

LUTHER MCDANIEL
7724 Bellmist Drive
Fairbun, GA 30213
678-799-0822
word ct. 2,600

BITTER FRUIT

I waited impatiently, occasionally pacing the black asphalt in the parking lot of a local Publix. The people flowing in and out of the sliding glass doors could not have possibly known how broken the man was standing next to the tan Toyota. They carried plastic bags stuffed with groceries to their cars, oblivious to the emotional wreck that cordially said hello as they passed. Anxiously sucking the toxins from a Doral cigarette, I watched two bag-boys dressed in snappy green t-shirts and black slacks scuttle back and forth through the parking lanes, gathering stray shopping carts while I mentally agonized over the last three spin cycles of my life.

The last three years had been emotionally hostile, to say the least. Two years ago I was on a rapturous high, expectations burning bright, love anew; and now, here I was, feeling like I lay hopelessly buried under a pile of revenge. How could something that began so seemingly beautiful end up so horribly tragic? Why was my happiness so evasive? Will God ever relieve me of the pain that plagues my soul daily? I knew in my heart that the answers to these questions lay somewhere far beyond the layers of my knowledge.

“You ready, dad?” Reggie, my step-son asked as he approached the car.

“Yeah, I didn’t see you come out.”

Reggie hopped in and we started the ten-minute drive back to the house, the home Carla had rented in my absence. It was a pleasant two-level Georgian-style home located in the neck of a quiet

cul-de-sac, situated near a small pond aesthetically accommodating a flock of graceful geese and some aquatic wildlife. God had provided well for Carla. He'd protected and carefully nurtured her through what must have been arduous days, much like I imagined, the painstaking care a gardner gives a fragile flower during inclimate weather. After pulling into the garage Reggie and me grabbed two bags apiece and went straight into the kitchen, through a side door.

Carla, my now ex-wife, was just coming down the stairs. "You didn't forget the Brown-n-Serve rolls did you, Reggie?"

"No, mama," he answered. "Leon reminded me."

Carla shot a disdaining glance in my direction, much like the look one gives a fly that shot the gap while the door was open.

"Leon remembered something?" She quipped in a condescending tone. "That's a miracle. You must have taken your meds this morning," she spurted at me.

"I'm not completely senile yet, Carla," I defended.

"Yeah," she said. "You remember what you want to."

The lack of respect for me in Carla's eyes was reflected by the void in her stare when she looked at me. And it was no wonder. I really couldn't blame her. God had warned me long before, but I just hadn't listened. "Whatsoever a man sows," He'd said, "That shall he also reap." The seeds of rejection I'd sown into Carla's hopes of happily-ever-after had now come to full fruition, and my harvest was tauntingly bitter. I could no longer justifiably use her shortcomings as a wife to rationalize my reckless behavior. I myself could barely believe that I had the gall to ask her to have me back, after walking out on twenty-six years of marriage, after putting her through so much, after putting so much of myself into

something and someone that turned out to be nothing more than a sordid affair, sinful from its inception, and callous from the core. Even if she had enough genuine love to forgive me, how could I forgive myself?

I took a seat in the kitchen as Carla fried a few pieces of chicken. The delicious aroma was assaulting, engaging my sense of smell with an almost violent passion. But that was no surprise. The smell of Carla's cooking could make a dead man hungry. She was one hell-of-a-cook. I'd enjoyed this good cooking for more than twenty years but the great food had long outlasted the quality of the marriage.

"Leon, take that garbage out please?" Carla asked as she checked the texture of her rice. "And when you come back inside take that jacket off and put it somewhere. I can't stand that cigarette smell."

Carla and I both smoked when we were first married. We'd both stopped some years ago, but I'd recently started back. I sometimes would silently accuse her of being hypocritical; being so adamantly against a vice we once shared. I did acknowledge that the smoke left a God-awful stench on everything within reach, and she had every right not to be violated by the vile odor. But it was not only the smoke that bothered Carla these days, I think sometimes the fact that I woke up breathing was her biggest problem with me. I realized that nothing was the same anymore, and I seriously doubted it would ever be. I'd been back for nearly a month now, and had well observed, often in personal torment, the emotional damage Carla suffered at my decision three years ago.

