

# As They Are

by J.M. Diener

I see people as they are, not as they appear. My mother tells me it is a gift: one that only the prophets had, but for the longest time I was not so sure. It seemed more a curse. The first time I truly became aware of my vision was my first day in school. I walked into a room full of strangers, but the strangest was the ugly old hag who greeted me at the door. She had long ratty wisps of hair in a scabby, balding scalp. Her eyes were bloodshot, filled with utmost cruelty, and she smiled at me with crooked teeth. She reached out a bony hand to touch my head and I shrank back. Her voice was sweet and young when she spoke, but the undertone that swung in it was dark, sepulchral, and utterly wicked. I could not bear to look at her, but clung to my mother's skirts; my mother who walked in perpetual light, clothed in brilliant colors, whose eyes shone with glory and joy and even in her weakest moments stood tall and strong, untouchable by any evil.

"Now, Sammy," my mother chided. "Don't be shy. Ms. Murray is your teacher. She's going to take good care of you."

"But she's *scary!*" I remember wailing. There was nothing to be done. I had to stay with the hag in the classroom. I could not bear to look at her or listen to her, for I intrinsically knew she was evil.

Until the day they took me to the eye doctor. I walked into the room to see a hunched, careworn man, old beyond his years, with rheumy eyes and weak motions. His voice held an undertone of depression. He took me through the tests and had me look through this machine. And then everything changed. When he stepped in front of the lenses, he was no longer a weak and depressed old man, but only middle aged, handsome, with graying temples and a warm smile. Even his voice seemed to have become higher, upbeat and energetic. When I leaned back from the machine, there he was again: old and broken. In that instant, I knew: I wanted those magic lenses, the ones that didn't make people scare me so much.

So at six years of age, I began to wear glasses. What a change they made! Even Ms. Murray was no longer scary. She had morphed into a lovely young woman with short brown hair and bright violet eyes. My mother, however, became plain. Her glow was gone, she had care lines etched in her face and her voice was no longer brisk and mellow. My father went from the mighty hero he'd always appeared to a homely, slightly stooped man with a balding head. I puzzled at this but never said anything.

The glasses did have one drawback: I soon realized that when I wore them I could not read what was written on the page, so I would have to take them off. And when I did the people I looked at changed. I learned to read under and around my glasses, so I wouldn't have to remove them.

## I See Too Well

When I was about twelve, I overslept on a Sunday morning. My shining mother ousted me from bed and made me dress hurriedly. I fumbled for my glasses on the bed stand and accidentally struck them, sending them skidding across the smooth top and down behind the bed.

"Oh no!" I cried trying to pry my way behind my bed to grab them, but for the life of me I couldn't reach them.

"Samuel!" came my father's voice. "It's time to go. You'll have to snack on a muffin on the way to church."

"I can't get my glasses," I cried back. I heard a rustle and into the room strode my heroic father. I had forgotten how breathtaking he was: tall and strong, his Sunday suit jacket a bright breastplate, his brown locks helmet-like on his head. His face was so handsome I stepped back in awe. He bent quickly and reached behind the bed.

"I'm sorry, son. I can't reach them. We'll have to move your bed." He looked at me, his smile shimmering. He glanced at his watch. "But not now. We really have to go. I am leading communion today. You'll have to make do without them."

“But, Dad,” I stammered, still awestruck.

“No buts, Samuel,” he replied. “Let’s go.”

It was the most shocking day I’d ever experienced. We walked into the church and everyone was changed. A girl from my Sunday School class came over and I could not recognize her. She was stooped, tiny and waiflike, a cruel look in her eyes. It was only when she spoke that I realized she was our teaching pastor’s daughter. Mrs. Tomlinson, my Sunday School teacher, usually plump and poorly dressed, had become one of the most beautiful women I’d ever seen in my twelve years. She was still a little on the heavy side, but she *shone*: her eyes, her very being. And as she told the story about how Jesus multiplied the fish and the loaves, she began to glow more and it seemed that she grew before my very eyes. But looking at my classmates, all I saw were warped, misshapen imps, bored out of their skulls. The one exception was Rodney, the most rambunctious one. He looked like a little angel, bright in the same light that enveloped Mrs. Tomlinson. Why was that?

Then we went to the teaching service, and I could not help but stare. Yes, many of those in the congregation shone more or less brightly, were lovely to look at, but the majority were grotesque beings, twisted or bloated beyond recognition. Only when they spoke to me did I realize that some of these were very pillars of the church, men and women whose life seemed above reproach.

But nothing compared to when Pastor Bergman stepped up to the pulpit. The person standing there was the size of an adult but looked like a giant baby. He gazed at the congregation with a drooling, toothless smile; and when he spoke all that came from his mouth were baby noises. This was the handsome, winsome, gray-haired patriarch of our congregation? This *infant*? And my parents were taking notes and nodding. I sat, gobsmacked. My mother nudged me and whispered something, then pushed my mouth shut. It was all I could do not to scream, leap up, and run from the room.

The ghoul at the piano played the closing song and we rose to leave. I avoided as many as I could after the service, longing to go home, but we stayed to the very end, as always, as my father is one of the Elders of the congregation. I sat in the corner away from the door, not daring to look at anyone.

“What’s with Samuel?” I heard one of the ladies ask my mother.

“He forgot his glasses,” she replied. “He can’t see so well.”

No, I thought, unaware of where the thought was from, *I can see too well*.

As soon as we came home, I ran upstairs and squeezed myself under the bed to retrieve my glasses. I promised myself I would never be without them again.

## I See Jasmine

I could never forget that terrible morning at church. I minimized my involvement as much as possible after that. I was also an outsider in high school, but it was where I discovered photography. My unique gift for seeing things as they are had the side effect that I could look through a viewfinder and capture images that no one else had seen.

The library was a place of great solace for me because there were carrels where I could actually take off my glasses and read clearly. But woe betide me if anyone happened to walk up. The most beautiful and popular girl in the school turned into a desiccated stick-figure that looked as if something were draining the very life out of it. The big and strong athletes were little more than mewling children; the intellectuals, ugly, haughty, preening beasts; and don’t even ask about the goths and druggie crowd. Only here and there was anyone who truly shone. One was Jasmine. To the rest of the world, she appeared an ordinary, slender girl with middle eastern features and long, black hair that she usually had tied up in a bun. She wore oversize glasses and dressed quite conservatively.

One day while I was working my way through *Silas Marner* for my junior AP English class, I heard a girl’s voice say, “Hi, Sam.” Forgetting my glasses, I turned and was dazzled. Here stood a veritable goddess: she

was wreathed in light, her black hair shimmering blue; her brown eyes danced in a smooth and flawless face, and the colors of her clothes were rich tones I'd never seen before.

"Oh, um, hi," I stammered, blinking.

"Are you okay, Sam?" she asked. *Oh dear, I'm staring*, I thought and pulled my glasses down off my forehead. The iridescent immaculateness muted into the Jasmine's cute, bespectacled features.

"Yeah, yeah, I'm fine." And then it just broke out, "Jasmine, why do you shine?"

"I *shine*?" she said, cocking her head to one side with a queer little smile. Then she giggled. "Maybe it's because I believe in Jesus. My mother always says that He makes us shine."

"Oh," I mumbled, not wanting to purse it anymore, but that simple statement sowed a seed that would take another five or six years to sprout. All Jasmine really wanted was to get my notes from the previous day's chem class; but after that I could never look at her the same way again: I was completely smitten. I never told her, but I wanted to see that glory again and I'd sometimes sneak a look over my glasses, focusing on her rather than the monsters that surrounded her. She went to a different church from my parents' one; one that my parents said we shouldn't have anything to do with because they were "charismatic". At that time all I could figure was that they had a band with drums and guitars, sang songs we didn't, and their services were supposedly "more wild", though what that exactly meant was a mystery to me. After all, all I knew was my parents' church. So Jasmine and I only crossed paths intermittently, which was why I lost track of her after we graduated from high school.

By that time, I was making a name for myself as an amateur photographer. My parents encouraged it as a career choice, so I decided to study art and photography and enrolled at a small state-run liberal arts college.

College was mostly boring. I kept my head down and kept away from Christians and pagans alike. I made an attempt at having a girlfriend, but that relationship died after about the fourth date, when she insisted on taking off my glasses and I found myself sitting next to a rotting corpse. Besides, no one could ever replace the lovely Jasmine.

## I See a Wonder

I returned home to build my photography business and moved into my own apartment downtown. It had a beautiful sun-lit loft, perfect for indoor photo work, and a huge closet that I converted into a dark room. There are some things that you can do with film that no digital camera in the world can duplicate. The nook where I set up my Mac was positioned just so I could look out the window and see the tree-tops of Manshire park. It was a great place. It was also across the hall from Mrs. Chung.

I remember the first time I met the stooped old lady. I had just signed the lease and was leaving the apartment to head back to my parents' house as she was huffing her way up the stairs with a big paper bag perched in one arm, pulling herself along the banister. It seemed wrong to me that she would have to do this by herself, so I took her bag and offered her my arm.

"My, aren't you a kind young man," she said with a smile that even through my glasses pulsed with the power of a thousand flashbulbs.

"My name is Sam Heiligenthal," I said. "I just leased apartment F."

"Then we're neighbors, Sam. My name is Nishu Chung." She was definitely Asian. Her hair was mostly gray, but still had black strands shot through it. Though tiny and frail, her dark eyes were clear and full of wit.

"Old age is not an easy thing," she remarked when we reached the top step. "But it has one advantage: I am that much closer to being with my Lord." She smiled, fumbled for her keys and let herself into her apartment.

"It's good to meet you, Mrs. Chung," I said, handing her the grocery bag.

“And you, too, young man. Come have a cup of tea with me when you’ve settled.” I couldn’t help but smile back.

“Yes, ma’am. I will.”

The opportunity came about three weeks later. I had given up going to church when I’d gone to college, using Sunday as my day to sleep in. I often worked on Saturday evenings, though this week I’d not had a job, so I woke earlier than usual. I heard voices outside the door as I stumbled past it to the kitchen. I looked through the peephole to see a young Asian man talking to Mrs. Chung. She closed the door to her apartment, hobbled across to mine and rapped on the door. I hesitated to open it, but curiosity got the better of me and I cracked it.

