

SOME WICKED WAY

“Can you believe that?” Patricia whispered as she nose-pointed to the couple seated two pews in front of them. “I can’t believe she’d come to church in that skimpy outfit. God Almighty, she looks like a street-walker. And that wild red hair is the icing on that cupcake.” Purposely shaking her head, “And just look at him, wearing short sleeves, showing all those nasty tattoos. Defacing God’s temple is what that is.” She looked over at her husband. “Larry!” Swatting his belly with the morning’s program that she was strangling in her hands, “Good Lord, can you be more obvious? I said look, not stare.”

“It’s July, it’s hot, they’re comfortable.” Larry could feel her steely blue eyes boring into him. “At least they come to church, Patricia,” he offered, although he knew there was no appeasing her.

“Oh for God’s sake, Larry,” she strained to keep a hush, “no real Christian woman would come to the House of the Lord in a tight hot pink tank top. And no good man of Christ would have graffiti plastered all over his arms. I don’t even want to think about where else he’s ruined himself. Probably has those piercings. All I know is that that’s no way to present oneself for worship. Obviously, Pastor Lloyd hasn’t ministered to them about what’s appropriate.” Pointing the crushed program toward the altar, “That shouldn’t surprise me, though, for I see Pastor Lloyd isn’t wearing a tie under his robe today.....again. Baptists have gotten so lax, almost as bad as the Catholics. I just don’t—”

“We’re starting, Patricia,” he said, appreciating the reprieve of the organ music. He stepped slightly closer to her, catching a whiff of Ivory soap, and dutifully placed his hand gingerly on her upper back. He looked at her for a moment, barely recognizing this person. She used to be a

handsome woman, one that never wore makeup or fussed about her looks; instead, her attractiveness came from being outdoorsy, athletic, smiling liberally, and having a happy, infectious laugh that emanated from her core. Not so now. Now she was intensely stern, routinely angry, and looked far older than her forty-six years. But he knew that it wasn't the passage of time that had taken a toll on her. The severity that her face held was the manifestation of the severity that her mind held. He began to wonder what toll their existence together had on him, when he heard her hiss, "We're supposed to be sharing the hymnal, Larry. Now move it closer to me or do I have to hold it?" Obediently, he positioned the book between them, and they began the opening hymn, *Cleanse Me*:

Search me, O God

And know my heart today;

Try me, O Savior;

Know my thoughts, I pray.

See if there be

Some wicked way in me;

Cleanse me from every sin

And set me free.

After being bid a blessed week by the pastor, the service was over. Larry turned to exit the pew when Patricia yanked forcefully on his arm, making his big frame stumble backwards slightly. Feigning a search in her purse, she whispered, "There's William and Eric. Don't look!" slapping his arm. "Let them go by. I have no desire to engage with them. I heard that the *good* doctor is now volunteering with Planned Parenthood. I can't believe he'd be allowed in this church knowing what they do at that place. Frankly, I can't believe they're allowed in this church at all considering

their lifestyle. Once again, there's no real moral leadership here for the congregation." Larry inhaled deeply and slowly sank back down in the seat. The two men saw him, waved and smiled warmly at him. With a half-smile, Larry nodded back.

When they reached Pastor Lloyd in the receiving line, he reminded them that for lunch the church had reserved the large dining room at the newly-opened Mediterranean restaurant. Larry started an enthusiastic nod when Patricia interrupted. "Oh darn, Pastor, we've got a family obligation today. That sounds sooo good though. I'm sorry we're going to miss it, and, well, of course, miss being in community with everyone."

"Anything serious?" Pastor Lloyd asked, placing his hand on Patricia's shoulder.

Waving off his concern, and stepping out of his touch, "No, no, it's just a matter of scheduling. Wouldn't you know, today was the only day that worked for all of us."

"Ha! Don't I understand that! Well then, enjoy your family time."

Before they got to the parking lot, Larry asked, "Family obligation? What family obligation?"

"Really, Larry? Mediterranean restaurant? Do I have to spell it out for you? Do you know how many terrorists are from the Mediterranean? And don't you know that they hate Americans? And don't you know that those heathens hate Christians especially? What better way to attack a bunch of us than after church, like with a mass poisoning or something." She threw her hands up, raised her eyes to heaven, and said, "And what is wrong with Pastor Lloyd to not see that? He's supposed to protect his flock. We've got to find a church that's truer to The Word." Adding through clenched teeth, "Like the one I used to go to."

