

## ***“Tainted Saints”***

by

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It began as something to do, a means of whittling away the time in a place where excitement is most often in the form of expectation: the upcoming something-or-other, the next annual whatever. Life is much slower here...and I was bored.

When I first moved there, just over twenty years ago, I never expected to stay long. I was fresh out of Bible College and the community church offered me the Pastorate. It looked like the perfect opportunity. The church was the oldest and largest in the town, with around a hundred in attendance on any given Sunday. I thought it would be good experience: the small congregation was a solid stepping stone and it would look impressive on my resume. But I was so isolated that I soon became invisible and offers from larger churches didn't come.

At first, I hardly noticed; I was busy trying to ingrain myself into the life of the people of my congregation. And in the rural south, that's not an easy task. The town-folk are nice enough—neighborly, they call it. Their roots grow deep in this region; people like myself, who have only been here for twenty years, are still considered “newcomers.”

And I was successful. The church grew as the community grew. Many of the town's most influential people were active in our congregation. The Mayor was one of our Deacons. The Sheriff taught our adult Sunday School class. And I was considered an integral part of the town's leadership, serving as confidant to most all of the town's officials.

But at thirty-eight years old, I began to grow weary with the lack of animation in the town, the church and in my own life. What had calmed me in the early days of my ministry—the slow pace of life in this area—now annoyed me. The prestige of my position ceased to flatter me; I no longer cared to be invited by the Mayor to open the Town Council meeting with prayer. The enthusiasm I had once felt about the ministry waned into routinized rituals. Preaching sermons, visiting the sick, caring for the flock. These became duties I performed with practiced obligation, but totally lacking in passion. I needed something to occupy my time and spark a renewed interest in this town and its people.

Somehow, out of that sense of tedium and monotony, the idea to write a book evolved. The concept was a natural outgrowth of my habit of keeping a personal journal. Early on in my

pastorate, I began to diary all counseling sessions, detailing the problems being discussed in my office. Everything was there in my notes: twenty years of marital problems, sexual confessions, infidelity, scandal and sordid sin, told in the privacy of pastoral counseling. It was Peyton Place, with stained glass and a steeple.

One afternoon, on my way to visit the nursing home, Jeannie C. Riley came on the car radio, singing "Harper Valley P.T.A."

"Harper Valley hypocrites," she called them in her distinctive country twang.

I huffed out loud.

*You don't know the meaning of the word,* I said to myself. *Why I could write a book about the goings-on in this town that'd burn your eyes right out of their sockets.*

Suddenly, like the old cartoons, a light bulb went on in my head. It had long been my secret desire to write a novel. And I was not without some skill; you don't preach two sermons every Sunday and one on Wednesday without learning something about communication. Not to mention the many articles I had contributed to our denominational magazine.

The shadow of that inspirational flash continued to dog me throughout the day. So that evening I took my private journals, closed myself off in my study and began organizing my thoughts.

"Whatcha workin' on?" my wife asked when I ignored her calls to supper.

"Just killing time," I answered.

And for the most part, that was true. As I indicated, our town was not alive with entertainment. The most exciting activity in my life to that point was my twice-weekly music lessons with the pianist at the Methodist Church.

*What should I call it?* was one of the first questions in the new venture as I stared at the blank screen.

I needed a catchy title. Then it came to me: *"Tainted Saints."* It was perfect, capturing the essence of the story.

I typed the words in the center of the page and nodded in pride as I witnessed the initial genesis...and genius...of my imaginative creation.

*It is good,* I thought to myself, plagiarizing an earlier Author.

Then came the dilemma. I could not use my own name, even though I had no plans of publishing; it was just something to do. A pseudonym was the logical answer. I decided on Jake Shepherd. “Shepherd” came easily, it’s the meaning of the word Pastor. “Jake” is short for Jacob, which means deceiver. I was the “Deceiving Pastor.”

I found that writing a novel was similar to preparing a good sermon. I started with an idea: it would be about a small town congregation, seen through the eyes of the brilliant, handsome and compassionate Pastor.

From the basic premise, I built an outline. Finally, I was ready to flesh it out (no pun intended) with the events. I had read somewhere that the purpose of the first paragraph is to make the reader want to read the book. You must “hook” them with some idea of what they could expect if they read the book. I gave it the same attention I always gave to the introductory remarks from one of my sermons.

The paragraph finally took shape:

*He looked carefully at the faces staring at him; their eyes riveted upward to his exalted position in the pulpit, their minds in rapt anticipation of his next words. He was their Pastor, and the evil, carnal deeds of their everyday life demanded that they listen with attentive ears.*

A vivid description of the Pastor followed. I detailed his skillful style and artful eloquence. It was easy to capture the proficiency of his professional training and the compassion of his heartfelt calling. Clearly, he was a voice crying in the wilderness of their spiritual barrenness.