“Good morning, young man,” she said with a smile. “Don is taking me to church and I wanted to invite you.” I must have grimaced, because she quickly continued. “Of course, I would have told you yesterday, but I think we missed each other. So perhaps you’d like to come to tea this afternoon, at four perhaps?” That seemed a lot better to me and I smiled.

“Yes, ma’am, I’ll be there.”

“God bless you, young man,” she laughed and shuffled off down the hall on Don’s arm. I closed the door and went about my usual Sunday routine: a slow breakfast, reading in a devotional book that my grandmother had given me upon graduation from college, a walk in the park and watching a couple of episodes of a show online. Even so, I felt giddy, as if the day could not pass quickly enough. I hadn’t been this excited about something since entering my first photography contest.

The occasion felt so momentous that I considered dressing up. I even pulled out my suit and put it on, but while knotting the tie I felt it was too over the top, so I settled for a pair of slacks, a blue dress shirt, and a vest that I often wore for wedding photography. As four o’clock rolled closer, I felt that I could not just go over empty-handed, so I ran out to the drugstore and grabbed a bouquet of flowers, making it back to the building just in time to stop in front of Mrs. Chung’s door and get my breathing calmed down before knocking.

She opened the door with a smile. She was dressed in a red Chinese coat and black skirt with small black slippers, her hair carefully coiffed, every inch the hostess waiting for an honored guest.

“Welcome, young man,” she said.

“Thank you for your invitation, ma’am,” I replied, extending the flowers.

“How very kind of you,” she exclaimed, obviously meaning every word. “Your parents certainly trained you well.” Her apartment was very like mine, though she received the morning sun rather than the afternoon. Her view was of the main street and she remarked that it was nice because she could watch the people go by.

“It helps me pray,” she closed, showing me to an old, solid armchair.

“I’ll just be a moment,” she said, heading toward the kitchen nook. I looked out the window and then down at the table she had sitting in front of it. There was a thick, black book with Chinese characters on the front of it and a framed photo of a much younger Mrs. Chung with a straight-faced man. I lifted my glasses to look closer and noticed a sparkle in his eye that suggested the seriousness was put on. Beside the photo was a post-card sized item with some Chinese calligraphy on it that arrested my attention. Though brushed in deep black, there was a glow around the letters, as if they were infused with an invisible power. I wondered what they said when my thoughts were interrupted by Mrs. Chung’s voice.

“So, here we are.” I turned, forgetting my glasses were off, and was stunned. Over my life I’d seen many, many shining people, but none like Mrs. Chung. Gone was the little old lady. In her place stood a beautiful, tall woman. The face was the same, but much younger; and yet it held the mature beauty of a woman who had reached her middle age but whose wrinkles had not yet begun to set in. She was not only shining brightly, the rich colors of her coat and skirt having become even richer, but she was also wearing armor. Her feet were sheathed in white shoes whose bands crisscrossed up her calves. A jewel-studded belt lay around her hips from which hung a sword about as long as her thigh and a gleaming lorica was over her chest, though the form of this accented her femininity. It was decorated with what looked to be images of humans

with wings as well as Chinese characters. A crystal shield fully as tall as her was strapped to her left arm, though it looked to be light and flexible and did not hinder any of her movement. Her head was covered in a shimmering helmet that reminded me of a picture of one worn by the ancient Greeks, though with small upturned winglets on the sides. But the strangest part was that the helmet did not obscure her features in the least. Rather, her bright, dark eyes shone through clearer than in her very face. They fairly glowed with kindness, courage, care, and charity. She was truly awesome, in the old sense of the word.

“My God, you’re beautiful!” I exclaimed. For a moment she looked puzzled as she set a tray with a Chinese teapot and cups down on the table.

“You’re a bit of a charmer, young man,” she said lightly, as if trying to brush it off. For once I could not let it go.

“No, I mean it!” I shot back. “You’re tall and you’re young and shining and you’re wearing this wonderful armor....” My voice trailed off and a longing struck deep in my soul: *I want to be like that!*

“Sam Heiligenthal,” she said sternly, straightening and waving a bright finger in my direction, “you are not making sense. I know I’m a little old woman. You do not need to make up stories. You are much too old for that.”

“But I’m not,” I stammered. “At least I don’t think I am.” She sat, looking at me intently with her bright, dark eyes.

“What do you mean?” she asked, and it all poured out of me: how when I took my glasses off, people changed. I described my parents, my grade-school teacher, that day at church, my classmates, Jasmine, my erstwhile girlfriend, and finally herself. As I spoke, I could see her features first soften and then turn to awe.

“What a gift!” she sighed. “God has gifted you supremely!” She folded her hands tightly. “Oh, that I could see as you do!” Then she cocked her head to the side.

“Sam, what do you see when you look at yourself?” I was stunned. I’d never thought of that.

“I don’t know, myself, I guess. I mean, I don’t look any different than in the photos that were taken of me, I don’t think.”

“Seeing yourself is the most difficult of all, young man,” she said. “The human heart has an unlimited potential to deceive itself. Perhaps you don’t see yourself because you choose not to look closely.” That thought astounded me and I suddenly wanted to go and look at a mirror, both fascinated and fearful of what I would find.

“But what makes people like you shine?” I asked instead.

“Think back, Sam, who were the beautiful ones, the shining ones?” she replied as she began to pour the tea. I thought for a long moment. In each case, those who shone were ones who called themselves Christians. They were people who not only believed that Jesus Christ was their Savior, but also strove to live a life that was in line with His teachings; and it seemed that the closer they were to Him, the brighter they shone and the more beautiful they were.

“But Mrs. Chung,” I interjected, “why are you wearing armor when so many others who say they are Christians do not?”

“That is simple, my boy,” she said with a laugh. “Many years ago, I began the practice of praying through Ephesians 6 and putting on the armor every morning. It has become my morning ritual along with reading my Bible and praying. It prepares me for the day and the attacks that Satan levels against me through my sinful nature, others around me and the dark, twisted world we live in. Few Christians I know are aware of this practice and fewer still actually practice it.”

We drank our tea and spoke of beauty and life. I drank of the glory sitting across from me as Mrs. Chung told me of her painful life, of immigrating to America as a young girl, of her beloved husband who loved Jesus so much, he’d snuck back into China many a time with Bibles to help the Christians there. Then many years ago, he took one more trip and never returned. No news ever came, there were no answers to inquiries to the authorities in China beyond the statement that he’d entered through passport control and customs, but Mrs. Chung knew she was going to see him again, at the very latest before the great Throne. And there they would sing the Song of the Lamb together.

"I am excited about it," she sighed. For the first time ever, I was unable to inwardly snicker at such a notion. The glorified warrior queen in the old chair across from me made such sentiments seem certain rather than silly. Mrs. Chung continued telling of how from then on she'd devoted herself to reading the Word of God, to prayer and good works. She told of instances where God had put her in situations and places where she was allowed to touch the hearts of others. As she spoke my heart burned, longing to live like that, longing to *be* like that.

Eventually our visit ran down and I excused myself, but not before Mrs. Chung asked the burning question.

"And how is your relationship with our Lord Jesus, Sam?" I stammered and stuttered, not wanting to admit that I really didn't have one; though the question brought about that burning desire again, to be like Mrs. Chung: to shine, to be dressed in brilliant armor, to know where I was going, to be certain of what I hoped for and sure of what I could not yet see.

I excused myself and returned to my dark apartment, looking out at the crimson bands lying across the treetops, the wisps of cloud painted in gold and the royal blue sliding over deep purple into the soft black of a glorious night. Only one bright star was visible and I thought of Mrs. Chung's question. How *did* I truly look?

I went to the bathroom, turned on the light and went to the mirror, but could not bear to look up. I stared at the sink and, for the first time in years, muttered a prayer.

"Please show me, God." I heaved a sigh. "Show me... no matter what." I raised my head and looked and here is what I saw: Not the usual rounded, youthful face with a slight spattering of freckles and gray eyes looked back at me, but that of an ill and wasted man. The eyes were dull and fear-filled, the cheeks sunken, the flesh pale, the hair thin and stringy. No, I did not look at all like Mrs. Chung or like my father or mother or Jasmine. I looked like Ms. Murray and my corpse-girlfriend, though perhaps not quite as bad; I was still on my way there. I looked back down at the sink and tears began to form in my eyes as I thought of what Mrs. Chung said: Who were the beautiful ones, who were the shining ones?

"Oh, Jesus," I moaned. "I want to *be* like that. I want to *shine* like that. Whatever it takes, make me like that!" Words from my childhood, from my grandfather, came back to me and I prayed them. "Jesus, forgive me my sin against you. Be my Lord and Savior. I give you my will and take yours in its place. Amen." I meant those words with my whole heart. They burned on my lips like bright embers, flowed from my eyes in salt rivers, and soared from my heart in a roaring wind. Then, I wanted to look up at the mirror again. But what would I see? Fear gripped my heart, harder than the first time. But then, that tiny voice, that bright voice whispered, "Don't you trust Me?"

"I do, I do!" I cried, raised my head, and gasped. Looking back at me was no longer the wasted and dying man, but that of a glowing child, head crowned with bright brown locks, gleaming eyes full of wonder. I could see tears, but they were of joy. I wiped at my face and the boy in the mirror wiped his eyes. In that moment I heard my father's voice, reading his favorite passage in the Bible, "Therefore if any man is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come." (2Co. 5:17 – NAS77) And here I am, brand new!

I couldn't wait, I rushed over first to Mrs. Chung's and beat on her door. It took a long moment before she opened it, and there she stood, wreathed in light.

"I'm new, too!" I cried at the top of my lungs. "I shine, too!" She smiled brightly and grasped my hands tightly.

"Welcome, home, son," she whispered, suddenly glowing brighter. I would have spun her around, but I had to remind myself that though she looked a warrior queen, her physical form was 80 years old and not steady on its feet.

