened while I took my wife from the comfort and safety of our home here in America to live in another land, to do the work of God. Once I realized God is God no matter what, my life changed. My testimony about

this has led more people to Christ, in the states and in other countries, than I can tell you.

‘Most of you in attendance today are still considerably young. With the exception of a few, I can safely say you haven’t faced great hardships or life changing experiences---yet. When you do, continue to have faith and know that everything that God called and created you to do will come to fruition. Know that even if things don’t work out the way *you* planned, if you don’t get that job, if your fiancée calls off the wedding at the last minute and elopes with your best man or the maid of honor, if you never get out of that wheelchair; know that God is still God. I had an instructor who told us ‘on the mission field, have an objective and stick with it.’ He put it ‘keep the main thing, the main thing.’ I’m telling you, in all you do, keep the main thing, the main thing. And that main thing is Jesus Christ is

your Lord and Savior no matter what happens or doesn't happen in your life."

That sounded like a sermon I would preach. It was unusual for the University. Their theology is usually bordered on 'if you have faith nothing will go wrong.' My theology is: what God has called you to do; do, no matter what your present circumstances are. Though he didn't cite it, I thought the speaker was going use Isaiah 55:9 *'For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are my ways your ways,' declares the Lord. 'As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my thoughts higher than your thoughts.'*

Whatever plans we have for our life, God has plans a million times better. But we must become accustomed to the fact that God's way of doing things may not make sense. We just have to know in the long run, we will come out winners.

I noticed many of the students were silent as they exited the chapel. Perhaps many were alarmed by the

tragedy of his wife, perhaps their minds were on their studies, perhaps they didn't care for they knew a thing like this would never happen to them 'cause they had faith in God.

"What did you think about what that man said in chapel?" Bethany asked as we sat under a shade tree, watching the Arkansas River flow past.

She had been quiet for most of the afternoon. I thought, like me, she was just enjoying the late afternoon sun. Her thoughts were on the sermon we heard hours ago.

"Ultimately he was planting a seed in our lives," I answered. "Being a follower of Jesus is hard. It's not just going to church and singing songs. It's a lifestyle. And that lifestyle only has two components; love and faith. God brought that man here today so we can ask ourselves, 'What would we do in that situation?' It's about love, it's about

forgiveness, it's about continuing faith even when one of the most traumatic things you can imagine happens before your eyes.”

Bethany chewed her lower lips as she took in my words.

“What do you think?” I asked.

“I don't know. I've heard sermons about bad things happening to good people, but never like this. You lose a job, God provides you with a better one. A tornado destroys your one bedroom home; God gives you a two bedroom home. He provides all your needs according to His riches and glory. When I was nine my friend's grandmother died suddenly. She couldn't stop crying but I knew her grandmother was in a better place. But this sermon really made me think. If my grandmother died out of the blue would I be so calm? That man really had great faith.”

“One of his points was faith is a process. That is something that isn’t stressed enough. To me God doesn’t cause calamity; He doesn’t take a loved one’s life just to see how you’ll react. That isn’t necessary. You either have faith in His ways or you don’t.”

“Since you bought that up, now don’t get mad at me, Dylan, but I was reading your notes on the class you taught about people being in your life for a season. Who determines the season, the person or God?”

“Both. Some people can’t handle true friendship so they are in and out of people’s lives. But when a relationship is ordained by God and both parties know it, they will let God orchestrate everything. God’s love is greater than it all.”

“Wow! That’s something. I don’t think I have anybody like that. I have good friends back in Dallas but they’re not out of my life. We’re just going to different schools. I’ll see them soon.”

“It’s also people like teachers and coaches. Maybe a librarian or a store clerk who did or said something that influenced your life then moves on. Maybe you had a summer job somewhere. You have a great time but afterward you never see those people again. That’s just the way life is.”

“But God *is* behind all this?”

“I think so. What about you?”

“I never really thought about it. Things just happen.

Can I ask you a real personal question?”

“Sure.”

“How old were you when your mom died?”

“About fifteen-sixteen.”

“Do you think God took her away from you?”

“I wasn’t a Christian back then so that didn’t come into question. My mother was dead, that’s all I knew. I used to talk to her about everything; problems, small talk, it didn’t matter. When she passed I had nothing.”

“Where was your dad?”

“He was out of the picture long before that. He had to travel a lot on business. Once my mother died, he kept on traveling and never looked back. Like I told you, I went to live with a cousin. I didn’t really know her before and things didn’t change after. She treated me nice; I guess it was more my fault than hers. She had a big house and I had a room in the back and never came out. All the decisions I made I made on my own. She was there but I didn’t want to share. I had friends but no one I was really close to. Psychologist would say I didn’t want to get close for fear they would leave me too. They may be right. But a lot of what I am today stems from my mother’s death. When she was here, she taught me and taught me well. Look at me; I’m not a drug addict; I’m not in jail. I held responsible jobs, have money in the bank, a college education. Through time I did come to the conclusion that her death was part of God’s plan for my life.”

“I’ve never met anyone like you. You have wisdom, you’re honest. All my friends are Christian, my mom and dad, but I never had conversations about God the way we have. We just accepted what was preached to us. There are no questions.”

“You never had a question about what you were taught.”

“Not until I met you.”

“What?”

“I mean, like I said, I just accepted everything. My mind was in math and business. What the pastor said I accepted, for that was his business to teach us. I really didn’t think anything he said needed to be questioned. My friends lived and thought the same way. My Dad reads the Bible more than my Mom. He never preached to me. I guess he figured I wasn’t a wild and crazy girl so he didn’t have to say anything. I always talked with my mom, but she would never

say ‘Well 1st Corinthians says this’, or ‘in Acts the apostles did that’. She just talked normal. But then---wow I can’t believe I’m telling you this. Remember that day we met, we were in the bookstore and you were talking to me then had trouble with your student bucks?”

“Yeah.”

“Well I was so thankful. Cause I wanted you to take me and kiss me right then and there. I would have played the fool for you in the bookstore or we could have sneaked up to the library; oh I forgot that’s you and Shivaughn’s little rendezvous spot.”

“Bethany!”

