

Marriage Among the Believers: A Love Story

Here's a riddle for you: how does a Christian fall in love?

The answer is this: Christians don't fall in love because a fall is an occasion for sin, and as we all know, true love, *agape* love, is the opposite of sin. Love that people fall into is of a different sort altogether.

It's not much of a joke, I agree, and it begs the question of how a single Christian living in a backward, out-of-the-way commune in 1978 ever managed to find a wife.

So here's the answer to that riddle as well.

Tammy and I met during one of those freakish early-spring storms that happen about once a decade. Snow was falling, coating the ground and piling up in the trees. Flakes landed on my neck and trickled down my back like the chill of death. Our septic tank was malfunctioning yet again—my memory of our barn is of one such problem after another; anything with a pipe either leaked or became clogged—and manure was bubbling to the surface in the meadow beside the barn. I was digging a hole where we could empty our slops until such time as we could get the septic tank pumped and repaired. And then I heard someone sneeze.

"*Gesundheit*," I said, "and God bless you, especially if you don't know enough to stay out of the cold."

"Thank you," said a thin, high, shaky voice exposed too long to the chill.

"Oh," I said, peering through the white branches. "Hide-and-seek. Is that it?" I shook the bough nearest me and watched the powder swirl and fall.

"Look," I said, "no more foolishness. I'm not really interested in Twenty Questions. It's about twenty-five degrees right now, and after I finish digging this hole, I'm going inside, where it's a toasty forty-six, and thaw out." Along with our sewage system, we never did get the insulation up to snuff. We may have loved Jesus the carpenter, but we never did learn the first thing about the construction trade. We couldn't even make fire hot, if you know what I mean.

I watched the branches move and a young girl step into view. "Only a complete moron would play games in this kind of weather," I said.

“So what does that make you?”

“An oxymoron,” I said, “since I’m digging a hole to fill it in. Just remember: as quick as you are, you’re shivering and I’m not.”

Her teeth were chattering, and her cheeks were blue. A bit of bone, a hank of hair: there wasn’t much more to her than that. She would have been cold in a desert at noon. She was wearing a denim jacket without a liner, a flannel shirt, and a pair of jeans, warm enough for our customary drizzle and mist; but in this bone-chilling weather, she might as well have stripped and rolled in the snow.

“Don’t tell them where I am,” she whispered. “Please? Even if they’re looking?” And at that point she promptly fainted into a slushy drift, which meant that there was nothing else to do but pick her up in a fireman’s carry and haul her wet, quickly freezing self into the barn. She moaned as though her dreams had taken a terrible turn.

When I opened the door, Rachel Sidwell, the wife of our leader and the woman I had once thought to be my girlfriend, was there to meet me. “Now you’re bringing them in from the highway?” she said. “Are you so selective that you have to import them? Besides, I thought clubbing a woman on the head had gone out of fashion.”

“Look here,” I said, “this is serious.”

I lowered the girl from my shoulders and rested her on one of the common tables, just cleared of the dinner dishes. And that’s when Rachel saw the color of her face.

“She’s freezing.”

“That’s what I’ve been saying.”

“She must have been out there for hours.”

It turned out that Tammy’d been in hiding for a day and a half. She’d slept under the trees and the stars the first night and thought herself lucky for escaping, but when the cold front blew through, she realized that she could not survive another night in the open. That’s when she caught sight of me digging my hole. Rachel and three other women carried her into the kitchen, where they heated water and helped her wash and bring back the color to her skin. They gave her a nightgown to wear and put her to bed, and she did not awaken until three o’clock the next afternoon. By my watch, she had been asleep some twenty hours. I didn’t recognize her until dinner that night. She sat over her plate of spaghetti with her blonde hair hiding her face, and I said, “You’re one of the Gaston kids, aren’t you? Your brother is in my fifth-period class.”

“Stepbrother,” she said. “I’m a Ueland.”

There were Gastons and Uelands everywhere—eighteen that I knew of. In three years, seven of them had come through my classroom. Somehow I had missed Tammy. Her mother had divorced her father for being shiftless; her stepfather had divorced his wife for being fat. They married each other

in Reno and threw their two noisy families together as if they were the Brady Bunch, minus shoes and middle-class aspirations, of course. They were loud, coarse, uneducated people who believed in love among the beer cans; they produced children faster than rabbits, and as a result they were working on a whole new brood. During the week, Gaston worked the big saw at Avison's, slicing whole trees into planks, and on the weekends he drank at the Dew Drop Inn. Stories went around the school that he wasn't particular whose door he opened at night, there being so many available to him, and his wife was more than willing to turn a blind eye. Two of the older girls, as well as their mother, were pregnant.