"I have to tell mom; I have to tell dad!" I laughed and rushed down the stairs, forgetting my keys, forgetting the door to my apartment, forgetting everything in my haste. I realized it when I reached my car, but could not bring myself to go back upstairs, lest I lose the joy. So I ran all the way to my parents' house and burst in on them at the dinner table, as they were reading their evening devotions. I'd forgotten that I wasn't

wearing my glasses and saw the two majestic beings at the table, looking at me in puzzlement. The glow of their worship was still in their eyes as I danced around them, telling them of my commitment.

"I'm his, I shine!" I cried. I told them of what I could see, how I could see. I hid nothing from them and after all these years, it felt so good! They knew. I didn't care whether they would accept it or not, but at least they knew. And I shone, too. I looked down at my hands and could see the glow. Then I closed my eyes in thankfulness.

## I See Beings with Two Faces

Even so, the next day, after reading in the Bible my father had pressed into my hands the past night, I chose to put on my glasses again; not out of fear, but out of the knowledge that I needed to function in the visible world. Two things my father had said that evening that struck me deeply. First, "Now it's time for you to grow, son." Then, "God has given you this gift for a reason. Use it wisely and only for others."

The big question was, how? Certainly, what I saw could benefit others. Besides, unlike other Christians who had to accept by faith who was saved and who wasn't, I could simply see it. But how could I tell them, how should I approach this incredible gift? I mulled over this that next week without coming to any conclusion. I went about my usual routine, though I added to this a few more visits with Mrs. Chung and we talked about what it meant to follow Jesus. I found myself constantly wanting to read in my Bible: it was so rich, so fulfilling, so different from when I was younger, and I read it because it was what a good Christian boy did.

Despite all of this, I was still traumatized by my visit to my parents' church. I'd known those people too well to be able to stomach the way they looked without my glasses; so I went to church with Mrs. Chung. She attended a tiny congregation that met in a mid-sized, white clapboard church over on the other edge of town. There were perhaps thirty souls in a sanctuary that could easily seat upwards of a hundred. They were all clustered about the pews, obviously part of various cliques within the church. Mrs. Chung sat up near the front where she could hear the pastor, a large, sandy-haired man with a red beard that was graying at the edges. I guessed he was probably in his late 30's, but he seemed older. I slipped my glasses off so I could read along in the ancient hymnals and was greeted by a nightmarish landscape. The pastor shone, but he was bruised and battered, one eye blushing purple, and a deep gash across his forehead. His teeth seemed to have been knocked out and his voice was tired and resigned. Beside the glorious Mrs. Chung was her grandson Don, who was also shining, though without armor, and over in the back was another family that shimmered, but they were subdued, as if they were afraid to let the light out. The others had the usual battered, emaciated and corpse-like features I'd come to expect. Except for three, that is: these were some of the scariest humans I'd ever seen. They were large and strong-looking, but there was something wrong with them. It was like they had two faces. One instant they had human features that were ghastly and greedy, emaciated and empty; but in the next moment they were scaly and beastlike, with round, fish-like mouths filled with fangs. Their eyes went from hollow sockets to bright orange orbs and back. They sang along to the old hymns with seeming gusto, but when the pastor stood up to preach, the dragonish faces hissed and spat while the human ones snickered and nodded. When I slipped my glasses back down the monsters morphed into two men, one elderly, the other in his middle years, and a woman who must have been close to fifty. These studiously avoided me after the service, as did most of the rest of the congregation. Only the shining family and the pastor greeted me and showed any interest in me. I was really not surprised at that, knowing who they truly were.

After we left, Mrs. Chung insisted on taking Don and me to lunch at the diner in the building next to ours. We made small talk and I found out that Don worked at the local electronics store. He had to go on shift that afternoon, so he ate his food quickly and left, making me very happy, because I wanted to talk to Mrs. Chung about what I'd seen. Her face became serious as I described the sights, especially the three monsters.

“Yes,” she sighed when I’d finished, “I figured that this was the case about our church. Poor Pastor Charlie suffers so much. I pray for him, but I know that there are those who want him gone. And he’s lasted so much longer than our previous pastors. If only we could find a way to remove the obstacles, I know the Lord would bless our church.” She heaved another sigh and looked away, face pinched with sadness. “And yet it’s just Pastor Charlie, Don, the Reichs, and myself who are interested in growth. No one else cares.”

“Then why don’t you leave?” I wondered, surprised.

“Because the Lord wants me there, young man,” she replied sternly. “As long as Pastor Charlie is in the pulpit I will remain and cover him with prayer.” She paused and looked away again. “Though he probably won’t be there much longer. His wife hasn’t come to church in nearly three months. She won’t even talk to me, and we were very close before this. I don’t know. It breaks my heart.” I reached out and put one hand on hers.

“Is there anything that I can do to help?” I asked.

“You have already helped, Sam,” she said resolutely. “Now I know the troublemakers and I can pray for a chance to confront them. You can pray as well. That will be the greatest thing you can do.” I felt warm all over at this affirmation, but it mingled with a melancholy at not being able to do more.

The discussion followed me the rest of that week and I attended church with Mrs. Chung one more time. This time the younger male monster turned his attention to me.

“How do you like our church?” he asked me after the service.

“It’s all right,” I answered, feeling something in the pit of my stomach squirm. “I like the sermons I’ve heard.” He sneered at that.

“You did, did you?” he snorted. I felt I needed to justify myself, but was uncertain as to how to do that.

“Well, your church is different from my parents’ church,” I pointed out.

“How so?”

“You’ve only got one pastor and one service. They have multiple Elders and two services: a worship service and a teaching service.”

“Oh, you’re a *Brethren*,” he snarled, the name a curse on his lips. “We’re Baptist. We don’t fellowship with *Brethren*.” And he turned on his heel and stalked off, leaving me shaken. What did Baptist and Brethren have to do with anything? Who cared what the order of service was or who ran the church or who taught? I couldn’t really wrap my head around that one. Regardless, I now felt very unwelcome at Mrs. Chung’s church and decided to go somewhere else the following week. After all, there were several other congregations around the area. There was bound to be one I’d fit into.

## I See Dr. Sage

**O**n Saturday I was to photograph a small wedding that was to take place at the Congregational church in the center of town. It was a beautiful building with a sanctuary that was nearly 200 years old. The stained-glass windows threw beautiful light around and I made it a point to visit the sanctuary at several different times during the day to figure out the best lighting and best angles. It was there I ran into Dr. Sage.

He happened to be in the sanctuary with the pastor as I arrived for my final survey the day before the wedding. The pastor introduced me and as I shook his hand, much like Mrs. Chung, his brightness was apparent even around my glasses. Dr. Sage was taller than me, with white hair and beard framing a ruddy face and sparkly blue eyes. He was dressed in a corduroy shirt and blue jeans with a pouch strapped to his belt and a wad of papers in his shirt pocket. A stained green cap rested on the pew where he’d been sitting. We chatted for a few minutes, and I found out he owned a farm on the outskirts of town and that he’d spent many years overseas, telling people about Jesus. This intrigued me and I wanted to question him more, but one look at the pastor told me that this was not the time or the place, so I quickly completed my survey.



But before I left, I took off my glasses to get a better look at the two men there. The pastor was puny, almost a child, with stick-like arms and legs and a light around him that was barely a glow. Dr. Sage on the other hand was as impressive as Mrs. Chung, perhaps even more so: he was tall and bright with broad shoulders; his weathered features had smoothed into the striking, firm face of a man in the prime of his life, his beard and hair now a rich golden-brown. He also was armored, though his armor reminded me more of the pictures of Roman legionnaires I'd seen: his helmet had the stiff neck shield jutting out the back, the heavy face guards and even a green brush that arched over the dome from one ear to another. His breastplate was made up of overlapping metal strips, very flexible, but very protective. His shield, while still of crystal, was also larger than Mrs. Chung's, his belt thicker with long tassels that fell to his knees. His foot-long sword was in his hand as he spoke and he was gently touching the pastor with it, bringing forth shallow cuts that flashed with light. His shoes were hobnailed, tied tightly above his ankles. His armor was obviously scarred from many battles, though each dent and cut was worked in gold, bright badges of his courage and constancy for Christ. In that instant I knew: this is a man to get to know; this is a man who can help me with my gift. While this was not the time to approach him, I knew where to find him and ask him I would.

As it was, I only needed to wait until the following day, for Dr. Sage was one of the guests at the wedding. I was very busy for much of the day, taking the photos the happy couple had requested. They'd asked for more candid pictures rather than formal ones, so I was in and among the wedding guests for the whole reception. Dr. Sage was also always speaking with one person or another and glimpses from under and around my lenses showed him burning brightly in a dingy crowd, often using his sword to prick one of those he was talking to. I wondered what that symbolized. It was something I decided I would ask him.

As the party progressed, I providentially found myself at the punch bowl getting a much-needed drink when Dr. Sage walked up, alone for the first time.

"Dr. Sage," I said, extending my hand.

"Well, hello," he said, looking me up and down for a long moment. "Right, you're the photographer. We met yesterday, didn't we?"

"Yes, sir," I replied. "I'm Sam."

"Good to see you again, Sam," he laughed, picking up one of the plastic cups of water. "Are you getting any good pictures?" I responded affirmatively and we briefly chatted about cameras and photography. I was amazed at how much he knew, and he admitted he dabbled in it himself.

"I'm definitely not as good as you are," he pointed out, "but God has given me a good eye."

"Well, about that," I hedged, my hands suddenly sweaty as I tried to figure out how to express the desire that had dawned the day before. "I ... I would like to learn from you." His eyebrows went up.

"Photography?"

"No, sir." My stomach was now squirming. "About Jesus; about living for Him. You see, I've only just become a Christian and I'm trying to figure this out..." I didn't know how to go on but didn't need to. Dr. Sage smiled warmly.

"I'd be glad to help you," he laughed. "The Lord and I were talking about you this morning, though I didn't realize this is what he meant." He patted me on the shoulder. "Why don't you come down to the farm on Monday, say for lunch? My wife is a great cook. We can talk better then." Said and done. The weekend flew by. I actually avoided church that Sunday, choosing rather to find a sermon on the internet, but the words of the megachurch pastor that I listened to felt stale and lifeless. I cannot see the reality behind recorded images, but I guessed that this man was not the spiritual giant his web site made him out to be; either that or I had just picked a bad sermon to start with. Regardless, I was itching for the following day so I could meet with Dr. Sage.