Dinner was somber. The sounds of silverware clacking against the bottom of a pretty but less than elegant set of Macy's chinaware occasionally broke the silence, but Carla and I barely said a word to one another. Reggie, now thirty-six, was upstairs surfing the internet, his favorite pastime since his release from prison, leaving Carla and me to eat alone. I couldn't help feeling that my presence was

only tolerated because I'd been in her life for so many years, and, we shared a daughter, who was now an adult living on her own, doing pretty well for herself. Over the many years of marriage Carla had gotten used to me. However, she'd well adjusted to my three-year hiatus, and that was painfully evident. I now seemed to mean no more than an old picture that hung on the dinning-room wall for too many years, or a family heirloom that had been passed down through several generations, once pleasant to look at but over time had lost its intrigue. The good years, for the most part, were lost somewhere in her memories. They'd become scattered pieces of pleasantries that now had little affect on Carla's feelings or behavior towards me. I'd left her for another woman and that was marital blasphemy, an act worthy of a vengeful execution. No trial. No examination of any precipitating events that led to our unfortunate demise, just death in the most tortuous manner her imagination could conjure.

As we sat at the kitchen table directly across from each other our emotions were like armies poised for battle, waiting for the most opportune time to fire the first shot.

"I never saw you use that much hot sauce before. Is that how you tolerated her chicken?" Carla taunted.

I knew that was a loaded question and I skillfully diverted. "This broccoli is great," I complimented. "What did you do different?"

"Nothing. It's the same as it has always been. You're just eating it with a different fork, at a different table, with a different woman."

"Do you want to argue, or could we possibly enjoy a quiet dinner?" I asked.

"Why would I want to enjoy anything with you? Why are you here anyway? I thought I wanted you back home, but you made your home somewhere else, and maybe you should just go back there."

It was fast becoming apparent that I wasn't going to stave off another character attack. I'd been

eating at Venice's table for almost three years and that fact wasn't going to be easy for either of us to forget. I'd violated every principle God had set forth for marriage and I was not going to slide through my sinful excursion unscathed.

"You know I never wanted to leave home. But you wouldn't allow it to be a home. Your incessant clamoring and complaining, about everything I did, and was, you practically pushed me away," I argued.

"It wasn't very hard to push you into the arms of another woman, was it? Do you realize what I went through after you left? How humiliating that was, how depression almost took me out? No you probably don't, because you didn't care. I went through hell while you and your whore were romping around town like the perfect little couple. What about the God you said you loved? Did you ever think about him while you were humping your little floozy? My God, Leon! That woman went to church with us!"

"Did you ever think about what you were putting me through before I left?" My pitiful retort. "You did all you could think of to strip me of any sense of dignity. I felt less than a man in my own house. You constantly belittled me, and disrespected me, until I actually felt like nothing. That's why I left. Someone else saw something decent in me, saw me for the man I really am. Something you had long forgotten."

Things had gotten pretty bad between me and Carla before I'd left. I was recovering from an arduous bout with alcoholism and I was doing well in my recovery, but in the debts of that demonic addiction I'd lost my job and things financially had gotten pretty rough. Carla rarely let an opportunity go by without reminding me of how stupid I was. And the irony of it all was that we were suppose to be

a Christian couple, trying to live our lives according to God's word. But after twenty-plus years of marriage the very purpose of us being together had faded in our rear view mirrors. We couldn't talk with each other, we rarely tried. We couldn't agree on something as simple as which television show we'd watch. We slept in separate beds. Sexual intimacy between us had ceased. It seemed once that pillar of fusion was removed the remaining structure of the marriage lacked the fortitude to sustain any semblance of a real union. But we both claimed to love God. It was funny that though we waved this Christian banner in public, we rarely sought his guidance through our dismantling storms. We were both too twisted inside of our own hurt, too selfish to consider the pain the other was going through. Each heated exchange pushed us farther from holy matrimony.

