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What People Say

James Calvin Schaap

Garrett told me when this all started that we caught the Pastor Neal in a lie. I said the pastor just misspoke, and since when did he—Garrett—get all self-righteous about bending the truth a bit? I mean, I've been married to him for more years than I care to admit. Not that it's been all bad. Don't get me wrong.

Besides, I'm not sure Pastor Neal is capable of lying. Sin?—yes, of course. But outright lying is the kind of transgression you expect of weasels and skunks and men who peddle crop insurance. If Pastor Neal has a shady side, nobody at our church has seen it yet. Naïve?—okay, we'll give you that, in spades, too. But I say if innocence is a sin, then why did Christ himself suffer the little children like he did? Answer me that.

But then my husband can't quite get used to a preacher who insists on saving gas by riding this little motor scooter around town, like a kid, a preacher whose hair deliberately sticks up the way Pastor Neal's does. "He greases it that way," Garrett told me when Pastor Neal came here for an interview. "That's the way he *wants* it to look, if you can believe it. It's like he got out of bed wrong," he said, pointing a piece of bacon at me.

"Like somebody else I know," I told him because I didn't like the way he was pointing that bacon.

Pastor Neal's not a dominie, an old-fashioned stem-winding pulpiteer, if you know what I mean. He hasn't yet come out with "thus saith the Lord," or at least he hasn't in the ten months he's been in our pulpit. That's what gets Garrett's goat, if you know what I mean. He can't get used to a preacher he's got to love. Men want to respect preachers, not love 'em, and it's a challenge for him, this pastor on

a scooter. But I think I can bring him through it—me and the Lord, and I been married to him for 51 years come August.

The "lie" Garrett insisted on wasn't even a fib. Pastor Neal just didn't get the words just right. He told us he was "seeing someone." He was, in a matter of speaking. No, he was, period. He's got a gizmo on his computer.

Of course, we didn't know that right away, and it started a whole lot of talking, as you can imagine. Alice Evans teaches 3rd grade, pretty as a picture but kind of quiet. Some good money had her as the one he was seeing, but I figured we'd have all known since there aren't many dark corners in a land this flat and open. Somebody would have seen them together, and you know people will talk.

Fran Gottlieb has been eligible for too many years already, we figured. Pastor Neal's young enough to have been one of her students—well, I'm stretching things a bit. Judy Smithson's husband left her two years ago, but I don't know if Pastor Neal is ready for an instant family—three kids. He's got to get some miles on before he's ready for fatherhood, we figure. Besides, word is, Judy's seeing someone herself.

Teresa Van Stedum—now she'd be a catch, just about perfect for a preacher's wife too, that's what we all figured. But Teresa's been nursing her own hurt for so long that we didn't think she was up to it yet. But someday. Poor girl. That's a whole different story.

It was impossible for us to believe that he was seeing someone we wouldn't know—I mean, you can count the eligibles on one hand almost. By *us*, I mean my friends. I know you're saying, "people talk," and we do, but it's out of concern. Mostly.

Took us two days before we started checking in with our grandchildren who'd gone to school with

Pastor Neal, asking them who he'd been seeing at college, long ago. Three days, four days—and we still had nothing. Claire said maybe we ought to think about hiring out a private eye.

The thing is, we love him because he pays attention to us. You talk to Pastor Neal, and he looks you in the eye, fair and square, and lets you talk. Not like a lot of preachers, if you know what I mean. The women of Norwalk Church love him because you look in his eyes and you trust him. Men don't understand that, but then a lot goes right past them.

And I've got to admit myself that I almost climbed aboard my own husband's skepticism when Pastor Neal—he really is a good, good man—first announced what was going on, how he really wasn't "seeing anyone," per se, but how he'd met someone on-line. On-line.

I had to explain that to Garrett, which was not pleasurable at all, let me tell you.

"On-line," I told him, before he went off to play snooker at the Senior Center. I didn't want him sounding stupid when those other guys started laughing about what Pastor Neal had said.

He hunched his shoulders.

"He met her on the internet," I said, pulling his coffee away before it ended up all over my kitchen cabinets.

Not much shuts my husband up, but I don't think there was room in his consciousness for such an idea—a preacher of the Word finding a girlfriend somewhere on a screen full of porn.

"It's a *Christian* thing, Carrie says," I told him. Carrie's our daughter. She lives in the Twin Cities. "You got to be a Christian to sign up, she told me."

Garrett's face turned to pink quartzite, I swear.