“Whatever. But those feelings were new to me. And I could tell by the way you looked at me, you liked me. It seemed so right for me to want you, but everything I was taught said it was wrong. So when you had trouble I ran out the store. I hid in the ladies room and tried to figure out why

I was feeling this way. I never had sexual thoughts about any boy until I met you. I was so confused I couldn't even pray. I didn't think I could talk to God about a thing like this. So I stayed in the bathroom and after a while I got a rhema word. I heard 'it is well,' and this peace came over me. I didn't know what was going to happen but I knew everything would work out. This girl I knew named Connie came in and I finally walked out with her. I figured if I saw you having her there would stop me from doing anything stupid. I thought I escaped but then you saw me at the car. I had kissed a boy once before. It was alright. But when you kissed me, wow, nothing ever felt so good in all my days! It felt so good I had forgotten that everybody said it was so wrong. Again I heard that rhema word, 'it is well.' When I felt it was time to leave I did.

‘That was the first time I had a conflict with biblical teachings. I called my mom. She really didn't know what to

say about the Bible. So she told me about my dad and the choir and all. But you, you just talk about the Bible and life like nothing. It makes me think. Like with that gay lady. I knew I was right, but after what you said about God's love, it made sense."

"I'm just me."

"Yeah but you're different. You're not only hot you're smart. You don't know what that does to me!"

That made me smile.

"It's true. It's things like that that make me know I'm going to spend the rest of my life with you. It would be a sin if I didn't."

"Well I'm not going anywhere."

Now it was Bethany's turn to smile. Like me, she could relax and enjoy the July afternoon by the river.

July was at the midway point. Though my relationship with Bethany was getting stronger and stronger, it seemed time was getting shorter and shorter. In two weeks I would be finished with school. The next stage of my life would begin; things would be opening up. Yet I felt things were coming to a close. There was a sadness to my spirit; a melancholy. Maybe I felt this way for a part of my life that I had grown accustomed to was ending; inching away day by day. The future can be scary, if you let it. That's why Paul instructed us to '*walk by faith and not by sight.*'

No Greater Love

Bethany stepped out of the shower and into the living room. I couldn't remove my eyes from her voluptuous body. Her only apparel was a white towel that fit snugly against her curvaceous frame, exposing long tone gams and delicious shoulders. Her hair, still wet, was pulled back, clipped in a

bun; a slight touch of lip gloss added to her perpetually pouting lips. Bethany knew this would excite me. It was her subtle way of saying, 'jump my bones, pig.' She would sit on the futon feigning with her hair or nails all the while waiting for me to come over and start something; at first pretending to fend me off but ultimately allowing me to enter her any place I wanted to. She was my greatest prayer answered and, in the carnal sense, my fantasy girl in the flesh. Yet tonight as she climbed in bed alongside me, the light scent of her sweet perfume captivating both the air and me, I saw her only as a child of God. She was a beautiful creation of the Creator, to be loved, respected and served just like anyone else I came in contact with. Something prevented me from touching her the way I wanted to. I didn't feel anything was wrong, I just knew she was on---I was on a new spiritual level. Bethany radiated like a child of God---a joint heir with Christ---not to be used for my sexual pleasure. I couldn't

believe I was thinking like this. Yet something in my spirit revealed this to me as plain as day. I love Bethany with my entire being. I would lay down my life for her; do anything to make her smile. But something in my spirit blocked me from touching her.

I took Bethany in my arms and caressed her as tenderly as one would a newborn baby. I remembered the first time I held her and how soft she was. Nothing had changed. The softness of her body made me kiss her. Bethany would kill me for thinking this, but tonight she was really a doll; someone I wanted to hold and pet. The truth be known I needed to hold on to her for comfort and security.

She looked deeply into my eyes searching. This time she didn't see lust, she saw love; pure love. Yes, she was my woman, but tonight I loved her as a woman. Bethany's soft lips touched mine.

"What is it, Dylan?" she asked.

The glow from the candle reflected in her eyes just as it had the first night we shared.

“You don’t know how much I love you Bethany,” I said stroking her hair back although it was already done the way I liked it. “You will never know what you mean to me. You are my life.”

“You’re my life too, Dylan,” she whispered.

I began to kiss her passionately on the lips and face.

As I rested my forehead against hers, Bethany’s towel unraveled. Her warm, wet, perfumed, deliciously naked body pressed firmly against mine. She was the sexiest woman I had ever seen and she was all mine. But our bodies touched without mine entering hers. We held each other and it was alright. We were not ashamed of our nakedness.

“Bethany you don’t know how much I want to—
Maybe this feeling won’t last forever--- Something in my spirit says ‘don’t make love, just love.’”

“Shhhhh,” she said. “It’s alright, Dylan. It’s perfect. Everything is the way it should be.”

She was right. It was lovely; Bethany and I just holding each other. Somehow the absence of lovemaking made love all the more sensual. Of course, sex is very important for a person’s mental and physical well-being. But tonight, everything was just the way it should be.

It is well.

I had gained an affinity for Bethany’s church. I looked forward to going, hearing the sermon, and spending time with the students afterward at brunch. I even stopped feeling like I had to dive under the seat. I was comfortable in a crowd. It was sad that all this happened at the end of my stay in Tulsa. These times would be over in a matter of days and I would be moving on, once again leaving something I

would miss so much. Church would be just another log on the fire.

“You can’t take everybody with you,” the preacher spoke. It was no coincidence that Bethany and I had recently talked about the same subject. I knew this message was for us. “Some people you have to leave behind to complete your journey, to experience all that God wants you to have.

Leaving can benefit you and others around you. I don’t mean people should be happy to see you go. I mean for every one and everything to go to the next level something has to change. It’s hard I know. But look at Abram. God told him to leave his family. If he didn’t, perhaps we wouldn’t be sitting here today. God tells Abram to leave and go to a place that He hasn’t even created yet (Hebrews 11:10). God said ‘just keep going until I tell you to stop.’ Jesus told his disciples to leave everything and follow him. Jesus told another man to follow him. The man said *‘just let me bury my father.’* Jesus

said, *'Let the dead bury the dead. Come with me.'* Jesus believed following him was more important. One must have courage to accomplish what one sets out to do in the world. One must have faith to live as a true Christian.'

“Why is it that God constantly says to leave your family? In the beginning God see's that Adam doesn't have a suitable helpmate and says *'it is not good for man to be alone.'* So He gave him Eve and says, *'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother.'* I always found this strange for when God said this; there were no fathers or mothers. It was just Adam, God and a bunch of animals. But right from the start; right from the first two people on Earth, God sets the stage that ultimately you have to leave one thing to get another. It is God's decree that you will always leave something or someone you love behind in order to go to the next step.'