"So, you're running away from that house. The only surprise is that you're the first one to do it."

"Shelly took off last spring," she said, "but the police brought her back."

Shelly was seventeen. She made it as far as Portland before she came home in a marked car with roof lights. Now she had a baby due in April.

"You're safe here for the time being," I said. "But you can't hide forever. There's school and the police and missing persons. You don't think your mother will miss you?"

"My mother," she said, "can't keep track of herself."

She stayed longer than I expected, and she was right: no one looked for her, not a policeman or parent or truant officer. We never heard a word about a missing girl in that pre-milk-carton era. Evidently, Shelly's mistake had been her choice of destination. The Salvation Army reported run-aways, and the police were obligated to respond, whereas Tammy found a spot in our barn with the other unmarried women and was soon pitching in at mealtimes and on washdays. She put on a little weight and lost her American Gothic look. She attended every study session, and I once heard her talking to Rachel about the doctrine of predestination. But it would be a mistake to think that I saw her very often or in anything like an intimate environment. After all, I was at school during the day, tormenting twelve-year-olds with the value of x , and if there was a meeting or Bible study in the evening, I might see her, but only in the company of thirty other people. Still, that Christmas after Tammy's arrival, Bonner Sidwell asked me to go for a walk along the creek bed, which was the closest thing he had to an office. The water and the trees. The open air. We were bundled up in parkas and scarves, and our watch caps were as frosty as our beards.

"That's quite a girl you brought us," he said.

"Who? Tammy? She was half-dead with the cold when I found her, but she seems to have revived."

"It's been nearly a year, and she has no intention of going home or moving on. You may have some responsibility for her."

"What are you saying? It wasn't my doing that she's been here this long."

“No. I mean it seems clear to me that Jesus has intended the two of you to be together.”

“Now, you’re joking. She’s sixteen, and I’m a teacher. She should be in school, playing softball and passing notes. I don’t need to tell you what would happen if I got fired over this. We would be out of luck all the way around. And I don’t mean just the loss of income.”

“That’s nothing we can worry about.” He looked at me from under his icy brows. “Are we to dictate the will of the Lord?”

Now, I should mention that Bonner had that habit of speech in which each sentence was a sermon and a reproof. We had known each other for four years at the time, but he still spoke to me as though I were a devoted disciple waiting at the bottom of the hill. Then again, I probably asked for it. After all, it’s not such a bad thing having a guru of one’s own, someone to give direction, and I’d been glad to be on the receiving end. So, he was given to making pronouncements of various kinds, and he knew how to use that breathy, quiet voice of his, making each one of them sound as though it was a revelation from God Himself.

But no matter how high-minded he tried to sound, we could ill afford bad relations with our neighbors; they already had their doubts about Christians living together in a structure made to accommodate animals. If they knew that our barn also sheltered runaway girls, there would be no end to their complaints. And having a little money wouldn’t have been such a bad thing either. I couldn’t understand how he could be so cavalier about our economic prospects, since in order to buy the property and barn we lived in, he had to use up most of the inheritance Rachel had gotten from a distant cousin. After that, there wasn’t much left, and each month was hand-to-mouth. There were only a few of us who had paying jobs, not because the others had no skills, but because such a high priority was placed on study and meditation. A little money came in from the arts-and-crafts crowd for our tacky attempts at beadwork and pottery, but being thinkers more than doers and believing our souls more important than our stomachs, our general inclination was toward the cloister and the abbey. And yet periodically, those of us who were gainfully employed would have to deal with our resentments whenever dinner was marked with the block letters of government surplus.

“I’m not dictating anything,” I said. “I know better than that. Still, I don’t think you can ask a sixteen-year-old girl to get excited about someone ten years older just because he carried her home in the snow.”

“Why would she need to be excited? After all, if it’s His desire, who is she to say no? Who are we to say no?”

“Oh, sure. Bring out the artillery, why don’t you?” Bonner had stopped walking and was squatting near a spot in the creek that was covered with ice, scratching away at it with a stick. “You’re going to tell me that that is

what my heart is like, aren't you? Frozen over. Too cold to understand what the will of the Lord is. Well, let me tell you something. I know almost nothing about that girl, except that her family is a horror show and she deserves to be spared. But I don't know that I'm the one to do it."

He stood up and placed his hands on my shoulders—a gesture that I'm a patsy for, I admit. "You're the perfect person," he said, "and together you'll be a perfect fit. You just don't know it yet. What she lacks, you'll provide, and where you have doubts, she'll be the answer. For in His image, He created them, the male and female, that His portrait might be complete. Besides," he said, "you think you're being so quiet and no one knows, but we can all hear you at night, and I'll tell you this: it's no way to live, Brother. At your age and not getting a day younger. No way at all."

