

The Truth

Kimberly Kells accepted the Lord Jesus Christ as her personal savior at the age of eleven, the Sunday after what she thought of as her drunken revel, when she drank two beers at her friend Trudy's house during a sleepover. Trudy got into her father's whiskey, however, adding water up to the point of sin before sin's consequences took hold, and she vomited over her grandmother's quilt. Trudy promptly passed out, leaving Kim to scrub the quilt, and meditate upon the awfulness of demon rum.

Kim had done wrong, but made it right again at evening service, crying out to all the congregation how she was a black-hearted sinner in general, while silently laying out her specific sins. These consisted not only of drinking, but ridiculing chubby Erica Sizemore's attempts at running during gym class, and stealing a bottle of nail polish from fellow sinner Trudy. Jesus forgave her. His love washed over Kim, and she resolved to serve Him, and try to be worthy, until that day when every Christian was called home.

And yet, how did one live? Of course, you studied the Scriptures, and listened to pastors and teachers, but Kim needed a guiding principle. In ninth grade she found one, in the words of Jesus in John 8:32: "Ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free." At first Kim thought this meant she should blurt out that her father had atrocious table manners, chewing with his mouth open, spilling soup on his shirt, and that she'd seen Judy Bender, the algebra teacher, kissing pot-bellied Coach Hazeltine. She soon discovered that pointing out such truths made people angry with her, causing them to point out *her* faults, such as that she was rude, and vengeful, and much, much too young to understand.

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Kim needed a corollary to the truth, and had only to turn to Jesus: “Judge not, that ye be not judged.”

The truth that set you free was a personal truth. You were honest with yourself, and tried not to swallow lies. If you sinned and were too stubborn to own up to it, guilt ate at you, and you became a slave to your iniquity.

Once she ceased to judge, Kim acquired the reputation of a genuine, “nice” girl. Other girls brought her their troubles, and Kim offered advice—and Bible verses, upon request. More often, she simply listened, and appeared wise for not talking. In any case, Kim’s devotion to the truth, and refusal to judge, worked well as guiding principles until she reached college, and met Blake Lee.

Blake played second base on a scholarship, and told Kim right away that he was “all field, no hit.” He was an acrobat across the infield, but couldn’t hit breaking balls. He managed an even .270 for their Christian college team, mastering bunts, and almost delicately dropping in singles off the league’s fastballs. He could never turn pro, but he enjoyed athletics, and didn’t want to become a CPA, aligning himself, like his father, with the boring old Chamber of Commerce. He wanted “to work with young people,” which meant coaching, and teaching American history if he were doomed to a high school job.

Certainly, Blake was a Christian. He could not have qualified as Kim’s boyfriend otherwise. And her parents approved of him, though once she overheard her father say to her mother, “Too good to be true.”

Blake’s parents approved of Kim as well, Blake’s dad even making a pass one loose and lively Saturday night in the country, an episode never repeated, and best forgotten.

Kim didn’t believe in sex before marriage, and neither did Blake, but of course they were young and full of hormones. After many fumbling, futile episodes, during which Kim’s tugging those

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shortstop hands away from her breasts became a kind of caress, Blake suddenly pulled down his sweat pants. Kim couldn't help but look, because she'd never seen a man's genitals, but then turned her head. She wasn't sure if she felt excited, or nauseated.

"Put your hand on it."

She had never truly encountered evil, but now maybe she had. "Blake, this isn't you. This isn't us. We—"

For an instant, he subdued his panting. "We're getting married, aren't we?"

"Oh, I want to. But *before* we're married—"

"This isn't sex, Kim. It's foreplay."

She wasn't skilled at first, even hurting him, but soon she found "the right angle," as he put it, and Blake bucked up and down on the couch, or car seat, before collapsing. Kim could satisfy ambidextrously, and learned to keep a Kleenex handy in her free hand. Soon, however, Blake bent her head, and plunged in and out as if her mouth were a vagina. Once, she swallowed the stuff, and staggered out of the car to spit, while Blake said, "Aw, I'm sorry. I'm no good. I'm really bad."

