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Can'ts and Don'ts

Bill Elgersma

The front of the church is sparse; a pulpit hovers above the congregation with steps to reach it, and the pipes of the organ behind it rise stiffly toward the cathedral ceiling of exposed rafters. When Klaus pounds the keyboards the stained glass windows rattle as the sound bounces around the sanctuary, but that is all the passion this building holds. Not much changes week to week, month to month, year to year. When a funeral happens, occasionally someone leaves the flowers, sometimes after a wedding too. When three of the younger women brought in a tree for the Christmas program, several families switched church membership. There are no guitars, drums, or praise teams, despite some of the kids who have come back from college asking about David making a joyful noise to the Lord. Arlene Peters had almost been kicked out of the house by her father when she had asked where the Israelites had gotten the pipe organ so David could dance. Dancing, of course, is a no-no.

Behind his pulpit, the preacher in his white shirt, narrow tie, and black jacket looks down on the two kids in front of him—he is both judge and jury. “In God’s house and before His people, what do you have to say?” He enunciates the “d” in God like so many ministers do, almost making the name two syllables. It is a classic preacher move. Regardless of whether it’s radio, television, or church, a person need only listen to the articulation of a few specific words to know what to expect for the next 10-30 minutes.

“Before God and His people, we have sinned,” comes the quiet, dutiful, rehearsed response, but the silence of the church makes it easily heard. The church is full to overflowing today—this is what the people came to see and hear this Sunday morning. Even the robins and blue jays that typically disrupt the service with their incessant

racket through the open windows understand the gravity of the situation and perch silently outside, also judging. The couple faces the congregation—he looking just eighteen, she not much over sixteen. They are nervous, and their hands shake. They do not hold hands; that would not be appropriate in the house of the Lord for two sinners openly admitting their guilt and feeling the congregation’s disapproval. Neither wants to be here, but he knows that living in this town without doing this—publically confessing—they have no chance. This is the way of the church—and by extension, the town, or at least that part of the community that he grew up in—that keeps to itself.

Feeling the weight of the congregation, Jake Atsma stands rigidly in the black suit his mom bought him for his Pake’s funeral; the white shirt and grey tie appropriate for both funeral and confession. His brown eyes examine each pair that examines him until they look away. His look acknowledges what so many others in this congregation already know: the church can discipline you publically—they can shame you to make themselves feel better—but they can’t make you sorry. That is between you and God.

Elaine Wilkinson trembles beside him, tears dripping from her cheeks as she bows her head, not able to face a church that views her as an outsider and therefore a threat—and for many, the reason why one of their sons has fallen into sin. The buttons on her sweater pucker across her chest where her breasts have begun to swell, and this once bulky sack, which worked so well, now stretches to detail the secret she has been hiding for months. She sniffs, and as she does, her mother, two pews from the front, sobs openly, her shoulders convulsing while the congregation looks on. No husband sits beside her, and the congregation innately understands that Jake should have known better. If her mother

couldn't keep a husband, he was going to have trouble with the daughter. A certain perverse satisfaction is evidenced across more than a few faces when both sobs are heard. This is not a church to be trifled with, and discipline proves their righteousness. The weeping is evidence of contrition.

The Wilkinsons are not of this church, and Janet Wilkinson is only here to see her daughter through the ritual. Their conversation at the kitchen table last night had been terse.

"Elaine, you sure you want to do this? You know what kind of a shitshow this is going to be tomorrow? You can just skip it. Those people just want to see you crushed, broken, that is it. You, the girl. This is going to land on you. You were the one who got pregnant, not him. This isn't right, you know. I don't know much Bible and I haven't made you go to church, but I don't think God only goes after knocked-up teenage girls."

"Mom," she sighs, "let it go. You play, you pay. Jake and I were messing around, and now I am pregnant. I am not going to hang him out to dry by himself in front of those hypocrites in that church because I was stupid enough to get pregnant. As far as I see it, that is on me."

There is defeat in her voice as she searches for the adult in her old enough to have a baby, while the kid in her attempts to mouth lines that sound responsible.

"No. No damn way. This is not immaculate conception. There were two of you, wherever you were, and between the two of you, you managed to make a baby." Janet spit the word *two* across the table. "He doesn't get a pass just because he is some pious, righteous church boy."

