

A Las Vegas Love Story

Richard didn't really think it was all that funny. Some of his fellow seminarians had laughed about God's incredible sense of humor but it all was lost on him as he looked down at the lights of Las Vegas. All he could think of was, "Why in the world, God, would you give me only one call out of seminary and have it be to a sprawling megalopolis in the desert? Have you forgotten who I am, God?"

He was right. Richard O'Neil was not really your Las Vegas type of person. The son of a hardware store owner from a small town in British Columbia on the border with Washington. The closest Richard had ever been to a desert was his musings through the Bible Almanac pictures of Moses and the Hebrews In Egypt.

If this was a joke God certainly had a strange idea of humor for there he was, descending on Southwest flight #1446 from Seattle to Las Vegas.

"God," he thought, "I've never seen so many lights in all my life... and there hasn't hardly been a tree since we flew over Reno. I don't know if I can live without trees!"

The pilot prepared to land from the southwest into McCarren and as he leveled the craft again Richard looked out of the windows at the expanse of the sprawling city. He recognized some of the landmarks from the articles that he'd read in preparing for this interview. He could see Luxor and the pillar of the Stratosphere. "It really does look like Seattle's space needle", he thought. He recognized the monstrous white Caesar's palace and the ones directly north had to be the Treasure Island and the Mirage. After that most of the buildings all seemed to blend together.

With a firm jolt the plane hit the runway and as it did a real sense of foreboding came over the young preacher. For a moment he honestly

wanted to cry. At that point he felt like Jonah just on the edge of Nineveh. Las Vegas was the last place he wanted to be.

From the moment that the young man had sense his destiny in ministry he'd also had an image of his dream for his life and career. He knew that the Lord would call him to minister to a small company of saints somewhere in the northwest, perhaps a town like White Salmon or Longview, or maybe even some place as big as Yakima. He felt his gift was in edifying the church and he would commit himself to a small congregation somewhere in a place where he could raise a family near the trees and build up a company of saints for the Kingdom.

Never once in his worst nightmare had he dreamed that he would be called to be an associate of a multi-staff ministry in a huge city in the middle of a desert. That evening, as the blazing sun set on the barren mountains to the west, Richard O'Neil desperately wanted to go home but he knew that God would somehow have him in Las Vegas. Southwest's 737 felt an awful lot like the inside of a whale to this reluctant prophet.

He was shaken by his contemplation by the sudden commotion as the "fasten seat belt" sign went dark with a "Ding!" and the announcement that the passengers were free to disembark with the warning of baggage "that may have shifted during the flight." It was time to face his Nineveh.

Before he got halfway up the jetway the blast of Nevada's August took his breath away. The air was dusty and dry and chokingly hot. He could hear the ringing of bells from the slot machines in the terminal as he approached the open door to the terminal. If he had not been in the herd tumbling off of the plane he would have stopped to observe the scene but the flow of those exiting pushed him on in a stream headed toward the lights and the aisles and strangers all around.

Suddenly he noticed a sign, "Richard O'Neil" and he turned to meet the man holding the placard. "Hello, I'm Richard," he said and the

friendly gentleman stuck out his hand and warmly said, "Welcome, son, I'm Pastor Dave."

So, this was David Greer. This was the man who had not only given his life to build up a ministry in this pit of sin but had also short-circuited his plans by contacting the seminary officials and asked for a young graduate who "was really ready to serve the Lord in a place that will take your breath away".

"I'm so glad you're here," Pastor Dave said sincerely. "Is this your first time to Las Vegas?"

"Actually, this is my first time out of the Northwest," Richard responded weakly.

"Well," Dave smiled, "then I guess the Lord's really going to open your eyes, isn't he?"

Richard tried to laugh but inside he wanted to run. He liked Dave but his sense of Las Vegas overwhelmed him and he would have given anything for some angel's voice to say, "Hey, it was all a test. God didn't really want you in Las Vegas, He just wanted you to be willing to go there if that's what He asked."

But no angel spoke and he turned with Pastor Dave to head toward the parking structure. "Is everything here tied to the casinos?", Richard asked as he saw the levels of the garage had names like "Stardust" and "Circus Circus" and "MGM Grand."

"Well, son, it's really prevalent. They say it's a city that never sleeps and I guess that's pretty fitting because the Bible shares that there's no rest for the wicked," Pastor Dave responded.

"Let me ask you, son, have you ever been in a casino?"

"No sir, I haven't."

"Well, if you're going to tackle a place like Corinth I think you need to have a sense of what it's all about."

"Corinth? That's interesting. I've been feeling for days like this was my Nineveh."