She felt she'd become a sinful woman, though wasn't it all out of love? And her doubts subsided in June, after graduation, when they were married. Kim found work teaching second grade at a Christian school in Bentonville, Arkansas, while Blake secured a more prestigious job: assistant women's volleyball coach at the university.

Married, Kim lost her fear of intimacy, of showing herself naked—and really, the act of sex didn't amount to much. She just lay there, perfectly relaxed, while Blake's hairy body thrust and grunted above her. He fell away in a stupor, and she went off to the bathroom to stare into the mirror. As if on a timetable, their couplings resulted in a pregnancy, and Kim became mother to a perfectly delightful little girl they named Esther. Kim loved to dress Esther in white or yellow dresses, white stockings, and black, buckle shoes. As a family, going up the church steps hand in

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hand, they made a beautiful picture. Like some old painting, she thought.

She wanted a second child, perhaps a boy this time, but Blake seemed less interested in sex than before. She supposed this was what happened to old marrieds, and she led an idyllic life in most respects.

When the season began, and Blake journeyed to Lincoln or Lawrence, and Esther peacefully slept, Kim indulged herself with a bottle of wine and a weepy movie. After all, the King James Bible said, “Drink no longer water, but use a little wine for thy stomach's sake and thine often infirmities.” Kim was never sick, but the verse was widely thought to be a blessing on wine for straight-laced Christians, really a harmless vice, if vice at all.

Blake bought a motorcycle, touting its gas mileage, and how its small size meant that he could park almost outside his office on campus. Kim rode behind him once, but didn't enjoy it. Motorcycles were dirty, noisy, barely short of violent, and she preferred the comfortable hum of her Camry. Anyhow, Blake could have a motorcycle if he wanted. As her fellow teachers said, men needed their toys.

Blake became head coach, and was gone a great deal. Games and recruiting duties took him all over Oklahoma and Texas. Kim loved her daughter, she loved her little students, and she loved her church, but she wondered if there was more. A Christian needed to give something back, and perhaps in the process spread the word of Jesus.

She learned of a program for homeless teens, signed up for training, and joined with other well-meaning folks to provide hot meals, conversation, and feeble games on Thursday nights. She'd held high the thought that they'd all been abused, and that with quiet encouragement, with tutoring, that at least some of them could find their way back into the mainstream.

Most, however, seemed unaware of their predicament. They flitted between programs,

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interested only in handouts. She heard several compare the meals offered by the Catholics versus other denominations. The consensus was that the evangelicals brought better food, but the Catholics hassled you less about Jesus.

One of the Catholics was a seminary student named Austin, a gentle, almost dreamy young man she assumed was gay. Austin was easy to talk to. The kids liked him, while they never warmed up to Kim no matter what she tried. She feared they thought she was a Goody Two-Shoes from the suburbs, while Austin seemed one of them, almost. Well, he'd make a good priest.

One night when they were near to closing—only Austin and Kim remained—she discovered Heather Briggs on the floor of the girls' bathroom. Heather was covered with tattoos and piercings, and was ordinarily a snarling beast of a girl, but now she lay comatose. Kim screamed, and as Austin came running, Heather began to convulse, beating her head on the concrete.

Austin tossed her his phone. "Call 911!"

As Kim did, Austin knelt by Heather's side, cupped her head in a palm, and reached into her mouth to pull out her tongue. "Could you find a pillow?" he called out—with amazing calmness.

Kim knelt, too, to scoot the pillow under the girl's head. Heather seemed not to breathe, but then gasped, and reached up with a powerful flailing. She struck Austin with the back of a hand, but then they held her down. Heather's breasts heaved and her eyes opened once, her dilated pupils like miniature black suns. The medics arrived and, clumsily but quickly, slapped oxygen to Heather's face, and transferred her to a backboard. Kim dropped heavily to the couch outside.

Austin put an arm around her shoulders. "You were terrific," he whispered.

Kim looked up through her tears. "I was so scared. I—"

"Heather will be fine," he said, and kissed her forehead.