"I know mom, I know. I don't get what your deal is. Both of us will be up there, but this is much harder on him than on me. I am not one of them. I don't have to feel it every day, so just let it go, okay?" Elaine pleads, the tears so much a part of her for the past months, easily finding their way down her cheeks and puddling on the table. The kitchen is silent with only the ticking of the pendulum-driven clock counting off the minutes to fill the void.

In another part of town, the straight lips of Jake's mother reveal volcanic fury just beneath the surface. Trixie Atsma has only come to this church by marriage, and the ritual is lost on her. The kitchen conversation Saturday night—

always the kitchen—after the kids have gone to bed—is heated. "Dammit Mark. You tell me how humiliating two kids in front of a group of holier-than-thou adults makes them better Christians."

Mark knows better than to answer, but he tries. He brought Trixie into the congregation much against the desire of his family and the church in general. And it hasn't been easy. "Trix," he begins, "this is just the way of the church."

"What? To take two kids that are screwing around and happen to get knocked up and toss them in front of that group? That's what Christians do?" Her voice is rising as she stands over the sink, wiping down a saucer and looking out through the blackness of the window. The twinkle of the street lights refracting through the evening air attempts to lighten the mood.

He is at the kitchen table where most of these conversations take place, and he thinks for a moment and then responds weakly, knowing she will not accept his answer: "That's the way of the church."

"Brilliant. Just bloody brilliant. Apparently it hasn't been all that effective because the kids are still doing it. The only difference between Jake and Elaine and a whole bunch of other kids in that church is that others are sitting in the back pews either thankful that they were on the pill or he used a rubber, or some girl is sweating right now because she is late, wondering if she is the next one up. The way of the church. She muses. "The church, that mystical, all-powerful, all-knowing, all-present, unknown group. They call the shots; they set up the rules, and they issue the punishment. Seems to me that an inner group of the church has more to say than the Bible. Sometimes with all of the rules and mandates, I wonder if Christ would be good enough to attend this church. She is becoming irrational in her anger. "We parade you in front of the church to make sure everyone knows you were screwing around, and once you say 'I do,' we sprinkle holy water on our bed, and sin turns into blessing. That's how this works?"

She takes a breath and looks at him, but Mark knows better than to say anything. While he has lived his entire life in the vacuum of the church, Trixie, before meeting him, had worked in town as a motel clerk and a waitress, seeing and hearing things that Sunday suits, Sunday hats, and shiny

shoes couldn't hide.

She starts again, "You tell me, how does Dena Postma get to run her mouth in a sanctified gossip session at the high school, during 'prayer power' having kids submit prayer requests that she can now broadcast to the community under the guise of all that is holy? What about Rick Mulder with half of his business on cash? What about that minister, what's his name, the one who used to counsel women in his office until one day he up and disappears, just out of the blue? The fishing and hunting trips, girls' week to Florida, the late night rendezvous at the Blue Light with the cars parked behind the motel. People just sweet as sugar on Sunday, and Monday morning at the Cut and Curl just dicing people like carrots. You want more? How come the rest of the community is not "before God and his people we have sinned?"

She crosses the pantry to the kitchen table and slumps in a chair beside him with her voice trembling both in fury and defeat. When matters of the church come up, Trixie's upbringing burns through the gradual refinement of age and experience she has cultivated within this community. "How in hell can you let that church do this to our son—to our children now? What makes this right in the eyes of the Lord if He is a just God and sees all sins in the same light? And to top it all off," her voice deepens as she attempts to imitate the minister, "'you must confess before us or you are not part of this community.' And, by God, as far as the congregation is concerned, our minister is not going to marry you, and the wedding will not be held in our church. She looks at him, livid and pleading for some sort of comfort—for something that she has not understood as long as she has been a part of this.

