

From the chapter: “My Mind Working in a Different Dimension” [pages 30-31]:

From all the readings of philosophy and religion since first being introduced to such ideas by Dream in that damn jail cell, the one lesson they all imparted was that the secret to becoming one with the divine is to love others unselfishly with no hope or expectation of personal reward. Do that, I believed, and everything you want will come to you. That’s why I’ve spent most of my life since then in service to the poor and dejected and unwanted. I got the love part down pat. The bugaboo is the no-expectation part. I never can get the hang of that. And as far as the idea that everything you want will come to you, well I just don’t know ’bout that.

I think about the Jesus pictures in my childhood home, hung on each side of the dining room table on flower print wallpaper. In one picture, we see a flaxen haired Jesus sitting on a big rock, a gaggle of adoring, pink-cheeked children sitting on his lap and leaning against him in adoration. So sweet and so false. I recall the song we used to sing in Sunday school: Jesus loves the little children, all the children in the world. Red and yellow, black and white, they are precious in his sight.

On the other side of the table was a copy of an El Greco painting of Jesus running the merchants out of the temple. He is tall and magnificent in his red robe, drawing his hand back to lash out with a whip. The merchants are in contorted positions of agony. To his left are two rosy naked cherubs, which, you know, are often associated in art with romantic love. Next to them stands a woman with bare breasts. As a teenager, I often speculated that El Greco put her there as a treat for horny old priests.

Every time Mama passed by one of those pictures, she would kiss her middle and index fingers and touch them to Jesus’s face. It was Mama all the time talking about Jesus. Papa hardly ever talked about religion, but he was a believer too. I think. He just didn’t talk about it much. Lord, he never talked about anything much, ’cept maybe fishing. He had a bumper sticker on his old Chevy station wagon: I’D RATHER BE FISHING. And we all knew it was true.

What I learned about religion when I was growing up came mostly from Mama and from Brother Carter’s hellfire and brimstone sermons. We went to Holy Word every single Sunday morning and every Wednesday evening from as far back as I can remember up until I went to college and quit going. I was living in the dorm, and I told Mama I was attending a church in Hub City. “Well, so long as they believe in the Lord God Jesus Christ, then I guess that is all right. But beware, I don’t much trust some of these modern liberal churches,” she said. Holy Word welcomed people of all faiths and even those who had no faith. Doubters were more than welcome, for there was nothing they loved more than a chance to bring doubters into the fold of the righteous. For what seemed like years, they had the same message on the signboard out front: *We live and breathe each day there is always a new opportunity to begin or renew one’s life in God.*

Services featured music from a Christian folk-rock band and a small chorus that rocked out on gospel tunes from oldies like “Old Rugged Cross” to new songs like “Let the Whole World Sing” and “Soldier of the Light.”

It was because of the music I was able to tolerate Holy Word. That and the welcoming attitude expressed in their newsletter and other printed materials but which we heard precious little of from Brother Carter, whose sermons were mostly angry shouting. “Lie down with vipers and you’ll get bit! Deny the lord thy god and you will spend eternity in the fiery lake of hell!” His brand of religion was more frightening than wild beasts or madmen with guns. But by the time I ended up in that jail cell with Dream Wilson I had learned to seek a kinder way of worshipping a loving and forgiving Jesus. What I had learned from the New Testament and what little theology I had read was quite different than Brother Carter’s fearful fundamentalism.

“Did you notice that statue outside when they brought you in?” Dream asked.

“Sort of,” I answered. “I was a little preoccupied.”

“Yeah, I can dig it.”

Thinking about how he had at first directed my attention to *The Blessed Ludovica* and then to some statue that stood outside the building. I figured the guy must have been into sculpture in a big way.

“Civil War general,” he said. “General Nathan Bedford Forrest. Forrest County. Get it?”

“So? There’s statues of Civil War generals everywhere you look. They reproduce like rabbits.”

“This one was famous for leading a massacre of Union soldiers after they surrendered. The three hundred Union soldiers they slaughtered were mostly Black. They were Black captives, and Forrest murdered them. He was also the first Grand Wizard of the Ku Klux Klan. And that’s who this county is named after. How does that make you feel?”

“It makes me damn glad I’m not one of those Black men across the way.”

“No shit.”

It made me sick. I didn’t know any of that. Like many others, I guess, I thought Forrest County was so named because it was smack dab in the middle of a pine forest. I’d never paid attention to the fact it was spelled with two *Rs*.

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Our cell had a concrete floor, scuffed and turned the color of tire rubber from years of grime. The walls were cement blocks coated with plaster—walls of graffiti, mostly girl’s names and Roman numerals

From the chapter: “And Then it Happened” [pages 223-224]:

What kind of idiot was I to think I could get away with claiming sex *just happened*? Like I closed my eyes for a moment and the next thing I knew I was with a woman not my wife, and we were naked, and then oops, I was on top of her. Oh, but it just happened. Like there was nothing leading up to it, no flirting, no hints. Like it hadn’t been the fear of getting caught and lack of opportunity and that alone that had kept us from doing it throughout the almost two decades she had been living with us, at first sharing a bedroom with our daughter and helping us raise her, and later in a bedroom of her own. But in a way it’s true that it did just happen. It came upon us like a storm. I can’t deny the message-filled looks over time, the flirting and teasing and sexual tension between me and Dixie that was as electric as bolts of lightning. But there was no immediate lead-in to us going to bed together. It took us both by surprise. The opportune time came and—bam! It was like in the movies.

Like in the movies, yes, yes, yes. The movies are ripe with hints so blatant a child can read them, telegraphing that the lovers are going to end ... well, lovers. They never talk about what they’re going to do. They never say, “Perhaps we should engage in sex now.” The man never asks for the woman’s consent, and yet somehow it is given. The couple fumbles with keys and opens the door to his or her hotel room or apartment, and before they’re even halfway inside the doorway they’re passionately kissing and ripping off one another’s clothes and he kicks the door closed, and then before you know it, she leaps up and wraps her arms and legs around his body, and the camera follows as he carries her to bed, and the audience sees closeups from a variety of odd angles of their naked bodies, fingernails digging into flesh or hands clutching a wad of sheet, or if it’s a PG-rated film there’s a pan to the ceiling or a window or to clothing strewn about the floor, and the morning sun rises outside the window to indicate passage of time, then she sits up with a sheet modestly clutched to her breast, and then there is a cut to a montage of the couple ecstatically running hand-in-hand on a beach, riding a merry-go-round, visiting an art gallery or sharing a meal at an outdoor café overlooking any one of a dozen possible idyllic scenes. That’s how sex *just happens* in the movies.

But not in real life.