“So the question is ‘why do you have to leave?’ The first reason; ‘people don’t share your ideas; they’re not loving and supportive.’ No matter how much you love someone, they may not love and support you. Remember the Tin Man in *The Wizard of Oz*? He didn’t have a heart. He thought he couldn’t love. The Wizard told him it’s not that you love, but that you are loved. You can love someone ‘till you’re blue in the face. But if they don’t love you, what is the point? It’s time to move on. It might be a girlfriend, a boyfriend, a fiancée, a family member, mother or father. They might love you but they want to control you. They want you to do what they want. Sometimes subtly with a sentence here and there to make you feel guilty, sometimes blatantly demanding you study at a certain college, you carry on the family business, you date who *we* want you too. The Bible tells us ‘*Joseph had a dream and when he told his brothers they hated him all the more.*’ (Genesis 37:5) It’s time to

move on. Kiss them on the cheek then tell them you're moving on. It's time to go.'

"Abram came from a family of pagans. How could he run back and tell his family he heard from the voice of one singular god and have them support this. Sometimes when you come onto something new, your old acquaintances won't want to hear it. Jesus' own family thought he was crazy. If that's your situation, don't hang around. Move on and follow God's command.'

"Number Two---People are too loving and supportive. You depend on them more than you do on God. Having a boyfriend a girlfriend, a 'mentor,' someone you run to for that hug, that kiss, that kind word, that support. That's nice and very much needed. If you don't have it, I pray that you do. But someone who is giving you too much direction or you depend too much on can be detrimental. I'm not saying don't have personal relationships or mentors. I'm

saying that God has to be your final authority. Is there someone in your life whose opinion matters more to you than the Word of God? That can happen very easily in many cases.’

“Why leave the comforts of a loving family to go off on your own? Why leave what’s comfortable; your comfort zone? The friends you have known forever, the community you were born and raised in. I don’t care if you’re a teenager crossing over from adolescents to adulthood or a sixty-year-old retiree; God is not finished with you yet. There is still more to do. But you might have to leave the comforts of what you’re familiar with to find it. You will never find it if you’re not in the place God put it. It might be across the street, across the highway, across the country, across the ocean.’

“Some might say, ‘Pastor you mentioned *The Wizard of Oz*. Didn’t Dorothy run away from home, take this

fantastic trip somewhere over the rainbow, just to find out there is no place like home?’ Like I said, you need a loving family and you should return to them. But look at what happened once Dorothy left. She went from dull black and white to Technicolor. Her courage and determination led the Scarecrow, the Tin Man and the Lion to find what they really needed. She helped to change their lives. And she also helped change the land. Before, everybody was afraid of the wizard. She unmasked him so Oz didn’t have to fear him. She also changed the wizard. He went from a fire and brimstone leader to one of love, offering to fly Dorothy back to Kansas even though he never heard of it and had no idea where it was.’

“One girl changed the lives of all those people and the community. Everyone seated here today has that same ability. Somebody is waiting for you to come along and help them in their plight. An angel of the Lord tells Phillip to walk

down a road Phillip had no intention of walking down. But there he finds an important official reading Scripture. Phillip asks him if he understands what he is reading. The man answers *'how can I unless someone explains it to me?'* (Acts 8:26-31) There is somebody out there waiting for the knowledge you possess. But do you have what it takes to walk that road less traveled? Do you have what it takes to walk the road traveled time and time again, to bring a message heard time and time again, that more than likely will still fall on deaf ears?

“And perhaps Number Three is the most important--- You leave because God tells you to. Sometimes there is no rhyme or reason. You go ‘cause God says ‘go’. God is not telling you to break any hearts or burn any bridges, but just follow His command. Right now you might have the perfect job, the dream house, the relationship you have been looking for all your life. Yet God is saying ‘if you like this part of

your life, well just follow me 'cause you ain't seen nothin' yet.' The question you have to answer is 'are you faithful enough to follow God?' It's all right to go to church every week, to come to Bible study, wear your purity rings and bracelets. But the Bible tells us *'without faith it is impossible to please God.'* So the greatest thing you can do for God is follow His lead, even when you think it's a great risk to you. The greatest thing you can do is say 'I so believe in God that I can surrender all I know to venture into the unknown because God said to.' Don't believe me, read your Bible *'walk by faith and not by sight,'* (2 Corinthians 5:7) *'blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe.'* (John 20:29)

“Jesus says to his disciples in Luke 14:28; *'Suppose one of you wants to build a tower. Will he not first sit down and estimate the cost to see if he has enough money to complete it? For if he lays a foundation and is not able to finish it, everyone who sees it will ridicule him saying, 'This*

fellow began to build and was not able to finish. ' So estimate the cost of not going. Estimate the cost of staying right where you are and imagine what things will look like in years to come. Remember God isn't just speaking to you. He is speaking to others, even those around you. You may not leave but someone close to you could. *'He is able to do immeasurably more than we ask or imagine.'* (Ephesians 3:20) Let those words be your guide.'

“The biggest trouble I have with being a pastor is I can't make you do anything. I can preach all day and all night, show you every Scripture you need, write books, provide CD's, DVD's; but after all is said and done I can't make you do anything. There is no magic to what I preach. You have to take that step, not even a leap, but a step of faith. You have to do what God has called you to do; you have to walk by faith and not by sight.”

The congregation cheered and hollered as they normally did. Maybe they heard but didn't hear this life changing message. For some it was just another message; another Sunday in church. Others would put it on a shelf and listen to it one day, then realize its importance. I heard it. At this moment in time I knew the message was for me. Did this mean Bethany? Did this mean to leave the school and never look back? Part of me was upset. Another part of me knew I was about to go on a life changing adventure where God was the travel agent.

As we walked across the parking lot, the scent of the about to change season hit my nostrils. Though July was in its heyday, a slight breeze hit telling of the impending September. A wind of change. Again the sense of melancholy hit. Looking back I knew things would be different from now on. The summer was slowly coming to a

close, leaving only memories and steps toward an autumn with a promised only God could provide.

“What did you think of the message?” Bethany asked.

I looked in Bethany’s eyes. She was my girl and always would be.

“Nice,” I said not wanting to elaborate.

Bethany drove and I was glad. I wanted to savor the message and not focus on the road. This was the last Sunday before school was finished. Everyone rushed back to campus to study for finals or put the finishing touches on term papers. There wouldn’t be a Sunday brunch today. Things had started to change.