And with his kind face so near, Kim kissed his lips. Thinking back, she felt that he hesitated, before kissing her, too. But who did what became unclear in her tears and rising excitement. She lay

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on the couch, while he pulled off her skirt and she peeled back her top. Then he was shirtless atop her, his chest slender but muscular. Such a delicate man, she thought. She clasped her hands behind his neck, and didn't realize at first that he was inside her. Then she lifted her legs and tugged at him, and moaned because never had it been like this with Blake. Meanwhile, Austin's face twisted with ecstasy, and regret.

In the days following, Kim tried out several sophisticated theories. Number one, it was meant to happen, as in one right person exists for you in all the Universe; number two, Austin was in reality a prince of darkness, hiding behind his almost-priesthood, preying upon vulnerable women; number three, sin was everywhere, even among Christians, and if you dropped your guard even for a moment, it gobbled you up; and number four, this was how the world worked, people coming together not as perfect mates but randomly, with sex inevitable.

She returned to the troubled teens once more, but couldn't find Austin. She resisted calling the seminary, sensing his absence was a message, that she was as much trouble for him as he for her. Now, the correct attitude seemed to be that sex between them had only been an accident, resulting from the stress of the moment. Of course, if she hadn't secretly been lusting after Austin, and he after her, the accident might not have happened.

This analysis, seeming true, profoundly depressed her, and she went about in a daze, not eating properly, almost speechless, unable to meet the eyes of her colleagues—all of whom, she was sure, stared knowingly. And of course she had to deal with Blake, who began to act self-consciously around her.

He'd leap up to do the dishes, and sometimes brought home fancy steaks to grill. He bought her a series of books on the Amish that she'd professed an interest in. With sex on her mind constantly, it occurred to her they hadn't made love in weeks, and she took the initiative, climbing on

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top, sometimes. Blake seemed surprised and, she couldn't help but think, distressed.

The principles she'd adhered to in college returned to her, and she got her heart right with Jesus, sobbing and praying, and drinking wine, through a long weekend when Blake left for Boulder. Jesus forgave her, as always. He didn't judge her. She could lie with another man, with five men, and still He would forgive her.

But she was not free. Though it put her marriage on the line, she knew she had to tell Blake what she'd done. He was a godly man, and she hoped that he, too, would judge not, lest he be judged. She'd explain, somehow, that it had just been an accident. Oh, yes, sin! But if you could even call it an affair, it was over as soon as it began.

Marriage was hard work, she'd say. Didn't people say that? She knew she could have been a better wife, and now she would be. She'd go along on some of his tournaments. Maybe they could take a motorcycle trip together.

Blake returned early, burst in full of false cheer, but with that look in his eyes. He knew. You couldn't fool a husband, at least *she* couldn't. She reached for the words: "Blake, we have to talk."

And he said the same thing: "Kim, we have to talk."

She sank to the kitchen table, and watched in amazement as he drew a bottle of wine from his briefcase. He pointed to it meaningfully, but she shook her head. Her sweet Riesling. Her favorite label. He *knew*. He'd known all along, and now—

"There's just no other way to say this, Kim. I've found someone else."

She almost wanted to comfort him. As he talked, she poured herself a glass of wine, and nodded understandingly, as wonder passed over his face that she didn't grow angry. He told of the many affairs he'd had, with students, sometimes, risking his job, and with a coach down in Texas, and when she still didn't respond he grew more confident, because his unfaithfulness had taught him a lesson. Now he had the courage, you might even say the moral fiber, to make a stand with the love

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of his life, Alice, an art instructor right across campus. Of course, Kim, you're a wonderful woman. You're a wonderful *mother*. But we were so young, so much was ahead of us, and maybe, well, I'm not saying we made the wrong decision, but—

After a while she heard a door close. Alone with the truth, she sipped from the wine Blake had so thoughtfully provided. For years she wondered how such an indifferent husband could have thought of the wine, the very stuff she preferred, when never once had she drunk in his presence, when she carefully wrapped the empties in plastic sacks and buried them deep in the trash barrel. She finished the bottle, leaving it on the table for anyone, for no one, to see. She looked in on Esther, and staggered to bed.