
Chapter Nineteen
EATING GRASS WITH THE CATTLE

Strippers are an interesting lot sharing a unique universe. The values and rules aren't the same as in the real world. A long time supporter of Vaginal Pride, I've grouped them into three distinct categories. At the bottom of the food chain are those unfortunates who should really keep their clothes on. Nudity isn't what God had in mind for them. Next are those who either look good but haven't a clue about erotic dance or those with fewer redeeming features whose moves are a bit more mesmerizing. The third category is unique. If someone in this group doesn't light your fire, there's something seriously wrong with your wick.

Traveling with Julia I had occasion to become friendly with hundreds of women from eleven clubs in three states. Working at The Doll House in Myrtle Beach, the Gold Club, Cheetah and Taj Mahal in Atlanta and Tiffany's, Circus-Circus and Crazy Horse in Cleveland, she also worked smaller clubs whenever she was unhappy with all the "glitz." She drifted between personalities.

But "glitz," is what it's all about. I've watched innumerable women on talk shows confronted by their significant others who want them to leave the "entertainment," business. It always comes down to money. But, more than the money, there's something about the lifestyle they're unwilling to release. It's power, daily given them by an endless stream of men

seeking cheap escape in a lavish illusion. The better they are at sustaining the illusion the more money they tend to make. It's a business in which the dancer plants the hope that something more might be possible if only circumstances were better. There are always circumstances. Dancers get excited when their "regulars" come through the door. They can instantly calculate whether it will be a good night or a bad one. A bad one was, typically, anything less than \$250 for the clubs Julia danced. If a regular comes in a dancer sees \$50, 75 or one hundred dollars. It may cost about 90 minutes of her time over the course of the evening, but that's not a bad return for just acting happy to see someone. That and scotchin' round in front of him from time to time.

The relationship between the dancers and the House is interesting. The dancers, for their part, know their job includes selling alcohol since that's where the house finds its fortune. In addition, most clubs charge the dancers some kind of entertainment fee, 25 or 50 dollars per night. That makes them independent contractors using the Club's facility to "shake their money makers." Dancers also have to "tip" the bartender and bouncers another 25 to 50 per night, beginning their shifts in debt. In some clubs they must also sell t-shirts and ball caps one set per hour, working their way through the crowd in hopes of finding some guy who didn't care if his wife found it. A lady will sit at your table and be the most fascinating person you've ever met as long as money and a good time keep flowing. If a real good time and a whole lot of money flows, you might get to know her "real," name as opposed to her stage name. "You mean your name's not Mercedes?" Meanwhile, he keeps buying alcohol.

Owners understand what it takes to energize male spending and generally don't care what their dancers do as long as they're earning money for the house while keeping them out of court. Some owners, keenly in touch with the energies driving their business, offer to pay for breast augmentation allowing the dancers to repay them over time. Big-breasted women can always sell over-priced beer to thirsty men looking for fun. Fiercely competitive, some dancers grab a man's genitals during a lap dance placing the other dancers at a sudden and severe disadvantage. It's about money and prestige and there never seems enough of either. The more erotic, the more attention, the more cash. Everybody is exploited in a strip club.

For some dancers, it's "just a job." But others have a genuine appreciation for the sexually liberated environment it makes available. From corporately sponsored golf outings where "nipple shots" are sold for \$20 each to urinating on clients for \$200 to being photographed during group sex, the options are as endless as the fools footing the bill. Money, power, glitz and the ability to create your most recent sexual fantasies with a phone call, tend to make long-term relationships an encumbrance. Because their idea of a perfect specimen is Superman with a lobotomy and trust fund, many dancers feel there's a man at home holding them back.

Though 20 years my younger, Julia seemed much more proficient at being lost. Hers was a neuro-chemical, electrical, brain thing. At 5'2" tall and 115 pounds on days of low barometric pressure, she was two, distinct people and neither liked the other. Never knowing what she wanted, she always seemed to want more of it and her vitriolic views of life and men occasionally poured out in dark, poisonous streams. After about a year I was able to identify "tics" in her physical behavior that let me know that she was about to go over the edge. With a distinct psychotic bent that tended toward violence, these spells lasted several to many days marked by suffocating depression.