The meeting could not have been better. I kept quiet about my gift initially, but Dr. Sage evidenced an insight that I had never experienced in anyone else.

"I can see that God has given you a special gift, Sam," he told me. "I don't know what it is, but you are called to do something more for Him. I want to help equip you for that." I was flabbergasted. This was exactly what I was looking for! I quickly explained the way I normally saw things and this time it was easier than

with either Mrs. Chung or my parents. Dr. Sage was skeptical at first, but when I explained the poking and prodding with the sword, he suddenly smiled.

“You know, I was quoting Scripture right at that moment,” he said in wonder. “You really can see these things! That truly is a gift and a powerful one. But you must use it wisely.” I asked him about the armor, and he reached for his Bible.

“The armor of God is found in Ephesians 6:10-18,” he explained, flipping open the tiny worn volume. “There we read, ‘Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. Put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil’s schemes. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand. Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place, and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace. In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints.’” (NIV84) He looked up at me.

“I pray through this every morning, putting on the armor and preparing for the day.”

“But how does that work?” I wondered. “How do you do that *practically*?”

“Well, it really doesn’t take very long,” he replied. “I say something like this, ‘Lord today I want to be strong in you and in your power. I lay down my strength and take up yours to face the day.’”

“I put on the full armor so that I may stand against the devil’s schemes. Lord, show me his schemes so that when I face them, I can take the way out that you provide, not falling into sin and thus disgracing you.”

“Help me to remember that my battle is not against flesh and blood, but against the authorities of this dark world. Help me to remember that no person is my enemy. Teach me to love them as you do. Help me to stand firm today, Lord, even as I purpose to.”

“I put on the belt of truth, remembering that in and of myself I am a sinner, unable to do anything to please you or save myself; but you have chosen me and saved me, cleansed me and seated me at the right hand of your Son in the heavenlies; You are the one who gives me value.”

“I put on the breastplate of righteousness, a righteousness that comes from faith and not by works, making it clear that I am accepted in the Beloved and right with you.”

“I sheathe my feet in the preparation that comes from the Gospel of peace. Help me to remind myself of the Gospel at all times and to step forward to share it with those who need it.”

“I take up the shield of faith with which I can quench all the fiery darts of the enemy. Help me to raise it up, trusting You in and for all things, praising You, especially when I don’t feel like it or see the outcome.”

“I put on the helmet of salvation for the transformation of my mind. In Your authority, I take captive every thought under the authority of Jesus Christ and bring them into obedience under Him.”

“I take up the sword of the spirit, which is Your Word. Help me to use it wisely and circumspectly to help people to know You better. Give me wisdom as I pray, praying in line with your Spirit. Amen.’ Then I usually have my prayer time and pray for other people.”

That seemed fairly simple enough, but it was deeply profound to me at the same time. This was something I could do, and I said so.

“It seems easy enough, Sam,” Dr. Sage cautioned, “but the devil will do what he can to discourage you from it, because he knows that once you put on this armor regularly, he will no longer be able to defeat you as easily. Temptations increase and battles get more intense. But believe me, the spiritual growth that this discipline will bring into your life will be immense. It won’t come instantly or quickly, but it will come.”

We went through putting on the armor again, me repeating after him, and that ended our session for that day. We agreed to meet regularly for the time being and I left from there, nearly floating on air. I was so excited to see what I would look like when I looked in the mirror. However, I was sorely disappointed when I

stepped in front of the full-length mirror on the door to my bedroom closet. All I saw was myself as everyone else did. That puzzled me greatly. Wouldn't I see the shine and the brightness? Wouldn't I be able to assess where I was at?

Mrs. Chung had an answer for me about that when I chatted with her over it the following afternoon.

"Our Lord never makes it easy for us, Sam," she pointed out. "He told us in His Word that 'without faith it is impossible to please him; for he that cometh to God must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of those that diligently seek him' (Heb. 11:6 – KJV). Perhaps God does not allow you to see your own glory-self because He wants you to accept what He has done in you by faith. *Believe* that His promises are true, that you have put on the armor, and it will be so. You don't need to see it to believe it."

This was a little hard to swallow and I pushed against it some. Why *couldn't* I see what I was? I grumbled to God about this for the next couple days, but as I read in the Bible, I finally came to see that I was merely being selfish. No one else could see what I did. They had to assess themselves without looking in the mirror. Why should I be any different? In accepting that truth came more of a freedom. I prayed through the armor each morning.

## I See a Wolf

Sunday rolled around again and I was unsure of what to do. I still had not found a place where I belonged. I poked around online to see what churches were in the area and was surprised at how many there seemed to be within a 10-minute drive of our little town. One, however, caught my eye: the "charismatic" church that my old classmate Jasmine's family attended; the one that my parents didn't see fit to fellowship with. Something within me tingled and I wondered what it was that my parents found so reprehensible that they would refuse to fellowship with these others who called themselves Christians as well. I had time to make it there for their scheduled service, so I headed down, hopped in the car, and drove over.

The church building was a long, narrow box with no markings other than a glass-and-metal sign by the driveway, declaring it to be the Lifespring Church. The symbol was water springing up to form a stylized cross. There were quite a few cars in the parking lot and one of the parking attendants directed me to a spot from where I headed up to the two-story building. I was warmly greeted at the entrance by a well-dressed middle-aged man and then again by several others who politely asked my name and told me how excited they were to see me here and how pleased they were that God had brought me. This was quite a different experience from any other churches I'd been to so far and I slowly began to feel at ease. I felt even more so when I glimpsed the tall, distinguished form of Dr. Sage over to one side, talking with a shorter man of middle eastern aspect. For a moment I thought to join him, but then noticed everyone filing through the double doors of the sanctuary. A projection at the front was counting down minutes and there were only a few left so I tried to find myself a spot somewhere at the edge of the middle, in case the realities that I would see would lead me to leave this place quickly.

The service started calmly enough with a band consisting of guitar, bass, keyboard, drum set, and two vocalists at the front. They sang songs I did not know, the words of which were projected on a screen above the band. As I looked around the fervor of the congregation seemed real enough. As the first song ended, the guitarist made some introductory statements and launched into another really fast song. People raised their hands, swayed in place. Some had their eyes closed, others wide open. I took my glasses off so I could focus on the words of the song, finding the imagery interesting if the poetry was pedestrian. Phrases were repeated over and over again. The melody shifted several times, making it hard to follow, but in my observation, most people were really into what was happening here. People were now clapping in time to the song. By about the third repetition I was able to figure out the chorus and join in tentatively. At the end of the song there was loud clapping, accompanied by cries of, "Thank you, Jesus," and "Praise the Lord," and "God, you're king!"

Suddenly to my right I heard a sort of babble that I couldn't understand. A young man beside me had his hands raised, eyes closed, face in ecstasy as unintelligible syllables tumbled from his lips. This was new and I was taken aback. He glowed with Jesus, obviously rapt in worship, but his glow was weak and unsteady, not growing like that of the woman in front of me who also had her hand raised in reverence. That puzzled me.

I looked towards the front and was surprised to see that the glow of the band was fairly weak. Only one of the vocalists blazed forth. The guitarist, who was obviously the leader, was pale and had a wolfish aspect to his face, but now glow. Somehow, I was not surprised to find a vaunted leader to be a non-believer. Still, he was an accomplished guitarist and did a good job of leading the congregation through the songs. The band was very tight, as if they'd worked together for a long time and there was a professionalism to the service that was both inviting and irritating. The worship continued in a lively fashion, consisting almost entirely of singing, as songs blended one into another. There was one hymn that I recognized from my childhood, but the melody shifted away, and the timing was very different than I was used to. As the singing continued several members of the congregation seemed to work themselves into a frenzy. Others swayed to the music, lost in rapture. A few here and there were glancing around like me, trying to see what was going on, but most everyone was fully engaged in this worship time. It ended with a middle-aged man taking the pulpit. We all sat down and, to my delight, this preacher shone brightly. While he was not armor-clad, there was a maturity about him that was expressed in an increase of his brightness as he launched into his teaching. It was rich, clear, and practical. He did not skirt the issues or lessen the blows, but poured forth the love and acceptance of God in ways I'd not known a preacher to do. And I knew: this was teaching I could thrive under. The sermon ended with a resounding call to action, but was then heavily muted by the fluffy phrases and churning chords of the final song the band had us sing along to. What an odd juxtaposition this was: a pastor that burned and a band that performed. I sat for a long moment, mulling this over. I would need to talk to Dr. Sage about this one tomorrow evening, I decided, putting my glasses back on.

I got up from my seat intending to go at least greet my friend when I heard a voice beside me.

"Sam? Sam Heiligenthal?" I looked over to see a young woman coming towards me with a bright smile. It took me a long moment to recognize her, but then it hit me.

"Jasmine!" I smiled broadly. "It's been a long time."

"Yes, it has," she replied. Her hair was down and rather shorter than I remembered and she was dressed much less conservatively than I'd seen her before. Her makeup was applied carefully and her glasses were gone, replaced by contact lenses, I surmised. She also was taller than I remembered.

"You look very nice," I said, and she blushed deeply.

"You think so? My boyfriend likes it, so I wear it." It was an odd statement, and I was tempted to look over my glasses to see the glowing girl I'd once known, but refrained at that moment.

"How long have you been back?" I asked instead.

"Oh, a few weeks. I'd never thought to see you at our church. Your parents were always so ... conservative." I wasn't sure how to answer that one at first, but then decided the truth was in order.

"I only just found Jesus a few weeks ago and I am looking for a place to belong." I hesitated. "I really liked your preacher's message." She smiled again, but the wattage that usually played around the edges of my glasses was missing.

"He's a good man," she affirmed and then looked over her shoulder. At that moment I peeked under my glasses, expecting to see the brilliant beauty I remembered so well. Instead, there was merely a feeble glow around her. She had cuts and bruises on her arms, neck and face, some still oozing blood. I tried to compose my face to hide my shock, but I was not quite able to.

"Is something wrong?" she asked, but I was saved from replying by the arrival of the lead guitarist from the band.