"It guarantees the girl you're hooked up with will be a believer in the Lord," I told him. "This internet thing—it's just for believers, so how bad can that be?"

Nothing.

"Garrett, I hate to have to break the news, but we're now officially in the 21st century," I said, "and there is no old-time religion anymore."

"The internet," he says. "He's seeing this girl on the internet, you say?"

Good night, that sounded awful. "Are you hearing me, or do you have to crank up that

machine in your ear?" I said. "I told you it was a *Christian* thing—this whole business—and besides there are tons of cultures in the world today where love isn't the spark at all, where parents line things up. I don't even know if that's such a bad idea."

"He's my preacher," Garrett said.

"So he's talking to this girl before he's smooching—if you know what I mean," I told him. "That's better than our own kids. Shoot, that's better than you and me."

"He's finding a wife on the internet, you say," Garrett said. Honestly, the whole business had him snookered is what I'm saying.

But that wasn't the half of it either. Seems this young woman who he's seeing—like I said, he's got this little camera-like thing on his office computer—she's in seminary. Oh boy, ain't we got fun. As if Garrett and the Senior Citizen gents didn't need more ammunition.

Here's the thing. Fran and Joe Henderson got a son in Atlanta, where this young lady lives. You know Fran—well, maybe you don't. But caution has never been her strong point. She goes to Pastor Neal and says that she wonders if she and Joe could stop in at this young woman's place when they're in the city anyway. "We'd certainly like to meet her," Fran told him.

And this is just the kind of man Pastor Neal is. He goes to his notepad and scribbles out the address, just like that, smiling. "Let me know what you think," he said.

"How much room you got in your trunk?" I asked when Fran called me to tell me what had happened.

"We're bringing some beef along for the kids," she says.

"I didn't mean it," I told her laughing. Maybe I did.

Anyway, Fran and Joe came back like Joshua and the Canaan spies, full of promising reports. Small, kind of quiet, they said, very nice smile, not pushy at all, even cute—seemed young, they said, but then so does Pastor Neal. Ordinary. Common. Nothing to worry about. Sincere, they thought. Even seemed pleased to meet them. "Someone I'd be proud to have for a daughter," Fran said, and she's raised some fine kids. Most anyway.

And that's where it stayed for a month or so, Pastor Neal occasionally taking a day off to meet her halfway to there. Don't ask how it is we know

those things. We just do. The consistory isn't exactly a sieve, but how do you really expect those men not to tell their wives, right?

Garrett wasn't exactly square with the whole business, as you can imagine. But he takes some nursing—don't they all?

And then Pastor Neal made the announcement, how this young lady—her name is Leanne, and I think that's a name without an edge to it if I ever heard one—how this young lady was coming to Norwalk for an official visit.

I pitied her. I really did. All I could see was her coming into church like some perfect foal at the county fair, all eyes measuring every angle. If it's a Sunday, I told my friend Claire, we might just as well get pulpit supply because Pastor Neal isn't going to be thinking about the Word. Maybe get some elder to read a sermon because nobody's going to be hearing anything anyway, Claire said.

Here's the way it happened, honest truth.

She got a cheap fare out of Atlanta on a Friday afternoon so she wouldn't have to skip any classes, and she'd arrive in Omaha at nine. Pastor Neal was going to be picking her up, of course, and the plan was for her to stay at the Newhouses, just across the street from the parsonage. All well and good.

Well, wouldn't you know? Tracy Albright had a heart attack. Now Tracy's one of my friends, and I was horrified to hear the news; but it wasn't one of those massive ones either, just a mild one, if I can say it that way. Anyway, she up to the hospital, of course, and Hank, her husband, calls the preacher right away, and Pastor Neal says it's his place to be with the family at a time like this and how can he get his Leanne here if he's got to stay with the Albrights?

Comes down to us. The Newhouses really don't drive that far anymore, and who on earth would like to be in a car with Ed in the middle of the city? Ed calls Garrett, and Garrett looks at me but he knows well and good there's nothing he can do but say yes, even though he wasn't altogether taken with the whole internet thing and the fact that we got someone who's going to be a woman preacher on our hands. "Good lands, what am I going to say?" he says to me when he puts down the phone.

I told him just to let me do the talking, which is the way we've often enough avoided calamity, if you know what I mean. "Besides," I told him,

"she's not the anti-Christ."

His fingers start to twirl, which I know is a sure sign that he's got real butterflies. I know my husband.