I should probably tell you what Bonner's thesis was, and now is as good a time as any. Bonner believed in several things, but foremost among them was the principle of confession. He didn't think of it as a sacrament, like the mainline denominations did, but he had latched on to a verse from the Epistle of James and rode that idea for all it was worth. That verse said that if anyone was sick, he or she should call for an elder, be anointed with oil, and confess his or her sins in as public a manner as possible. Bonner took this to mean that any affliction—physically or emotionally felt—could be cured by the understanding that sin was the root cause of all illness. Those of us at New Aurora were thus big believers in salad oil and the spiritual badgering of anyone with a fever. Anytime someone had a cold, that brother or sister was suspected of harboring something undesirable, and *Praise Jesus!* it became time to find it out. Of course, confession was likewise viewed as preventative medicine, so there we were on many an evening, toting up our sins of commission and omission, as the Catholics like to say, lest the hand of God descend and ungently nudge us toward a more amenable state of mind.

That I hadn't contracted some sort of repulsive physical ailment—a puss-filled skin condition, say, or an infected, swollen eye, not to mention hairy palms—for jacking off in my bed at night was something of an affront to the principle that Bonner held so dear. To my mind it seemed too embarrassing in comparison with spiritual pride or envy, and I couldn't imagine standing up and describing the details of my sin; nor did I want to imagine the reaction of my fellow barn residents.

The corollary to confession was restitution, and Bonner set great store by this as well. It wasn't enough to confess to the family at large; the confession needed to lead to some sort of concrete undoing of the sin. So we were married, Tammy and I, for the sake of my restitution—never mind that my confession was not verbalized—and this is how it came about. Bonner and Rachel called Tammy and me into their room in the barn.

Since there were no chairs, we took off our shoes and sat on the bed Indian style, as though we were having a coed slumber party. While Bonner announced what he had in mind, Rachel, who was round and puffy and in the eighth month of pregnancy, nodded and nodded. Tammy and I were to marry, the ceremony taking place directly after dinner. There would be no marriage license—at least not for a couple years—since Tammy was underage and we had no desire to risk her parents’ or the authorities’ attention, but in every other way, we should understand the marriage to be as ironclad as any in God’s sight. I expected her to run screaming from the barn and throw herself into the creek so that my embarrassment would be complete, but when Bonner was through, Tammy started nodding and nodding, just as Rachel had been doing, as though the message had come from on high.

“How do you feel about it?” she said to me.

“Well, it all seems a little sudden and rushed, and I’m a pretty old guy by comparison with you. It’ll be like dating a former student, except that we won’t be dating—we’ll be way past that—and I never had you in class.”

“Maybe this is too drastic,” Rachel said, “no matter how good an idea.”

“If you need a little time to get used to the idea,” Tammy said. “If that’s what it would take.”

“Well,” I said, “I’m not sure.” I was looking into Tammy’s eyes. They were not remarkable for their color or depth; they were merely blue—nothing eccentric regarding their shape or size, no flecks or strange glints. They were what they were without messages or portents, and I wondered again if such an irrevocable act could transpire on such short notice.

“No,” Bonner said, “this is the perfect idea and the perfect time. You will know love through the passage of years, and we would be remiss to let the specter of doubt intrude. This is a case of cold feet, but that’s all too common, even after months of preparation.”

So it was settled, and after our dinner of Spam and powdered eggs, Bonner brought the membership of the Colony together to celebrate.

“As Paul tells us, it is better for a man and woman to marry than to be alone and give occasion for sin. So, to have this brother and sister united in the Lord, this is the will of God.” A scattering of *Amens* and *Praise-the-Lords* followed. “What can you promise to each other?”

Tammy made a beautiful speech about her model of marriage being everything that her mother’s wasn’t. She promised to be truthful and supportive and trusting. She promised to be faithful, sober, and kind. She left out obedient, she said, because that was an old way of thinking about the sexes. If both partners were obedient to the Lord, then nobody needed to be top dog. In less than a year’s time, she said, she had learned any number of things, not the least of which was the nature of true love, for which the ideal was Jesus and His sacrifice on the cross, and she promised to sacrifice

for me. Sacrifice and sacrifice, and then sacrifice some more, as much as she was able to. When she was through, there was an upwelling of applause and even a few tears, and I thought I would be hard pressed to come anywhere near her in feeling. This little slip of a teenaged girl had stolen all the good lines, and the only thing left was honesty.