“Do you still love her?”

“I'm here, Carla. Not there,” my non-response to her question.

“That doesn't mean a thing,” she yelled. “You're here because she doesn't want you anymore. Her evil work is done. And now you've come crawling back to me. Just who, or what do you think I am, Leon?”

“You said we could try this again, Carla. And I really do want to fix my wrongs. I'm truly sorry for the pain I caused you. But I was in pain too. You just didn't understand.” As soon as those words escaped my lips I knew I'd stepped on a mine, and Carla exploded. After slamming her fork against the kitchen table she jumped up.

“You go to hell,” she yelled as she stormed towards the staircase leading upstairs to the bedroom. Just before rounding out of sight she looked over the banister at me and tossed, “there's a fruit salad in the refrigerator if you want it.”

Even at the spire of her anger Carla's instincts as a wife peeped above the fray of fireworks. As I sat there alone, staring at the eggshell white Kenmore range on which Carla had just produced the delicious meal sitting in front of me, I pondered a very uncertain future. I'd pretty much lost my appetite but I still craved something sweet. Carla remembered my sweet-tooth as well as my health problems that prohibited too many sugary deserts. The fruit salad she'd offered sounded irresistible, and it was healthy to boot, so I decided to indulge, and grabbed the plastic bowl out of the fridge .

I took my seat again and began sorting through the grapes and watermelon pieces. I dug out the chunks of cantaloupe, my favorite, that seem to lie mischievously near the bottom of the bowl. I set aside the remaining pieces of fruit with painstaking care as if I were rearranging the positive pieces of my life, rearranging them in hopes to avoid this dismal failure I now seemed to be fermenting in.

As I savored the sweet fruity taste of the chilled dessert I thought about Venice, and how deeply I'd fallen in love with her. The combination of her beautiful charm and my wife's daily disdain of me left me with what I thought at the time to be a no-brainer. I was snared and completely bound by the love of a woman half my age. The sin aspect of our relationship was all but erased during our passionate embraces. My perceived freedom from the incessant persecutions of my wife was like a burst of new youth, another chance to be in love, and to be loved. Venice too seemed ensnared by our romantic bliss. A future of happiness in fairy-tale proportion looked certain until one day suddenly her youth betrayed me, and the realization that she was every night lying next to a man old enough to be her father, a man who wasn't even in very good health, began to wear away at her commitment to the relationship.

I started to anguish in the memory of that day when she told me that she wanted to move on,

after nearly three years of the two of us planning a life together, after I'd all but irreparably destroyed my previous life. As I recalled the painful words that bitterly impaled my very soul I bit into one of the chunks of cantaloupe. I tasted an unfamiliar tart, a bitterness unassociated with the cool sweet juice that usually emanated from the chaste fruit. Suddenly the emotional tear in my heart evolved into a tangible pain. My chest tightened and it became difficult to breathe. My head felt heavy, and then light, and heavy again before plunging into the bowl of fruit in front of me. I remember asking God to forgive me just before I sensed my being easing off into oblivion.

Carla had been in bed, staring at the ceiling, her thoughts about me waging war. A part of her still loved me, happy I'd finally come home. Yet another part despised my audacity. Could she ever hope to recapture what she'd once had for me? Would I ever be able to give my complete self to her again, uninhibited by memories of Venice? Carla and I were equally torn, equally confused, and equally uncertain as to our next move. She suddenly thought about what she had done. She leaped out of bed and rushed downstairs. She froze in stride when she reached the bottom of the steps. She gazed into the kitchen and saw me sitting there, slumped onto the table, my mouth slightly open, the lifeless stare in my eyes fixed on her. God had long warned me. I just didn't listen. For Carla and I, it really was;

THE END