“Are you sure you don’t have any plans after you graduate?” Bethany asked.

“I haven’t heard a thing?”

“How would you like to move to Pittsburg?”

“Pittsburg? What the heck is in Pittsburg?”

“Carnegie Mellon,” we said in unison.

“You going there?” I asked knowing the answer.

“I have to. I hate it here. Academically I’m dying. My first class was alright, but it’s been downhill ever since.”

“It’s the summer. The sessions are different from the fall and spring.”

“I thought about that---”

“And didn’t you say God called you here?”

“I thought about that too. I’ve been praying but all I hear is ‘keep studying.’ Carnegie Mellon called me on Friday. They said I could still attend if I wanted to. They never take transfer students but they want me. So it must be from God. The only drawback is I would have to double up and make up classes. I’d graduate in three years instead of two and would be doing four years work in that time. But I wouldn’t mind. I’m sorry I didn’t tell you right away. I called

my mom and she said I should stay here; it's a good university and it's closer to home. But I want to go Dylan. They're still offering a full scholarship. All I have to do is say yes."

"And you want me to say 'yes.'"

"Yes. I know this is a Christian university. But that's all I know. I learned a lot being with you this summer. You once said I'm gonna meet a lot of things that challenge my thinking. I know that's true. Pittsburg and Carnegie Mellon would be a great starting point. Things changed when we met that gay lady. I don't know a lot of people with opinions different from mine. I think it's time to start."

"When do we leave?"

A burst of energy shot through her body.

"Classes start the end of August," she said not containing her excitement. "We would hang out here for a

week or two, then go to Dallas so you could meet my family.

Then off to Pittsburg, PA.”

“Do you want to get married in that time?”

“I don’t know yet. Carnegie Mellon is going to be tough. It wouldn’t be fair to you having a wife who spends all her time in the library or on the computer. And I want a big wedding in Dallas. Let’s not rush it. What do you say?”

“As long as you prayed about it and know it’s what God wants you to do.”

“All I know is I’m suffering here. Everything at Carnegie worked out. Maybe God told me to come here just to meet you, then go off to Carnegie. Dylan you’re a smart man, you could work with a church out there or start your own. You have it in you, I’ve seen it.”

“Maybe. I’m in.”

A big smile spread across Bethany’s face.

“Oh Dylan, we’re going to be so happy.”

God works like that. One minute you're driving home from church, the next your whole world is transformed into something completely different.

"I have to call my mother," Bethany said and hit her contact.

Sentiment overcame me with every step. The campus that I once walked across with wide-eyed hope and anticipation now seemed to have a shadow of close hanging over it. No longer would I look at the clock over the student lounge and be glad the day was over or know I had only forty-five minutes to finish a paper or an exam in ten. This clock that I once feared or revered would be just an item in my memory. When I first came I didn't want to stay. Now I didn't want to leave. I once heard Bethany say about herself, "Boy, I've become such a geek!" I knew exactly what she meant.

“Dylan,” Dr. Jarvis called from behind.

“Hi, Dr. Jarvis,” I said turning to greet him.

“Are you free for a few minutes? I have someone I want you to meet.”

“Sure,” I replied.

That was Dr. Jarvis; always one with a book for me to read, a church to visit or speak at. I knew this chat would be enlightening.

Like most of the instructors, Dr. Jarvis had a small book-lined office. I spent many a time with him here. It dawned on me this would be one of the last. I expected to see his guest but the office was empty.

“On their way up, Dylan,” Dr. Jarvis said noticing my concern. “Have a seat.”

I took my usual chair in front of Dr. Jarvis’ desk. He plunked into his chair smiling.

“Have you decided what you are going to do after you graduate?” he asked once I was settled.

“I’m moving to Pittsburg?”

“Pittsburg? What’s happening there?”

“I don’t know yet. I’m still waiting to hear from God.”

“Well before you go let me run this by you. I know you always had an interest in military chaplaincy but had some trouble. The university has connections in Washington and a number of calls were made on your behalf. Now it turns out Dylan, Uncle Sam wants you. Sgt. Walker, who I know you spoke with a few times, is on his way up here. It’s for a final interview. Just between you and me I think it’s out of formality. The position is yours.”

I looked at Dr. Jarvis in amazement. I heard his words and knew I was sitting in his office, but the whole situation

seemed surreal. This was a miracle in the making; a life changing situation. Just like meeting Bethany.

“I don’t know what to say,” I said really not knowing what to say. Of course I wanted to be in the military. That was my dream, my calling. But what about Bethany?

“Speak with Sgt. Walker. Hear him out. If God really put chaplaincy in your heart, you’ll know what to do.”

As if on cue Sgt. Walker entered. I leaped to my feet, perhaps seeing one too many war movies.

“At ease,” Sgt. Walker said through a small laugh. “You’re not in the service--- yet.”

Sgt Walker periodically came to the University as part of a military recruitment drive. He was a very pleasing and direct man. As we began to talk, I realized it was exactly as Dr. Jarvis said; this wasn’t an interview; Sgt. Walker came to offer me a job.

It turns out I would be more than just a chaplain. A newly formed Federal program was preparing to send trained clergy to military camps and installations in various parts of the world. They scoured major religious institutions looking for candidates with backgrounds like mine, Master's degree, teaching and overseas experience. The assignment had numerous tasks; assist chaplains already in residency, take over when a chaplain was on leave, counsel, baptize, marry and help prepare those soldiers who were headed to seminary when their tour was up. If it involved spirituality, I would be doing it. Assignments could last a few days, a few weeks or a few months, it just depended on the situation. But the commitment was two years, no exceptions.

It was a faith-based program instituted in Washington. These were salaried positions. Somewhat like a contractor; Blackwater on the reserve side. I would be doing everything I dreamed of; instilling the Word of God to men

and women on the battlefield, seeing the world, having ties to Washington. And there was no age requirement; just a willing heart. It was everything I ever wanted; except Bethany wasn't in the picture.

There would be a six-week training period in Maryland starting in October. Upon completion we would deploy to our respective destinations in December to be with the troops for the holidays. I didn't have to commit right then and there but an answer was needed within two weeks. The program was only open to a certain number of pre-selected candidates. I told Sgt. Walker I would have my decision by the end of the week.

