

Abstinence makes the heart grow fonder

PAUL WILLIAMS

Picture a sixteen year old boy, very ugly, crew cut, rotten teeth (calcium deficiencies), overbite, gawky, zit faced, sitting in an upright hard wooden pew in church in suit and tie.

Me.

Picture a church built on swampland, in between brown rushes and yellow festering water that breeds billions of mosquitoes, harbouring a thousand croaking frogs.

Green River Baptist Church.

And now picture the congregation: men in dark suits and ties with wide lapels, women in long crinkly large dresses with high collars and puffy sleeves, and skirts down to the ground so their ankles are hidden.

Them.

Picture a community where no one has sex, mentions sex, and every new born is a virgin birth. Sex is evil. Sex is the original sin that cast Adam and Eve out of paradise.

Now picture the Pastor of this church, a young preacher straight out of Riverside Bible School, with intense eyes, blonde hair, goofy teeth, and an iron grip on his congregation.

Pastor Steve.

Finally picture his Sunday sermons at around eleven am on a hot Sunday, with flies buzzing around, us with rumbling stomachs (we've been in church and Sunday School and choir practice since 8am).

He was the only one allowed to talk about sex, but only in euphemism, always in the negative. Flee fornication! Resist the devil! Trim your virgin lamps in preparation for the arrival of your bridegroom Christ.

Procreation occurs only within the sanctity of marriage. Dating is frowned upon, dancing is forbidden and rock music a damnable sin. Boys and girls do not mingle at social events, and married couples do not display any affection for each other in public. There must be a Bible between you if you want to sit next to a person of the opposite sex in our church.

Seriously.

It was easy for me to be a virgin at that church: not only was I separated from the opposite sex and given no means, opportunity, or motive, I was, as previously mentioned, also very, very ugly. I hated the moustache beginning to grow, the hair on my legs, the breaking voice, the way puberty had stretched me into a gangly alien being who did not recognise himself in the mirror. And worst of all, my genitals had mutated slowly into monstrous alien beings with a life of their own, insisting on shaming me and diverting my attention from the straight and narrow at every social event. Hormones and pheromones and testosterone pumped through me, torturing me, possessing me, compelling me to stare down girl's tops, up their skirts, to rehearse vile imaginary acts my Id wanted to perform with them.

However when it came to actual sex, I was safe from Satan's clutches. I was the last person who ever would get laid, the least attractive to the opposite sex in that church. I would, it seemed, remain pure with lamps trimmed until the second coming of Jesus my Saviour.

But then there was Terri.

Terri was fourteen. For some reason unbeknown to me, she sat next to me in church every Sunday. A large Schofield King James hard cover, red letter, gold edged Bible sat between us of course, but she always wore these huge long skirts with great big folds in them, like a king size doona, and we managed to touch each other without anyone noticing. At first it was just an accident, my hand pressing against hers on the bench, my foot against her shin under the skirt. And then, slowly, over weeks, it was fingers and wrists. And then it became a habit: every Sunday we squeezed hands, palpitated fingers, felt the texture of sweaty palms throughout the whole service.

Every service.

I never got above the elbows, and she never did more than squeeze my fingers tight as if she were milking them.

So far so good. Nothing wrong with a little hanky-panky. But things got worse. The pastor warned us about slippery slopes, about the little lie that becomes the big

lie, about small habits that become lifestyles, about roads that are easy to run down that become, well, slippery slopes that shoot you straight down to hell.

So by the fifth service of Lent, my fingers were spidering over her thighs, and by Easter, her hand had guided me all over her legs, her armpits, the outside of her bra, her belly button, the long fence of her panty elastic, and finally, at the Eucharist, into a marshland where birds exploded out of the reeds as I walked past, the water oily and still and yellow and stinking like the primeval soup that spawned the first life on earth, where I waded in the water barefoot, squeezed through the brown reeds and plants that looked as if they would eat me, my feet getting stuck in the mud, and the terrifying pressure as I tried to pull them out. Water creatures swam towards me. Water spiders skated on the surface of the viscous water. Bubbles erupted from the bottom, and my stomach was in a queasy knot of repulsive disgust and excitement at the adventure of it all. I felt the shame of returning home all muddy and stinking to mother.

Her face when I dared look was bright purple. Her breath caught.

'You all right, dear,' whispered her mother, turning her head from the pew ahead. 'Do you need your asthma spray?'

Terri shook her head. 'I'm fine, Mum.'

The Pastor frowned. He was always watching. Like God. He knew the number of hairs on our head. He was Omnipresent, Omniscient and Omnipotent. Wore huge yellow rimmed glasses when he read from the huge Bible on the huge pulpit. And peered over them at anyone fidgeting or coughing or not paying attention.

