
Chapter Eighteen
AS A DOG RETURNS TO HIS VOMIT

Sitting at a table in the darkest corner of the room I ordered a shot and a beer. A non-drinker, I forced down a few rounds. Just about the time I was trying to figure out what I was doing there, the young lady from the end of the bar came and sat down. Her name was Julia. Not Julie and certainly not Jules. People who take their name that seriously generally lack perspective. Addicted to chaos and a good time, her body seemed divinely designed to fine-tune the apparatus but her soul proved a barren, wintry place. I've always hated winter. Twenty years my younger, she was an exotic dancer at the Crazy Horse Saloon on St. Clair Avenue in the heart of downtown Cleveland.

I couldn't believe it. Was she hitting on me? Me? My own wife didn't do that anymore. Already in a fog I heard her saying something about dinner. By this time she'd been flattering me for over an hour. "Are you married?" she asked. "Who would have me?" was my response. A lie isn't always the words we say. It's also impressions left or expectations raised. One word would have saved everything: "Yes." If I could take all the difficulties of my youth and lump them into one, they still wouldn't have provided the depth of trouble toward which I now plummeted. I told her I was a desktop publisher working from my own office, true but incomplete. The only thing that struck me as more bizarre than where I was and what I was doing was telling her I was a minister in a

Pentecostal church. Horrified with myself that I still possessed the capacity to jump that far, that quickly, we were intimate before the evening was over.

Laboring in Carrollton for six years, my 25th wedding anniversary was six months away. With children and wife waiting at home, I abandoned all reason. Had I not lied to her, she would've gone away. Going out with married men wasn't a moral issue to her but, in her line of work, she'd made a commitment to avoiding the problems that always accompany such foolishness. Calling it foolishness is an act of kindness. Stark raving mad is closer to reality. She wrote her phone number on a bar napkin. As soon as I was a few miles down the road I threw it away, thoroughly disgusted with myself. But I had given her the phone number in the church office. Other than the alcohol and erection, I'm at an absolute loss as to why I did that. Make up a number; anything but don't give her the real number. I was never a very good criminal.

The alcohol and my conscience didn't allow me to sleep that night. Next morning I drove to the church, locked the door behind me, walked to the front of the sanctuary, removed my shoes and fell on my face in agony. "What have I done?" didn't trouble me nearly as much as the question, "How could I have turned that corner so quickly?" Building a small mountain of tissue before the altar, I wept into the afternoon. Then the phone rang. I was in trouble. Again.

Nothing in my life prepared me for this woman. She never had a friendship or relationship that lasted more than two years. A card-carrying member of MENSA, her database brain championed two causes: tearing down her father and promoting atheism. More likely to invite her inner demons to sit down for a drink than to confront them, she was also bulimic and bi-sexual. And I thought I had problems.

Her father was a practicing transvestite who worked at one of the big rubber companies in Akron. Julia and her father had issues. Then again, she seemed to have "issues" with all her family members. Two of her three sisters followed her lead as exotic dancers, one appearing in a national men's magazine before her 19th birthday. Her grandmother ran a mail order, video company specializing in x-rated Bondage and Sodomasochist films. Julia's mom wrote reviews of the films for their

newsletter. She once asked, "How many ways can you say, 'He tied her up and spanked her?'" Why are you looking at me? Of all the women in the world with whom a tongues-talkin' holiness preacher might commit adultery, this one had to take the cake.

Finally confessing all my lies to her, I imagined the truth of who I was would be enough to drive her away. It wasn't. When I told her she said, "If you think you're going to dump me and go back to your life the way it was you're mistaken. If you try to leave me I will come down there and destroy you." Great. She was also one of those, "Fatal Attraction," kinds. There's no such thing as "good" timing in these cases but the timing of this evil couldn't have been worse. Jim Bakker and Jimmy Swaggart, two other Assembly of God reprobates, had been at the center of controversy for the last year. These people would run me out of town on a rail if they were to find out. I doubted that Sandy would put up with it again. She had too much going for her to be saddled with a man who seemed unable to figure out what he wanted.

Living with debilitating terror, I could find no way out. Reality was overtaking the fantasy. I did know this much, a reprobate trapped in the body of an ascetic has no business being in the ministry. Beyond that, I'd put too much into this group of people to let my foolishness tear it all down. Resignation and relocation might at least allow me to save my marriage. Maybe I can sneak a way out of this. District headquarters knew the congregation was killing us and made an opportunity for us to pioneer a church in North Ridgeville. Pioneering means to start a church in a community where the denomination has none. They insisted we take a 3-month sabbatical, with pay, in an effort to heal. Maybe I can pull my head out of my own noose, after all. We would move, leaving no forwarding address or phone number. I didn't want anyone to know how to get hold of us. By now things were so strained with the church that our departure was necessary for everyone's benefit.