"Dylan you look like you can't take anymore good news," Dr. Jarvis continued. "But the floodgates of Heaven have opened in your favor. There is an orphanage in Brazil that is interested in you too. I spoke with the pastor there. You could start right after you graduate and work till October

when you start the chaplaincy program. However, they only provide room and board. You would have to pay for your flight over there. The pastor and I figured the cost of the trip and staying there should be about twenty-six hundred.”

Or the exact amount Eddie and Cindy handed me a few weeks ago.

“When does that begin?” I asked.

“Last day of finals are Wednesday, grades are posted on Friday. You could be on a flight Sunday afternoon and start in Brazil Monday morning. Those kids, that ministry, need you, Dylan. But the choice is yours.”

“Sounds like a plan,” I said, my spirit knowing it and ready to go. In the flesh, my head was spinning; everything was happening so fast.

“Deployment at the drop of a hat; that’s the military life,” Sgt. Walker added. “Sounds like you’re already military. But try to take some time for yourself. Military life

is no walk in the park. You get R&R but there are no bed and breakfast's in the hills of Afghanistan.”

I took a walk across campus. Twenty-four hours earlier I looked to these grounds with an air of nostalgia. Now I didn't see anything. My mind was too far gone. I loved my time at the University when I walked in solitude; I loved my days with Bethany. I wanted them to continue. But they couldn't. 'It's not fair,' was my ultimate response. 'Why don't things work out for me?' also ran through my head. I knew I had to go---check that I wanted to go. But I also wanted my life with Bethany to grow. I know things work out the way God plans, *if* you follow God's plan. There is happiness at the end of all this. At least that is what I keep telling myself. I had what I always wanted with my relationship with Bethany---but why must I do more? I feel like I'm chasing rainbows. Everything I really want is in the

distance. I keep walking and walking trying to reach it; yet never do. And the rainbows, like the stars and the moonlight, really aren't there at all.

I had to go. This was my calling. My theology; things don't happen by accident they are designed by God, there are good ideas and there are God ideas. If I were to stay, sure I would have Bethany, but what else? Sit around idly hoping for a new opportunity while she is off to class, going places the school and the Lord takes her? There was the idea for the book, but I could write that and gain more knowledge while on the mission field. And my assignment would be finished in two years; Bethany had three years of school left.

God tells us not to worry about our needs, but to *'seek first his kingdom and his righteousness and all these things will be given to you.'* *'Don't worry about tomorrow.'* (Matt 6:25-34). It's one thing to read or preach

those words to others. It's another to walk through them yourself.

I text Bethany and asked her to meet me. She was in the library working with the Rosetta Stone Language software and wanted to continue for a few more hours. Actually I was glad. God gave me the vision to surprise Bethany with a grand meal; caviar, shrimp and a bottle of the finest Martinelli's I could find. Our sunset picnic would be under the shade tree on campus where we often prayed. Things began on school grounds, it only seemed fitting they should end there. It was under that shade tree the message hit me:

“IF YOU REALLY LOVE BETHANY YOU WILL GO.”

Though God always speaks to me, this was only the second time I literally heard His voice. It's not a voice you hear just with your ears; you hear it with your entire being. I

wondered why God said ‘if you love Bethany’ and not ‘if you love Me.’ I didn’t question. Obedience to the call would make everything work out the way God intended.

We sat gazing at the sky as we had done numerous times before. The day was perfect. I needed to tell Bethany of my epiphany. I reached out and pulled her close to me.

“Caviar! Wow! I always knew you had it in you,” she said with excitement. “Is this a celebration? Did you get the job of the century? Or are you taking me down gently before you run off with Shivaughn?”

“You’re crazy, Bethany. But I wish it was just Shivaughn. Then I could definitely say no and not think twice.”

“What is it, Dylan? There’s a spirit of uncertainty over you.”

“Are you sure you’re not the one graduating from seminary?”

“Stop playing,” she said with a slight smile. “What’s up?”

That was my cue but I didn’t know how to begin. Do I come right out with ‘I’m leaving for two years,’ or do I paint a picture of how seeds were planted for these trips long before I met her and I’m now seeing the harvest. I shot out the truth.

“I’ve been invited to go to Brazil for two months then serve with a special military program for two years in the Middle East.”

“Wow!” she uttered in a breathless whisper.

Bethany was right about my spirit of uncertainty. But this was the last thing she expected to hear. Her eyes widened but all her sights were in her mind.

“Where,” she began then stopped herself. “What,” again stopping before finishing the thought. “Wow!” was all she could again say.

“I just found out about it from Dr. Jarvis. I prayed about it and know it’s the right thing to do. But I couldn’t give my final decision without talking to you.”

“Wow!” she breathed again in disbelief. “When do you leave?”

“Sunday.”

“This Sunday? In six days!”

“Yeah. Brazil for two months then back to the U.S. for a week or two before I start training for the program.”

“Wow!” Bethany said again this time with a shake of her head. “That’s so fast.”

I wanted to touch her but she seemed in a world of her own; her eyes telling me her mind was digesting the situation.

“This is what you have been praying for. You have to go, you know that as well as I,” she finally said maybe

trying to believe it herself. “But I don’t want you to leave, you also know that.”

Tears dropped from Bethany’s eyes as she fell into me. Her body resting against mine but her distant thoughts prevented a real connection. She pondered the situation in silence. Not to be sexist, but most women I know talked about their problems, sometimes incessantly; just repeating the same point over and over. Bethany was just the opposite. She’d go silent, internalizing an analysis of the situation. I don’t know what was more frightening, incessant chatter or emotional silence.

I wrapped my arms around my Doll then kissed her gently on the cheek.

“It will all work out,” I began softly. “I’ll be away for two years and you’ll be at school. I’ll do what I’m called to do; you’ll do what you’re called to do. Then we’ll be together.”

“But to spend two years without you. Three months ago I didn’t even know you. Three months later I can’t live without you. Why couldn’t we have met after you came back? I guess decency and order goes out the window in some cases.”

I planted my head against hers. She placed her hand on mine. If one of my students posed her last statement, I’d asked ‘who decides what decency and order is?’

“I had trouble with this too. ‘Why now,’ I asked. I don’t have an answer.”

“I have to call my mother,” Bethany said brushing away from me.

She took her cell from her purse and walked off tapping her mom’s number.

When Bethany stepped away my first thought was to pray. Then I realized prayer time was over. It was time to

walk in His authority. I thanked God that all worked out the way He wanted and left it at that.