That first night I worked until nearly two in the morning. I could not wait until I got home the next evening to continue with my new hobby.

Early on, however, it became apparent that this kind of tale could not be written in the refined style of my ministerial training. No, I would have to swallow my pastoral propriety and step decisively from the “Paths of Righteousness.” Instead of lofty cleric terminology, I would need to opt for the common language of the lay people. And in my book, “lay” took on whole new connotations!

It wasn’t easy, but soon the four-letter words flowed off the keys effortlessly. God became an expletive. Hell was no longer the place of dread for sinners, but the standard reply to an question—Hell, yes; Hell, no; Oh, hell.

Sex and sexual organs were vividly presented in graphic, multi-dimensional details. Strong action verbs, used in new contexts, were employed to steam up the story: poke, hammer, throb, thrust, drive. Common words—hung, fruit, buns—assumed baser meanings, spicing up the characters. Sometimes I broke into a fevered sweat as I wrote the text.

My main characters were basically good people, with all the good intentions inherent in basically-good people. But they had their foibles. The Mayor had a secret drinking problem, which he shared with the waitress at the local diner. His wife, to cope with the loneliness, regularly allowed the Home Owner's Insurance agent to "inspect her premises."

The Sheriff of my fictitious town was a card-carrying NRA member, macho to the core. He was as fit as a twenty-five year old and wore his shirts tailored tight to reveal his rock-hard build: broad chest and trim, flat waist. But his upper body was the only thing that was hard; he was sexually impotent. His wife no longer gave a damn. She was a complete drug addict and her supplier was the town doctor. In return for the prescriptions, she gave Doc' the opportunity to make regular "physical" examinations.

In supporting roles, other citizens were introduced. The high school basketball coach who was a closeted homosexual, presently having a torrid relationship with the married mechanic at the Shell station on State Highway thirty-nine. The town librarian who secretly loaned pornographic books to a select groups of library-card holders. The varsity cheerleader who'd had two abortions, without the consent of her parents.

Though I changed the names, rearranged the events, even transposed the sexes of those involved, all of the episodes had really happened. The story was basically drawn from my own experience of listening to the details told to me in confidence.

The project consumed me for more than four months; I spent every available minute working on the manuscript. When it was finished, I sat for several minutes and stared at the "THE END" which closed the final chapter.

"It is finished," I said aloud, quoting Someone else.

I stacked the hundreds of sheets into a neat pile and put the manuscript in a drawer—one with a lock. I was content with leaving it there. After all, I had accomplished my purpose: I'd written a book!

But in the winter of that year, the church went through some trying financial times. A near-by plant cut back and many in the town were laid off. Money was tight and my salary suffered...significantly! By the first of the new year, it was obvious I would have to seek outside sources of income.

One day, while looking for typing paper to prepare a resume, I came across the manuscript. I stopped and spent several hours re-reading it. The span of time since finishing it gave me enough objectivity to know that it was good. Dirty, but damn good.

Something inside me clicked. Greed, ego or desperation, I'm not sure. But I decided to give it a shot.

*What the hell, I had nothing to lose!*

I took the manuscript to the church office and ran off about twenty copies, sending it to every publisher I could locate. I also ran off fifty copies of my resume and mailed them out around the county.

In less than four weeks, I had a part-time job working with the county child welfare department. I was responsible for interviewing and placing foster children in homes. The money was nominal, but it helped take us through the dry spell.

About a month after I got the job, the rejections began coming in. Five, six, seven. Then ten. I was more amused than hurt. Each time the package would arrive, I would destroy the letter and the manuscript.

*It was a stupid idea anyway.*

But then came a letter—without the returned manuscript—from a New York publisher. They liked my manuscript! Enclosed was a contract to publish *Tainted Saints* in hardback and offering me an advance of seven thousand dollars.

I didn't understand most of the stuff on the contract, but I understood seven thousand dollars.

"Hot damn!" I shouted. Then, almost as an afterthought, I let out a resounding "Hallelujah."

I was secretly pleased with myself. Secretly, because there was no one I could tell. It was a solitary sense of accomplishment. The only thing that bothered me was the money. But I dealt with it quickly and decisively.

*This is no problem*, I reasoned as I pondered the sudden addition of seven thousand dollars.

I figured I could find a way to incorporate it slowly into our financial resources. After all, it wasn't *that* much money.

When I got home, my wife immediately picked up on my elated mood. "Good day at work?" she asked.

"I got a raise," I told her, figuring it was a simple way to explain the extra money.

Later that week, I opened an account at a bank in the nearby county seat. I decided I would draw out a little each week to give the indication that I did, indeed, get a raise. Besides, there was no way I could tell her the truth. (Did I mention that in the book, the handsome Pastor was having an affair with his piano teacher?)

By the time the book came out, the seven thousand dollars had run out. I drove all the way up to Birmingham to buy a copy. It had been more than fifteen months since I'd sent the manuscript in, so I was able to read it fresh.