Unable to find work, she often berated me as a loser. "You just wanted a dancer to take care of you just like the rest of the losers. I don't believe you were out looking for a job. Where were you? Did you go sit at a strip club? You shit! Where did you get the money for that? Did you steal my money?" And round and round and round. But the crowning moment wasn't a rant, it came with soft tones and a deliberately slow cadence, "You are a fat, lazy, decrepit middle-aged cripple and it disgusts me to have to touch your body." She was everything I hated in a human being but everything I adored in women. How do we get ourselves into these things and why is the exit is so poorly marked?

I was an economic prisoner living in the same emotional cauldron as a battered wife. Just when you're ready to buy a bullet and rent a gun or stick your head in the oven, the fantasy person reappears to reassure you everything will be O.K. Though you know it's just the eye of the Hurricane the sweet, generous, fun-loving person you crave sweeps over you, reminding you why you threw your life away.

Money aside, our biggest differences were my children and religion. She resented my effusive love for my children. That was a losing battle. She also resented my stubborn refusal to take an enlightened position and acknowledge that God is a myth and danger to mankind. She joined a group of atheists called, the Humanists of Georgia. HOG? Possessed with an inordinate fascination of their own opinions, they taught me that divine influence is not a prerequisite for stupidity. They were the same kind of all talk no show people that populate the average church. With no answers for anything worth knowing they spent most of their time mocking people of faith. To them, God is nothing more than a preserved relic of ancient brains. Being spiritual is a great deal more difficult than merely being intelligent.

Saint Patrick's Day, 1995, found us spending the day remembering the displaced snakes. Somebody's got to do it. After some mixed drinks and a few other excesses, Julia stood from her sitting position and, without warning, paced the floor in front of me in a non-stop torrent of escalating abuse. Stopping in front of me she slapped me and stood like a volcano ready to erupt. Catching my breath, she slapped me again. "If you hit me one more time," I warned, "I will knock you out." She did and I did. Finally dragging me down to the place she wanted me to be, I responded in kind. Knocking her to the floor I straddled her body, beating the top of her head with a hand that can't form a fist. My entire forearm turned a decidedly dark shade of black and blue.

She moved out and we didn't see each other for a few months. But she started showing up again and I caved again. When the cute, articulate, sexually charged Julia was around, I caved. Living in separate apartments we decided we'd try to rebuild the relationship slowly. Marriage counselors refer to it as transient structured distance; living apart but working toward co-habitation. But we were doomed from day one. And I knew it from day one.

Julia finished with me in February of 1996. "I'm in love with someone else and I don't want to be with you anymore." Seems she'd been having an affair with the son of the HOG president. How does one compete with a Prince of HOGS? "I need someone who thinks like I do," she said. Good luck. That one was right up there with, "No one will ever love you the way I do." My God, I hope not. All the furniture was hers. I'd

left everything with Sandy. The car was hers. The bank account was hers. Now alone, I had nothing to show for my entire life. My stupidity had taken on biblical proportions. Two months later I was signing divorce papers for one wife and an alimony check for another and the collapse commenced. Only a few years had passed since I'd been telling people how to find God and build strong relationships. I'd betrayed everything and everyone ever held dear and now, like the last dregs circling the drain of a recently flushed commode, I hit bottom. Joe Walsh was right, "The bottom has a rocky reputation,"¹ and there's no place like it to clear up a man's point of view.

Walking two blocks to work, the entire world collapsed and my body refused to function. Fighting my legs, I struggled to keep from collapsing in the middle of the busy road. A few feet up the sidewalk I sat down at the first opportunity, leaning against a signpost for support. Having trouble with my breathing, my heart wouldn't slow down and my muscles left me severely weak-kneed. Lying on my back I practiced breathing techniques learned to help control pain.

Slowly working my way back to my feet, I walked into the office and said, "Take me to the hospital." Spending a few days I was diagnosed with acute clinical depression and prescribed a healthy diet of Zoloft and Psychiatric counseling. Borrowing a friend's car to pay \$150 per 50-minute sessions, I couldn't figure out how to play that game. He was one of those doctors who insist the patient do their own work believing insights gained during introspection will answer their own questions. Can't I do that at home for free? I already knew how I felt about my life and but he kept asking anyway: "How do you feel about that?" You would think that, with all their education, they could come up with better questions for a hundred and fifty bucks. It was going to be a long climb out of this hole.