"There's my girl," he said, possessively putting an arm around Jasmine's shoulders. There was something about her movement that made me wonder if she was entirely comfortable with it. Then he noticed me.

"Who are you?" he asked coldly.

"Anton, this is Sam," Jasmine said instead. "He's an old friend from school."

“Nice to meet you,” I said, extending my hand. Anton shook it perfunctorily.

“How’d you like the service?” he asked. Even through my glasses he was wolflike, a predatory light in his eyes. There was something about him that put me off, especially in the way he was now holding on to Jasmine’s shoulder. What was going on here?

“It was different,” I replied, trying to be polite. “I didn’t know any of the songs, but I really appreciated the message.”

“Ah.” Anton grinned. “You’ll learn ‘em pretty quick. They’re easy.” Then he maneuvered Jasmine to the side.

“It was good to see you ... Sam, was it?” he said. “We’ve gotta head out.”

“I’ll see you around, Jasmine,” I said. She just looked at me and smiled, though there was something to it that looked frightened. I glanced over my glasses as they departed, and it looked like Anton’s claws were digging deeply into her upper arm. In that instant I wanted to rush up and tell her what he was and what he was doing to her. But how?

Instead, I went looking for Dr. Sage. He was standing with that middle eastern man again, who turned out to be Mr. Malik, Jasmine’s father. I’d only seen him once or twice while in high school, so it was not surprising that I’d not recognized him.

I was then approached by another man my age who invited me to go to lunch with some of the other singles. I agreed, as it would be a chance to meet others at the church. As I was waiting for the group to gather, I noticed Anton and Jasmine off to one side, Anton speaking quietly but forcefully to his girlfriend. Suddenly my right eye itched, so I lifted my glasses to scratch it. As I removed my hand and my glasses were tilted, I saw a very odd picture: in my supernatural vision, Anton was striking and scratching at Jasmine with his claws, snarling and spitting. She was shrinking down, tears streaking her face, blubbing in anguish. In my natural vision, they were simply standing there, talking. It’s amazing, how much words can hurt. I made up my mind to go over and break up the conversation when my new friend, Mat, arrived with the rest of the group and we departed for dinner. But Anton was still talking to Jasmine and obviously still wounding her on a spiritual level. In that moment I decided that I needed to do something about that.

## I See an Attack

I spent a pleasant time with the singles of Lifespring, but the whole time the situation with Jasmine and Anton played in the back of my head. It was unconscionable what he was doing to her! Even though most of the people I hung out with were friendly and kind and glowed with God, towards the end I found myself a little moody and terse with them. After I left, I wondered if I had offended any, but couldn’t really do anything about it at that moment.

I got home and after a few moments of indecision flipped on my computer, figuring I’d look at my favorite comic strips and maybe watch an episode of my favorite show. And that was when it hit: just as my browser opened to the usual search box, I found myself flooded with intensely lustful feelings towards Jasmine and even more intense violent intentions towards Anton. This was a shock to me: my clear vision has kept me pretty much immune to a sensual attraction to the opposite sex. When a beautiful woman turns into a stick figure, a corpse, or a hulking monster when you take off your glasses, you tend to lose interest in them. After all, the only woman I’d ever been remotely attracted to was Jasmine and that was because of her shining with Jesus. That was gone now. Why should I be feeling this way?

I tried shoving these emotions away from me, loading up the show on my computer, but it wouldn’t come up. Maybe the site was having an issue, I thought. Only a few fragmentary pictures loaded, one of them only for a moment before my advertisement blocker caught it and hid it, but in that instant, I’d seen what was obviously the face and hair of a beautiful woman. Once more those intense feelings surged over me. What could I do? In that moment, the thought came: *Get away; do not be alone!* But where should I go? I wondered. Mrs. Chung was away with her family. Family ... my family.

I leaped up, leaving the computer running, grabbed my car keys, and headed over to my parents' house, my heart and head still pounding with rage and lust. I pulled up and breathed in and out deeply.

"God, help me," I whispered, taking off my glasses and dropping them on the passenger seat. "Jesus, please help me!" Again the urge not to be alone flooded me and I got out of the car, walked up to the door and went in.

"Sam!" My gorgeous, glorious mother was standing there, blazing like the very sun. She'd obviously just spent time with God, and it flowed off her in peaceful waves, pushing back at the darkness that surrounded me. She looked at me, puzzled.

"Are you all right, son?" she asked.

"I am now," I managed to push out. "I just needed to be with someone."

"Well, come to the patio," she said, taking my hand. "Your father and I just finished up our Sabbath reading."

"Maybe we can read some more," I suggested. She smiled at that, and her shine increased in anticipation. Coming out on the patio, my hero father rose to greet me. He looked at me critically for a moment.

"Are you all right, son?" he asked in the same words as my mother, and I couldn't hold it in anymore.

"No, I'm not," I said. "I feel ... angry and ..." I couldn't bring myself to say the words.

"Come, sit down," Dad said, pulling me to one of the other chairs around the cast iron table. "Tell me about it." Suddenly I was flustered. What would my parents think if they knew I'd gone to Lifespring? Would they disown me because I'd chosen to visit a church that was different from theirs? But then I remembered the preacher's teaching: the richness, the depth, the practicality; and I knew that it was right to have gone there. This was rooted somewhere else. So I told them where I'd been.

"Yes, Lifespring has become a very good church over the last few years," my father said with a satisfied smile, much to my surprise. "Ever since Tom Klein took over as pastor it has improved." He shook his head slightly. "Of course, I don't care for the music much, but the preaching is very solid."

"You've been there?" I asked incredulously.

"Yes," he replied. "The Elders decided we should visit each of the area churches at least once every couple of months to foster unity among the greater body. I've been to Lifespring twice now. If that is where God calls you to, then go by all means." I felt myself expand at that. My father had approved of my choice! He looked at me critically, then.

"But that's not all that happened, is it?" he asked pointedly, and I wondered if my father had the same ability to *see* as I did.

"No," I said and told him about meeting Jasmine and Anton. I wasn't sure how far to take it, but once the cork was out, the whole thing poured out. Dad looked very thoughtful as I told him of the intense emotions that had driven me here.

"I just have to do something to help Jasmine, Dad," I told him. "I want her to *shine* again, like she used to when I was in high school. She was the most beautiful person...."

"And she still is, son," my mother put in. She'd brought out a fresh glass of her sun tea for me, something that always made me feel at home and relaxed.

"But she doesn't look that way now," I wailed. "What can I do?" Both Mom and Dad were quiet for a long moment, looking at each other. I could see from the increased glow around them that they were both praying. Finally, it was my father who spoke.

"Start by praying for them both, Sam," he said. "Pray for them to change. Don't interfere until God makes it very clear that you are to act."

"And, sweetheart," my mother added kindly, "make sure that your heart is right before God when it comes to Jasmine. Is all that you really want for her to shine again? Or is there more that you desire?" My heart skipped a beat. It was like she'd just looked into my soul and pulled out a dark, hidden secret that even I did not know was there. Yes, I wanted more than simply having Jasmine glow again: I wanted *Jasmine*. Was that even right? Wasn't it enough to see her shine? What would it be like to live with someone like me, who

could instantly pinpoint the spiritual state of anyone who was around them? Wouldn't that be a burden to such a person? I couldn't make a decision at that point, but knew I must, must come to grips with it as soon as possible.

"Well, son, let's pray," my father interrupted and did so. His rich words warmed me to the core, and it felt to me like the attack I'd just been through had been thoroughly thwarted. As he finished, I felt like I wanted to tell him something, to thank him for what he'd just done for me.

"Dad," I said, "have you ever heard of putting on the armor of God?"

## I See My Mentors

The following afternoon I went to visit Dr. Sage again and we discussed various things, including those intense feelings that I'd had and how I'd handled them.

"What you did was very good," Dr. Sage told me. "Of course, you can't always get away to see people like you did yesterday. In cases like that it's good to have memorized some Scripture that you can quote to counter the Enemy's attacks."

We also talked about the service, and I asked him why the songs were so dissonant to the sermon.

"Now that's an interesting observation, Sam," my mentor said. "It often depends on the song leader. If he or she is in tune with the Spirit, then the music and the sermon will mesh perfectly. If the leader is not focusing on what the Spirit wants, but rather on what he or she wants, then you end up with songs that carry a different message from what the Spirit is saying through the preacher." He smiled ruefully. "You kind of came on a bad week. When Anton leads there is often such a dissonance. However, when Gloria or Kenneth lead, the service is much more of a unity. Rick does a decent job, too, most of the time, but he hasn't been leading since Anton was asked to join the worship team."

"You have more than one worship leader?" I asked, surprised.

"Yes, we find it's better that way," Dr. Sage pointed out. "Each of the leaders gets a break to actually focus on joining into worship themselves; it gives us a positive variety and it allows more people to use their gifts."

"How long has Anton been leading?" I wondered and instantly regretted the question; it was beside the point.

"Oh, a few months, maybe." Dr. Sage compressed his lips as if he was going to say something more, but then changed the topic. I thought about Anton's spiritually lupine features and wondered why he looked like that.

"Dr. Sage, what do you think it means if someone attending a church looks like a wolf?" His eyebrows went up.

"Someone looks like a *wolf*?" he returned. "Now that's an image." He smiled for a moment. "It sounds much like the way Jesus describes false teachers, 'They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves.' (Mat. 7:15b – NIV84) Perhaps if someone looks like that, they have entered the fold to take over and build themselves up at the expense of others. Did you have someone in mind, Sam?" I was flustered. Anton very well could be part of the fellowship in that way, trying to push himself forward for his own glory. His possessiveness of Jasmine could suggest that. But was it fair to say anything about it to Dr. Sage? What was his position in the church? If he was a leader, then perhaps it would be worth telling him, but for now I decided to let it pass.

"I'm not at the point where I can talk about that yet, sir," I told him.

"Very well, Sam," he said, obviously respecting my decision. "Let's talk about motives today." It was just what I wanted to discuss. We talked about how we always have mixed motives and how important it was to make sure we analyze our motives, especially in sticky situations.