“So,” I said. “So this is what we’ve come to. I’m a little flustered, I don’t mind telling you that. When I woke up this morning, I never thought I’d be a married man by nightfall, so let this be a lesson to us all. Our destinies can change at a moment’s notice, at the whim of the Lord. And here I am whimpering along. But I’ve gotten off track. I’m supposed to be promising myself to my bride, which is my intention, believe me: promising myself to her since it seems like the right thing to do. Tammy, do you hear that? I’m yours. We don’t know a thing about each other, except that we met in the cold. You might say we’re mysteries of the moment, but I suppose we’ll learn about each other soon enough. In a year’s time, we’ll no doubt be like all the other marrieds, wondering how to keep the spark alive. At least we’re starting fresh.”

When I was through, there were a few confused murmurs and one or two folks clapped a bit before there was silence. I had been something of a letdown, but I couldn’t think of any way around it. Afterward, a blanket was placed over our heads, as was our custom, and Bonner led the Colony in prayer while Tammy and I breathed on each other in the dark. First one person and then another asked God to bless us, and we were blessed at length. Jesus give them this, Jesus give them that. I’m sure He thought we were terrible beggars, and I guess we were. Underneath our blanket, I could tell that Tammy was weeping. “This is the happiest I’ve ever been,” she snuffled, which did not seem to be the best of signs: not if the pinnacle of happiness were to be found under a wool blanket still redolent of mothballs.

When the praying was done, Bonner and Rachel and the rest of the Colony led Tammy and me outside the barn, which was another one of our customs.

“Now, you know what comes next, don’t you?” I asked Tammy.

“Not in so many words,” she said. “But you’re probably thinking what I think you’re thinking. I can guess, you bet. Hoo, boy,” she said, “boy, oh boy.”

“Well, we have a bit of a hike,” I said, “and unless we have a little help, we’ll have a few things to carry.”

On the hill above our creek, there was an eight-by-eight shed with a pallet bed and a foam pad. In the winter, we used it to store extra perishables, and in the summer the marrieds might spend a night or two there for a little privacy. The night we were married, a fine rain continued to fall and the threat of a full-blown ice storm seemed real enough, so we were hauling blankets and sleeping bags. The thermal underwear beneath our clothes

would be our pajamas for this little honeymoon getaway. Holding a pair of sleeping bags and a pair of flashlights, Bonner was leading the way.

"I should probably warn you," Tammy said. "I'll probably be a disappointment."

"I wouldn't be too sure," I said to her. "It's not like I've taken a lot of test drives."

"Well," she said, "even so."

Bonner opened the door, and we cleared a space on the pallet, setting on the floor the cartons of powdered milk and the unmarked bricks of cheese.

"OK, kids," he said, "get to know one another, and we'll see you in a week, give or take a day or two. Someone will leave your meals outside."

And then he was gone, taking one of the flashlights back down the path. We watched the beam of light parry with the trees before it suddenly disappeared. The kerosene lantern in the shed cast its harsh light on every corner, every one-gallon can of pork and beans, every three-pound box of Bisquick on the shelves. We were alone. Tammy sat down on the pallet and drew one of the sleeping bags around her shoulders and over her head. It was really quite cold. "I don't know what I was thinking," she said, beginning to snifle. "Men are men, even if they are Christians, so I guess I've got what's coming to me. It's the price of a marriage. Men being men and women being women."

"Look," I said, "I'm not a bad guy, and I hate to hear you talk like this. This has all been a whirl." I started to restack the cheese on the pallet. "I don't know what we were thinking. It's just a case of Bonner's persuasiveness. He could convince the Pope to be Jewish, but let's face it: you're too young to be married, and I'm too old to be married to you. Like I said in the barn, we don't know a thing about each other. Maybe that's the way it's done in other places, but it's hardly the American way. It's silliness. Silliness to think otherwise."

With that thought, she began to snifle again, but harder this time. Her body began to shake, and the sleeping bag over her head was bucking up and down like one of those bobble-head dolls in the backs of people's cars.

"But you can't cry," I said. "Oh, come on now. There, there. You may be a girl, but you're practically grown up all the way. You can't fall apart for every little thing—not even a marriage that hasn't really happened."

"You don't understand," she said.

And I didn't. She wasn't upset about the marriage, and she wasn't upset about the sex, at least not in the sense that I had first imagined. The act itself was something she was already quite familiar with, given the presence of her stepfather. The old bastard had started in on the girls the moment they suffered their first periods, and he was working his way down the line as though they were a set of stairs, as though he had to step on each tread or suffer bad luck. In Tammy's case, she had been stepped on more than once.