But the healing process soon began. It started with something as unspiritual as you can get. She had one of those, "I'll need to see the driver's license" kind of names: Gypsi Phillippe. Sitting at opposite ends of Bimbo's Bar and Grill, she was doing the "I stare hard at you then look away, casually drawing on my cigareet" routine. I'll play. It didn't matter if her momma was a stray cat and her daddy a bulldog with a wayward eye. If all you needed was a night away from yourself, she was

mighty fine. The only problem, as far as I could see, was what to do with the guy that "brung" her. He goes to the bathroom and I slink down the aisle carrying a drink in my one, semi-good hand realizing I'd never "picked up" a woman over the course of my entire life. For good or bad, everything seemed to turn into a relationship. In spite of my serious lack of experience, we're sucking face by the time he gets back and we just ignored him. She looks at me and asks out loud, "Should I take you home or not?" Oh boy. The guy what brung her left. I asked to see the driver's license. "Yep, that's your name, alright." Good enough for me. It was 18 months since Julia's departure.

Thirty minutes later I'm laying flat on my back, she's slapping both my shoulder's yelling something about, "Oh baby, you da man" and I'm thinking, "I am *not* ready for this." Yikes. I spent the balance of the weekend putting Neosporin on my wounds and wondering, "What the heck was that?" I'd already learned that you're not likely to find a mutually nurturing relationship in a bar. But I wasn't looking for love. I wasn't looking for sex. I thought was looking for a dozen wings and a Killian's draught but I was really looking for me. Like the fallen king eating grass with the cattle, I "came to myself." I awoke.

I started to think, "Know what? Maybe I'm not as gruesome as I think." Maybe I'm not a skin-rotted zombie brushing grave dirt from my face. Maybe I'm not the Lobsterman collecting quarters at a sideshow. Maybe I'm not a "disgusting, decrepit, middle-aged cripple." With my life in a holding pattern, small pieces started coming together. It was time to stop feeling sorry for myself, get a clue and move forward again. All other chapters of my life segued neatly into and out of one another but this was going to be a brand new beginning starting from zero. If my children were to ever respect me again I was going to have to dig deep and build something honest. Consistency confirms authenticity and I must lay down a consistent pattern of behavior to let them know it would be O.K. to trust me again. Guilt is the gift that keeps on giving and, if allowed, will seriously inflame our neurosis while restricting our life options. Guilt causes us to cower. Finding your way back from the Big Brink is a lesson worth assimilating. The option is to wither into a Gollum-like creature living in the dull drone of our city streets, drifting from one new adventure to the next. I didn't want to be that guy. Might as well dress me in a green-plaid leisure suit and stick M-80's in my ear.

Relationships. Look it up in a reasonably good dictionary and you'll find a reference: "See Pandora's Box." Of all that might be said on the subject, finding and becoming the right person must certainly be near the top. The closer I become to the person I was designed to be, the closer I'll come to *choosing* the right one for me. I cannot choose properly if I don't know who I am. Until then I'm just shooting in the dark. In 50-years, my number one rule regarding relationships has become: keep it simple. Always keep it simple. Realizing that any real discussion about the differences between men and women must begin with things like shoes and public restrooms, I've yet come to feel the male of the species needs but three things for contentment: something to do, someone to love him and something to look forward to. But men often place wants ahead of needs. What do men *want*? They want in. They want into your heart, brain, flesh and fantasies. What do women want? Cash. A woman has a difficult time throwing her legs over her head while yelling "Ooooooh baby," loud enough to crack the plaster if she's worried about buying food for her babies or paying the rent. And it seems neither of us can help it.

For decades I stood on platforms around America, scripture in my head and Armageddon in my soul because of relationships. God and I have been talking about this for years. At the risk of being redundant, bad choices will haunt us our entire lives if we don't know who we are. The foundation matters. When the underlying terror of a person's life is living life unloved, choices with people can sometimes be reason-defying. Especially when they've had a history of being loved by some truly wonderful people. How can such unrest live so long in one heart?