Pastor Dave laughed, "I can certainly understand that son. And if you really can't work in this city than I would be the last to wish you to come here. But my friends at the seminary are sure that you have unique gifts that will be a blessing to my church and to this community. I tell you what, don't lock yourself into saying no quite yet. You give it a couple of days and then we'll see if you sense that this really is where God has destined Richard O'Neil to be, o.k.?"

"Yes, Sir. I'll try."

"All right," Pastor Dave said as he put a warm hand on Richard's shoulder, "that's the spirit. Now, let's go see this town a little bit."

They drove up north past the airport and left on Tropicana right past the Thomas and Mack Center at UNLV. Richard couldn't believe it, the road was eight lanes wide and filled with cars and taxis. It was nearly 9:30 p.m. and the sidewalks were jammed with people walking under billions of watts of lights as far as the eye could see.

Immediately Richard recognized three things... 1) This obviously was a town for couples, 2) Most of the women were not wearing a lot of clothes, and 3) This truly was not Snohomish or Whitefish Bay or Eagle Creek.

As they sat at the light on the corner of Tropicana and Las Vegas Boulevard Pastor Dave prepared to turn left. Richard could see the MGM lion and New York New York's false skyline and roller coaster on the right. He saw the magical kingdom facade of Excalibur blocking the view of the million-watt lamp shining from the peak of Luxor's pyramid. When the light turned Pastor Dave headed south and then immediately turned off into one of the parking garages for Excalibur. "C'mon, son," he said, "let's give you a taste of what Christ competes with here in this city."

They entered the back of Excalibur by a bridge walkway and stepped on to the tapestried carpet above the casino floor. Richard had never seen such gaudy imitation opulence. It was evident that millions of dollars had been spent on image but he wondered what was under the facade. People were milling everywhere but very few seemed to be smiling. Everyone was intent on something in the lights and noise and crowd, but Richard had an overwhelming sense of emptiness.

Often, as they walked along, he became incredibly aware of a woman walking by in a very suggestive outfit. It was more than just the uniformed cocktail waitresses, for there were many who were dressed provocatively. He was frustrated that he noticed and he hoped like everything that Pastor Dave didn't notice that he noticed. The whole atmosphere just set him on edge.

"Son, don't look at your watch and tell me what time it is," Pastor Dave said.

Richard tried to comply. He looked everywhere he could around the huge room for a clock and couldn't find a thing that would give him any sense of time.

Pastor Dave noticed his dilemma and said, "They intend it that way, son. They want people to get lost in this place. They want time to pass without any warning. You can't even see if it's night or day in here."

"How depressing," Richard responded. "But, I guess it makes sense if you are on the receiving end of all the gambling going on."

"You've got that right. These buildings aren't operated as charities! Let's go outside and walk the strip a bit."

The two of them headed out another exit and when the doors opened Richard noticed it was easier to get into the facilities than it was to get out. When he remarked about it Pastor Dave responded, 'That's also part of the plan. Why, when you go to some of these casinos they will have long moving walkways to assist you in entering but as you leave you have to walk on your own power for hundreds of yards. It, obviously, makes staying all the more attractive."

The massive sliding doors opened and Richard was again hit with the blast of dust and heat of the nighttime air. "Do you ever get used to the heat," he asked?

"Oh sure. It takes a little while, but you do become accustomed to that."

They walked on down the sidewalk, often being jostled by couples and tourist groups from around the world. A series of people, men and women alike, began holding out brochures and handouts to them as they passed. Richard innocently took a piece thinking it would be coupons for restaurants or notices of sales in stores. In a split second he realized this was not literature that they gave to the children at church.

He was so embarrassed he didn't know what to say. Pastor Dave immediately set him at ease, "Don't worry son. I won't hold it against you but I'd advise you to not accept any more gifts on the street. Hedonism is alive and well here, I'm afraid.."

"I just don't know if I can do this, Dave. This is all pretty overwhelming to me."

"I understand, son. Just you give the Lord a couple of days to convince you one way or the other, o.k.?"

The slick brochure went into the first trash can available. (At least it went on top of the pile of cups and pictures and newspapers tumbling out of the receptacle.)

Within twenty minutes the men agreed that they'd had enough and they returned to the car. Richard sat silently as the pastor pointed out landmarks and gave facts about the explosive growth of the town. It all seemed too much to him as they pulled into the pastor's driveway on the west side of town.

"You come on in now, son, and put your things in this room. Are you hungry?" Richard assured him that he wasn't and after an appropriate amount of time getting acquainted with Mrs. Greer he excused himself to go to bed. In the darkness of the room Richard O'Neil tried to pray but he was crying too hard to be very eloquent. .