Might as well try the caviar. Delicious beyond words. I had to stop or I wouldn't have left any for Bethany.

"My mom said I have to work it out," Bethany said when she returned. "She said there comes a time when advice from parents or friends won't do. This is one of those times. She said it's between you, Dylan and God. You have to decide. I might as well have been talking to you."

I had to smile.

"What's funny?" she asked.

"It seems I'm on the side of parental wisdom again."

"My mom said we do things either in love or selfishness. She said I had you for a few months. Now I have to turn you over to the world."

"What do you think of that?"

“I think it sucks! It might be true, but it still sucks.

All I wanted was to go to school, get my degree then go work in the Far East. Now all this; decisions, love, what’s right, what’s wrong...”

“I thought you were asleep when I was watching all those old movies on *TCM*. I guess their flair for melodrama seeped into your subconscious.”

“I didn’t have all these issues before I came here.”

“But we didn’t have each other.”

“Yeah but I liked it when things were less complicated. And if you tell me this is all part of growing up, I will hit you so hard in the mouth.”

She actually made a fist. I took it, kissed it, then took Bethany in my arms and kissed her lips.

“Dylan, I’m gonna miss you so much. But I’m proud of you. It sounds like they don’t pick just anyone for that program. You must be something special.”

“Haven’t I been telling you that all along?”

“Yeah. Maybe one day I’ll believe it.”

We kissed passionately. Maybe people were watching, maybe they weren’t. We didn’t care. We were in a world of our own. Soon we would be in a new world that God was leading us to.

I had finally taken a page from Bethany’s playbook and finished my term paper two weeks before it was due. That left more time to be with Bethany and attend to last minute affairs. What little furniture I had, I donated to Kingdom Builders for their outreach department. My wardrobe in Brazil would be mainly, shorts, jeans and cargo pants. Bethany said she would store my other clothes at her parents’ house in Texas. She also wanted all my books.

The time with Bethany went from somber to sweet. Some days were reminiscent of the period after a loved one

passes; not knowing what to say, you know something has changed but you don't really know how it will affect you, etc. Other times Bethany would surprise me with a new tee shirt, a new pair of jeans. She couldn't stop giving me things.

As God would have it, both our classes had take home finals. All we had to do was hand in the completed exam before noon on Wed. then we were free. Again, like Bethany, I had finished mine long before the due date. On Thursday night we drove out to the lake to grill steaks under the stars.

God had blessed us with a beautiful warm night. Though it was close to eleven there were still a few scattered couples, a man, a woman walking a dog. As far as we were concerned, it was just the two of us under the dark blue blanket of Tulsa's portion of the universe.

“Remember one night you asked me about the universe, the stars?” Bethany said. “I lied. I do think about those things.”

“What about them?” I asked.

“The stars. We’re not seeing the real thing. It makes me think.”

“About what?”

“Seeing the beauty of something that really isn’t there.”

“And what do you think God is telling us in that revelation?”

“Always the theologian. That’s my Dylan. But that is an interesting question. Since God made things that way, there must be an answer. Maybe it’s a constant reminder that even though something is gone we can still see the beauty of it.”

“That’s beautiful.”

“You’ll always remember that, right Dylan?”

“There isn’t a thing about our three months together that I forgot.”

She smiled and fell into my arms.

“You know, we had some great times together. We did things, rode horses, talked; I learned a lot from you. But what I’m really gonna miss is having your arms around me. Especially at night when we were in bed and the lights were off. I always felt so safe, so special. Nothing will replace that.”

I held her a little tighter.

“Yeah, like that,” she said.

And that’s how we remained till dawn.

Our plan was to spend our last night at the spot of so many encounters, the hot tub. Unfortunately, the pool was crowded with families and the hot tub with young teen girls

flirting with young teen boys. We had spent three months with these areas to ourselves in this complex that housed close to two hundred units. Now it was like Coney Island on a hot July afternoon. Just another sign it was time to move on.

We retreated to the apartment, spread a picnic blanket on the living-room floor and enjoyed a dinner of Kentucky Fried Chicken and biscuits. The blanket was my sleeping bag which would also serve as our bed tonight. The church had picked up all my furniture that afternoon. The room was dim save the small glow of a scented candle. This gave the unfurnished apartment an element of romance. There was so much to say in these last few hours. Yet we said nothing, sitting in silence.

I had been deep in thought. I glanced over to Bethany who as usual was resting on my bicep. She was staring deeply into my eyes.

“Why are you looking at me like that?” I asked as the glow of the candle highlighted her face.

“Because you’re there,” was her answer. “You’re so quiet tonight. You always wanted to know what I was thinking. Now I’m asking you.”

“Oh nothing,” I said knowing my thoughts but not wanting to hear them aloud.

“Dylan,” she said stretching out my name.

“It all seems so inconsequential,” I began with some hesitation. “Hand in a paper, final grade, school over yesterday, take care of a few things today, tomorrow I’m off to Brazil. Just like that. Without fanfare; without time to debrief, think about what happened the past three years, my time with you...”

“My dad told me you have to leave the past sometime if life is going to mean anything.”

“Yeah, but so fast? In forty-eight hours I’m going to be in a whole ‘nother country, starting a whole new life. Just like that.”

“Pastor spoke about the man who wanted to bury his father but Jesus said to follow him immediately. That’s crazy! It was his father, he loved him, had an obligation to him. But who did he love more; Jesus or his father? Jesus said *‘if anyone leaves his father, mother, brother and sister and homes he will receive a hundred times as much in this lifetime.’* (Matt. 19:29) The man didn’t go with Jesus. I’m sure he missed out on a lot. Dylan, you’re going with Jesus; a hundred times more than you have right now is promised to you. Think about it.”

She was right. I used that same example many times in class. It’s always a question of who do you love more; yourself and your ways or God and His. I love God with all my heart, soul, body and mind. I will love Him until the day

I die and then through eternity. But I could also write a love song for Bethany.

Matthew and Mark wrote about leaving all you know to receive a greater reward. But both writers ended their passages by saying *'the first will be last and the last will be first.'*

“You’ll be first Dylan.”

A single tear rolled down her cheek as a smile appeared. Her words were like a political concession speech at the primaries; she lost the battle but was giving her support to the party to serve a greater good.

“You’ll be first too,” I said. “You’re letting me go.”

“I’m not leaving you, you’re just going away.”

“True.”

“How do you live a last moment?” she asked.