Mark has no answer that satisfies. He never has. He grew up in this church and knows its power in the community—bowed to its power except to marry Trixie—and endured their passive aggressive wrath. Early in their marriage, he had told her that this zealotry would die with the old people, but he was wrong. Somehow, it seems to be a continuous loop, chastising favorite sins to maintain its purity. Thinking out loud, Trixie once suggested that maybe this vehement castigation came from their own fear and guilt of the possibility of committing this sin. Mark wasn't sure she was wrong. Perhaps letting their minds wander, what if... provided no one finds out...

is a dangerous place to go, and maybe this type of discipline helps keep the wayward mind from wayward deeds. It was a theory he had processed after Trixie's comment, and looking around the congregation he wondered about the satisfaction he saw on faces.

The whole conversation repeats itself every time something involving discipline in the church comes up, and it always ends the same way. He stops talking, and she goes to bed. He waits for an hour and then follows. The room is dark, and he listens for her breathing. She is not sleeping, but she says nothing. He is smart enough not to start, and so the silence grows. In two or three days, the tension slowly subsides. After a week, their hurts heal, and the partnership begins to mend, with more scar tissue around the edge.

In the Atsma house that week, although the little kids don't know what is going on, they know something is wrong. The tension in the house is positively electric. The celery snaps more crisply; dishes crash to the floor when dropped, even the pine in the cookstove seems to explode more percussively as it burns to take the early morning chill out of the house. Of the four children, Tony and Lee are the youngest at six and eight, and while they don't know what the problem is, they are aware that something is not right. In church on Sunday morning, Tony had turned to his mom and whispered loud enough for those in the four pews surrounding them to hear, "What are Jake'n 'Laine doin' up front, and why's 'Laine crying?"

"Quiet," she snaps, then Lee punches him. That distraction is enough to take him away from the business at hand, and the two of them church-wrestle their way through the rest of the service. For the boys, Sundays are brutal with nothing to do except go to church. In the community of Mackenrend, everything shuts down for the day. No ball games, no swimming, no skating—just a lot of no's. Tony wanders from the hall, sort of lost and looking for something to do. With the electricity in the air and Lee not around, he is reminded of the scene at the front of the church once again.

"Mum," he starts as he stands in the kitchen doorway watching and listening to her chop vegetables into the soup, "why were Jake'n 'Laine up front? Are they in trouble? Not sure of how the response is going to go, he is near enough to the back door to make a quick exit if necessary.

She looks at him and smiles. Of all the kids, Tony has received the most parenting from everyone in the family, almost like he will be the perfect child if everyone takes a crack at him. “Come here, little man,” she pulls out a kitchen chair, slumps into it, and holds out her arms. He snuggles in. “Most certainly they are, Tony, most certainly they are.”

She hesitates, trying to sort out what should be said and what he doesn’t need to know. For the most part, she and Mark have resolved to tell their children the truth when they ask, although not always to the level of detail that others in the community do. When Lee came home with a sex-ed vocabulary from Nate Postma that made her blush, she had called his mother and suggested all that information might not be necessary. The phone conversation created a rift, and Trixie only felt justified when, six months later, the graffiti that appeared on the bus stop shelter bore a striking resemblance to both Nate’s inventory of words and his printing. When his teacher discovered the spray can in his backpack, Dena was livid. Trixie never said a word.

“Well Tony, Jake and Elaine are going to have a baby,” she starts, praying he does not ask for details.

He stops squirming for a moment, thinking about the situation. “Oh, like my teacher, Mrs. DeJong?” He looks up.

“Yup, just like Mrs. DeJong,” she affirms while giving him a hug. And forgetting the trouble part of his question, with his curiosity satisfied, he pushes open the door to head outside, the screen door banging closed behind him.

Twelve years later Tony is reminded of the scene. Not really the scene as in the conversation with his mom, but the scene as in a young couple at the front of the church. For much of his life, the church has been his rulebook on sin. Mostly what he knows is what not to do because the minister has been vigilant. He has come to understand the difference between good and evil, but fear has been the deterrent. The wrath of God—and mostly the wrath of God as meted out by the church—has hung above him. And in all of those years, what he has been taught most thoroughly is the dangers of lust and women. They are the ones who draw you in, they are the ones who keep you out late at night, they are the ones who use their bodies for attention, and they

are the ones who get pregnant. And then it is too late. Your life is over, and now you are married. The last two lines are never said, just implied as a logical consequence. Every time his mother hears a version of the litany, Tony knows the paint is coming off the kitchen walls when they get home.