"There will be times when you must make quick decisions, when you can't take a long time to think through what is motivating you," my mentor explained. "For that reason you need to practice doing this when you have the time and learn to do it well, so when you get into those situations, you'll be able to think

more quickly and accurately and act in tune with the Spirit.” He showed me how he would use his journal to work through his thoughts and suggested I try it, too. That was my homework for the week and it was precisely what I needed at that moment. I knew exactly what motives I was going to sift through: those in regard to my wanting to help Jasmine regain her shine. I started right after my solitary dinner that evening, taking out a sheet of paper and writing down all the reasons I could think of for helping Jasmine. There were many selfish ones: wanting to have her for my own, my glory, punishing Anton for hurting her, being perceived as a hero, earning my place in the church, just to name a few. But there were also good ones: wanting to see Jasmine truly be in tune with Jesus again, seeing her healed, helping Anton see what he was doing so he could repent and come to Jesus, protecting the other believers from the threat I knew he posed. As I looked at the list and marked the positive ones with a green marker and the negative ones with a red one, then I prayed through the list as Dr. Sage taught me, embracing the good motives and rejecting the bad ones, repenting of them before Jesus.

The exercise brought me a joy and relaxation. Dr. Sage had suggested destroying the list after I was done, but something held me back. Instead, I wrote at the bottom, “Pray for Jasmine and Anton every day,” and hung it on the wall beside my computer. I was not going to allow my negative motives to affect this rescue effort and I was going to do all I could to make it work, beginning with prayer.

My week continued as normal with tea and prayer with Mrs. Chung, though this now shifted to Thursday as her church had started a prayer meeting on Wednesdays again. She told me that she’d found some allies in a few friends from another church, who had agreed to come to her church on Wednesday nights and pray for revival and the exorcism of the agents of evil that were tearing down her Pastor Charlie. I also told her what I couldn’t tell Dr. Sage, namely about Anton and his wolfish aspect. She was silent for a long moment as she considered this.

“Sam, you’re facing something similar to what I’m up against, if on a smaller scale. Find yourself some allies, some prayer warriors who will stand with you and keep you safe.” She smiled. “I will certainly pray with you about this.”

“Can I ask you something else, Mrs. Chung?” I said. She nodded and after a long moment I pushed out, “Do you think that someone who has my gift should get married?” Her eyebrows went up and she smiled oddly.

“I really don’t know, young man,” she replied after pondering a bit. “For those who know what you can see, you will be very intimidating. That is, unless they are very mature.” She paused and thought more. “I can tell you this however, having been both married and single, that there are certain freedoms that you will have as a single, that you will have to give up when you marry. God gives both gifts freely and means for us to enjoy both, *but*,” here she raised a shining finger, “it is not wise to try to find a husband or wife at all costs. If you do that, you’ll be denying the gift God has given you *now*. And living in the now is important. Don’t worry about tomorrow for today has enough worries of its own.” She smiled at me. I wasn’t sure what to do with this advice but filed it away for later. We chatted some more and then prayed: for Pastor Charlie and for Anton and for Jasmine... and for me: that I would know how to approach this situation. I felt much better when we finished. What a joy it was to meet with such mature Christians! I felt supremely blessed by those whom God had put in my life.

Following that conversation, I received a call from a prospective client who was looking for a good photographer for a wedding a couple weeks hence. They’d gotten my name from a friend of a friend, whose child’s birthday party I’d done sometime earlier, and they wanted me as their “principal photographer” for the big event. I agreed to meet with the wedding planner the following day, only to find out that these were people with money coming out their ears and that I would be one of three people doing stills along with a very professional crew doing the motion pictures. I decided at that point that I would need an assistant for this job, especially if I was supposed to take the big set pieces. But who could I ask? I pondered that as I left the meeting, turning it into a prayer as my mentors had suggested.



## I See Context

Sunday worship at Lifespring was much richer than the previous week. The glowing girl I'd noticed last time was leading this time and the female keyboardist was replaced by a man who also shone brightly. I wondered if these two were Gloria and Kenneth. Anton was still there with his guitar, though he'd faded into the background more. This time we did not merely sing. There were Scripture readings woven in among the songs and a time of open prayer, which lifted my soul. This time when Pastor Klein took the pulpit, his message was even more magnificent. It was even punctuated by short choruses of praise that enhanced the message and raised the responsiveness of the congregation. The final song was a soaring anthem that underscored the key points, leaving me sated and excited to put into practice what I'd heard. I sat for several long minutes after the service ended, basking in the brightness and resting in the richness. Ah! This was what worship *should be*: all-encompassing, all-filling, all exalting Him who was worthy. Once more I was struck that this place was *right* for me. I sighed with joy and stood again. In that moment I wondered if Jasmine was around but did not see her in the throng. *No matter*, I thought.

Mat invited me to lunch again, and I realized that this was something that the singles in the church did regularly. I was even surprised to see an older gentleman who could have been my grandfather joining in as we headed off to our local diner. As we walked into the restaurant, I apologized to Mat for my negative attitude the week before.

"Ah, it's nothin'," he replied. "Saw you talkin' to Anton before, so I figured." He shrugged.

"You 'figured' what?" I asked, thinking that I might be catching his meaning, but wanting confirmation.

"Well," he hedged as we sat down at the big round table the singles usually used, "Anton ain't the easiest one to chill with. Rubs people the wrong way, you know? People usually get edgy after hangin' with him." He shook his head. "Plays a mean guitar though."

"You do, too, Mat," the girl sitting next to him interjected.

"Yeah, but after Anton joined the band, what's the point? I can't play a lick of what he can, 'specially since he's gone pro and stuff." I raised my eyebrows. Well, that would explain why he was so good.

"Still," the girl replied, "I can't see what Pastor Tom and Daoud see in him. He sure knows how suck up to them." She snickered. "My mom's from Germany and she says they call people like him a 'cyclist': bow to those above you while trampling on those below."

"Karin," Mat said with a scowl, "you know we're not s'posed to talk like that 'bout them that ain't with us. It ain't fit. And Jesus don't like it, neither." Karin smirked at him.

"Your Uncle Will's said the same thing about him, and you know it," she shot back.

"That's Uncle Will," Mat replied. "And he apologized afterwards. He knew it was wrong to say that there. If he and the other leaders wanna talk like that 'mongst themselves, that's their business. We're called to love everyone, even them's that's prickly." Mat might have a homey way of saying things, but he sure knew how to call them, I thought. Now this was a guy I could really like. Peeking around my glasses, I could see the distinct difference in light between Mat and Karin. He blazed and she barely blinked. There were a couple questions I had to ask, since I didn't know the first names of a few people.

"Who are Daoud and Uncle Will?" I put in.

"Daoud Malik?" Karin replied. "That's Jasmine's dad. And I've seen you talking with Will Sage. Most of us call him Uncle Will, because of Mat here."

"Oh," was all I said. To me he'd always be *Dr. Sage*. My parents had emphasized respecting people. It was odd to me that the respected leaders of this congregation would be referred to on a first-name basis by my peers, who are much, much younger than them. This was something I'd have to get used to. Karin, however, kept talking.

"You know; I miss having Jasmine around. She's always so much fun, except when we get into all the spiritual stuff. Ever since she started going with Anton, she's never around." She looked at me. "You know Jasmine, right, Sam?"

"We went to high school together," I replied.

“Yeah, me, too.” She squinted at me. “I don’t remember you, though. When’d you graduate?” I told her the year.

“Okay, you were a grade ahead of me, that’s why I didn’t know you,” Karin went on. “You went to a different church, right?”

“Sort of,” I said, glancing at Mat, who was chatting with the older gentleman that they’d invited to come along this Sunday. Karin caught my glance.

“That’s Carl,” she informed me. “His wife died a few months ago and we’ve kind of taken him under our wing. He’s a single again, after all.” She giggled at that.

During the rest of the meal, I chatted with Karin and Mat and learned a few more things about Lifespring. Karin definitely liked to tell other people’s stories and she did it with a zest that was disconcerting. Mat had to shut her down quite a few times. What I did learn from the discussion was that Anton had only started coming around Lifespring in the past year or so and had quickly become part of the worship team, on account of his inordinate guitar skills. While he’d made a profession of faith, his joining the worship team had resulted in several people quitting, including Mat and Rick. He’d also latched onto Jasmine right after she’d returned from college, making Karin think that they’d known each other there. She also had lots of other juicy details that were not pertinent to the matters at hand, and I came away from the meal, better informed but wanting a bath. Mat invited me to what he called “flock”, which met on Friday evenings, and I said I’d try to come, but that my job as a free-lance photographer often had me doing things on Fridays and Saturdays, so I couldn’t promise to attend all the time.

I went home with my new knowledge and spent some time in serious prayer. While some of it was good, the way I had obtained some of it felt wrong. I picked up my Bible and flipped it open, finding myself in the book of Proverbs. Two lines sprang out at me: “The words of a gossip are like choice morsels; they go down to a man’s inmost parts” (Pr. 18:8 – NIV84).

*Oh, no!* I thought, realizing that in listening to Karin I was participating in gossip, something that my mother had always stressed was abhorrent to God. I immediately knelt down and asked God for forgiveness. But even as I was still on my knees, I wondered what I should do with the information that I had been given. Would it be right to act upon it? I mulled over that, dreamed about it, and carried it through Monday until I was able to ask Dr. Sage about it.

“That’s a tough one, Sam,” he said. “What you know can’t be unknown anymore, which means you’re responsible for that information. In Proverbs it says not to betray a confidence when arguing with your neighbor (Pr. 25:9-10). God may lead you to act on what you know, but at the same time you should not discuss it with anyone who has no business knowing that. If you get into a situation where you’re tempted to share such information, ask yourself, ‘Will this person be able to act on what I’m telling them? Does this fall in their sphere of responsibility?’ If you can answer ‘yes’ on both of those, it’s probably okay to share the information with them. Otherwise not.”

