

Adonis Mirror



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God's Gift

By Richard Leader

Jeff was a loser. He was short, but even then, his arms seemed even shorter and pulled tight against his body, giving the impression of a roly-poly little t-rex. Every time he spoke it was a violent outburst, not because of the content, but because of the urgency with which he said it, desperate for his rare chance to communicate anything to anyone before he was hushed and forgotten once again. I felt proud to have gone to his birthday party one year. After all, every kid in our church was invited to attend and yet only three of us managed to show up, each of us cowed by our parents into doing our civic duty, never mind the fact that none of us were friends with him or really even knew him. Of the three attendees, I was the only boy; the presence of the two girls was less indicative of Jeff's social circles or popularity and more a reflection of girls at that age generally being more malleable to that parental pressure encouraging you to do the right thing. It must have occurred to me, on some level, that I was the only boy from church to be thusly malleable.

I didn't even attend the same school district as Jeff, as the girls both did. In exchange for the lengthy car ride out into the country and sitting around a cake with people I barely knew, I began to feel like it was indeed a great civic duty, that I was a great civic person, and that my charity—or that of my parents'—made us very good peo-

ple indeed, at least compared to the mental list of non-attendees that I was composing in my head. Jeff received an electronic football game that year, the kind that uses magnets under a metal plate to shuffle the players around. I felt bad. Not only was he behind the times, *Tecmo Bowl* having become all the rage, but unlike the Nintendo version which could be played alone, I quietly wondered how much use his new toy would get over its lifetime.

It was at that moment that Jeff became my foil for introspection. He was like me—at least I felt some sort of kinship, my own self doubts swirling with my sense of *noblesse oblige*—only incapable of hiding his deficiencies, and I watched him carefully for clues to my own salvation as he flailed about socially. The defining “Jeff moment” for me happened during a Sunday School class. The teen group met in a room at the far end of the large basement in the church; it had a college dorm type feel to it, with dozens of different rugs woven together on the floor and scavenged couches and reclining chairs harvested from roadsides lining the walls. No longer forced to sit around a square table on metal folding chairs as in previous years, it was a place that made us feel older and more important by its very design. That sense of maturity was not a holy one but a secular one, a rudely macho one, and it was no accident that the space’s design worked to strengthen the church’s midweek Youth Group meetings more than it did the captive audiences of teenage kids, not “young adults,” who were still malleable enough to attend those Sunday School sessions bright and early on the weekends. Indeed, the Youth Group grew so large

that they became audacious enough to knock out the dividing wall separating their space from the rest of the basement without any real debate amongst the church stewards: one can imagine that they would have enjoyed hammering out that wall no matter the need for it to be done, no matter their numbers.

I had tried attending the Youth Group once, not out of my own volition, but again submitting to the will of my parents: my mother dropped me off at the country church, abandoning me at the door, forcing me to go in or stand outside forever. Walking in was like a scene from a movie that unfolded in slow motion: two older boys stood playing pool as a girl brushed across the table as she walked by, imitating that sultry maneuver where she slid her hand across the wooden edge of it, creating a gendered identity for herself just as the boys did by wearing their varsity jackets. At 13, I was clearly out of my league. Sunday School was more my style; we didn’t need to knock any walls out. There was always more than enough room for us all. It was just us losers—us losers and Jeff, who stood as a loser even among even us.

One day our Youth Pastor, Rick, was delivering a lecture on the topic of love. Or more truthfully, about marital rape, although none of us were sophisticated enough—nor allowed to be sophisticated enough—to understand it precisely in those terms. Instead, this was a message on love and what to expect from it, a point clearly directed towards us boys even though we were a minority in the classroom. Married couples exist as one flesh and all the other standard topics were addressed, but the primary argument was that of submission: mari-

tal rape cannot happen because if one partner fails to consent, an ethical breach in the relationship has already occurred: and that a marital breakdown more worrisome had already occurred, with one partner putting the other into the position of being a rapist.

Rick appealed to us boys with a personal example of husbandly duty, imploring, “Yes, even if I don’t feel like it, it’s still my responsibility to make love with my wife if that’s what she wishes.” It was a smart way of reversing the issue of marital rape into some sort of gender neutral phrasing that had all of us boys thinking of how we can’t wait to begin fulfilling our civic duties for Jesus. But in closing his speech, Rick also managed to imply that to *really* give Jesus his just due, you have to abstain from marriage (and thus all relationships and sexual activity), because all of that takes time away from the Lord. This was a Baptist church, and Rick himself was happily married with two daughters. In fact, he once tried setting me up with one of them despite me being quite a bit older, though I forget which: Noël was the smart one and Nicole was the pretty one, and everybody knew that fact about them, but how they knew it is beyond me since they were identical twins. But he had to concede that he wasn’t that strong in the Lord himself, that God had put the urge to love a woman inside him.

The discussion continued, about how people are born with various gifts, put there to glorify God, and Rick began naming people around the room. Rachel had temperance, Beth had empathy, and when he got to me, he froze. He didn’t really know me that well on a personal level as I wasn’t part of his youth group, even though he

thought me a good match for his daughter. After staring at me an inordinate amount of time, he stammered something about me knowing big words and being able to teach people stuff. Perhaps it was Noël I was supposed to marry.

But it was exactly then that Jeff piped up. He probably realized that if it was that difficult for Rick to find Jesus’ gift in me, it would probably be a whole lot more messy for him. So he ejaculated—and if that word is ever appropriate when discussing speech, Jeff’s delivery style is the premiere candidate—something to the effect that he *is* in fact that Strong in Christ, that Jesus didn’t put that urge to love a woman inside him, and that he’d be able to dedicate his life to the ministry through this blessing.

I can’t know for sure, but I imagine that everyone was staring at him with a look of blank horror at that moment: I certainly was. It was something about Jeff’s internal life that we certainly didn’t want to know about, even as Rick congratulated him for his gift. I also can’t know if Jeff did dedicate his life to the ministry: last I heard he was drummed out of the Air Force because he refused to take orders from a female superior. That certainly makes him a good candidate for the church. But then and there, sitting on my paisley futon, I saw how Jeff had been roped into saying that, corralled into being the loser that everyone thought he was. He stepped into that role and was rewarded for that stepping with a cheap trophy saying “God’s Gift,” confirming everything that everyone besides God had ever thought about him.

I decided a lot of things for myself at that moment.