Rachel Stephenson is stretched out beside him on the blanket at the beach. Her family moved into the area when she was in Grade 10, and although they didn’t go to Tony’s church, the community had somewhat accepted them because their kids had enrolled in the Christian school. That makes them safe. Somewhere in grade 11, Rachel decided Tony was interesting, and she made him her project. He didn’t have a clue about anything relative to puberty and girls, and she turned him into useless mush according to his friends, all the while helping him navigate the world of high school girls and hormones and comfort. By the end of high school, she had educated him to the point that he got it—sort of. The conflict and tension between the minister’s words and Rachel’s body confused him, and he couldn’t ask his mom for clarity on this one.

Sundays, the one day he has time to do nothing, are filled with church and Rachel. Old enough to think for himself, he now violates his community of restrictions and goes to the beach on Sundays after church. The wind whistles through the pines in the summer heat as the waves lap the beach, occasionally breaking into whitecaps over the sandbar. High school is over, and he has the rest of his life in front of him. This summer he is again working for Lampman Construction as he has for the past three years, and he is filling out. Broad shoulders and thick neck from the lifting. No longer a kid, his hands are cracked and scraped from the blocks he slings to the scaffold. They hook on Rachel’s clothing when she wears satiny things that slip softly over her skin, and he loves the feel. His skin has long ago burned and tanned and burned and tanned until he is a light shade of black while his hair is sun-bleached white.

Rachel has also filled out, and she knows it. The bikini stretches across both her hips and her chest until the weave is frightened that it might not hold, while her tan complements the black satin fabric that seems to shimmer in the sun as it catches her curves. Any tan lines are a stark white contrast, but not much has been protected from

the sun. As she turns to even the tan on her back, Tony eyes her from neck to heels. The rest of his life. That is what he has.

Rachel reaches behind her back and pulls the string to undo the bow. She doesn't want string lines to ruin her tan. Then she turns to him and murmurs, "Honey, rub some lotion on me."

Tony takes the bottle and creates an oily line from neck to where her spine disappears into her bikini bottom and begins spreading it, but he is scared. This has happened too many times recently, and with each time, the tension increases. Rachel undoes something and asks for assistance, knowing she pushes his buttons. This time, as he finishes, she turns over, looks around, pulls off her top and says, "now lotion these please," and arches her back.

Tony glances over his shoulders and then up and down the beach. "Rache," he whispers, "this is a bad idea."

"What, you want me to sunburn, or you don't like them?" she smiles, sliding her hands underneath her breasts and pointing them at him.

"That's not it and you know it. This is going to take us places we don't need to go, he absurdly whispers to the empty beach, guilted by his upbringing and frightened of himself.

"Like where? She was not giving up without a fight. "Two weeks ago you were okay with keeping me and the girls from burning. What changed?"

"Rache, you know nothing's changed. But I'm scared.

"Scared of what, Tony? Boobs don't bite," she teases, hair blowing across her face with sparkling eyes—a look inviting him to her.

He isn't drawn in this time—no smile, no wise-cracks. She doesn't get it. She doesn't understand the ingrained upbringing. She doesn't hear the voices in his head, the lectures from family members, the lectures from his parents, the shadow of the community, the incessant railing from the pulpit.

His family wasn't keen on Rachel, and ironically his mother was most concerned. It wasn't based in anything theological. It didn't have anything to do with her church membership or what they did on Sunday. It was more about being a teenage male from this community and attempting to navigate maturation with someone from the outside. After all, she had been that

person from the outside—that permanent alien—and she knew the community's perception while they anticipated Mark's fall to her seduction.

Sitting at the kitchen table after supper one night where they had debated church issues again, she had started. "Tony, Rachel doesn't get this community. She's cute; she's sweet, and in your world, she's hot. Her body's filled out and she's confident. I'm not stupid, and I'm not blind. She's going to draw you in, and you're a great catch. I'm warning you: at 18 everything she offers is going to look great. But you have to know what you are going to pay for that moment, and it's on you, not her. Decide what you're going to do before you get into the situation."

"Eew mum. Stop it. Enough already," Tony shook his head. "Rache isn't pushing me anywhere I don't want to go, and besides, you don't know her. His chair scraped the floor as he stood up and moved toward the door, attempting to escape.