And I suddenly became very afraid.

*What if someone in the town read this book?*

We were not *that* isolated. Had I been careful enough in shuffling the events and clouding the facts? I tried to imagine their reaction and suddenly I became ashamed. I felt like Judas, selling out the most intimate details of my flock for a paltry thirty pieces of silver. Or, seven thousand dollars in today's market.

Judas went out and hanged himself, but I was not ready for such drastic action. However, I did need a positive way to deal with my remorse. Therefore, I formulated the most probable scenario. The book would sell a few thousand copies, the standard first-run order, and then fade to obscure discount tables. Even if someone in the town read the book, they wouldn't likely connect me to the author nor would they care to reveal the character they most identified with.

I closed the book and relaxed. For a short time.

"Did you see *The Tonight Show* last night?" It was my publisher and he was very excited. My book had been out for a few months and this was the first time we had spoken since then. He woke me up on a Saturday morning. Fortunately, my wife had gone to buy groceries.

"No, why?" I replied in sleepy tones.

"Some dingbat starlet was talking to Jay and mentioned your book."

I sat straight up in bed. The details were coming too fast to comprehend.

"Jay was asking her about what she did in her free time," he explained in response to my stunned silence.

"She said she liked to read racy novels. Then she took your book out of her purse and showed it on national TV. "They spent the rest of the friggin' interview discussing the goddamn book. We couldn't have paid for better publicity."

"What should we do?" I stammered—suddenly awake, but stunned to a muddle-headedness.

"I've already ordered another printing." He was talking very fast now. "If my hunch is right, this thing will go through the roof in the next few weeks. Can you stand some extra money?" He snickered the way only a rich man talking to a poor man can.

"More money?" I repeated, meekly. "How much money?"

He snickered again and my stomach knotted up. "Just ball park, but I'd say you could expect to see..." He paused for effect. "...probably in the neighborhood of thirty to forty."

I screamed into the receiver. "Thirty thousand dollars!"

"Okay," he calmed, "Maybe more. Listen, I'll get back to you toward the middle of next week. I want to run some stats from our distributors. We should know more by then."

Three months later, I receive a royalty check of nearly forty thousand dollars. My book had topped the *New York Times* best-seller list for the second month. According to my publisher, it was breaking all records.

"Your money problems are over," he informed me when he called to see if I got the check. *Wrong, asshole!*

My money problems had just grown by forty thousand. How was I going to slowly siphon that much into our budget? Thirty-seven thousand dollars was more than I made in a year.

*It's okay, I told myself, once I was rational. I'll put the money into an IRA and only use the interest. In no time, this will die down and we'll have a nice nest egg for retirement.*

That was over eighteen months ago. I've received three more checks, totaling just over a hundred thousand dollars. At first, I tried to make the outgo keep up with income—a new

dilemma for me. I gave several large, anonymous donations to the church and a substantial endowment to my college, setting up scholarships for Creative Writing. I even bought a new grand piano for the Methodist Church.

But the money continued to come. Finally, I hired an accountant from Birmingham to handle my finances. He was vowed to strict confidentiality, though I, of all people, knew better than to trust that code. His instructions was to make all arrangements for paying taxes, as well as investing the money wisely and finding philanthropic uses for the earnings. His confusion was evident when I told him to cut me a meager check every month.

Lying became a full-time art form for me. Explaining to my wife the means of buying a new car or the source for the "unexpected" money when the heating system at the house went out. I hated what I was becoming, but there was little alternative. And soon, I settled into a peaceful co-existence with the reality of my untold resources.

Then came the call from my agent. He told me that a Hollywood production company was inquiring about the rights to *Tainted Saints*. They wanted to turn it into a feature film. In addition, they would work with my publisher to arrange a tie-in deal, with the film and the paperback version being released within weeks of one another.

The combined contracts—movie and paperbacks—would net around half a million dollars, in advance. And that did not include the future royalties on the paperbacks.

*There's no way to hide that much money, is there?*

Looking back, I guess I should have come clean. And it's hard now to say why I didn't. Hell, it's hard to say why I wrote the book in the first place. Or why I sent it to the publisher. There is no question that I was wrong. I betrayed all those people who sat in my office and poured out their hearts to me. But at least by remaining silent their anonymity was still intact, even though I used their stories as the basis for my book. If I came forward in confession—revealing myself as the author—everyone would be able to distinguish the real people from the characters in the book. My ministerial ethic dictated that I protect them, like a good shepherd guards his flock.

Besides, I think I have found something to do with the money. I am going to use it to finance myself an extended vacation. And I'm working on a new Jake Shepherd book. It's about a handsome, successful Pastor who suddenly finds himself with an incredible amount of

money. He uses the money to run away to a tropical island with his mistress/piano teacher and establish a new identity.....

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