As she marched ahead of him toward the car, he studied her. She was wearing a formless, long-sleeved, calf-length brown dress and brownish pantyhose. The dress was unembellished except for a small gold button fastened high at her neck. The flat brown shoes were unembellished to match. Other than a few strands of gray in her short brown hair, he thought to himself that she looked like a walking turd—a thought that made him chuckle. Perhaps it was disrespectful, and yes, unchristian-like, to compare your spouse to a turd, but she'd treated him like a piece of shit for so long that he felt entitled to a snicker at her expense.

He longed for the woman he'd married ten years prior. Pat was a happy woman back then, who had a job she loved as a mail carrier, who had tons of friends, who played team sports—women's softball and volleyball in summer, and women's hockey and a bowling league in the winter—and who was a dyed-in-the-wool liberal, fervently believing in *live and let live*. Moreover, she liked him then—maybe not love, but liked him. They had a great friendship and that was good enough for him. He was grateful to simply have her companionship. After all, he was aware that he wasn't considered a good-looking man, particularly with the honker he'd inherited from his father, and it didn't help that he was an introvert—hell, he was a cubicle accountant whose favorite pastimes were Sudoku and fly-fishing—so he felt damned lucky just to have a woman give him a second look, especially someone like Pat. The added bonus was that, although she didn't like her, saying only that she thought Pat was too strong for him, his mother stopped asking him if he was gay.

Their lives—his, hers, and theirs—changed when her mail route was extended to include that church. From the very first day she delivered to them, a church member would be waiting for her to give her “the great news” that would “deliver” her from her sins—and members rotated daily to share their personal stories of salvation with her. Every day she heard a new testimonial of being cleansed of the evil that caused disobedience to God and The Church. Several of those people told

her that they'd been cured of *the gayness*. At first, she laughed it off—they both did. Each evening she'd come home recounting the “ministering du jour,” which they found bizarrely entertaining, although the extremism was disturbing. Pat particularly had a hard time understanding how people could mislay their sense and sensibilities or how anyone could lose themselves to some repressive dogma. Larry would offer, “Think Jonestown, Waco, the Third Reich, The Donald.” Still, in a matter of weeks, Pat's sense and sensibilities were lost. He could vividly recall the evening that marked the end of the life they knew—marked the end of the Pat he loved. It was a bright and crisp Tuesday in October. That evening, Pat walked in the door, headed straight to their bathroom and immediately jumped in the shower. A really long shower. Afterward, wrapped in her flannel bathroom, and without looking at him, she sat down for dinner. When he asked if she was alright, he got a snort of *fine*. Attempting to lighten her mood, he asked, “So, Pat, what was the day's sermon at the mailbox?” She raised her head, locked blazing eyes on him, and sneered, “My name is Patricia.”

Within a couple of weeks, she had quit her job because the church believed that a woman's place was in the home—when she wasn't in church. The woman who formerly believed that an immaculate house was by no means a comfortable home, became a clean freak. Every inch of the house was ritually scoured. From the limited amount of skin she allowed exposure, it appeared that she scrubbed her body raw, as well. Ceremoniously, she purged her clothes closet of all her signature attire: jeans and t-shirts. Toneless, frumpy blouses, skirts, and dresses were their replacements. She continued her crusade by expelling all her sports gear from the garage. With each irrational action, the death knell for Pat got louder and louder. When just about every trace of Pat was expunged, she abruptly disowned all her friends, citing reasons that didn't seem to exist. Ultimately, she disowned something significant within herself. Larry begged to understand, but he

couldn't make sense out of the only words Patricia would offer, "You don't get it. You're of the flesh and of the evil in this world. You need to beg for forgiveness and turn your life over to Christ." He begged to differ.

Two months too long-suffering, Larry took a job in another city. Facing powerful opposition from Patricia and church leaders, he played his ace: head of household, master of their domain, a.k.a., The Man. He hoped that by getting her away from the church, the woman he once knew would resurrect, but even after creating distance, he couldn't get the church out of her. He then had to accept that Pat was gone. Rarely, though, did he allow himself to retrieve those shelved memories. Now, closing his eyes momentarily, he took in a deep breath and walked to the car.

"You were just standing there, Larry. What was that all about?"

"I was calling on Jesus."

She took a slow, deliberate step closer to him. "It would do you good if you really were calling on Him. Now what were you thinking about, Larry?"

He knew that he'd need to call on Jesus if he dared tell her his thoughts. He also doubted that it would do any good. A call asking for help with Patricia? Hell, Jesus would just let it go to voicemail. Besides, he was hungry and just wanted lunch. He opened the car door for her and said, "I was thinking we should get some fried chicken and apple pie at Earl's."