All of us experience a sense of alone-ness at some point in our lives. I'm not talking about the kind of alone that makes an Enya CD sound festive but the kind of alone that tends to suck hope from our veins. Mental health professionals say it's a matter of self worth and value. They should try living inside my skin. Trust me, in spite of it all, I still feel pretty good about myself but being alone is beyond my capabilities. Atlanta held nothing for me. It never had. Besides that, it was taking way too much work to be this shallow. My future ran through Ohio. Grandchildren were growing and there was no reason in the world I should miss that. The time for mourning my yesterdays had passed and I was finally able to look away from the storm and focus on the rainbow.

As I wrestled with all this baggage the phone started to ring. First, from a fellow in Idaho, then another from Canada and a third from Virginia Beach. The earliest were from contemporary Church historians Ivan Lewis and David DiSabatino. Preparing serious works since accepted as definitive, they were researching the All Saved Freak Band® in connection with the musical roots of what later became known as "Jesus" music. Attempting to catalogue the years between 1965 and 1975, their works traced the roots of the "Jesus Movement," the largest spiritual revolution in the last 75 years of Church history. Its legacy is observed in every Youth Ministry and worship service in America. Permanently affecting the way people worshipped in a corporate setting, the Jesus Movement also brought teaching to the forefront instead of preaching, the evangelistic emphasis that sustained it.

Their honest questions demonstrated knowledge of "rumors." They were interested in more than the music but how do you relate the story on the phone without feeling like a complete idiot? It seemed no one else from the band was talking. They attempted to contact Larry but he never responded to such things. When you're trapped in a conspiracy, sudden interest in events at your asylum can put a serious hop into a one-legged man.

Dealing with the possibility that we'd been part of something wonderful without knowing it provided the largest silver lining of my life. The deaths of three people and countless lives broken might now have legitimate value. None of us, in those early groups, created anything new. We just arrived early, believing the marriage of two, old things wasn't such a bad idea. Collectively, we were like the first person to put a hole in the bottom of a flowerpot, wondering why no one thought of it before. Seeing us as an aberrant part of something so big was a lot better than seeing us as fools on a dirt road. "Normal" people were interested in what we did for the value of the music and lessons learned. But we are also a nation of people who find train crashes fascinating, the voyeur in each of us finding varying value in the details.

The third call came from my darling Sarah. Calling from an oceanfront vacation she said she was officially engaged and the wedding would take place in October of the coming year. This was big. It would be the first occasion since my departure from reason that the family would be

together. Jesse and Jon were in the military and married with children of their own. While Jesse worked shore patrol for the Navy in Key West after four years on a nuclear attack sub, Jon was with the 10th Mountain Infantry in Somalia. Pinned down at "the end of the line," he was part of the "Blackhawk Down," operation that reclaimed the bodies of our fallen soldiers from the burning streets of Mogadishu. Jared remained with his mother and Justin came to live with me. At 16, his presence was a strong catalyst for good in Atlanta and he was using the occasion of his sister's wedding to pack up his stuff and move back to Ohio.

Spending everything I had on a one-week vehicle rental and hotel rooms, the coming wedding would bring me face to face with the many people I'd disappointed in so many ways. She was marrying a special man from one of Carrollton's better-known families. That meant *anyone* might be there. I hoped everyone might quickly discern that Jesus no longer restrained me. I was ready for this. Then again . . .

Spending the first day and evening with gathering clan I also wanted to get in a few personal items while here. While moving back to Ohio had been a thought my plans were in limbo. Trying to work my way back up to the level of "ordinary guy," I found fuel sorting through the clutter of my belief system. Some of us frail creatures cannot face life without a codified system of some sort. Regardless of the star from which they hang or the path they send us down, they provide a structure in which life finds meaning. Tomorrow was a big day. Aren't they all? The evening would find me with my old friends, the Smiths, but the day was set aside to visit Shannon's grave. The location held peculiar guilts and regrets felt nowhere else in my universe. Visits here tended to tear away the scab from wounds that have a mind of their own. Already feeling guilty that I couldn't remember the inscription on her gravestone, tomorrow would provide the first altar I'd been to in a long time. Declining all offers of company I was about to discover how truly lost I'd become. Not lost because of the last five years with Julia or the previous twenty years of religious devotion but just plain lost. I had never really been.

ⁱ Joe Walsh, *Eyes of the Confessor*