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Chapter Sixteen  
**SOMETHING MONSTROUS IN THE ROAD**

Sandy and I had been growing apart for a long time. Never taught how to minister to my own marriage, I believed universal obedience guaranteed universal bliss. Obedience was the key to everything. Besides, if you were spiritual enough, you wouldn't have such feelings. Ignore it or club it into unconsciousness with fasting and prayer but don't talk about it, don't deal with it. It will go away. It was the Christian formula for pure disaster and part of the lingering legacy of Larry.

Psychologists tell us the average person is very much like an iceberg in the sense that only a small portion of our lives are viewable, *above* the waterline. In fact, 75% of an iceberg can't be seen. The visible portion is the smallest and represents our behavior. The unseen portion represents what we are inside - motives, memories, urges and attitudes. Traditionally, the Church has chipped away at that which is visible in our lives. As a result we've created an entire generation of surface people incapable of dealing with the bulky issues lying hidden at the core of their being. "Try harder, pray more often, deny yourself," is what we tell people. "Never mind that dull, thudding ache in your soul that provides sustained impulse to inappropriate behavior. Work on the visible." It must be nice to be simple. I knew "*Just Say NO*" was stupid a long time before the government finally figured it out in 2002. Just say no works great until you *reeeeeeeally* want something you're not supposed to have

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and also have the means to get it. The size of a man's transgressions are often directly proportionate to the size of his opportunities.

It's no wonder so many church altars are filled with the same people, dealing with the same secret anguish, week after frustrating week. They've done everything they know to chip away at the Negative Visible in their lives and still come up defeated. They long for the promised green pastures and still waters but "What's wrong with me?" seems the only recurring theme of their soul. Discouraged and disappointed they either give up or resign themselves to living on the surface. That's exactly what happened in my marriage. The fault did not belong to my thoroughly self-sacrificing wife. The fault lay in my own unwillingness to talk about my dissatisfaction. I could not tolerate what I saw of myself in the depths.

Freud suggested that the two, great, energy producing sources for a man are anger and sex. He got me on both counts. I've long contended the person who said, "The way to a man's heart is through his stomach," failed geography. There's no easy way to break into this but, if I were a woman, I'd be down on the pier waiting for the fleet to dock. After one year as Pastor I became sexually involved with a woman from the Church. I hate this part. The result of mutual seduction, it continued 8 months and its memory will not be romanticized. One thing a pastor has is time. Another is a position of influence. The congregation pays him to use both for the glory of God and the good of people. His family certainly doesn't anticipate the time robbed *from* them will be used to create problems *for* them. What can be said for beacons of light who also make conspiracy against common decencies? Shame is one word! Exclamation points are redundant with effective writing but that last sentence begged at least one. "How are the mighty fallen?" Generally, in an ugly fashion. A man finds himself in a position of having failed at, and lost everything that matters. Hearing my "explanation" to the District Presbyters, one brother apologetically interrupted saying, "Brother Markko, it sounds like you're trying to save something that's already been lost: your integrity." I was as moved by its gentleness as its truth.

There is no "explanation," no justification for such betrayal. What a word. But that's what you are and that's what you feel. Traitor to every good and pure thing to touch your life. Traitor to a left lonely wife whose

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only crime was to believe in you. Traitor to a vision and calling for which so much sacrifice now seemed so vain. Traitor to a father, of a heavenly sort, who had reason to expect better. Throw in a good dose of self-pity and you find a man, sitting alone in the dark, weeping into the food he holds on his lap.

In a state of disintegration on the couch, I managed a faltering smile to Shannon, on her way upstairs to bed. Now a teenager, my darling knew I failed without knowing the details. For her entire life her father's heart was set on pleasing God. That's what she knew. Love makes demands on us so she paused long enough to say, "I love you, Dad." She was still that six-year-old child trying to protect her father from pain. Who can estimate the power for wholeness in the love of a child? But self-pity now took over the asylum.

I felt I'd committed the unpardonable sin and, since there was no sense being miserable in two worlds, I contemplated suicide. I knew seven Valium wouldn't kill me but it was enough to determine elapsed time to unconsciousness. I wanted some certainty of insufficient time for rescue. What a goof. Twenty years later I'm impressed with the adolescent drama of it all but I sat at my desk and scribbled down elapsed times until I passed out. Maybe my "inner hippie" just wanted to put on a ferocious buzz but I reasoned the final time recorded would provide a ballpark figure. Sandy found me laying there, notes on the desk with a final line that kind of scrawled off the page, leisurely going nowhere particular. I felt I could no longer face anyone. Neither could I give up. Hope is the last thing to leave a man. It was late winter, 1982.

Unemployed and living in the country placed peculiar strains on an already battered family. When you lose your ministry you lose your livelihood. Since most pastors are as honestly generous as they ask their people to be (aren't they?) there's likely not much cash in the bank. With six children and bills just like everybody else, there was a lot to deal with. Church deacons didn't make it any easier. They knocked on our door angrily asking what I knew about "the petition." Rumors a petition was circulating, insisting on my reinstatement, caused them some anxiety. They were dubious when informed of my ignorance but believing I could even consider such a thing proved they never knew me. The sense of shame was so complete I'd hoped I might never see

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any of them again. That seemed far too painful a notion. Professing undying, Christian love and fellowship not two weeks earlier, they were now turning their cars around in my driveway, late at night. I understood their anger. They too were betrayed but, "Please, leave us alone. Please."

