

Sextrade

Public Awareness and Education



BOOK EXERT

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A Place of Meeting

Strange how often he shows up on the streets on those ugly nights when sensible people just stay home. It's mid-November, close to midnight, and the cold has yet to reach a clean, true-winter snap. For now, it's just that sneaky, raw chill that seeps upwards from the sidewalk and spreads through your feet, legs, up to your shoulders and down to your hands. It's not until your fingers are aching with it that you realize that it's not just cold *out*, you're cold right through, too. If there was precipitation, and it feels like there could be at any second though the pavement is dry, there is no way of knowing whether it would be rain or snow, or a sheet of ice creeping down Church Street from the north.

Rose is a "high-track" girl for sure, and she stands her corner with all her might. She has a tumble of Hollywood blond-streaked hair, perfectly painted lips and long legs that rise from thigh-high shiny white stiletto-heeled boots to disappear into an astonishingly brief pair of shorts. A waist-length fur jacket, generously open. And some kind of bustier, which you can't afford to inspect too closely, that offers the rest of her (including a small name-sake tattoo) to the world.

When you get up close, Rose's eyes are the best part of her. Luminous hazel irises precisely painted onto whites as clear and glistening as porcelain. If eyes are the windows, there's no doubt this one has soul in abundance.

No body is perfect, and she's not a kid any longer. When she turns to talk to someone else, you can see that the shape of her nose displays evidence of having been surgically altered – a rough kind of surgery, the kind administered in a hotel room by an angry pimp or john. Her teeth are a peculiar streaky grey, her inheritance from a heroin-addicted mother. It's a testament to her character that, despite everything, she never hides those teeth; she laughs and smiles as freely as a little girl. You love that about her.

She greets you and your street work partner with an enthusiastic but strangely motherly hug, asks after your spouse and your "beautiful little babies" – it doesn't matter what the ages of your children are; she always refers to them that way. You tell her how the kids are doing, the little things they're into, how they've grown and so on, because you can see that she's not being polite, she really does want to know. It strikes you that this is the kind of conversation you'd expect to have in the foyer of a church, after the service, with one of those beautiful old saints with tight white curls, arthritic fingers and a row of imitation pearls.

Rose is a mother too, so you ask about her kids. Those great hazel eyes brighten another dozen or so watts. Oh Jas is into the terrible twos now, he's so much trouble, she tells you, chuckling. And Reuben! Nine going on eighteen, handsome as his father, but without the temper so far, thank God. The school says he has an attention deficit problem, but they're working with him and he seems to be doing a little better. On she goes with the details that occupy any parent's attention, and you can tell that, despite the fact that nobody anywhere ever has modelled healthy parenting for her, she is absolutely dialled in to those children.

You make some remark to that effect, and her eyes fill with tears.

"I love them," she says, simply, softly. "I'd do anything for them."

And she does. Every night, in cars, hotel rooms, alleyways. Every night, she sacrifices her body for the children she loves.

She tells you that Reuben saved her life. The father could see a six month interruption of his principal income on the horizon when she told him she was pregnant. He alternately offered her the world and threatened her life so she'd go for an abortion, and she actually got on the bus one day to go to the clinic. Then, the strangest thing happened.

Somebody spoke to her – not somebody on the bus, or waiting for it, not somebody she could even see, but somebody definitely spoke to her. This voice told her that she had to give birth to this child, and keep him. He would save her life. And that's exactly what happened.

When the father realized Rose was determined to carry the child, he simply walked away. Everything about their history together suggested that her expectations of beatings and worse would be fulfilled, but instead he walked away. And when Reuben was born, it was as if she herself had been granted a new kind of life. She had a reason to live.

She's sure, she tells you, stepping a little closer and looking you straight in eyes, (trembling lips, flicking a tear away with a long plastic fingernail) that if she had aborted him, she'd be dead now. He, and now Jas, are still her reasons to live. That Reuben! He's such a little hunk. A tiny, one-note hiccup of a laugh.

She sighs, looks down, suddenly deflated and weary.

"Can't believe I'll be thirty in a couple of weeks," she says. "Thirty! I can't believe I'm heading into my eighteenth winter out here ..."

She inspects the street and buildings around her critically, as if it's the first time in a long while she's really looked at them. It all seems suddenly greyer, as if you were watching TV and someone had fiddled with the contrast controls. The question flutters through your mind: which is more heartbreaking, the last eighteen years, or the first twelve?