But in a private universe flocks of birds beat hot wings at me, dive bombed me from dizzying heights, cawed loudly in my ears. The ground beneath my feet crumbled away and I found myself in quicksand that sucked and sucked and squeezed me down into a dark abyss.

This could not go on.

But next Sunday, it did go on. This time I had entered another dimension, a shimmering world of high crystal clear lakes and tall mountains, snow-capped, with clear blue skies. The blue lakes were transparent and through the still skin of viscous water I could see mermaids, alien creatures, bright coloured tropical fish.

Next Sunday, I who had never taken any drug or mind altering substance in my life was high, my brain blowing out into beyond language into wordless ecstasy, seeing colours that were beyond the spectrum, hearing choirs singing outside of the human auditory range, feeling my body expand and pulse as large as the universe. And the portal was a viscous stickiness between my fingers

that felt like snot but tasted like sour grapefruit.

Next Sunday, a month of Sundays later, the same. A sticky dimension of pure spirit, a transubstantiation of the flesh.

Every Sunday. Every. Every. Every.

All under the watchful eye of the Pastor, who stared omnisciently, but, I prayed fervently, saw nothing.

I tried to stop, and one Sunday gripped the hymnbook tight to my chest. But she wriggled and sighed and pushed against my thigh until I let my hand loll on the pew bench, and she groped for it and guided my fingers into her parallel universe.

Every week.

Sometimes we toured her belly button, traversing vast territories of desert, jungle, mountains, across rivers, slowly, finding the source of the Nile. All the while our faces were deadpan during the long sermon about sodomy (furthermore, since they did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God, he gave them over to a depraved mind, to do what ought not to be done), we would be under the ramparts and into lands of cloud kingdoms made of candy floss, or discovering King Solomon's Mines full of glittering treasure, or running fast down a mountain pass during a thunderstorm, while lightning crackled all around us.

I say us, but can only speak for myself. Her mouth remained prim and tight; her eyes never met mine; her posture was upright and her demeanour pious. The only give away was the facial rosacea, the sunburn spreading down her neck and on occasions the goose pimples on her arm.

And every session would end in the closing plangencies of the sermon, after which the congregation would leap to its feet, grab its hymnbooks and sing gustily.

Every Sunday night I would rebuke myself for these carnal ventures into sin, and vow never to give in to lust again, but the following week, Terri and I made our ways into caves, through waterfalls, across purple fields of little flowers into new worlds where three suns rose, and seven moons orbited, citizens wore bright and shiny auras around their middles.

It had to stop.

We climbed hot dunes, above a crashing glitter blue sea; we dived the Great Barrier Reef and marvelled at a million species of coral; we danced on a wild tropical Hawaiian beach in hula skirts, drinking Kava from half coconut shells; we orbited the earth in silver UFOs with friendly green aliens with a thousand tube fingers like mini elephant trunks that sucked at our skin instead of speaking through their mouths.

And the sermons continued, like thunder rolling across the sky. A storm was coming, that was for sure. Fist on pulpit, eagle eyes, tremulous voice: Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God.

Birds exploded out of the reeds, cawing loudly in fright. Cicadas screeched. A billion frogs croaked, and mosquitoes zinged around my flesh, biting me where I dared not scratch.

'That tickles.' Terri wriggled in her seat. And giggled. The sermon came to a screeching halt. Terri hid her face in her hair. I frowned into my Bible.

'If people find the Word of the Lord amusing,' Pastor Steve said to the rafters above us, 'then they should crawl out of this sacred place on their bellies, like serpents.'

The silence was a high snowy mountain in a rushing wind. My fingers were frost bitten. My lips chapped with cold. The high pitched whine rose in my left ear, and my feet were icy.

His blue, blue eyes watching, watching, through his yellow rimmed spectacles. 'OK at the back there? Let's continue.'

But thank the Lord: the organ finally struck up the rousing post-sermon hymn and the congregation rose to its feet. Terri smoothed her dress. I held the hymn book open at the wrong place, the thin pages sticking to my fingers as I turned them.

After the service, Terri was hustled out by her parents, but before I could escape, Pastor Steve blocked my way. 'Jimmy, I'd like to see you at the manse this afternoon. Are you free?'

Freight trains screeched in my ears.

It was nothing. It was a routine visit, I told myself. We all took turns at visiting the Pastor for spiritual checkups. Nothing. Nothing. Nothing.

The manse was a large double storey house on the ridge behind the church.

'Come in, come in.' The Pastor's office was full of natural light, and he sat behind an oak desk, surrounded by bookshelves with bright, modern books with titles like *The Corinthian Catastrophe*, *Fox's Book of Martyrs* etc. He gave me a bone-breaking handshake and a warm smile. 'Tell me about Terri,' he said.

'Who?'