Her door opened and she pretended to be asleep, but that never stopped him. The last time he opened her door, she had had enough. She hit him over the head with an aluminum softball bat, threw on her clothes, and climbed out her window. Then she walked around in the woods until the snow started to fall, which was when she found me. That's why she was concerned about people looking for her: she assumed that she was wanted for murder. Evidently, though, she had pulled her punch or hadn't hit him square because a week later, Bonner saw him driving his pickup toward the mill, his head encased in a gauze bandage that made him look like the world's fattest Q-Tip. Bonner had made a joke about it at dinner, and the color had drained from Tammy's face. At the time, I hadn't known why.

"If I never see a man's dick again, I won't be unhappy," she said. "Or his balls. All that floppy stuff you guys drag around with you like an extra leg. Who needs it?"

"We're not that bad."

"You'd push it in a knothole if you thought it would make you happy."

"Now you're exaggerating," I said, but then I wondered. I was twenty-six years old, living in a religious commune and wondering where my life was going, a guy with a slide rule and the daily company of junior-high-school students with their hormones on display for the whole world to see. On the other hand, I had no romantic life except the one conducted in my own head and hands, and the fact that it was common knowledge was more than faintly embarrassing. "So you're saying that if it weren't for all the in-and-out, this marriage thing wouldn't be so upsetting?"

"Would you want to be buried alive—in your own bed, no less?"

"When you put it that way, no."

"You're quick, I'll give you that."

"Do I deserve that?" I asked. "I could do without the sarcasm, especially since I think a compromise is in order." So much for sacrifice, I thought.

This is what I proposed: there would be no sex, and we would manage separate beds somehow in the cramped spaces allotted to us, but maybe we could figure out a way to be friends and intimate on other levels. It would be a marriage of minds and hearts, altogether pure. We would know one another without the confusions of physical intimacy—she'd grow more comfortable with me, and I'd grow less needy as well—and maybe one day...

"Why would you want to do that?" she asked. A very good question indeed.

"I'm no prize," I said. "And I'm beginning to see Bonner's point: you have your problems and so do I, but together we'll supply what we lack separately. I won't touch you."

"We don't have to be quite that drastic," she said. "I wouldn't mind a little cuddle every now and then, and having someone to sleep next to doesn't sound like such a horrible thing either."

“No,” I said, “it doesn’t. But I snore, and I can’t guarantee to be perfect in the face of temptation.”

“I’ll buy earplugs,” she said. “As for the other: one slip-up and I buy a bat.”

So we zipped our sleeping bags together and took off our boots. We fumbled with our first kiss but did better with the second. By the third, we were feeling chummy.

“See,” she yawned, “you’re not so bad.” And five minutes later, she was asleep. Rolled over on her side, breathing like a machine while I stared at the ceiling, wondering how I had gotten here: married after all this time to an adolescent runaway so traumatized by sex that I would have felt guilty putting my hand on her waist.

Look, I’m no different from any other male of the species, Christian or no. I had my fantasies—most of which folded open and were stapled in the middle—whereas Tammy had no breasts to speak of and her hips were just a nod to the feminine. Although she’d put on some weight over the past year, her arms and legs were as thin as sticks, her cheeks and jaw as sharp as blades. But when we had kissed, her lips were soft, and I could tell that she was smiling.

Would it surprise you if I said my Christianity had once been on the shaky side? Before coming to New Aurora, I attended a church housed in a building that resembled a concert hall. The choir wore shiny fire-retardant robes, and the minister’s hair was so perfect, it looked like a toupee. Maybe it was. There’s no need to name names or cast aspersions. Suffice it to say that it was one of the lowest of the low Baptist branches. But the women were beautiful, with the sharp, practical understanding that beauty and a summer dress demand. They left their late-model cars and flounced through the rare Portland sunshine as though they were the answer to a question I hadn’t known to ask. This was where I first met Rachel Sidwell. She hadn’t met Bonner yet, and her name was Walters then. We became close friends during a college-group potluck in which the minister talked frankly about sex before marriage. Don’t do it, he cautioned us. The physical relations of a man and a woman are sacred and one of the Lord’s great mysteries. “It’s a mystery to Mr. Plastic Man,” she whispered to me. “What would he know about it?” The minister’s three children were Korean and adopted and the subject of a sermon about once every three months, during which they sat silently and without expression, like the good props they were. The minister’s wife, on the other hand, always smiled, even during funerals, and there was some talk that twice a week she saw a psychiatrist in Vancouver, then hit the card rooms.

Rachel’s father owned a car dealership in Beaverton, and she had grown up in that church. She wore her sunglasses on top of her blonde head,

drove her father's black Mercedes coupé, and drank like a sailor. When the meeting was over, she tugged my sleeve and said, "I'm thinking it's time for the sacred and mysterious. How about you?"