Leave it to Bethany to sum our situation like that. It hadn't dawned on me but that was exactly what we were doing.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"I mean what do you say? Yeah we have email and texting but that's not like having you here. You once said when you go back you noticed how things have changed. So this moment is really the end of this part of our relationship. It's our last moment."

"I never realized I was living a last moment until after it happened. You think things will last forever, so you play it that way. But you turn around and they're gone. I guess you live a last moment like you should live any other; with no regrets, say everything that needs to be said, appreciate what you have while you have it."

"Where am I gonna get wisdom like that when you're gone?"

“You already have it. I’m gonna miss that brain.”

“Liar. You’re gonna miss my body.”

“Well that too. But it’s the package I always loved.”

“That’s why I hate you. You always had all the answers.”

“That’s why I love you; ‘cause you’re such a brat.”

We kissed. I let my tears be reflected by a smile.

“What’s funny?” Bethany asked.

“Nothing. Just I’m gonna miss you---I’m gonna miss this---our life together---everything we had.”

“Oh don’t get me started. I was watching that show you like, *The Twilight Zone*. There was this thirty-six year old guy who somehow goes back in time to his childhood and meets himself when he was eleven. He wants to tell himself as a boy to enjoy his time now for life doesn’t get better; there are no more merry-go-rounds and band concerts. His father stops him from doing that and asks ‘is it really that

bad where you are.’ His dad tells him there are still merry-go-rounds and great things where you are, you just don’t see them. He was looking behind, he had to look ahead. Dylan, instead of thinking about the past and what was, why don’t we focus on the future and what will be? What’s it gonna be like when you’re finished with your work in Brazil and the Middle East and I’m finished with school? What do you say, Dylan? Will we meet in China, Italy, maybe even New York?”

“And you say you don’t have wisdom,” I said in awe of Bethany.

“That just came to me. There is always goodness around us. And we can speak in faith about what we want for our future.”

“There are good plans and there are God plans. Let’s let God decide what’s going to happen.”

“The Bible says, ‘*Ask and you will receive,*’ ‘*If you ask anything in my name it will be given,*’ ‘*Whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you receive it and it will be yours.*’ (Mark 11:24) That’s your favorite Scripture, handsome. Don’t doubt. I don’t.”

Bethany was right. We can ask God for the desires of our heart. With faith they will come to pass.

“Dylan, I have something for you.”

Bethany ran to the closet and came back with a package. She handed it to me.

“It’s heavy,” I said weighting it in my hands, sounding like Ward Bond at the end of *The Maltese Falcon*---

My eyes met Bethany’s. I opened the nondescript box. Of course it was wrapped in newspaper. I carefully removed the paper and found a Maltese Falcon.

“The stuff that dreams are made of,” I said.

“That’s what we are and always will be.”

I held it the same way Sydney Greenstreet and Peter Lorre would have if they possessed the real thing. Paul wrote in Hebrews 11:1 *'Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.'* That is what I was holding in my hands; the realization of the unattainable, the unreachable.

"I'll keep this with you," I said. "This way I will come back to everything I ever searched for."

She smiled understanding.

It was crazy. Bethany and I loved each other with a passion and commitment that eternity couldn't destroy. Yet we knew we had to separate. How can I let her go? Tonight I held Bethany knowing this would be the last time I felt her soft, warm body against mine; the last time I'd be captivated by her perfumed hair or touch her pouty lips. Neither of us wanted it to end. Bethany held me tightly. I held her even

tighter. Many nights she had cried in my arms, on my shoulder. Tonight a tear or two dropped from my eyes. She was my Doll, my dream; the answer to my prayers. I wanted to hold her forever; till death do us part as the preacher says. But I couldn't hold on to what I wanted, what I had. That reality brought tears to my eyes. Unlike the man who wouldn't leave his dying father to follow Jesus, once again I was leaving all I knew and loved for a greater glory.

You might ask 'why all the melodrama? After all, you're just going away for two years. People go to college, serve in the armed forces all the time. And you're not breaking up, you'll just be apart.' The real issue is 'the calling.' God has given me the perfect mate. She loves and supports me, I love and support her. We complement each other. There were never any games in our relationship. We were in love from the start. So the question is 'if everything

is so right, why is God separating us?' The Fundamentalist will say 'you were fornicating so God punished you.' Well, again, we're still together, we're just separating for a time. After all is said and done my situation isn't that desperate. I recall Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane. He is praying, knowing his earthly ministry is just about over. The Roman soldiers are closing in, coming to crucify him. In Luke 22:42 Jesus is recorded in prayer, *'My Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me. Yet not my will but yours be done.'* At first Jesus is asking for the cup; the pain of all his friends deserting him, the beatings and humiliation, the grisly crucifixion, all of which he knew would occur, be taken away. In the second sentence he relents and accepts the call on his life. Though these sentences are written back to back, I believe a few hours passed between them. Jesus knows he has to die a painful death to fulfill the Scriptures. That was his purpose on earth; His calling. But now, when the

actuality of it comes to pass, it's a frightening thing to him. Jesus is so anguished he sweats blood. Ultimately he realizes that God's purpose is greater than his desire. He fulfills his calling.

I think I'm like that. Jesus said we must deny ourselves, take up our cross and follow him. (Matthew 16:24) Paul said he died daily. (1 Corinthians 15:31) Ultimately I do the will of God, not only for myself, but because I have to share what God has given me. Bethany's mom was right. One is motivated out of selfishness or selflessness. A true follower of Jesus must always be selfless.

Bethany quoted Mark 11:23 last night. Jesus told his disciples, *'Have faith in God. I tell you if anyone says to this mountain, 'Go throw yourself into the sea' and does not doubt in his heart but believes what he says will happen; it will be done for him. Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it and it will be*

yours. ' Paul said we must *'walk by faith and not by sight.'*

He also said *'without faith it is impossible to please God.'*

I'm asking, I'm believing, I have faith.

I awoke and was greeted by Bethany's face. Her eyes were closed, yet I kissed her sweet lips and tasted her delicious cheeks and forehead. Something was different this morning. I awoke with a powerful arousal and felt no qualms. It was though a veil had been lifted from me.

"You know it's okay," Bethany said with her eyes still shut.

"Yes, I do," I replied still kissing her.

I entered Bethany without reservation. Our lovemaking was different. It was special, tender. I felt like a husband going off on a business trip making love to his wife one last time before a long duration. We were never more as one than this moment this morning.