That night, God understood.

After three days they were back at McCarren Airport. The last words Pastor Dave had for the young man were, "Now son, the people here would love to have you join them in this task, but you go home and pray. You alone can sense if God wants you here," and somewhere over southern Oregon Richard knew. He just couldn't shake the reality as much as he absolutely wanted to- God had ordained that Richard O'Neil was going to attack a Nineveh called Las Vegas.

He immediately packed his few belongings in the little Nissan station wagon and started the long, lonely journey south. Nearly every facet of

his being wanted to turn that little old car around toward Washington and her trees but there was no flaming angel in the path so he made the 1,100 mile journey toward the desert.

When Richard came to Las Vegas it took longer to find an apartment than he would have assumed. The explosive growth of the town made everything cost more than he'd expected and apartment availabilities were at a premium.

Eventually he did find a small place that wasn't too bad considering it was a bit closer to the strip than he might have wished, but it seemed a bit inconsequential as he felt he wouldn't be spending that much time around the apartment. He was single, he had a ministry and a church that he could sink his teeth into and so he knew that he would occupy most of his waking hours in his calling. The lack of special amenities at his apartment complex was not going to be much of a concern at all.

Over the first weeks he gradually got to know the town and the roads and his church members. He also learned that he could breathe in the town's atmosphere without a constant sorrow and continually reminded himself that this was, exactly, the place where God wanted him to be.

Richard also found out that there was a little touch of home to cure his loneliness every other week or so. He discovered that the Las Vegas Thunder of the International Hockey League played their home games at UNLV's Thomas and Mack Center. There was some talk of someday bringing an NHL team to Las Vegas but until then it was a pretty inexpensive way to have a touch of home for a few hours. He soon realized that Las Vegas wasn't home, but it was the right place for him.

Then came the fateful day. Busy-ness in ministry had taken its toll and Richard had allowed his dirty laundry build up until it was almost intolerable. He carried his massive load to the room in the apartment

complex where the machines waited to eat his quarters just as if they belonged In Las Vegas. After a few minutes of listening to the low hum of the machines and just as he was getting into the book that he had brought to pass the time the door opened. A bouncy young woman entered the room with a basket of her own.

Richard noticed right away that she was either underdressed or overdressed, depending on your viewpoint. He tried to give a pleasant, acknowledging, disinterested smile and intended to bury his nose back into his book but the young lady was not going to let that happen.

She immediately began to strike up a conversation and was not going to let it die. "Hi, you must be new here! I've not been here very long myself. My name is Sam... actually, it's really Samantha, but everybody calls me Sam! What's your name?"

"I'm Richard, I'm pleased...."

"Oh, hi! Richard. Is it always Richard? Does anybody ever call you Rich or Richie? My uncle's name was Richard and he was a really nice man, although I never really got to know him that well 'cause they lived in Ohio and I grew up in Omaha. Have you ever been to Omaha? It's kind of hard to find a job there and that's why I came to Las Vegas. This really is a place where anybody can work..."

She continued to talk and in spite of the fact that she didn't often want to seem to come up for air he found her intriguing and funny and sort of simple and refreshing. She even helped him fold his clothes when the dryer stopped and eventually said, "I'm in apartment #17 if you ever want to stop by."

"Thanks, Sam. It's been nice meeting you," he said as he turned to carry his load back to his lonely room.

After that meeting he began to notice that he'd randomly see her around the apartment complex. He did sense that she kept strange hours but then who was he to question anyone? After all, he gave so much time to the church and its ministry that he often came in late and left early too.

One particularly pleasant afternoon he decided that he was going to cool off in the community pool by the laundry room. As he opened the gate he saw Sam on the lounge chair. He immediately knew this was going to be difficult for he knew she'd want to talk but he also knew that what she was wearing was going to make it difficult for him to keep a pleasant conversation going for long. As soon as she saw him she called out and Richard knew he was going to determine to keep his eyes on her eyes.

They talked and laughed and eventually she said, "You know, you've never come up to my place for that drink!"

"I'm sorry to disappoint you, Sam, but I don't drink."

"You know what, you're really different. I don't know that I've ever met a guy that doesn't drink and isn't dying to get into my apartment. You know what, Richard O'Neil, I find you refreshing!"

He blushed a bit and responded, "Why thank you Samantha Ballinger. I sort of find you intriguing too! "

Richard couldn't believe that he'd said it, but he didn't really regret it. (And he could tell that she wasn't offended at all so maybe it was o.k.)