The next few months were brutal for everyone. Winter, not yet over, forced me to carry fuel oil in five-gallon containers to keep the home warm. We couldn't afford a minimum gallon delivery. The phone was disconnected. Sandy discovered a dozen ways to create potato entrees and I hauled discarded, produce leaves from Cleveland's West Side Market to feed our goats. I remained anesthetized trying to regain sanity. Look what I put us through. Why do I continue to make such destructive choices? Don't get too excited, Joe. You're not done with that by a long shot.

I now had time to focus on my soul, my children and marriage. We started what turned into 18 months of counseling with Doctor Richard Dobbins of Emerge Ministry in Akron. He was also the Assistant District Superintendent for the Assemblies of God. I liked Doc. Not for his preaching, position or administrative skills but for the fact that healing people was his core drive. I was honored to call him friend at that time of my life. When I later trained with him a group of Senior Pastors and mental health professionals were learning group therapy techniques. One of the methods he employed was a "fill in the blank" questionnaire to be completed and read aloud. One question forced me to distill my feelings about myself. It started, "My body is..." How do I answer that in front of these people in twenty-five words or less? I penned something I still believe. "My body is a mess but it houses a lump of gold in a continual state of refinement." The well-intentioned lady to my left misunderstood the positive energy behind it and said, "On no, you're a lovely man." Turning my head only slightly left and looking from the corner of my eye I smiled and asked, "Want to trade?" I've never played well with others.

Sandy went through a wonderful metamorphosis. One of her heartaches, she expressed to Doctor Dobbins was, "*She* was all the things he never let me be." Ouch. That still hurts. It should. "Until the pain of remaining the same," Doc said, "is greater than the pain of

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changing, people prefer to remain the same." Pulling our lives together we thought we'd faced and survived the worst things life might present. But something truly monstrous lay in the road. It was now June 12, 1982 and we were about to learn that some wounds never heal, some broken hearts never mend and some pains decline to stop slamming heavy objects into our heart regardless of the lengthening years.

It was three weeks before Shannon's 15<sup>th</sup> birthday and she watched her siblings as we ran errands and picked up items from the store. At 15 she was already a grown person in many ways. When we got home, she asked if she could go jogging around the hay field out back. It was shaping up to be a gorgeous Saturday evening and she'd had her hands full the way older sisters always do when trying to rein in younger brothers all afternoon. More than that, it was a personally disappointing day for her. She hoped to get a letter from her first boyfriend, in Spain with a church youth group, YWAM (Youth With A Mission). But, no such luck and she was a little down in the dumps. "Sure, baby. Go ahead and thanks for helping out today."

I lay down on the couch while Sandy busied herself around the house. The rest of the children played in the back yard. After a while I noticed I couldn't hear them anymore and, when you have six children and it gets too quiet, it generally means somebody is into something. I got up and walked through the kitchen and mudroom trying to see through the back, screen door. A neighbor boy standing outside yelled, "Somebody's been hurt out back." Not bothering to put any shoes on my feet I picked up speed and walked quickly toward the barn. Another child, I cannot recall who, said "Shannon's been hurt." I began to run and by the time I got to the back of the last outbuilding someone else said, "Shannon's been shot."

Oblivious to shoeless feet I flew through the stubble of the partially mown hay field. It was now about 8:00 PM and the sun was beginning to set. The air was filled with the fragrance of new mown hay; a smell so sweet I swear you could eat it. In what might have been the kind of halcyon summer evening that moves poets to write sonnets I found my child lying in the field. Next to her our neighbor lay with his face in the dirt, howling and literally pulling the hair from his head.

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When farmers cut hay they start on the outside of the field and work their way center-ward in a diminishing spiral. It's not unusual for a farmer to cut a few swaths from the outside of the field the night before he intends to "put it up" in order to get a more accurate idea of how long it may take to cure. Shannon was jogging around that outside swath and decided to lie down in the fresh, mown hay to rest. Our neighbor was hunting groundhogs. The vermin were tearing up his vegetable garden and it was time to deal with them. Farmers do it all the time. He started his hunt down by the small creek running through the woods at the back end of the hay field. That's why he didn't notice her jogging. As he moved in her direction she heard him coming through the tall, unmown hay and lifted her head to see. All he saw was a brown patch of hair and he fired a single, rifled slug from a .410 shotgun.

When I arrived a few minutes later and saw... and knew, my legs refused to support the weight of my heart. My knees buckled forcing me to crawl the few, remaining feet until I could kneel beside her and scoop her up in my arm. As her life flowed from her body it stained my shirt some sickly, otherworld color. I've heard of a Primal Scream but I've never actually heard anything I thought qualified. Until now. From some, dark place deep in my being to which I've never been and to which I pray I will never return a cry blistered its way to my vocal chords, shredding heart and soul as it traveled. My head snapped back and, with face pointed heavenward, the agony that tends toward incoherence enabled me to frame only seven words: "Not my children, God. Not my children." My first instinct was to imagine this as God's punishment for my sin at North Bloomfield. The corrosive influence of legalism is difficult to fully extirpate. I have long since been reminded by the gentle nurture of His spirit that God is not in the business of getting even. He's in the business of wiping slates clean. But, in that moment, my tormenting delusion only twisted the knife deeper.

