

## At A Glance

### Which One of You?

*By Gary Broughman*

#### Chapter One ...

Honest to God I'm not an in-your-face kind of guy, not now not then, but that morning I wanted to hurt someone, even if it spilled over on everyone. But then I walked out to face the congregation and felt the Sunday morning rapture swirling through the pews. It stopped me in my tracks. These people weren't here to be slapped around, I thought, they're here for a cleansing—to show up and leave feeling good inside. That's what they're used to and even at that angry moment I hated to deny them.

So I knelt and faced the altar, like I was praying. I always knelt like that before starting the service and I guess I really was praying, something like praying anyway. When I stood the happy murmuring ended, and as I turned to face them I had everyone's ear. Many were smiling—at least until I started talking.

"We had to Baker Act my son Sagan yesterday," I said. They knew he wasn't really my son but they'd heard me call him that before. "We had a little ... altercation ... in the house, and Carolyn's son Scott ... well, no one was actually hurt but everyone was a little upset and when we couldn't calm Sagan down ... well, we called the doctor and he said, take him into ... the hospital for his own protection. So we did, and he's still there."

I had pictured more anger in that speech. Some people sitting there had helped stir this brew and now I'm thinking I should have given them the fiery version. The smiles were gone but no one was squirming in the pews like I'd imagined. It was me squirming. A lot has happened since that morning—enough to fill a book—but I knew at that moment I'd never again let people make me squirm when by all rights they should be the ones feeling the heat.

I've become a different guy since that July morning, but right then five hundred curious faces were waiting in dead silence for what I'd say next. I had to say something. The hum of the big a/c units became a roar. My mind was jumping all over, thinking how we had to scrape together money when one compressor failed and how often a pregnant pause in a sermon was ruined by a cooler motor kicking on. Florida churches couldn't do summer business without air conditioning but that morning I was thinking how soft we all were. I pushed on with the service in the usual way.

"Do we have any visitors with us this morning," I asked, scanning as I spoke. A couple near the back stood. I smiled, said welcome and tried to listen, but it was like the adults in Charley Brown cartoons. Something about Indiana and the couple they were sitting with.

I spotted the local newspaper editor Jess Gabriel in the front row to my left. It hadn't been three days since I talked to him at a little league baseball game about Sagan's problems. I guess I'd invited him to come to church some

Sunday and he'd taken me up on it. Besides family, Gabriel was the only one out there who had the full back story on Sagan's situation. Even the perpetrators in the pews—chock full of wild rumors and sitting with eyes down—knew only what truth I'd let them know to defend myself.

"And I see Mr. Gabriel from the Sun-Journal is here with us," I said. "You can't hide your light under a bushel Jess. Stand up and let the people see you." He did and a few people clapped. I smiled and said "welcome."

In those days I wasn't fully born again yet so it was easier for me to fake contentment, to give everyone including myself a pass and travel the wide and easy road. That's what I intended to do—drop the Sagan thing for now—but before I could get back to the usual pabulum, one of the perpetrators decided to stand and make an issue of it.

"Lest our guests think we're a congregation of troubled young people," she stated, "I want to announce that our high school theater group gave us something to be proud of in Gainesville yesterday with a superior rating in the state competition. They performed a scene from Shaw's *Pygmalion* and one from *The Glass Menagerie* in the contemporary class."

"Thanks for sharing that with us Mrs. Pinkerton. Now—" I was about to announce the opening hymn but her voice boomed over mine.

"Only 15 percent of *all* schools received 'superiors' in both classifications."

"We're all proud; thank you Mrs.—"

"I just thought we should know how much we have to be proud of."

"I agree; thank—"

"And for those who don't know, we have several children from this church in the group: Jennifer Bentley and my own son Bradley."

Honest to God, I'm not one to judge people by appearance but at that moment I was eager to dislike this woman; her hips looked big enough to birth an elephant and her flat face was a ... I'm sorry, but she wouldn't stop.

"Is that all, Mrs.—"

"Children to be proud of," she said.

We sang and I preached. I delivered the sermon I planned to preach, the story of the one lost sheep ... *Which one of you wouldn't leave the ninety-nine behind and enter the wilderness to rescue the one which was lost?*

Jesus knew the answer to "*which one of you?*" was usually, "*not me.*" He hit his people between the eyes with that, and I meant to hit mine. But I didn't. I ladled it out like cold soup. Weeks later I realized I'd given up on them at that moment. Maybe Jesus wouldn't have, but I did.

Of course, Jesus didn't mind getting into people's faces, challenging them to get it up or get out. Put up or shut up. Me? My style was to polish up their ego, empty the trash bin of their conscience and send them off wearing grateful smiles, pretty much certain God was happy with them no matter what they said or did. "Y'all come back now. Jesus loves you and remember, we encourage automated debit as the pain-free way to give." I get a little cynical looking back, but at the time I didn't know any better. Everyone loved it when I stepped into the pulpit and it never occurred to me that anything should be different. They loved my preaching and they loved me. The pews were full and I loved being loved.