"Sure," I said. "When you think about it, the sacred and mysterious are walking on two legs all around us. Let him who has the eyes to see, see. We're all naked underneath our clothes anyway. That's Toastmaster philosophy in a nutshell."

When we were through, she pulled the sheet up to her neck. "Thank God for the sacraments," she said. Our clothes made a collage on the floor of her room, which was on the third story of her parents' enormous and tasteless house. Her mother was at a spa in central Oregon, and her father was on a golf vacation in Hawai'i. From her bedroom window, we could see the Willamette River and the log barges floating south. Mount Hood was to the east, and Mount Saint Helen's to the north.

"This is OK," I said. "I could learn to live this way."

"Don't be ridiculous. Living here is like believing in advertising."

"I could do that."

"You'd hate it. I hate it, and I'm superficial in all the worst ways."

"No, I just don't understand rich people who complain all the time about how meaningless their lives are," I said to her. "I've never been rich, so I don't have a lot of sympathy. All I have is envy for the view from this window."

Rachel rose from her bed naked and went to the adjoining bathroom. She spoke to me over her shoulder. "You're welcome to it, Buster. It's never done me a damn bit of good."

A week later she met Bonner Sidwell, who was preaching on a street corner in front of the courthouse in downtown Portland. He promised her poverty and rustic living conditions, and she became an instant convert, much to her parents' mortification.

"We're buying a farm," she told me. "It's a ground-floor opportunity with Jesus—like nothing I've ever seen. Bonner knows what he's talking about."

She had turned demure overnight, and I was curious, yes I was. So I came out to the barn at New Aurora. About twelve people were living there. I was done with school, I had a teaching position in the nearby boonies, and I couldn't think of anywhere I'd rather live. Besides, Rachel was there, even if she had become a different person and was already committed to Bonner. So, I guess you could say that I went to church in the hope of meeting women, and I came to New Aurora for the sake of one in particular, and then when it came time, I married a teenaged runaway because none of my original plans worked out. Pretty pathetic, really. But in my years with Bonner and Rachel, I'd latched on to a whole catalogue of principles, and I lived and died by them even if I didn't always believe.

Besides, Tammy and I were not unhappy, not by any stretch. We spent seven days and nights in the shed on the hill above the barn, walking in the woods and talking. For a sixteen-year-old girl, she had seen her share. She told me stories about her mother's habit of singing college fight songs while drunk and her stepfather's way of lighting a fire in the fireplace with a blowtorch. He kept it on the hearth for that purpose, and when he was drunk or angry, which was often, it was a threat to everyone's safety. She cried about her stepfather's sarcasm and those nights when her door opened and her mother's unwillingness to see what was happening or even to care. We covered everything, and I spent one entire afternoon holding her and telling her that I didn't think a thing less of her as a person, that she wasn't the one to blame. If I weren't restricted by our faith, I told her, I'd feel compelled to kill her stepfather, gut-shoot him and slice off his balls.

"Now you're being stupid," she said, wiping her eyes with the back of one hand. "But thanks, it means a lot."

"He's sick and should be put out of his misery."

"OK," she said, "enough's enough."

One day we walked to the top of the small hill we called Mount Carmel. A light rain was falling, and we came back drenched and shivering to find that someone, maybe Rachel, had left a package on our doorstep: a thermos of hot chocolate, two mugs, and a can of whipped cream. We spent another day reading the Gospel of John and praying together because Tammy thought a marriage should begin with good habits. I grew more and more nauseated with our earnestness, but when I opened my eyes and found her staring at me, she patted my hand and said we didn't need to continue. At that moment, she didn't seem as young as I had first imagined. That night, we crawled into our double-wide sleeping bag and snuggled against each other. Although there were moments when we began to warm to each other and might have let our impulses take over, the nights were cold and we didn't do anything more than stick our tongues into each other's mouth or sleep like spoons stacked in a drawer. When we came back down the hill, the teasing we received our first night back was fierce. There's nothing like your virtuous Christian for making innuendo—it's all so lusciously dirty and forbidden, like apples in the garden—and I felt a bit unmanned that none of it was true. Which was the beginning of our first argument.

"You promised," she said.

"It's a matter of principle," I said. "Aren't we lying? Think about it. We're letting them think something that's not so."

I was taking advantage of her character. She was really a very honest person in those days—maybe the most honest I've ever known.

"What do we care?" she said with little conviction.

"They're family," I said, "in the better sense of the word."

"So we tell them everything?"

"We could," I said, "but I have to confess I'm a little embarrassed. What would I say?"

"Well, that's your problem, isn't it?"

"Tammy," I said, "you're right. It's my problem, and I made you all kinds of promises that night, but it wasn't exactly a normal courtship. You have to admit that."