## I See Jasmine Again

Tuesday morning dawned slightly misty, just perfect for a picture that I’d been intending to take in the park. Photography is after all patience and persistence paired with observation and opportunity. There was this lovely little gazebo off in a hidden corner, which would look perfect in an early morning eastern light, especially when wreathed in mist. I threw on some clothes, grabbed my film camera, which was loaded with black-and-white, and my DSLR camera and literally ran across the street so I wouldn’t miss the moment. I got to the gazebo and lined up the shot, but was only able to take a frame or two of black-and-white, before I heard a sob and a sniffle. I pulled down my glasses and looked to my right. Seated in the grass was a young woman in conservative jogging clothes: a loose t-shirt and longer shorts over spandex leggings. Her hair was pulled back into a business-like bun, her forehead resting on her arms. Perhaps she was just tired, I thought, pulled out my DSLR and pushed my glasses up on my forehead. But she sobbed again, and I

looked over, this time without my glasses and saw the flickering glow of a weak or wounded Christian. I dropped my camera and walked over to the jogger.

“Hey, are you all right?” I asked and she looked up at me. Jasmine!

“Hey, Sam,” she said, her bruised face tear-streaked. I couldn’t bear to look at her like this and pulled my glasses down onto my nose. The bruises were gone, but the tears were still there.

“I’m just working through something,” she said.

“Must be a pretty hard something.” It just popped out of my mouth and in that instant I had a sense that this was one of those divine moments. I squatted down next to her.

“Would you like to talk about it?” I asked.

“No ... maybe.” She sighed heavily. “It’s not really... I mean, you’re a guy, and....” She looked away, flustered. I looked for words to say but couldn’t find them and so sent a silent prayer heavenward. Jasmine looked back again.

“I just needed to get out some,” she said then. “It’s been a rough time since we ran into each other. He’s just so... so... I don’t know.” She rested her chin on her arms and looked off towards the gazebo.

“It really looks nice, doesn’t it,” I found myself saying, noticing the angle from here with the light and the mist was even better than standing. “Look at how the light comes through the mist. It only lasts a few minutes, but it’s glorious, kind of like God wants us to see how He sees His children.” I glanced at Jasmine and saw a smile tugging at the corner of her lips.

“Yes, it is beautiful,” she sighed. “But does God really see me that way? I’ve screwed up so much in these last weeks.” I glanced back at her, suddenly wondering if her wounds were at least somewhat self-inflicted. I thought for a long moment, perhaps she needs a distraction, something else to focus on.

“God thinks we’re beautiful, Jasmine. He’s made us beautiful after all. Then He makes us more beautiful when we come to Him and walk with Him. That’s what I’ve been learning from Mrs. Chung and Dr. Sage these days.” She smiled a little and I wondered what she was thinking.

“Thanks, Sam,” she said then. “I needed that.” She sighed. “I don’t feel very beautiful right now.”

“The clothes?” I asked, coming to a realization.

“Yeah, and the makeup and the hair. It’s not *me*. It’s what *he* wants me to be.” She looked at me. “Is it right to change who you are so you impress someone you like?” I didn’t have an answer for that.

“What do *you* want to be like?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” she replied. “I can’t figure it out. Sure, I finished college, I have a degree. My parents want me to marry and have kids, like my big sister, but I want to see things, do things, but what... I don’t know.” In that instant an idea popped into my head.

“Are you working right now?” I asked.

“No.” She looked at me, curious. “Why do you ask?”

“Well, I’ve got a big job coming up, shooting a wedding. It’s a really big one and I’m going to need an assistant, who can help me place people and arrange dress hems, maybe hold my extra flash, or help set up equipment. Since you aren’t doing anything, would you be interested? I’d pay.”

“You’re offering me a job?” she asked, somewhat incredulously.

“Well, it’s a once-off thing,” I said. “I don’t do big stuff like this really often.” She smiled. “And you can wear what you want, as long as it’s both formal and functional.” That elicited a chuckle.

“Formal and functional? For a girl?” She laughed again. “You don’t really know women, do you, Sam?” I shrugged.

“I’m an only child, Jasmine,” I countered. She sighed and gave me a lop-sided smile.

“Okay, Sam, I’ll be glad to, even if it’s just this once.” She looked away. “It’ll be nice to do something with someone different for a change.”

“Great, we’ll be doing it on Saturday. It’ll be an all-day event. Do you want me to pick you up or will you drive?”

“I’ll meet you here at the park,” she said resolutely. “We don’t have an extra car and I don’t think Baba would approve of you picking me up from our house. He’s particular about that.” I frowned. That was not

quite right, was it? I didn't want to go behind Mr. Malik's back. I wanted to ask what she was going to tell her parents but refrained. That was her business. I knew that offering her the job was the right thing to do, but shouldn't we be above board on what we're doing?

"I'll tell them about the job, though," she told me then, allaying my fears. "Despite his wanting to protect me, Baba has always wanted me to get some job experience. And a wedding should be all right with them." She wasn't looking at me as she said it, making me think she was thinking out loud. "Well, maybe it is better if you pick me up from there," she continued. "If Baba sees it's you, he should be fine with it." She glanced at me.

"Baba?" I asked.

"Oh, that's my dad. He said Uncle Will is really impressed with you and thought you were very polite when you talked with him the other Sunday. He doesn't approve of young men very easily." She smiled again, shining a bit more.

"Good," I said to her. "Are you feeling a little better?" She straightened up and her smile was genuine this time.

"Yes, I am. Thank you, Sam. You came along at just the right time." Those words warmed me like I never thought they would. I straightened from my crouch and thought to help her up, but she was on her feet before I could offer.

"I'll see you Saturday, then," she said and jogged off. I watched her go, vanishing down the path. I turned back to the gazebo, but the mist had melted, and the sun was now framing the peak of the structure. The moment had passed, replaced by a more momentous one. There would be other mornings when I could capture that image, but another morning like this one would never come.

## I See Something Special

Saturday came with sudden swiftness. Only three things stood out that week, first my time with Mrs. Chung, during which she shared her cares and I mine. We came away mutually strengthened. Mrs. Chung was truly a ferocious fighter and a powerful prayer warrior. But she needed people with her, and I was glad to be one of her "allies", as she called it. She was both pleased and perturbed by my employing Jasmine and warned me to guard my heart.

"It was a God-moment," I protested.

"Maybe," she replied. "But the Enemy is pragmatic. If he can use Jasmine to make you fall, he will. He'll do whatever it takes. Be on your guard." She smiled. "I will pray for you all day Saturday, young man. You are like my son: just starting out, brave and brash. Don't let the Devil drag you down." I smiled at that. The end result of the conversation was me placing a phone call to my Dad and telling him about Saturday, too. He actually sounded pleased when I talked with him about it, not at all worried about me not doing the right thing; and that strengthened my resolve to be a gentleman toward Jasmine and to be above reproach.

The third thing was the visit to "flock". It was a great time, and I was surprised to see Jasmine there that evening. Karin later told me that this was the first time Jasmine had been back since she'd left for her last semester of college, and I wondered why that would be. Maybe Karin was right: Anton and Jasmine had met in college, and he'd begun exerting a bad influence on her there. Well, it was speculation, I told myself, and speculation is unhealthy: it's like trying to find symbolism in pictures where it doesn't exist. It wastes energy and divides people, much like what my first-year photography prof kept doing in looking for hidden meanings in our photos.

I pulled up to the Maliks' house early on Saturday morning and found my hands trembling. *It's just a job*, I told myself, but it oddly felt more like I was picking Jasmine up for a date. I decided I needed to center myself and so bowed my head and prayed.

"Dear God," I said out loud. "I want to do this right. I want to help Jasmine, but I'm afraid my feelings are going to get in the way. Protect me from myself and protect her from me. Help me to keep my mouth shut

when it should be and to say only what you want me to. And help me to be a good friend first and foremost." I sighed heavily. "God, I want her to *shine*, again. Please, just let that happen and I'll be content." I knew that the last line was not strictly true, but that *was* my chief motive, for crying out loud. I'd rejected the others over and over again and did so once more. Then I climbed out of the car.

The door opened as I walked up and Mr. Malik was there, obviously waiting for me.

"Good morning," he said gravely.

"Good morning, Mr. Malik," I replied. "I hope this is okay with you." He looked me up and down sternly.

"Bring Jasmine back at the end of the day like you've promised, and we'll see," he said first, then added, "What are you going to pay her?" I named the amount I'd decided on, which was fifteen percent of what the happy couple was paying me. His eyebrows went up.

"So much?" he asked.

"Photography can be very lucrative, Mr. Malik," I explained. "It wouldn't be fair to my employee if I made good money and didn't pay her well, too." He pursed his lips.

"You make a good point," he said, then turned into the house, said something in another language and Jasmine appeared. She was wearing a dark, conservative pantsuit over a white blouse with her hair neatly pinned up and a minimal amount of makeup. Very professional-looking, I thought. That was good because it took the entire date-feel out of the situation.

"Hey, Sam," she said. "Do I need to take anything?"

"No, I've got it all," I replied, then turned to her father. "We should be back this evening: it's an all-day event and we'll have to clean up when everything's done."

"Just be home before curfew," Mr. Malik said to his daughter and she replied in that other language, kissed him on the cheek and walked out to the car. I shook his hand, too, and for a moment thought there was a twinkle in those dark-gray eyes. But if there was, he masked it instantly.

"What language were you speaking?" I asked Jasmine as we drove off.

"That? Oh, Arabic," she said. "My parents were both born in Lebanon. They moved here right after getting married when Baba came to get his masters."

"Really? I had no idea."

"Well, we didn't really hang out much in high school," she pointed out.

"That's true," I replied. We made small talk as we drove to the venue, a beautiful lake about forty miles from town. She told me about studying social sciences at a major university to the north. I told her about learning photography. It turned out that she liked art, too, and was a decent illustrator.

"But I never could figure out how to use a camera," she lamented. I asked what she thought she would do with her degree, and she said she didn't know.

"I kind of did it, because it was the only thing that remotely interested me there." She shrugged. "I enjoyed the research and figuring out what people were thinking, but I don't know how to make a career of that. I don't really like the academic atmosphere. It's too closed-minded."

"Really?" I exclaimed. "How so?"