So we went. And there she was, coming off the plane.

We're thirty minutes outside of Omaha when I'm thinking that Fran and Joe's report from the field was right on the money. Not that she was reserved either, really, but she didn't fill the air with talk like some can. Mostly, Garrett stayed out of it, which was fine because I thought he could learn a little civility, maybe even warm up to her if he heard her talk. All I needed to do was steer the conversation away from the potholes.

Seems she's come to the Lord on her own, her parents no particular help at all—she even asked us to pray for them. Something happened in college, something that changed her life; she bottomed out on something, didn't exactly say what, and I wasn't about to pry. Quoted C. S. Lewis in fact—about kicking and screaming his way to the throne.

I'm thinking Garrett has to like this, but I'm also guessing that there's some voice in him saying she's awfully young in the faith.

It's dark on those roads outside the city. You start on your way your way out here, and sometimes people who aren't used to it get a little antsy. There's nothing but your own headlights out front, like the snoot of a hound. Deer galore, too. More after harvest—which is what time it was.

She's sitting in the back seat by herself, and I'm thinking that maybe I should have insisted she sit up front like I would have if she'd been a man, should have put her closer to both of us or something, but maybe that's just the mother in me. We've got kids older than Leanne.

"He speaks very highly of your church," Leanne said, her voice coming out of the darkness. I'd have liked to see her eyes just then, but there was nothing in her voice that gave me any clue she was being fake nice.

"We like him, too," I told her. "Don't we, Garrett?"

He really hadn't said much, and I didn't want her to think that he was just some muddle-head farmer. The man raised our kids and kept the whole operation afloat through really hard times. He's got a right to his opinions, and I love him. Maybe I said that already.

He swung his face toward me as if he didn't really want to participate.

"I was saying how much we liked Pastor Neal," I repeated. Ever since he's had a hearing aid he's even more of a selective listener. "He's been a Godsent to this church, hasn't he?"

All he's got to do is grunt, I'm thinking.

"He's a fine boy," Garrett said, which wasn't exactly the response I was setting him up for. "He's going to be a fine preacher someday, I think," he said. "He's on his way."

That wasn't bad.

"Could you live out here?" he said.

"My word, Garrett," I said. "Talk about cart before the horse."

"I don't know," she said. "There's a lot I don't know."

"Can't see it right now," my husband said. "But we live in a beautiful land here."

"What's that town?" she said.

"No town out there, just farm lights—fewer and fewer of them, too," my husband said.

"Looks like a town," she said.

"It's a community," my husband said. I was proud of him.

"That's really nice," she said. "I like that." Then it was quiet—for about a minute. Then, "I can't imagine living here," she told us. Not haughty either. Lord knows, we get a lot of that out here. That wasn't the point, and I could tell it. "I mean, it's an awful lot, so fast. So much to worry about."

"Well, Rome wasn't built in a day either," I told her.

"If you marry him," Garrett said, "will you tell him to sell that scooter?"

Honestly, it was about the best line right then, as if it were scripture. That little girl sat in the back seat and just roared.

"I don't really like it all that much myself," she said. "But don't you dare tell him."

"Don't worry—we can keep secrets," I said, figuring the Lord himself would forgive me for that one.

"So are you going to be a preacher too?" Garrett said. "The two of you? Methodists in town got that kind of tag team. They seem to like it. 'Variety's the spice of life,' my friend Ed says. He goes there. The only difference is, he says, the guy's a little funnier than his wife."

"That's a switch," I said.

It's quiet again. Through the windshield, the stars were barely visible, and I had this sense that maybe if we'd show her the skies out here, she'd like it. She'd like us.

"So you going to preach?" my husband said again. If I'd have known it, I'd have thrown an elbow.

"I don't know," she said. "In college I was 4.0, and I just went right on to seminary, maybe too full of glow, just having become a believer. I'm the kind of person who got where she is because I didn't have to work much—does that make sense?"

We didn't have the radio on. The markets are all down anyway, and quotes come in all day long, never at night. We got CDs we take along on trips, but I hadn't thought of them. It was quiet as a mouse in the car is what I'm saying. I guess I didn't expect that questions we might ask—either of us—would come back in our laps. As old as we are, we're not accustomed to people asking our opinions about things.

"I mean, it's like I've been on a track in my life, and this whole thing—this whole on-line thing—I honestly don't know what to think about it."

"You like him?" my husband said.

"He's so caring," she said.