For breakfast I whipped up Bethany's favorite; fluffy pancakes. Afterward, we packed the remaining dishes and pots and pans. The glassware that Bethany once made fun of was now going with her to Carnegie-Mellon along with the waffle iron and crepe maker.

There was little conversation as I finished the packing. From time to time I would look at Bethany who closely followed me. She would just smile a smile of assurance.

The car was loaded with boxes, the apartment empty save my carry-on and the falcon. I held the falcon not unlike Bogie in that last scene.

"You really love that thing, don't you?" Bethany said, catching me.

"I love the gift, but I love the giver even more."

"I love my bracelet. My mom said I should insure it."

“If you lost it, I would just buy you another one.”

“I know. But nothing takes the place of the first one.”

I took her in my arms and kissed her passionately.

It's almost sad that three years of my existence in Tulsa fit into the trunk of Bethany's Honda Accord. But that is the life of a missionary. All of Bethany clothing and sundries filled the back seat. I took one last walk through the empty apartment making sure I didn't leave anything, then closed and locked the door on another part of my life. I dropped off the key with the rental office and that was that.

Bethany drove. Though I had been driving more, I never did get my license. We passed the hot tub, the apartment grounds. I thought we would pass the University for one final look but the airport was in the opposite direction.

The days of long goodbyes at the airport are over.

The plan was Bethany would drop me off with just enough time to check-in then catch my flight. As she drove Bethany had one hand on the steering wheel, the other on my knee. Her ever present bracelet still dangled from her wrist. Again there was little conversation. Her phone rang; Bethany looked at it and said:

“My mom. I’ll call her later.”

There was such a thickness in the air one would think I was going to the electric chair not off to do God’s work. As we turn onto the exit for Tulsa Airport, the reality hit us.

The airport wasn’t crowded. Bethany wouldn’t have to drop me off then move along. Sure the airport had their security procedures. But this was Tulsa not Kennedy. We had a little extra time, if only a few moments.

I got my bags from the trunk then joined my Doll at curb side. We were face to face. She looked at me with those electric blue eyes. Though our eyes never broke the gaze, I noticed every inch of her. I needed her in my arms. I grabbed her tiny waist, the same way I did in the parking lot that first day. Our lips met without hesitation. Not a lusty ‘we’re about to do it right here and now kiss,’ but a long, tender, passionate kiss. We kissed and held each other now knowing who the other was and still knowing this was right, that we had to be together and nothing, not a parking lot in broad daylight could stop us.

“I’m gonna miss you so much, Dylan,” Bethany said when we came up for air.

“What am I gonna do without my Doll?” I replied.

“The kids are gonna love you,” Bethany said. “Be all you can be to them. They can learn a lot from you.”

“Enjoy your time at Carnegie-Mellon. Don’t call me saying you hate it there too.”

“Brat,” she called me.

We kissed again.

“Speak to me in a different language,” I said.

“A pig to the very end,” she said with a smile.

“Please,” I asked looking deeply into her eyes.

“Au revoir--- until we meet again.”

“Au revoir,” I said through a whisper.

“I love you, Dylan,” she said softly.

“I love you too, Bethany,” I replied.

We kissed one last time. A long, sweet, passionate kiss. We held each other so tight our cheeks melted together. I took a quick peck at her neck then we released each other. Bethany looked at me with those eyes I fell so deeply in love with just a few short months ago. She turned and walked away as if taken by a great unseen force. I watched her until

she disappeared into the now forming crowd. I loved the wiggle in her walk, her curves, her voluptuous body, the arch in her back, the way she stood erect like a ballerina. Here in a crowded airport my Doll still aroused me. Maybe I am a pig.

Sitting in the airport; waiting for a plane to take me to a far away distance had become one of my favorite pastimes. The sun, visible through the large windows, always held promise. A sunset meant I would travel through the night and wake up to a new day in a new land. The sunrise spoke the beginning of a new dawn. I wished I could have shared this moment with Bethany: my Doll sitting at my side, my arm around her shoulder as she read some erudite book; the warmth of my body as her only acknowledgment of the world around. I know you're not supposed to linger in the past, but Bethany was my partner, my love. Easy to remember, so hard to forget.

A Christian walk is a lonely path. Me, an airport, a lone bag at my feet, smiling as I watched couples, families, friends engaged in conversation, is my existence for now. Fellowship to me has always been a fleeting existence. Sharing love in one place, and then moving on as God calls to the next. Jesus says the Son of Man has no place to lay his head. That's also true of this disciple. There is no home for me. Just happy memories of yesterdays and a faithful hope for tomorrow. I smiled.

I thought about that episode of the *Twilight Zone* Bethany mentioned and downloaded it. I hadn't seen it in a long time. It's funny I remembered the part about longing for the past and forgot the overall point of the story; look ahead, life isn't about the past, there are fun and exciting times exactly where you are, anywhere you are. What was it Bethany said about riding horses: 'Hold on too tight you

won't go anywhere. Hold on loosely and you have more freedom. Then the two of you can really fly.' God did say if I really loved Bethany I have to go. And Bethany thought I had all the wisdom.

As the plane started to ascend to its cruising altitude, I thought about something that happened at the end of my first year. I wanted to go to summer school to get Tulsa and the University over with as quickly as possible and head back to New York. But the Lord placed in my spirit to go on a mission trip to Africa instead. I signed up for a three-week trip to the Ivory Coast. When the trip was one week away I was nineteen hundred dollars shy of the twenty-three hundred needed. Sunday night all the mission teams were traveling out of town to begin a week-long ropes course. My fundraising days were over. Sunday morning I went to my church-by-default. At service the pastor instructed the

congregation to pray for the students and their needs. The elderly woman I was sitting next to grabbed my hand and asked if there was anything she could stand in agreement with me for. I told her about the trip and the nineteen hundred dollars. She bowed her head paused for a second or two then looked up at me. She gave me a quizzical stare but didn't say anything. She bowed her head once more and went to pray. Again she looked up, this time saying, "In order for this to work you really have to believe you're going."

She was right. At that time I didn't know I was going to come up with the money. Her words made me realize I had to stop relying on my ability and place my faith in God. If God decreed something for my life it would be done, no matter how things looked at the present. The lady prayed with me. Four days later the nineteen hundred dollars came in and I was on my way to my first overseas mission trip.

‘In order for this to work you really have to believe.’

That’s how God works. It’s that simple.

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