"My social-sci professors were insistent that their view was the only right one," she explained. "Here we're told in one way that we're supposed to research and come up with new ideas and conclusions, but when we really do, we're shot down." She huffed. "A couple other girls and I did a project on how Arab Christian women view themselves. The prof didn't like the results because they didn't support her very radically feministic viewpoint. We were only given a B- grade, even though our advisor, who was in poly-sci, thought it was a very good effort and was worth at least an A. It was a *research* paper after all." She glowered at that, then muttered, "I still haven't forgiven her for that." Insight struck me in that moment: this was where Jasmine had begun to lose her glow!

"I met Anton soon after that," she continued. "He was supportive and intervened on our behalf, but my prof still wouldn't give us a better grade and it affected all of our GPA's making one of my friends miss Magna Cum Laude by one percentage point." She gritted her teeth. "But Anton was so helpful and so friendly. We started hanging out." She looked over at me. "He even called Baba to ask permission if we could

date!" She shook her head. "It takes a lot to win Baba's approval. He's really old-school when it comes to dating and he's said that he won't allow me to marry anyone whom he doesn't approve of." I didn't really have an issue with that one, because my parents were similarly strict. "Anyway, it was nice to have a boyfriend...." Her voice trailed off.

"Was nice?" I wondered out loud. Jasmine didn't answer that one, but rather stared out the window glumly, so I changed the topic, trying to get her mind off Anton, but he sat in the back seat invisibly for the rest of the drive, and it wasn't until we topped the ridge to descend to the lake that Jasmine stirred from her reverie.

"Oh, wow!" she exclaimed, taking in the blazing blue surrounded by gorgeous greens of various hues. The light was just perfect, and a cloud had moved over the sun so beams of light played on the beauty below. I pulled over, got the DSLR out and shot several frames to test the lighting and to record this glorious moment. Then we descended to the lakeside where the wedding would take place.

The rest of the day was really busy. Jasmine did a great job from the get-go. She showed excellent skills in helping me and the other photographers schedule where we would be for what part of the wedding, as well as making a couple suggestions regarding location that really enhanced the results for all of us. She was humble and helpful and willing to do most anything, from holding the bride's dress in the right way, to entertaining the flower girl and ring bearer, neither of whom could have been more than four years old.

I had my glasses off more than half the time, because without them I get a clearer view through the viewfinder. Thankfully Jasmine was not too distracting to me. The groom was a hulking monster, drooling over his fangs, and the bride a bloated beast that was the equal of her prospective husband, though through the viewfinder he was exceptionally handsome and she a stunning vision in a revealing dress. Once more I was struck with the disparity between the physical and spiritual realities. Even so, it was a very nice, very romantic wedding, despite a raunchy speech by the best man and a really soused maid of honor.

Thankfully, the happy couple climbed into the limo by late afternoon, allowing us to depart sooner than I'd expected, our responsibilities being taken care of. The wedding planner reminded me that the remainder of my fee would be given upon receipt of the photos, which I promised would be ready by Wednesday next. We then departed happily, pausing at the top of the hill to look down on the lake again and catch a few more snapshots of the lake in a different light.

"You know," I said to Jasmine, "it's amazing how where the light falls changes how you see things. You see that grove over there?" I pointed to a cluster of deciduous trees across the lake. "That was invisible in the morning light, because the afternoon light brings out that delicate gold tint of the leaves."

"Hm," Jasmine replied, watching the westering rays.

"And when it gets to be dusk, the trees will all become one giant gray mass and the lake will become a mirror of the sunset. You can see individual wavelets on the water then, even from up here."

"Yeah, and from here you would never be able to tell the mess that was left behind by the wedding party," she observed. I nodded. She turned to me then.

"Thank you for this, Sam. I really needed it. I really needed a friend."

"You're welcome, Jasmine. Any time." And I meant it. We climbed into the car and drove off, silent for a long time. Then when Jasmine spoke it took me by surprise.

"What you said about light is true about people, too, isn't it?" I hadn't even thought that far ahead.

"I suppose you're right," I hedged, her not knowing that I could see more than anyone else in that regard.

"It's like with Anton," she mused. "At college he was one way, but when he came here and joined our church he changed." I wanted to prompt her to continue, but something held me back. Jasmine was silent for a moment then continued, "He was so much more secure at college and was actually quite nice. Except he always wanted me to wear those other clothes and more make-up and keep my hair down." She shook her head. "Since he came here, he's become so possessive, so controlling. It's like he's afraid to let me be out of his sight." Out of the corner of my eye I could see her glance over at me. "I don't even know if I love him anymore." She paused for a long moment, then said, "But Baba approves of him." And she sighed.

"Is that so important?" I heard myself asking.

"Why, yes!" she exclaimed. "I've waited so long to find a man that my father approves of. I never dated in high school, and I so want to get married!" She smacked her hand over her mouth when she said that, realizing she'd told that to a guy.

"But aren't you supposed to approve of him, too?" I asked instead. I glanced over to see her staring at me, open-mouthed. I thought about what Mrs. Chung had told me about marriage and wondered whether Jasmine should hear it. I sent a prayer up for wisdom and as no urge to speak came, I remained silent then.

"You're right," she mumbled, getting ahold of herself. "I hadn't thought of it that way." Then she turned and looked out the window for the rest of the trip, obviously mulling over that.

We pulled up in front of her house and I reached over the seat to get an envelope from my camera bag.

"Thanks for coming, Jasmine," I said, handing it to her. "You really were a big help today. You made our job a whole lot easier, and I think your suggestions made the pictures better, too." She both blushed and brightened at that, accepting the envelope.

"What's this?" she asked.

"Your pay," I said.

"Oh." She hesitated. "You gave me something much better than money, Sam," she said then. "Thank you." She leaned in slightly as if she wanted something more then opened the door and ducked out of the car. I opened my door and stood up to make sure that she'd entered the house safely and saw Mr. Malik in the entrance. I nodded at him and he nodded back at me, then I left, feeling both fulfilled and wanting more. That last movement before she exited the car: had Jasmine wanted to kiss me?

## I See...

Sunday morning I saw her from a distance, sitting with her parents. This week Dr. Sage asked me to join him and his wife, so I did. The guy at the keyboard was leading the singing time this week and he took it in a bit of a different direction, skillfully weaving responsive readings in with the songs, as well as what he called "Korean style praying", namely everyone praying as loudly as they could, all at the same time. I didn't really like that, being a more contemplative type anyway, and was surprised to see Dr. Sage simply standing there with his eyes closed. His glow, however pulsed ever more powerfully as I could see him communing with his God amid the cacophony. It wasn't until we sat down that I noticed that the guitarist today was Mat and not Anton. *Oh, no*, I thought. *What happened to him?*

After the service, I looked for Jasmine, but she wasn't there, and neither was Anton. How odd, I thought, heading out to lunch with Mat and the singles again. Carl was along, too, and this time I spent some time talking with him, hearing about his days as a petty officer on a destroyer during the cold war. Then I headed over to my parents' house to tell them how the previous day had gone. Dad smiled gravely and Mom positively shone at how I had handled it. I was buoyed by their joy and headed home after dark. I parked my car in its usual spot and headed to the entrance of the apartment when a shadow detached itself from the doorway next to it. I barely noticed it, until a pair of strong hands grabbed me and slammed me against the wall, knocking my glasses off. I winced and opened my eyes to stare into the wolflike features of Anton.

"You!" he snarled. "You took it all away. You took *her* away, damn you!" He raised his fist and swung it at me. I was too stunned to move and caught the full force of it on the side of my head, splitting my cheek. *Oh, God, help me!* I cried out inwardly.

"What did I do?" I asked, knowing all along that I had prayed for them, that it was my prayers that had made this happen.

"You stole her from me," he hissed with a curse. "She was mine and you stole her from me. I knew you would do it the day I first laid eyes on you. You want her for yourself!" He raised his fist again.

"I would say you lost her yourself, Anton," I said coldly, and I was amazed at how steady my voice was. He shook at that, growling again, his lupine eyes blazing in the night. I brought up my left arm and for once I could see the crystal glow of my shield.

“How dare you say that!” he howled.

“I know what you are, Anton,” I said. “I can see that you’re a wolf in sheep’s clothing. You’re in this for yourself and no one else.” I took a deep breath and continued, “I’ve been praying for you both, Anton; that God’s will be done and that you would both know him better.” I pressed my shield against him gently and it pushed him back. He let go of my collar, talons still extended.

“You what?” he gasped.

“All I want is Jasmine to shine again, Anton,” I said evenly. “And you can shine, too. You can be a sheep instead of a wolf; you can really be part of the congregation of saints.”

“What do you mean?” He snorted. “I only joined those holy rollers so I could get Jasmine. Her old man is a moron and that praise and worship crap you sing on Sundays is some of the most poorly written music on the planet. Why would I want to be a part of that?” He growled, slavering. “And why would I want such a worthless uptight wench like Jasmine anyway? That was my mistake.” He looked at me. “Thanks for pointing it out. Here’s your payment.” He slashed at me, and I raised my shield, his claws raking sparks across it. He had meant to wound me but did not touch me. My faithfulness had protected me! I praised God for that. I bent to find my glasses and saw something dripping on the ground. While my spiritual self was unharmed, he really had split my cheek with his punch, and I was bleeding.

I went upstairs and knocked on Mrs. Chung’s door, only to have it opened by my warrior-queen mentor.

“Sam!” she exclaimed. “What happened?”

“I had a chat with Anton,” I said. “I just want to know, is it bad enough to need stitches?” She laughed at that.

“Didn’t I say you were a brave one, young man?” She stepped aside. “Come in and I’ll fix you up.”

The rest of my week went by calmly. I had found peace, knowing that God had answered my prayers. I’d held true to my motives and to my commitment to pray for Jasmine *and* Anton; and I kept praying even for him. After all, isn’t he just a lost soul, too? Our battle is not against flesh and blood, but against the principalities and powers of spiritual wickedness in heavenly places. So Anton is not my enemy, no matter what he tried to do to me; and pray for him I will.

That Sunday I sat with the Sages again and looked across the congregation to see Jasmine with her parents, just a few rows ahead of me. Jasmine was shining again, perhaps not as brightly as before, but I knew it would increase. I looked towards the front where Kenneth was once more leading worship; and I was happy.

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