The morning was like any other morning: Larry sitting at the kitchen table with his coffee, reading first *The New York Times*, followed by the local newspaper, while Patricia watched *Fox and Friends*, flashing between *praise the Lord* and spewing condemnation at the sinners of the world—and the low-life parents of those sinners. Still in her navy-blue cotton pajamas and matching oversized floor length robe, she came into the kitchen and refilled her decaf. Most mornings she didn't

acknowledge him. She said that it was best if she maintained her distance while he ran “afoul of The Lord” by reading that “immoral printed rag out of New York.” Glancing his way, she froze as she caught sight of the headline on the *Sweet Springs Daily*:

WOMEN ARRESTED FOR MASSAGE PARLOR PROSTITUTION

Slowly raising her free hand, she pointed to the newspaper. She tried to speak, but speech was impossible. Forcing an inhale, she managed on the exhale, “What’s....what’s....that all about?”

He snickered as he folded the paper back and flicked the front page with his finger. “Who would think, right here in Sweet Springs, and right on Main Street no less. Said they were running a prostitution ring for over a year.”

“Do they.....does the paper say anything else about it? Like.....like who the clientele was... or....who....” She searched Larry’s face.

“Nope.” He looked at the time on his phone, gulped the last of his coffee, and stood up. Without looking at her, “But I bet the place was frequented by a bunch of hypocritical bible-thumpers,” he chuckled again. “Gotta go, see you tonight,” he turned toward the door, waving his hand above his head. Goodbye kisses—any kisses for that matter—had stopped a long time ago.

Patricia’s eyes followed him until the door closed, and then looked to the window, watching his car drive away. Her heart was pounding. She wondered what he wasn’t telling her. When she became aware of her damp socks, she realized she was standing in the shattered remains of her morning coffee. She knew she couldn’t do this anymore.

That evening, Larry was halted at the door by a feeling of dread. His senses were confounded by an atypical scene. Looking down, he saw the stained tile and scattered fragments of Patricia’s

coffee cup, and the newspapers and his mug were exactly where he'd left them. He heard an eerie silence instead of the usual Christian music playing. And he was enveloped by a sickening pungent smell. Hesitantly, he willed his legs to carry him forward.

The brown corduroy recliner faced the living room doorway, and there she was, still in her pajamas and bathrobe. She was staring at him, or past him, he wasn't quite sure. His mind couldn't register what it was seeing. Clumsily, he moved toward her. Behind her, what had been a bare linen white wall, was now freckled burgundy, mixed with clinging chunks of chair stuffing and corduroy fibers. His gaze inched down to the trickle of dried blood that her chin held, then to the scrapbook cradled in her lap, which was opened to the photographs of her old sports teams. Finally, his eyes landed on the gun resting at her feet. Larry sank hard to his knees, trying to take it in. At some point, he became aware that his head was shaking violently back and forth, his body was trembling, and he heard his own wailing. He became cognizant of the smell of vomit which was oozing down the front of his shirt.

The service was held in the rose garden of Sweet Springs Baptist Church, where Pastor Lloyd offered a heartfelt and generous sermon. In it, he said, "We may never know why someone would do something that we believe is unthinkable, but who are we to judge?"

As he walked out of the church, Larry turned toward the tap on his shoulder and was quickly taken into a tight hug by a young woman in a tailored beige sheath dress, her red hair neatly pulled back with a silk scarf. With tears running down her cheeks, she said, "I'm so sorry about your wife. We feel so bad, we kept meaning to introduce ourselves, but it never happened. I'm so sorry." Her husband stepped forward and extended his hand, exposing body art as his suit sleeve raised. "My sincere condolences, sir. If you ever need anything, and I mean anything, like yard work, errands, anything whatsoever, please don't hesitate to call us. This is Jenny and I'm Chris." With a sad

smile, he handed Larry their business cards. Managing only a nod, Larry mouthed, “Thank you.” As they walked off, he looked at the cards. Dr. Christopher Ronzell and Dr. Jennifer Spring were oncology pediatricians.

In the parking lot, talk between a small group turned to local events. “Hey, Shawn, what more do you know about the massage parlor case?” Shawn was a deputy with the sheriff’s department in Sweet Springs and was directly involved in the raid. “I can’t say much, but I’ll tell you, it’s sure one for the books. Those masseuses didn’t just cater to men.” He looked around to make sure no one else was in earshot—especially Larry—and said, “They had a long list of women clients who also got,” he held his hands up making air quotes, “*happy endings*.”