Rose says she'd get out if she could. But who would hire a thirty year old woman with no schooling and no resume – not one you could attach to a job application, anyway! She tried once. Actually got a job as a cashier for a couple of months. But after years of working the street, she felt like she was on a different planet. Couldn't maintain any kind of focus, and couldn't make enough money to pay the bills. Still, if it wasn't for the boys, she'd pack it in. (You wonder if "packing it in" refers to sex work, or life in general.) It's the only way she knows she can make enough to support them. She shakes off that line of thinking with a kind of controlled shiver. She glances around again, and it seems to you that this time she's wanting to be sure that no one else is close enough to hear what she's about to say.

"I gotta tell you something," she says, almost whispering. "But you'll probably think I'm crazy." Glancing over her shoulder again, and leaning still closer.

"I think ..." The pause tells you she's concluded she can't actually say it, but then she gathers herself together again.

"I think God talks to me sometimes."

She's looking at you, those fabulous eyes glistening again, waiting for you to find some gentle way of telling her she's nuts. You're faintly surprised to discover that this makes perfect sense to you, that God talks to Rose, and you tell her that. Of course he talks to her. He loves her. She's inspecting you to make sure you're not just condescending to her little fantasy. Apparently satisfied with what she sees, she continues. It seems she missed the "love" part.

"I think he likes me, too." She's not saying this with that defensive you-know-I'm-actually-a-pretty-good-person kind of attitude. This, apparently, is mostly what God has to say when he talks to her. She seems surprised and touched, as you would be if someone you thought had never known you were alive expressed his or her undying affection for you.

Suddenly you realize that she has assumed that God talks to *you*, and likes *you* – of course he does; you're "church people". She's always believed that God speaks to his people (church people; not the phoney ones, but the ones who are sincere and have their lives all neat and tidy) and loves them. It's not bordering on *crazy* to think that God would talk to somebody like you – the surprise is in discovering that he includes *her!*

Rose's humility shines a penlight into that dim corner of your soul where you have so carefully stashed your arrogant assumption of God's favour. Although the assumption itself holds true, your arrogance crumbles. You find yourself stumbling over words, trying to express to Rose just how precious she is, how clearly her passion for her children speaks to you of the passion Christ endures to bring his sons to glory. You want her to understand that God doesn't just like her, he *loves* her, spent his son for her, that there *is* forgiveness, that the new life she sensed at Reuben's birth is just a taste, merely a whiff, of the feast he wants to spread before her.

This is a little much for Rose. She doesn't get it, and she treats you to the kind of nodding smile reserved for silly but well-intentioned flattery. She gives you and your partner maternal little back-patting hugs that infer a gentle but distinct dismissal. She's looking past your shoulder at the cars cruising by. She sighs something about renting body parts, and with a final wave, steps toward the curb.

Dignity

Alphonse and Little Johnny operate in seamless unity behind that long counter, two bodies controlled by one mind, offering up their nightly ministrations of cheeseburger voodoo. Johnny drops the basket of fries into the hissing grease while Alphonse is taking another order, but it's Alphonse who retrieves them a couple of minutes later. He lifts the basket from the fryer, dumps the fries into the bin and waves the saltshaker over them without even glancing down – his attention is fixed on the hockey game being shown on the TV hung high in the far corner. Vancouver is spanking a Detroit team that has not yet begun to take the playoffs seriously. "Fishburger and rings!" shouts Little Johnny. By the time the customer arrives at the counter, it's Alphonse who is standing indicating the condiment choices with a wordless flick of his wooden spoon.

Below the hockey game, four or five women sit before video games, smoking and chatting casually as their fingernails click on the glass screens. They have played these games hundreds of times, and they occupy no more of their attention than breathing. A few more women sit at nearby tables picking at plates of fries and sipping beer or hot chocolate. Nobody buys Johnny's coffee. A young woman in sweats and a chemical tan slides by the table, flashing a grin at you and your partner as you sit talking with another of the "working girls". A few minutes later, you decide it's time to get back out on the street, so you excuse yourselves and get up to leave.

On your way out, a new woman sitting a little to one side of the others speaks up:

"You work with Steve, right? You're the church people?"

Steve is Sanctuary's street pastor. At about six four and two forty, with a bushy greying beard, he stands out. He looks like a member of Hell's Angels, but the women here know him as pastor and friend. Even women new to the stroll get to know who he is pretty quickly, and the woman speaking to you is definitely somebody new.

She seems a little self-conscious, so you step closer. She turns a bit so her back is to the rest of the women. Introductions all around – very formal, complete with little hand shakes – and Carmelita tells you she's asking because she's kind of interested in going to church, but she needs, you know, to find a place where she wouldn't feel, like, singled out.