"Look, I came from the outside. I do know. And I just don't want you to be the material for the rumor mill," she sighed. "Lord knows how we love to talk about others. But more than that, I don't want you to have to grow up before you need to. Somehow we manage to make our kids old in this community, long before they should be, and then we turn them into us."

All of this replays through his mind as he is sprawled on the blanket beside his girl—the conversation less than a week old. "Look Rache, I know this is all fine and good. I rub lotion on your boobs and nothing happens, right? For now I can do that. I want to do that. What am I saying? I really want to do that! Tony struggles to put rules and emotions and reality together.

She smiles at him, listening to him wander through his thoughts, believing she has him back on track. She takes the sun screen, puddles it into his hand, and places his hand on her breast in a rubbing motion to apply it.

Tony withdraws the hand and looks at her, shaking his head with a frown. "What happens when that isn't enough? What happens when all of a sudden everything needs lotion, and you are naked on the blanket in front of me? Then what? Tony stumbles for words, unable to look into her eyes. "I don't think we're going to stop—under the guise of protecting you from a sunburn."

"Well, why worry about that until it comes up?" Rachel smiles, working to keep the mood

light. He is far too serious for what she has in mind. She is just teasing, like she has for the past several months, but he has moved beyond these edgy rendezvous that she has been orchestrating.

“Rache,” he starts, “if you get pregnant because rubbing suntan lotion on you turns into sex, we are stuck for life. He doesn’t mean the word “stuck,” like “stuck stuck,” but it slips out, and for a second he wishes he could take it back. But he knows even if he could, he wouldn’t.

“What do you mean, stuck?” Her smile freezes, and the tone is liquid nitrogen.

“Over the years, I have watched guys stand before the church with their pregnant girlfriends and publically confess that they have sinned before God and all his people. The church believes confession is good for the soul. I would say, ‘They think humiliation is good for the soul.’ You want that? You want to face your parents and say, “Sorry, didn’t mean to get knocked up. Sorry, forgot to take my pill. Sorry, he forgot to wear a rubber. Sorry, I couldn’t find someone to get an abortion? You want to stand in front of that congregation and say, ‘Yup, I got caught’?

The words are harsh and crude, but he wants shock, coarseness, something to keep him from doing what has consequences long after the moment has passed, because at this moment, even though he hates it, he knows his mom is right. This isn’t on Rachel. It’s on him and right now, it isn’t about God; it is about community censure.

“Rache, we keep doing this, and we’re past the point of no return. Soon enough I know rubbing suntan lotion on you won’t be enough. And in the moment, I know it will be great. But, regardless of how this fits with what I believe and my church, what if you get pregnant? We don’t get to take it back. He is looking out over the water, the hazy horizon, as he thinks out the words.

Sitting up now, she tugs her top down and reaches for the strings angrily. “What the hell is wrong with you? When did you get this uptight? What happened to fun? I am offering, and I thought you were taking. Hey, this is me, Rachel, remember? She reaches out her hands and turns his face to her. “I am the one who taught you everything. You think I don’t know what I am doing? I can deal with the church. Is that your problem? The oldest in her family, she has not received sibling lectures, and her parents have not been permanently disappointed, publically humiliated yet by the decisions that children make. The community has not yet weighed in on her, forgiving but never, never forgetting. Being a member of the United Church in town, the choice for those who needed a default church for a wedding or funeral, she isn’t under the microscope. The world of can’ts and don’ts does not exist for her.

“Rache,” he starts. “Never mind about my church. They’ve got a rule book, and they keep rewriting to fit what they think and then proclaim it as the will of God. And they keep score. This is about me and you. Our futures. Everything in my body says yes, but looking at this community, I still have a chance. I don’t have to come home to a kid and a wife and a dead-end job because I didn’t get to make choices. I’m not divorced, making alimony payments. I’m not in a constant fight with my wife over money because the job doesn’t pay enough to cover the rent and the car payment and the baby’s clothes, never mind a house or a vacation somewhere warm. I’m not taking night school courses online, trying to change my future so I can provide for my family. Maybe I’m too young, maybe I’m just scared. . . .I don’t know. But what I do know is I just can’t do this right now.”