"That doesn't answer the question," my husband said. He was almost out of control.

"How much must you like a person to sign up for the rest of your life?" Leanne asked. "How'd that work with you?" she asked.

I honestly don't know how I would have answered that question, but I let the two of them be. The dash lights turned his face gold.

"I didn't have much choice," he said. He nodded towards me. "It just seemed natural, you know? With this internet business, it's just a whole different thing."

"And was it the right choice?" she said.

I wanted to break in, but I couldn't. She was talking to him—even though I couldn't see her face, I knew she was talking to him.

"Best choice of my life," he said. "Best thing I ever did."

"Ask him again when I'm not around," I told her.

"But I didn't know it then," he said, "didn't know half of what I know today, which is only half of what I should—if that. That make sense?"

“No,” she said.

“Don’t imagine it does to someone your age,” my husband said. “This guy you’re seeing—our pastor, Pastor Neal—he’s a fine, fine boy. Just can’t call him a man yet, but he’ll get there, hear? He doesn’t have a lick of deceit in him. I think you can trust him, which says a lot. I do.”

“I can trust the Lord,” she said, “but I have lots of problems trusting people.”

“You and me and half the faithful, if not more,” he told her.

And then, just like that, she said it. “Would you pray for me?” she said.

“Right now?” my husband said.

“Yes,” she said. “Would you?”

Now I have never for one day in my life questioned my husband’s faith, not once. Not that he’s been outspoken about it or anything. It’s just not his way. But when push comes to shove, I know he knows he’s in the hands of the Lord. We’ve been through too many hard times out here in the middle of nowhere for me to think he doesn’t find his only comfort in belonging to Jesus.

But that doesn’t mean that when he’s said just a few words to someone he hardly knows and he’s driving our Buick halfway through the night and he’s not all that comfy with the internet and women preachers—that doesn’t mean he’s just going to “go to the Lord” at the drop of the hat like some TV preacher. Honestly and truly, I didn’t know what on earth he’d say just then, although I knew in the middle of my heart and soul that he was just as sure as I was that he didn’t have any choice.

So my Garrett pulled over on Hwy. 44, not a car sight, left the engine running, and the three of us got out. I insisted we hold hands, like Kum-by-yaa, which is not my husband’s favorite. That’s the way it went.

Public prayer has never been one of my husband’s gifts, and he knows it. But this praying out here under a giant sky wasn’t public, the kind of *public* Jesus himself warned us all against. But what Garrett said that night broke through something for all of us—for this little girl, who didn’t know a thing about what she was getting into; for me, who maybe has too often not trusted her own husband in his later years; and for him, who wasn’t all that keen on any of this before this woman, in seminary, took him into her confidence and asked him to lean on the Lord God for her, to lift her

up.

Something broke out here in the darkness, and in me. I could feel something tugging from the inside of my head at my eyes and nose. I could feel it.

“Look at the stars,” I told her when he’d finished. “Just look up.”

“I never knew there was this many,” she said. “I never dreamed the sky was this full.”

“Lots of things about life out here come as surprise,” I told her. “Trust me,” I said, and then I grabbed Garrett’s arm and pulled him close. “Even someone my age gets bowled over once in awhile.”

“You’re kidding,” she said.

“Keeps us young,” I told her, laying a kiss on his cheek for the first time in a ton of years in that kind of situation.

“But now listen to me, girl,” he said, standing out there in the weeds along the highway. “You go any farther with this guy, and you do something about that hair, will you?” he said.

“Garrett,” I said.

But she said she wasn’t all that fond of it herself, not for a preacher. That’s what she said, honestly, and that’s what I told Claire and Fran and Joe and Betty. And I’m sure it got around.

Come Sunday, Pastor Neal preached, bad haircut and all. And when you looked into his eyes up there in front of us that morning, I still couldn’t help but think that there was a man you could trust.

I don’t remember the sermon. You get my age, they go in one ear and out another. I just know it was good—that much I remember.

And when Leanne walked in with the Newhouses, we were prepared for that triumphal entry, all of us. I saw to it myself, making sure everybody knew what went on the way home from Omaha.

“So what do you think?” I asked Garrett after we let her off at the Newhouses that Friday night.

“Just what the doctor ordered,” he said, and he raised his eyebrows, nodding, the interior lights on above his bald head.

And then I shut the door, and he drove the Buick into the garage.

That’s just the way it went. And now all we can do is pray, which is all we can do for our own kids too. Every day.