You tell her about the worship time at Sanctuary – "Oh, at five pm? That'd work, 'cause I'm not really, you know, a morning person" – and assure her that her situation would not be unique in our "congregation".

As you take your leave, the young woman with the grin swings out of the restroom hallway. The sweats are gone. Now she seems to be dressed mostly in the chemical tan, augmented by a little Spandex, high heels and a couple of pounds of artfully applied makeup. Although she's wearing much less, her self has been cloaked. She grins at you once more, the momentary flash of a carefully hidden soul. Your partner holds the door open for her, and you follow her out to the street.

* * *

Over the next couple of weeks, you see Carmelita again on the street, but she's working and there's little opportunity to talk. It's not until you meet again at Little Johnny's that you really connect.

She's a pretty Filipina, early thirties, with clear coffee-coloured skin and a big smile full of perfect, sparkling white teeth. Black hair pulled straight back from her forehead, bursting into a mass of curls at the back. She's dressed quite sensibly, except for the standard extravagant cleavage.

You talk first about church stuff again, and she explains that she lives out in suburbia and doesn't have a car. Sanctuary sounds like it would be a good fit for her, but it really doesn't work for her to actually get there on any kind of regular basis. Would you know of any place closer to where she lives that she'd be welcome? You tell her you'll make some calls, see what you can find. You ask about her living situation, and she tells you she's been staying with her parents.

"Do they know what you're doing here?"

"Oh, no!" Mildly shocked. "They'd just die."

All through this conversation, she's been engaging, intelligent and breezy, but you have the sense that she's jockeying for position, trying to find a way to talk about something else a little closer to the bone. Her eyes flick back and forth around the restaurant to see if anyone is paying attention. The other women are engaged in their own conversations, and the ubiquitous night creatures – sweaty men who sit drinking beer a few tables away from the clutch of women, greedy eyes roving from body to body – well, they're paying attention alright, but not to anything she might have to say.

After a few more polite but meaningless exchanges, and with absolutely no change of expression, she sallies forth.

"I don't really feel like I fit, you know?"

"How so?" you say, thinking she's returning to the church discussion.

"Well, look at these girls. They all seem to have it so together – you know, they always seem so happy and carefree, and they keep themselves looking so good. I just always feel like I'm falling apart." She says this all so casually, bright-eyed and perky. She leans toward me slightly, but her attitude seems more conspiratorial than concerned.

Realising that she's not talking about church, but about feeling like she doesn't measure up to the rest of the working girls, you can't quite stifle a little laugh. You're thinking about the many desperate, whispered confessions you've heard from Rose and other women through the years, and about the fact that most of them congregate here at Johnny's to drink and toke a bit before they can face another night on the stroll.

"How long have you been working?" you ask, thinking that, at her age and if she's typical, she'll have been "in the trade" for more than half her life.

"Just two years!" she says. "My mom's a minister" – she tells you the denomination – "I've never done this kind of thing before in my life! I'm thirty-five. That's pretty late to start, huh?"

It is indeed. You ask her what happened, how she ended up here.

"Well, I have a psychiatric condition," she says in the way you might tell someone you have a birthmark behind your knee. "I'm fine when I take my meds, but I got partying a little too much a few years ago and stopped taking them, and then things *really* fell apart, and then" – a tiny sigh, the first overt indication of any sort of distress – "and then I sort of ended up here."

She takes a careful sip from her drink, barely touching the straw so as to maintain the perfect red paint job on her lips.

"I'm fine now though," she says, perky again. "At least, I'm back on my meds. I still feel like I'm running hard to keep up, but I keep slipping farther back. These girls" – a glance at the women chattering nearby, the merest pucker of frown between her eyebrows – "they just seem to cruise along."

"We're all pretty much in the same boat, you know," is what you say to her. "Half the women in this place have told me in different ways that they feel just like you do. The wheels keep falling off in my own life, and I keep screwing up in the same ways, over and over."

"Really?" she asks, eager to believe it.

"Sure. We're all of us just keeping the most attractive cover we can on the mess underneath."

Her jaw drops briefly. We sit silent for a minute.

"Really?" she asks again.

"Uh huh."

Pause. “Well, thank you for telling me that.” She’s pondering this revelation. You can almost see it sinking in: it’s not just *me* ... She looks down at the tabletop, not seeing the detritus of Coke cans, lipstick-rimmed styrofoam cups and empty french fry containers.

“Thanks!” she says again, looking up. And flashes a perfect white smile.

A couple weeks later, you see her posed on her patch of the street with another girl. She thanks you for the message you left about the church near where she’s living – Jack, an old friend with years of street experience is an associate pastor there, and it just happened to be the same denomination as her mother’s.