Leaving Carrollton in November I held my breath. But Julia, now the Predator-In-Chief, would not give up. I'd waited my entire life for a woman to want me that badly and, now that it was here, I was sickened by it. But there was one fly in my ointment. Earlier in my relationship with Julia I'd mentioned where my daughter worked. I was proud of her. She showed up on my daughter's job and, in front of her co-workers

announced, "My name's Julia. Your father and I have been seeing each other for the past ten months. Where is he?" It was Christmas, 1992.

When the phone rang, I picked it up to hear my daughter's sobbing voice. "Dad, who is this Julia person?" Turning to Sandy I handed her the phone. "Sarah needs to talk to you." Ashen faced I sat on the couch and waited for my world to end. When Sandy sat down and gently asked for a response, I told her, "I don't love you anymore and I don't want to be married." Neither did I want to be with Julia. I felt like the stuff that gets scraped from the bottom of a shoe.

I no longer cared about losing my ministry. To say it was secondary is an over estimate of the value I now placed on it. Sending a letter of resignation to the District headquarters was the easy part. Telling my two, youngest sons still living at home is one of the most painful memories of my life. Sitting around the dining room table I was as straightforward as I could be. At 15 and 13 "the Boys" took the news as best they could. Justin dropped his face into his arms and wept openly. Jared sat still and did his best to behave like the older brother but the tears flowed from vacant eyes. "Will we have to go to court?" was the first question asked. They were afraid. In the space of a few, monstrous moments their world changed direction. If there is a hell I doubt it will be any more emotionally painful than that moment. What a Christmas. I remained in the apartment for another ten days in an effort to secure some, small amount of money for Sandy and the children. For 25 years I'd given lip service to a desire to be a better man. What a joke. Any man who says he loves two women at the same time loves neither enough and himself, too much.

But I would be no man at all if I didn't honor the mother of the children for whom these pages are written. But where to begin? In "Mespo," I suppose. We'd been encamped beneath the Tents of Shiloh about four years when I asked her, "What do you want for your children?" After a thoughtful pause she said, "I want them to be honorable people, contributors to their communities." I never saw it that clearly my entire life. My views were always scrambled with patriarchal or spiritual mumbo-jumbo. Capable of succinct brilliance she was encumbered with a heart that believed enough love can fix everything. She is the only one to experience the worst of me and still believe for the best in me. Giving

due respect to present loves, all since her have received an increasingly cleaned-up act. She eventually found her way to a gentle-hearted man who filled her Saturday nights dancing to "the oldies," and the rest of her time with the respect and joy she always deserved. And he had a house.

Some knaves aren't content to be adored by the Queen. Adding another betrayal to my lengthening list of sins finally eroded any lingering illusions of self worth or respect. Ever aware of my failings, scars, deformities and propensities I had no idea what I was going to do. Leaving Sandy burned every bridge I'd ever built. When news began to filter out, everyone turned against me. Jonathon, now in the military, summarized everyone's feelings when he called and said, "Dad, I love you but I could kick your ass." At least he was speaking to me.

Julia still wanted me. Deciding to follow the money, she moved to Myrtle Beach. Dancers from Atlanta and Myrtle Beach planted the idea in her head that they were making \$600 - \$700 a night in those cities. I had no place to go; no job, money or prospects. Four lost years were now screaming over my horizon and I hadn't yet hit bottom. Following a rather torturous, six-month odyssey we ended up in Hot-lanta, Mecca to strippers and magnet for foolish men. Having abandoned everything including the will to care, I determined to follow the example of Solomon when he said, "I gave myself to know pleasure" and "Whatsoever mine eyes desired I kept not from them." I was going to determine if the old, Latin proverb was true: "Sentio, ergo sum," I feel, therefore I am. The life and pretences of a man wanting to be something he seemed unable to be were over.

What we love most will eventually turn us into its own image. Energized by a copulatory imperative, I determine to milk the situation for all the carnality it was worth. This was going to be very weird. Julia was one of those people who are indifferent to where they're going in life as long as they look good when they get there. She saw marriage as nothing more than a real long date, the marriage vows a sanctioned exchange of dysfunctions. "What happens if you get tired of him in six months," her aunt asked her? "It'll be the best six months of his life," was her laughing response. She didn't think much of men but I seemed the only person unaware of it. Never underestimate eccentricity's power to fascinate.

My departure from Carrollton marked the beginning of the most tumultuous years of my life. Committed to becoming the best neophilic possible, I would relocate 15 times in the next six years including a two-week stint in my car. It would have been longer but the repo-man found it.

Atlanta is a pleasure driven economy. She boasts the largest gay community east of the Mississippi and the largest "Swingers" club in the South - Atlanta United Socials with upwards of 350 participating couples. With more strip clubs per stupid man than any other city in America, it's also one of the few major cities that serve alcohol in totally nude bars. It's not a convention city by accident. Strip clubs provide the only arena in which needy men can get beautiful women, ordinarily way out of their league, to tell them lies for a dollar. Those who really want to feel witty, charming and sexy lay down a hundred dollars for the V.I.P. Room. There must be some primal apothecary voodoo behind slutty, "pooh-pooh," undies on sexually charged women. Speaking as victim and beneficiary let me tell you how the game is played.