That was before Sagan came along.

Out in the parking lot, people were breaking into the usual cliques, some benign enough and some not. Carolyn's mother was there with the group by Mrs. Pinkerton's Lexus. Dr. Roscoe, the lay leader, was waving his hands as he spoke. His face was red; I could see it from 50 feet away. I was doling out smiles and handshakes one after another when Jess Gabriel appeared before me. He wasn't smiling like during the service.

"So what's the story?" he asked.

"The story?"

"I've been in the news game 25 years," he said. "I can smell when something's not right."

I suppose I'd invited him to stick his nose in when I started babbling to him at the little league game. But who was asking, Gabriel the man or Gabriel the editor? He followed my gaze to the group by the Lexus.

"Looks like the palace guard is cooking something up Dietrich."

"I'm not worried," I told him. "This whole thing with Sagan will blow over. You'll see. I'm pretty well entrenched here, and, my God, one of the conspirators over there is my mother-in-law! It's not that big a deal. A little party, a little marijuana."

"In the parsonage."

"Well, that's where he lives. The quantity was so small ... the police aren't making a big deal of it."

"Do you want me to speak with the chief about it?"

"If you think it will help, I guess so ... and thanks for keeping it out of the paper."

"Like you said, it's not that big a deal." Gabriel smiled as he shook my hand and left. I felt like he was a friend. Someone genuine. I'd been feeling like I was living in a snake pit and he helped balance things. I became more optimistic as I walked with Carolyn across the grassy parking lot to our house.

But she looked troubled and I tried to lift her spirits by bouncing in front of her, walking backwards as I joked about her long face.

"I thought you agreed not to hang our dirty laundry in front of the congregation," she said.

"You said that; I just listened."

"You agreed this was basically a private matter."

"Did I say anything to offend anyone. All I did was give a few facts. Believe me, I wanted to challenge the meddlers head-on but I didn't. I said I'd leave it to your mother to, like you said, 'smooth and sooth.' That's what I'm doing."

"Except, Pastor Waymire, now you've made the whole thing public and everyone will want the rest of the story."

"There's not much to it," I objected a little lamely. She used "Pastor Waymire" like a mother uses all three names to chastise a child: "Dietrich Matthew Waymire!"

Carolyn pushed through the unlocked screen door to our sun porch, letting it fly back at me. "Not much to it? Illegal drugs! In the parsonage! Police banging on the door! Your 'son' hauled away! Not much to it you say? There's a lot of old

fashioned people in this church who would beg to differ with you!”

I stood in the doorway holding open the screen door. She had disappeared through the sliding glass door into the kitchen. I resisted saying anything and later realized I’d seen her mother in her for the first time. Not a happy thought. I loved Carolyn but I wasn’t a big fan of her mother. It’s never a smart idea to lampoon your wife’s mother, so I walked past her toward my office, ignoring the two glasses of iced tea on the kitchen table.

“You don’t want a glass of tea?” she said, sounding surprised. We always shared iced tea after Sunday’s last service and recapped the morning, who was and wasn’t in church, things like that. It was a weekly ritual so it surprised me too when I mumbled “no” and continued into my office.

“The kids went home with mom,” she shouted to me, “this will be a very good time for us to talk about what we’re going to do with this mess.”

“What mess?” I called out.

“You know what mess. Sagan. What are we going to do about Sagan?”

“He’s not a mess; he’s a teenage boy.”

“You know what I mean,” she said impatiently. “We can’t just keep the status quo.”

I said nothing, because I agreed we couldn’t stay status quo but knew she already had a plan I wasn’t going to like. My idea was to work harder at making Sagan feel like part of the family; I feared hers was to toss him back to his mother, or worse yet, back into the system.

“Are you going to say something or not,” she barked in her mother’s voice. Then pausing in the silence, added, “Oh sure, go stick your head in the sand. See where that gets you!”

I fell asleep in my office, waking to the sound of a car horn. Carolyn appeared in the doorway with a suitcase in hand. “I’m going to stay with my mom a few days—me and the kids. Let me know when you come up with an answer.”

“What’s up with this?” I asked, genuinely surprised. She just turned her back. You think you know someone. When I married her and brought her children into my life, I didn’t think anyone could love me more. She was devoted, crazy about me, always trying to please me. Thrilled, I thought, to be married to a preacher and living in a stable Christian home. The kids and I grew tighter and tighter over the years. Honest to God, I even forgot I didn’t father them. They were mine to care for just like her. But then, that’s also how I feel about Sagan. Apparently, feelings welcomed in one instance aren’t in others.

The front door closed and seconds later I heard the tires of her mother’s Lincoln backing over the pea gravel in the driveway. I figured I’d hear that sound again soon and everything would go back like it was. That’s not how it happened.