“I haven’t actually gone yet,” she says, watching your eyes carefully. “I’m still, you know, down *here*, so ...”

She leaves it hanging, needing to know how you’ll react. Wanting to know how it *really* is.

“It’s okay,” you say. “Jack’s been this whole route” (gesturing around the street) “and he knows where you’re coming from. Call him! He’ll give you a ride.”

Now you’re looking her right in the eyes, because you know this next is what she’s really waiting for:

“And besides, the people in that church are all in the same boat as you and me. They’re just trying to keep the most attractive cover they can on the mess underneath.”

She lights up that smile and actually laughs. You’re pretty sure she will make that call sooner or later.

The Hope of Redemption

Rose again, but a couple of years later, and on a cool spring night. The hair is a little shorter now, and a different colour. But for a kind of tightness around those wonderful hazel eyes, everything else initially seems much the same. She’s standing less than thirty yards from the spot where she told you about laying herself down for her boys, and confessed that God had been speaking to her.

She’s more extravagant in her movements, a little wilder, a little less earth-motherly. You realize with a sinking heart that, as has become the pattern over the past year or so, she’s been drinking or toking, or both. It seems now to be the only way she can face another night. Despite the manic activity, or maybe because of it, she radiates the weariness she began to speak of so long ago. Her weariness grabs your own heart, grants you a momentary flash of insight into the staggering emotional cost of doing what she does, and it seems to numb your soul. In this moment, you can hardly fathom how she survives.

You had been talking about the usual stuff – kids, weather (*This* is supposed to be spring? Whatever happened to global warming?) – but the impact of her weariness has caused you to lose the thread. You realize with a start that she is now talking about the future, not usually a popular topic. And she is speaking with some animation, not just a dreamy vagueness. She has a plan! A plan for a future and a hope, a plan to take these bitter years of street exile and turn them into something good.

She has applied to George Brown College, she says – and she’s been accepted! She whirls around, hands reaching high above her head, hooting with laughter. What program? Community Worker! She’s going to become a Community Worker! At this point, who knows how she’ll manage money-wise? Paying the bills is not something she has entirely worked out yet. But some day, she’ll be a Community Worker, and she’ll spend her time counselling women in prison, or women who’ve been assaulted.

Some of the other women nearby laugh, and tease her: what does she know about women in prison? What kind of counselling will she be able to offer? They know that the only novelty there will be supplied by her being on the other side of the bars.

But it’s all good natured, and Rose is laughing when she responds, “I been schoolin’ you girls for years!”

And it’s true. She’s taught many of them how to stay relatively safe out here, how to watch out for each other, how to present themselves and how to take care of business. She’s been a kind of a den mother. The other women go to her when they have a problem, and they gather around her when one of their number goes down. She has offered words of comfort and encouragement to you, too.

You remind her of this. She looks at you, glances back at the women ten or fifteen feet way, and drops her voice.

God still talks to her, she tells you. She really wonders if someday she might actually become a preacher – she’s not really interested much in the actual preaching part, it’s more looking after people; “preacher” is just the term that comes to mind. Rose seems pretty serious about all this, and a little puzzled. The pieces of that particular picture don’t quite fit together just yet, but God keeps talking to her. And he really does like her; she’s sure of that. Wouldn’t that be something, though? To take all these years out here and get to use them to help other weary women find rest? Wouldn’t that be something?

It is a continual surprise that God is willing to pour his glory (“the glory of God in the face of Christ”) into a dusty, cracked – broken! – jar of clay like me⁴. It’s just as surprising when I see that glory leaking out through somebody else’s “cracks”. It’s so surprising that it’s easy to miss, easy to dispense with the ludicrous and faintly blasphemous notion that Jesus might be right here, right now. Seeing is not necessarily believing. Sometimes it’s believing that allows me to see.

After all these years, it still requires of me a disciplined choosing to act or receive if I am to be the Christ or recognize him. Being present, abandoning power, picking up my cross – it’s only by the deliberate choice to act in ways such as these that I can

offer myself to others as the presence of Jesus. Only by choosing to be still can I see the hidden Jesus, experience the power of utterly abandoning myself into his arms, and receive eternal life offered into my own motionless hands.

By no amount of effort can I save or regenerate myself. This is the work of God alone. But he still insists that / choose – he will not choose for me. Day by day, I am choosing, looking for Jesus' presence in myself and in others. I have come to expect that I will see him, but somehow, it's still always a surprise when he shows up. Now I see him momentarily in reflected images: distorted, fractured, obscured. I can hardly wait to see him face to face.

Exert from the book *God in the Alley*, written by Greg Paul