Samantha eventually asked, "Hey Richard, I've never asked you what do you do for a living?"

"Well, you're not going to believe this but I'm an associate pastor at the West Sahara Community Fellowship church."

"You're a preacher? I'll be! Who would have thought that Sam Ballinger would have a preacher for a friend?" she laughed. "I'm not much of a church-goer but I wonder if you'd mind if I tag along some time to see you in action?"

"No," he responded, "I'd love that. There's a really great group of people there and I think you'd really enjoy yourself."

"I hardly ever get up that early but how about this weekend?" She'd caught him by surprise.

"Sure, why not?" Richard felt a mix of emotions as he responded. Wasn't he supposed to be sharing and witnessing? Shouldn't he be opening the doors of the church this way? What would the people of the church think? Shouldn't they be excited that a guest has come to check them out?

They set the time and though Richard actually didn't expect Sam to keep the appointment. But sure enough, just as he was putting his things in the little Nissan he looked up and she came out of apartment #17, dressed up but not in the manner that most of the women of West Sahara Fellowship would be that morning.

His dilemma suddenly caught him full force but there was no way her was going to reject her now or discourage her. His only hope was that Pastor Dave had been preaching on one theme for four months- "This shall be called a house of prayer for all people". That morning Richard O'Neil prayed that the congregation had heard that message and adopted it, otherwise he was headed for certain trouble.

But, bless their sweet bones, the congregation *had* heard and they welcomed Sam and embraced her from the first day.

Sam actually became assimilated into the church family more quickly than he might have imagined because part of the fulfillment of Pastor Dave's vision included using the church facility as a ministry center for the community. Throughout the week various 12 step groups met all over the building.

Everyday people were finding out how to live deliverance in AA, OA, NA, SA, CA, SLAA, CODA, and several other support groups. Sam was at the building attending meetings often but Richard never asked her which ones she went to. He just knew asking wasn't appropriate.

I suppose that it's not surprising that after months of cell groups, home Bible fellowships, active attendance, and dedicated work toward living clean and sober that Sam happily announced to the church family that she had gotten a new job and she was now working as a waitress at Sizzler. "It's not nearly as much money as I was making before but I feel a lot better about myself," she said. "I really want to do well." No one had ever asked her what her occupation was before but it was evident that this was a step up.

Richard couldn't help himself. He found that as she grew she was also meaning more and more to him personally. I know you'll find it hard to believe, but after a year-and-a-half Pastor Dave pronounced Samantha Ballinger to be Mrs. Richard O'Neil.

The young couple soon found a nicer, larger apartment. Sam seemed so very happy and her joy just grew for it was not long afterward that the couple announced to the church that there was a little bundle of O'Neil on the way. When Jonathan was born it seemed that Sam had found the greatest joy of her life. They both rejoiced in all that God had given them.

Until the night of the February board of deacons meeting. Richard came home discouraged. He'd come up with a plan for youth ministry

that he'd dreamed of since his days in the seminary. He'd covered every base. He just needed a few people to catch his vision but it was not to be that night. Instead of embracing his plan a few of the old guard of the church shot it down and actually were a bit rude in doing it.

He should have known better. Richard should have remembered that Sam was still a baby Christian and she wasn't completely ready for the realities of living in a house with stained glass windows. He did the natural thing, he dumped his frustrations out for his wife and, sadly, she was never the same. It all fell apart so quickly. The very next night Richard was with Jonathan when Sam didn't come home from morning she came stumbling in, obviously strung out.

Richard couldn't believe it. The room got tense and there was a confrontation. Sam slammed the door to the bedroom and the baby woke up. Later that day neither of them said anything about the event but by the weekend Sam finally spoke, "I don't really feel like going to church today. Why don't you take the baby and go without me?"

"And what am I supposed to say if someone asks me where you are?"

"I'm sorry, but right now I don't care what you say to them. The truth is that I don't care about them at all right now, o.k.?"

That was the last time she even considered going to church and the growing distance that her change represented immediately took its toll on the family. Sam became increasingly irresponsible and life deteriorate quickly. There was no discussing her downward spiral until one day she finally shouted at Richard, "If it weren't for the baby I'd leave you!"

The inevitable day came that the baby couldn't stop her either. One day Sam was gone, just gone.

There was no word from her for months, that is, not until the knock on the door when the courier delivered divorce papers. Richard went to the law office and saw his wife sitting across the table. She looked like the world had chewed her up and spit her out but she never said a word as the lawyer did all the talking. Richard barely heard the words, "My client surrenders full custody of the child, Jonathan, to the father..."

That was the only moment when he thought he saw a flicker of pain and regret in her cold eyes.

