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The Dance

The first time I met Leah she was sitting on the blue sectional in the living room of the parsonage. I was the pastor of the Plainview Baptist Church in Krum, Texas, a place that is as small as it sounds. She was the fiancée of Jeff, a young man who had been hired to paint the outside of the parsonage.

A few days earlier I had come home to find Jeff painting the side of the house next to the gravel driveway. As I got out of the car and walked toward the door, I asked Jeff how it was going.

“Pretty good, I think I’ll be done by Friday,” he said.

“Sounds fine,” I responded as I reached for the doorknob.

“Say preacher, my fiancée and I are getting married soon and we need someone to do the wedding. Do you marry folks who are not part of your church?”

I hesitated. I didn’t know how old Jeff was, but I knew he couldn’t be much more than 18. Which meant, I figured, he had gotten a girl pregnant and wanted to do the noble thing and marry her. I’ve never thought much of such arrangements. Teenagers who marry because the girl became pregnant usually have brief and miserable unions.

“Sometimes I do,” I said to Jeff hedging my bets, “why don’t y’all come by and we’ll talk about it.”

So it was that a few days later I met Leah, a lovely brunette with a quiet but firm demeanor. When I asked how old they were, Jeff volunteered that he was 19 and Leah was 17. Before I could get to the obvious question, he blurted out:

“But we ain’t pregnant or nothin’ like that. We just love each other and want to do this proper. Both our families support our decision.”

In the course of our conversation Leah said virtually nothing. But she didn’t seem shy or nervous, which teenagers often are when they talk to someone like me for the first time. If anything, her eyes revealed a strong, assured woman mature beyond her years. She almost seemed amused at Jeff, whose extroverted energy was dominating the room. He was loud and funny, a little odd to be sure, and she watched him with curiosity.

I agreed to do the wedding for no other reason than I liked Jeff and Leah intrigued me. They were married a month later standing on a wooden platform in the middle of a field. Leah and her bridesmaids came out of the trailer house that her parents lived in

and walked fifty yards across the field to the “stage.” The three bridesmaids wore short cocktail dresses that revealed more leg than I had ever seen at a wedding. Leah wore a full-length wedding gown, with train, which dragged across dirt and weeds all the way down the “aisle.”

After the wedding a barbecue and beer bash took place in that same field. A country western band, set up on top of a cattle trailer, played late into the night. As I headed to my car at the end of the festivities, Jeff’s Uncle Bob slipped me a twenty dollar bill as payment for my services.

That was the last I saw or heard from Jeff and Leah for many months. They never came to church, which was not a surprise, and I almost forgot about them completely. Then one day the phone rang. I answered to hear a frantic voice on the other end of the line.

“Reverend McKinney, this is Jeff, you know the guy who painted your house and you married last year.”

“Hey Jeff, what’s wrong? Has something happened?”

“It’s Leah. She’s got the measles. They say it’s real serious and she’s in the ICU at Denton Regional. Can you come see her? We got no church or pastor and she needs someone to pray for her.”

I said I would be there as fast as I could. Driving to the hospital I confess that I was skeptical about Jeff’s dramatic claims. I thought to myself, “She’s a teenager with measles, how serious could that be?” What I didn’t know was that a measles epidemic was in full swing and had already killed several adults in the region. That simple childhood disease can become lethal in an adult body.

I walked into her hospital room ignorant of these facts and was stunned by what I saw. Tubes were coming out of Leah’s mouth, out of her chest, and out of her side. She could not speak but was fully conscious. As I leaned over the bed rail to look into those strong eyes I saw something else. Terror. She was begging me to do something with those eyes. I stumbled to find something to say, but with each stuttered line of false assurance her eyes only grew bigger and wilder. I said a quick prayer and bolted as fast as I could. Almost running down the hall of the hospital toward the exit, my body was soaked in sweat.

Leah was dying a slow, agonizing death that could not be avoided. The measles would gradually destroy her lungs, but it would take months for the disease to complete its gruesome task. And I, for no other reason than my house needed painting, was the person designated to be her spiritual support. I wasn’t always up to it.

In the months that followed I fell into a routine. Some days I planned to go to the hospital to visit Leah, but I couldn't even bring myself to get in the car. I conveniently found other urgent pastoral business to distract me. Other days, I drove to the hospital determined to go inside and bring comfort to this scared girl, but would circle the parking lot two or three times and leave. It was those eyes. She needed something from me and I had nothing to give her.

The shame I felt on those rides home after circling the hospital without landing still haunts me today. It was failure and cowardice and a betrayal of my calling all wrapped into one ugly package. I hated myself in those moments and hated being a pastor.

There were days, however, when I went to the hospital and didn't leave. I slowly walked down the hall to Leah's room and faced those eyes. I never figured out how to have a one-way conversation with a person who could not speak. I never found the words to bring relief to those eyes. Even so, on the days when I found the courage to face them, I drove home feeling a little less ashamed.

Leah died after five months of horrible suffering. I was relieved when the end came, which also brought feelings of shame, but I now realize Leah must have felt the same relief. The funeral was packed with family, friends, and several nurses who had come to love this young woman who could only communicate with her eyes. Everyone cried a lot, especially Jeff, whose only request for the service was to hear Garth Brooks' song *The Dance* at the end. The mournful country ballad about loss includes a poignant chorus:

And now I'm glad I didn't know
The way it all would end
the way it all would go
Our lives are better left to chance
I could have missed the pain
But I'd of had to miss the dance

It was the perfect hymn to summarize their brief marriage.

By chance my house needed painting and the painter needed a preacher. For that reason alone I met a young woman who was in love and whose life was almost over. I tried to be her pastor. I pray she could see that.

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