I'd been through enough in my life to know she wasn't going to make it. I heard what old-timers call, "the death rattle" in her throat. Still, she breathed and I thought that, perhaps, she might still hear. I've been told the sense of hearing is the last to leave the body and I didn't want my terror to disrupt the peace of any lingering consciousness. I was there for her first word and I was here for her last sunset. Being a Dad is not all it's cracked up to be. I forced myself into as much self-control as I

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was able and began to speak softly in her ear. I do not now remember the things I said. If I did, I'm certain I would not share them.

It's strange what a person may notice in such moments. I noticed my neighbor had removed the bolt from his shotgun and lay it perfectly perpendicular to the gun. I was amazed at how methodically he must have done that in this moment. I noticed that Shannon had a big, ole "booger" on the end of her nose. She would have been so embarrassed had anyone seen it. I wiped it away for her. I again looked at my neighbor, a devout Mennonite sworn to policies of non-violence, writhing on the ground. What must he be going through? I am convinced the collective agony, huddled within 12 square feet of space on an obscure farm in Mesopotamia, Ohio was sufficient to wound the entire world.

Our phone was disconnected. Someone ran to the nearest phone to get help. As darkness began to close in on the day the emergency vehicle arrived and got a flat tire coming through the same field I ran in stocking feet. While someone changed the tire the paramedics came running and removed her from my grasp. I watched as they cut open the front of her blouse and brassiere. A thoroughly modest young lady she would have felt so humiliated. You never stop wanting to protect them. They took her to the nearest hospital in Chardon but they couldn't treat shotgun trauma to the head. After an interminable, bureaucratic lag they transported her to Rainbow Babies and Children's Hospital in Cleveland where, sometime after midnight, rushing was no longer necessary. Without asking our permission, Shannon slipped away and went to visit her "Unca Ree."

Brain-dead they call it: no electrical activity in the brain. But the law said they had to leave her on life support. Her body was forced to breathe, her blood was forced to circulate but she was gone. We had some hard decisions to make. Sandy and I decided I would go home to make certain the other children were looked after for the next few days. She stayed beside Shannon's hospital bed and held her hand all night long. That morning we signed papers to have the life-support machines disconnected and to have her organs donated. But not her eyes. I couldn't bring myself to let them have her eyes even if it meant every other child on the planet would never see.

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As we prepared for the funeral, Sandy brought home a new pair of shoes for Shannon. When I saw them all I could say was, "Oh, Sandy." There were innumerable volumes in those two words. I hurt so badly for her. My betrayal, the distain in the community, financial hardship and now, this. Our sins hurt most when the price is exacted from the innocent. "I know she'll never wear them," she said with tear-laden and broken voice, "I just wanted to do it for her." When life cruelly cheats you of the opportunity to say good-bye your heart demands you do something.

The Assembly of God church in Burton was filled to overflowing. Several, former CRC members came and helped in whatever ways they could. But not Larry. Not my sister. Not anyone from the Church of the Risen Christ. It's probably just as well. We covered Shannon's casket with a Christian flag and placed it into a horse-drawn buckboard provided and driven by a local Amish congregation. The local supermarket in Middlefield was the Golden Dawn store. A hand-written sign taped to its front door announced, "Closed today for Shannon Markko's funeral." Hundreds of people followed the horse and buggy to the gravesite. No one complained about the slow pace of the horse. The Mennonites gave us a grave sight in a small, peaceful corner of the private cemetery next to her uncle Randy and Brett Hill.

At the gravesite the Christian flag was removed, folded and handed to Sandy. My dearest friends lowered her body into the ground and we buried her with hand shovels. Struggling with the tool, I placed the first shovel of dirt to discover, horrified, there is no way to do it softly. As the dirt dropped four or five feet, thudding onto the plywood sarcophagus that received her casket, the Mennonite choir questioned in a cappella voice, "Will the Circle be Unbroken?" Beyond that I remember nothing. Nothing save the one, religious zealot with a death wish who stopped me as I was leaving, shook my hand and said, "If one soul is brought nearer to God because of this, it will be worth it." I didn't give a damn about what people thought or if he'd be able to drive to the hospital with arms broken and eyes swollen shut. The old me came screaming to the surface and I stepped right up into his face, nose-to-nose and hissed through clenched teeth, "No it won't. All the souls in the world wouldn't be worth it." Refusing to release his hand I pulled him closer. Putting my cheek on his I whispered in his ear "Your soul isn't worth it. I want my

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daughter back.” And I walked away leaving him to stumble around in the pool of his own, well-intentioned idiocy. I’ll bet he never says anything like that again. I’m glad I could help him grow. I only went back to her grave once and that was to see the headstone: “Weeping may endure for the night, but joy cometh in the morning.” I sure hope so.