"Fine," she said. She was gritting her teeth, and her jaw muscles were so tightly clenched that I'm surprised she didn't crack a molar. "I admit it. Happy?"

"Don't take it that way," I said.

"All right," she said, "I can see there won't be any peace until we get this over with."

We had been washing the dishes after dinner, our assigned chore: washing and drying and arguing. Tammy untied her apron and pulled the loop over her head.

"Come on," she said.

"You're joking. We have the baking dishes and the soup pot yet, and you know how tough they can be. I'll probably be scraping them with a knife. If we only had the money to join the twentieth century and get a dishwasher."

"Right now, and I'm not kidding."

She grabbed my hand and dragged me back to our cubicle of a room, newly hammered together. Our plywood walls still smelled like fresh cuts and sap. There was sawdust on the floor and indentations around the nail heads.

"Tammy," I said, "we don't have to do this. You're making me feel horrible."

"This offer," she said, "will not be repeated." She pulled the curtain across our doorframe, then unbuttoned her shirt, untied her boots, and dropped her jeans while I stood watching. "Well? Come on. Time's a-wasting."

"But everyone's awake," I said. "We'll have no privacy whatsoever. I saw Brenda Caldwell reading three rooms ago. You can hear Arnold Stone scraping away on his violin. Bonner and Rachel are probably doing their devotions. You know how they are after dinner. They pray for an hour or more with their lips moving."

"Fine," she said. "Do what you want, but I'm warning you: it's now or never."

What was I to do? I took off my clothes, and there we were: exposed to each other and the air.

"Well," she said, biting her lower lip. "OK. Here we go."

She hardly looked bigger or more developed than the girls from the elementary school who took accelerated course work at the junior high. One arm went across her chest and grabbed the elbow of her other arm, which

hung down, her hand shielding the sparse pubic hair at her crotch. Her breasts were really no more than mere suggestions. I could count each rib. Her belly was a cave, and though her knees were together, I could easily see between the parentheses of her thighs. And after a year of eating our government-surplus food! The boards creaked as she tugged off the army blankets and lay back on our newly built bed.

“Tammy,” I said, “we can’t do this.”

“I knew you were going to say that,” she said and covered her face with her hands. I touched her shoulder, but she pulled away. “Who would want me? After what I’ve been through. I can’t say I blame you.”

“I want you,” I said, “of course I do.” And the moment I said it, I knew that it was true. “I love you,” I said.

“*Hah!*”

I knelt between her legs and kissed her hands, which still covered her eyes, while I fit myself into her.

“Stop that,” she cried, frantic, trying to buck me off with her hips, but I was too heavy for her.

“What?” I said. “This? Or this? When I move a little here, is that what’s bothering you?”

“All of it,” she whimpered. “All of the above.”

“I’m your husband,” I said, “and you know that such things are allowed. That’s why people get married in the first place.”

Her fists were balled up, and she was hitting my shoulders. Not very hard really, just spastic little punches that a toddler might have laughed at, thinking them playful. But she was crying and kicking me with her heels and craning her head back and forth. Holding her was like holding a pile of mismatched sticks in a strong wind: I was waiting for her to fly into pieces.

“Get off,” she sputtered. Her voice rose in pitch and volume. “You’re too heavy. I can’t breathe. You’re hurting me.”

“Now, now,” I said, “I think you’re telling me a story. You don’t want me to touch you, but you don’t want me *not* to touch you. You say you can’t breathe, but you’re screaming at me.”

“Oh, Jesus,” she said, “he’s killing me.”

“I’m not your stepfather. I’m your husband, and you know Saint Paul and the Book of Ephesians: husbands and wives together are the image of Christ and His Church.”

“If that’s what it takes, then let me die!”

“There is some debate about authorship, I agree, but that’s no reason to doubt everything. You can’t throw the baby out with the bath water. It’s a good book, all in all. In any case,” I said, “we won’t be this way much longer.”

When I rolled over to my side of the bed, her face was wet and shiny with tears, and she was sobbing so hard that she had begun to hiccup.

There was a knock on our doorframe and a tentative voice on the other side of our curtain.

“Yes,” I said, huffing and puffing a little. “What is it?”

It was Rachel’s voice: “Everything all right in there?”

“Just fine,” I said. “Just a newlywed tiff is all. And then making up. We’re still adjusting to one another.”

“Tammy,” she called, “tell me the truth. Is he being awful?”

“No,” she hiccupped. “He’s no worse than any other man.”

“That’s not saying much,” Rachel replied, but we heard her walk away nonetheless.

“So much for coming to my defense,” I said. “Thanks for sticking up for me.”