A year later there was a knock at the door. Richard opened it to find Sam standing there, scars and track marks incredibly evident. Oh, there was one other thing that couldn't be ignored, she was exceedingly pregnant. "I need you, Richard, you're the best birth coach in the world..."

A baby girl was born. Sam was determined to call her Satin. "I always thought a little girl should have a delicate, pretty name like Satin", she said.

Richard pulled out the old baby items that Jonathan had outgrown and set up a nursery in the room that had become his office. When he went to get Sam and Satin to bring them home the nurses looked bewildered. "We're sorry, we don't know where your wife has gone but she left you this note..."

The young man fumbled with the paper and saw her handwriting.
"Richard, I'm sorry. I can't do it. Please take care of her. I know you will."

If it weren't for the ladies of the church he never could have made it with a tiny girl and a toddler of a boy. He thanked God for the caring Christians of the West Sahara Fellowship. The sweet saints were so accommodating and wonderful that Pastor Dave sometimes remarked

that this may all have happened just as a test for his church family. He called Satin and Jon the church's "angels unawares".

If God ordained that this test should come to this congregation then He really knows how to do it for less than a year later Sam was back, this time bearing a boy that she desperately wanted to name "Lance". But, haggard as she was, only skin and bones and a protruding stomach, she again left as soon as the child was born and rarely re-entered their lives again.

Richard tried to build a life. His folks visited whenever they could and they helped him take the necessary steps to purchase a small home of their own out on the west edge of town in a new development. "This apartment living just isn't fit for these sweet grandkids of mine," his mother would say. "We've got to get you a place of your own, now don't we?" And so they did. It was hard but it was worth it all to that little family.

Richard also took the three children to see his parents homestead in British Columbia every chance they got. The kids loved the trees and the clean air and the old people they called "Gramps" and "Gram". They loved getting the little presents from their grandparents at birthdays and Christmas and on the second Tuesday of the month... whatever occasion seemed to call for an expression of love.

Once in a while Sam would call, just often enough to keep the wound open. She'd make contact somewhere near a birthday or a package would arrive a few days after Christmas. On the phone she'd try to carry on a conversation with the children but would not talk to Richard at all. The stricken husband would struggle to smile at the children on the phone and say, "Tell your mother I love her..." and they'd repeat the message but it almost always brought the conversation with the children to an abrupt end.

Eventually Richard adopted Satin and Lance. He wanted to give them a new beginning so he renamed them. Lance became "Christian" and he named Satin after his mother, "Margaret". By the time the children were facing the teenage years they had not heard from their mother for a long, long time.

One day pretty little Margaret answered the phone and called out, "Daddy, it's for you!"

The voice on the other end said, "Mr. O'Neil, this is Marie Haywood, I'm a volunteer for chaplain's office here at the University Medical Center. We need to inform you that your wife was admitted here several days ago and she's not doing well at all. You may wish to come, and soon... "

Richard took the kids over to spend a few hours splashing in the Greer's pool and asked Mrs. Greer if she'd mind feeding them. "Oh Richard, I'd love to. Maybe we'll all go out for pizza... now you just go and don't give a second thought to the kids, o.k.?"

As he left the home Pastor Dave embraced him and said, "Son, you call me if you need anything at all. Gina and I will be praying for you."

Richard first stopped at the admissions area and talked to Gloria Maloney, one of the faithful members of West Sahara Fellowship. Gloria told him that she'd just found out that Sam was in and had taken the liberty to check into the situation. It appears that there was a bill of over \$37,000 that had built up for her care.

For a moment he wavered and then turned to head toward the business office where he assured the administrator that as soon as possible he would take out a second on his home and would pay the bill in full.

The young pastor then took the elevator up to the third floor and walked down the immaculately shined linoleum to room #347. The door was

shut and a sign hung on the frame that read, "Blood and body fluid precautions". He slowly pushed the door open and saw a shell of a woman whose gaunt arms protruded out from under the blankets. If it weren't for weren't for that wonderful raven hair he wouldn't have recognized her at all.

For a moment she was oblivious to his presence. She stared vacantly at the ceiling and then slowly looked over at him.

Richard bit his lip, smiled, and then sat down on the edge of the bed. He bent down and took her frail body in his arms and whispered, "C'mon babe, let's go home."

So I bought her to me for fifteen pieces of silver, and
for a homer of barley, and a half homer of
barley:

And I said unto her,

"Thou shalt abide for me many days; thou shalt not play the
harlot,

and thou shalt not be for another man: so will I also be
for thee.

-Hosea 3:2.3