He closed his eyes and then opened them, as if he had sent a quick Instagram prayer to God and received

an answer. 'This has got to stop.'

I reddened.

'Satan,' he said, 'is a roaring lion seeking whom he may devour. And he is a good counterfeiter. He deceives young people into thinking that lust is love, that mere feelings are the real thing. And many a young person has perished in this way.'

Slid a gold edged bible onto the table towards me. 'I Corinthians chapter 6, verse 18. Read the passage I chose for you today. Aloud, please.'

I cleared my throat. 'Flee fornication.'

'Go on.'

'Every sin that a man doeth is without the body; but he that committeth fornication sinneth against his own body.'

The Pastor had x-ray vision. His eyes could also melt anything in their path. I was a puddle of red shame on the floor.

'I'm not trying to condemn you, Jimmy. My job is to protect my lost sheep from prowling wolves.'

I opened my mouth, but no words came out.

'Fornication is a sin against your own body. You understand that? Your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit.'

I pictured a temple, somewhere in India—dark, winding passages, of high spiralling towers into the tropical sky. Hundreds of birds wheeling around its turrets. Cawing loudly like crows.

'Sorry.'

He stood behind me. 'Don't apologise to me. Apologise to Him whose temple you have defiled.' He guided me with a hand to the rough floorboards in front of his desk where we kneeled, and he pressed fingers into my skull until it hurt. 'Begone Satan! Lord, give Jimmy armour to combat the weakness of the flesh, weapons to fight the son of darkness.'

'Amen.'

I blinked up at him.

'Imagine a big black marker. A huge black marker, the size of a person, dripping black ink. Paint her from head to toe with it. Blot her out. The images you have saved in your heart of her—black them out. Scribble over her. Cover her with ink.'

I imagined. The marker squeaked as I pressed hard.

'Jimmy, if your eye causes you to lust, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. Do you understand that?'

I nodded.

He stood. Mussed my hair. 'God bless you, Jimmy. Black her out of your life. Zip her in a shroud. Delete her from your hard drive. Sacrifice her to God. Then He will give you the desires of your heart.'

'Thank you Pastor Steve.'

Next Sunday I sat as far away from Terri as I could. I could not look her in the eye. Not that I had ever looked her in the eye. Not once.

She glared past me, in bewilderment, in hurt, in scorn. And as she left the service afterwards, her body brushed against me. 'Coward!'

That night I dreamed of dead bodies floating on the Ganges River, floating past temples made of mud, spattered with bird excrement. Of Easter Island statues, abandoned, toppled in the grass, while the glitter blue sea crashed on the shores of this lonely island. Forlorn birds cawed in alarm, wheeling overhead in large circles.

The following Sunday I sat as far away from Terri as I could. She was hurt, but I could not do this anymore. I scribbled her with the marker, blotted her image from my retina.

At school we learned that the Mississippi delta was an anticlimax of a river that silted up at the end, went underground, flooded all marshy and sticky with reeds growing in the estuary, with lots of creatures swimming in its yellow slime.

And so it went. I had resisted the devil and he had fed from me. I felt pretty sanctimonious, holy even, and Pastor Steve smiled at me from the pulpit.

But on the third Sunday after Lent, she passed me a note during the meet-and-greet-your-brethren part of the service.

Kitchen. After service. Parents have to talk to Pastor S. We have ten minutes max.

Ignore it. Be alert and of sober mind. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. I tore the note into shreds throughout the service, each word, until it was a million little pieces of dandruff.

But after the service, there was no escape. Terri was waiting for me. She pushed me to the back of the

church kitchen, amongst the boxes and the cupboard and closets.

'Hi, Terri.'

'Hi.'

'Sorry,' I said.

'Sure you are.'

'We're leaving the country tomorrow,' she said.

'Leaving?'

'You'll never see me again from tomorrow. Are you happy about that?' She pressed herself against me, and guided my hand under her skirt.

We fumbled in the pantry amidst stale chocolate chip cookies and cakes under doilies and large urns of water heating up for tea. We didn't take off any clothes, just...

A black night sky enveloped me and pin prick coloured stars fizzed at my brain. I smelled burnt rice and gas.

There was not much to see, and for me not much to feel except terror, pain and dizzy weightlessness that made my whole body spin into the far reaches of space. Terri winced, clawed, and breathed much too loud, as if she were suffering a stroke, but we both got through it.

'Jesus,' she said. 'Christ.'

And then we smoothed down clothes, pulled up pants, straightened hair. We didn't even talk to each other. We walked out the back door onto the lawn where trestle tables piled with cakes were waiting for us. Terri's parents whisked her away by car, and I was left with a thumping heart. I looked up and saw, through a pane of glass into the office, the eyes of Pastor Steve, watching, watching, watching.

AUTHOR

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