“You’re a prick, and I hate you.”

“Please don’t say that. I love you. We’ll get better in time. ‘Let me not to the marriage of true minds admit impediment,’” I said. “That’s Shakespeare and the Anglican prayer book, and we’re true minds if there ever were such a pair.”

What I meant to say was that, all things being equal, we were cripples of a kind, not perfect beauties or perfect souls, and we would just have to learn how to get along day by day. I probably hated myself for the way I had acted even more than Tammy did, but we had moved toward each other and that moment one step at a time, and when decisions had to be made, they were inevitable and impossible to undo. If there’s any one thing I wish I could do, it would be to apologize to everyone I’ve ever met for being who I am. And I suppose I would have to start and end with my wife.

There’s nothing so bad that it can’t get worse. Then again, it can always get better, and if Christianity is built on anything, it’s built on grace and the notion that things can get better even if there doesn’t seem to be a reason why they should. Tammy hated me for a time, and then she didn’t. *Praise God*, and I mean that sincerely.

There came a night some days later when she asked if I was ready to go to bed, and I knew what she meant. After the dishwashing-interruptus evening, I hadn’t touched her. We had gone to bed each night much as we did on our honeymoon—minus the cuddling, of course. I pressed my face against our room’s plywood wall and gave her as much space as I could. Tammy wore her thermals to bed and a flannel nightgown on top of them. So, I wasn’t prepared when she put on her happy face. It was Wednesday night and our designated time for REC—which stood for Reproof, Exhortation, and Confession—when she leaned over to me and put her lips to my ear.

“I have a confession to make,” she whispered near the beginning of the meeting. “The other night. I didn’t have a horrible time. I mean, it wasn’t completely awful. There were parts that I almost enjoyed.”

“That’s good to know,” I whispered back.

“And you’re not a prick. He was a prick,” she said, “but you’re not. At least I don’t think you are. It was a little hard to tell at the time.”

“That’s also good to know,” I said.

“I still have a problem, I’m not going to lie to you,” she said, “but I’m willing to get over it. I’m willing to try.”

Bonner was scolding Rachel for being too concerned with her looks, but we all knew that he liked them just fine—who wouldn’t?—and if anyone was too concerned with them, it was Bonner himself. I saw him looking at her as though he were gauging where his wife ended and his baby began. His criticism was just for show anyway—priming the pump, so to speak, for others to follow.

“So, I’m feeling a little sleepy,” she said. “How about you?”

“Now? It’s only seven thirty, and Bonner’s just getting warmed up.”

“No one will miss us.”

But when we stood up to go back to our room, Bonner stopped speaking midsentence. “Ah, the newlyweds,” he said, “leaving so soon?” *Wink, wink, wink*—as racy as our faith would allow.

“Something in your eye?” I said. “That’s too bad, but we have one or two things of our own to take care of.”

“I’m sure you do,” Bonner said. A waggle of his eyebrows, and there was a wave of laughter from those sitting around the common tables. They were waiting to confess their flaws and deficiencies, so any little relief was welcome.

“We have something to...we’re going to—,” I began.

“I’m ovulating,” Tammy said.

Applause and laughter followed, and we were waved out of the meeting area and pointed toward our room by the good will and blessings of our family.

“You’re what?” I said.

“You were on the hot seat, and I thought I could help you out. Besides,” she said, “I don’t think I’d mind having a baby. One of these days. Not now, but soon. I see Rachel and the others. They look happy.”

What she wouldn’t do was have more than one. After seeing all those brats issuing from her mother and sisters, she had no desire to become one more breeder of neglect. No, what she had in mind was one cherished child, two at the absolute most, cared for by their parents and the larger community of belief, trained and disciplined and sent out into the world with the best that loving humans could offer. She would get the job done right the first time, and she would make up for the sins of her mother and her mother’s generation in the process.

“If that’s what you want, then we should start practicing,” I said.

“I think so.”

I can't say we were terribly athletic or proficient, but we managed to feel good about things, and we didn't care who heard us in the commons or the next cubicle. They were listening anyway, those devout voyeurs. And four hours later, when the barn was pitch dark, we tried again, just to make sure we remembered everything we'd learned earlier.

"Thank you," she said.

"My pleasure," I said. And it was, it was.

If I remember anything at all about those weeks and months before the deputies paid us their pre-dawn visit and drove us from our ramshackle Eden, it would be the pleasure of our practice, learning how one body fit with another, how love could grow and flourish no matter how rocky its start. How we would continue to pray and hope for the perfect, redemptive child, even after we were told that Tammy was not ever likely to have a baby. How we would continue to pray even when we had begun to doubt whether Jesus was likely to care.