

Cal's Letter

by Prudence Todd Moffett

This year Willaine has flown back home from a huge, California-style mega-church where she serves as hostess. Over the years, Margaret has found it easy to call up a mental picture of contemporary architecture of Willaine's church, its abundant staff, multiple ministries, to see her glide across plush carpet to greet newcomers. Today Margaret is thankful that thirty years haven't diminished her splendor. Her smile is one to put the most uncertain newcomer at ease. Only up close can you see the faint purple under her eyes, a tiny pinch at the corners of her mouth. In Vee's parlor Willaine stands, a majestic palm tree amid the undergrowth of all that's left of the Missees and their friends. They're one in envying her beauty, but Margaret's sure she carries her guilt alone.

Memory is the damndest thing. The gated community is shut behind her American Motors Concord, leaving Vee's suburb and the cluster of remarkably well-preserved middle-aged women, but carrying with her inescapably vivid pictures of all of them, years ago.

Back in the forties—was that possible?—Vee had invited Margaret, new in town, to join the Missees. They were the only two juniors inducted into Central High's Honor Society that year. Margaret barely knew the other Missees, all of whom had grown up together in Memphis, so she was grateful for Vee's invitation. They're still fast friends. She, Vee, and Willaine, though, were the only three of the club members who got saved. Margaret's family had moved to Memphis so her dad could take advantage of Rural Electrification, a New Deal program that enabled small power companies to install street lights in towns and run lines out to farmers. He was proud to leave behind the string of small towns they had lived in and make Memphis, a real city, his headquarters.

The Missees club set the style for Central High School. Dot was homecoming queen, Eloise class president. They quit wearing saddle shoes and changed to loafers, so all the other girls dumped their scuffed brown and white lace-ups. The Missees had already consigned black and white ones to the pits. And the day Carol and Vee wore their cardigans buttoned down the back, the changeover clogged the girls' rest rooms through third period.

The Missees maintained a positive force in preserving members' chastity. No kisses on the first date, ever. At sleep overs, they went around the circle, quizzing one another. Did he try anything? What did you say? If one of them weakened, the group gave her spine a good stiffening. He'll think you're cheap. He'll tell. No religion in it, they

were all for keeping their good names, particularly Willaine's, whose beauty the boys buzzed around like sweat bees the mouth of a catsup bottle at a picnic.

Their junior year at Central, Gary Jamieson had sidled up to Margaret and Vee one day at Johnny's, where public and private high schoolers hung out together after school. Standing out a little because of his age he might be in his late twenties—he managed to fit in slouching like the boys were that year and using the current slang. He carried a slim, flexible Bible in a red leather binding and leafed through it to persuade us that Jesus should be important in our lives. Vee, more persuaded than Margaret, talked the Missees into helping Gary start a Fun-with-Jesus club in Central High. Later, of course, big youth rallies became popular, but that was after the war. They were among the first targeted as teenagers, a special group in need of the Word.

Vee, too, had to beg to get Mrs. Riley to open her door, if not her heart, to the gang who overflowed the furniture and sprawled on the floor around Gary, who stood in their midst. Of course men his age were all in the army, but he made no apology for his 4F status as a seminarian. The choruses of unfamiliar peppy hymns, the very colloquial Bible translation, the contemporary language, never a “thee” or a “thou” in prayer, intrigued Margaret. And since the Missees were in it, Fun-with-Jesus caught on.

The following August the Missees all went to a Fun-with-Jesus camp, where they learned Bible verses wrenched from their context, and sang more choruses. Margaret loved to sing, but had a voice that needed to be drowned out by a group. While she was having a good time, Willaine was the first one to be saved. In their cabin, Willaine sat cross-legged on her canvas cot and stumbled over the words to express her experience. She ended up saying, “I just know it's real. Something's real.”

Margaret didn't know how real it was, but she wanted to do whatever Vee did. So when Vee raised her hand to accept Jesus, Margaret did, too, stifling her awareness that she didn't feel any different than before—hoping maybe that would change. She squirmed in her seat when someone talked about a “second-hand faith.” What was it to know Jesus? Where could she find him, out in the air somewhere? She managed to shrug it off. Newcomer, unsure of herself, she slipped her feet into Vee's footsteps.

For some reason it didn't take on the other Missees, either, and Willaine and Vee with Margaret's almost mute support couldn't bring it home to them. The others tolerated their “witnessing” to a point, then Carla, or one of the others, would beg, “Can't we talk about something else?” “It means so much to me,” Willaine always responded. It meant a lot to Margaret to be one of the chosen. Moving around the way she had, a divine anchor sounded like a good thing. Someday it would be real to her.

“There's got to be a limit,” Carla would reply.

Finally they quit talking about it, except to share blessings among the three of them.

Calvin Burnside, the camp leader, headed the national Fun-with-Jesus movement. He was the camp leader. Though a decade older than Gary, he made sure all the campers knew he liked to be called Cal. A short, athletic-looking man, dark hair hung lank over his sad, squinting brown eyes. Today Margaret would say he has charisma. Or animal magnetism. He made Gary and the other seminarians on his staff look gauche, untried. He knew, instinctively, the way to a sinner's heart. Campers hung on his every word, and idolized him shamelessly.

Cal and Willaine spent a considerable amount of time in earnest conversation, facing each other catty-cornered across the end of a picnic table in the dining hall, an open Bible between them. Willaine sought deeper truths, apparently.

Cal made endless fun of Fundamentalists—“fundies” he called them. Margaret had never heard the word, had to deduce its meaning from Cal's description. So far as

she could tell, she had never encountered one. She would have been surprised if the rector of her church were to tell her Fun-with-Jesus was a fundamentalist movement. Cal told his audience of well-behaved, mainline churchgoers in no uncertain terms that their churches did not have salvation in them either. Baptism? What could a little water on the brow of a squalling infant accomplish? The same with confirmation, or being submerged as an adult. What they needed was a private, individual transaction with Jesus. That done, they needed to pray and learn the Bible and witness—all this thrown their way with charm and personality that hooked all but the most cynical. He described his own personal encounter with the Lord, after a crashing mountain thunderstorm had put him in fear of his life.

The skies stayed calm at camp that year, but Margaret did her best to believe she had made her own individual transaction. Cal had at them, morning and evening, and crammed into seven fleeting days everything from sexual purity to a literal seven-day Creation. His words convinced her of William Jennings Bryan's defense of the Bible right there in Tennessee in the Scopes trial. Cal was no orator, but he made good use of his platform. He stood Margaret's world on end. She could see her dad was worried, but like Vee's mother, he couldn't find a whole lot to say against True Religion.

A year later, Willaine, Vee, and Margaret had enrolled at Galilee Christian College. They rode the Illinois Central north on a day coach full of servicemen. The men were headed for Chicago and other trains to New York or Seattle and different theaters of war. The three girls transferred to a coal-powered North Western Railroad commuter for a short ride to the campus holy ground, just west of the city.

Margaret and Vee tore into their college courses like Christian soldiers. Willaine, on the other hand, responded to Galilee's sanctity by majoring in prayer meetings and evangelizing Chicago's skid row. Margaret watched Willaine, in her ankle-length mink coat, head out to press Bible-message tracts in the hands of drunks and beggars. Her glowing face framed with wind-blown blonde hair, cheeks flushed by gusts from the lake, Willaine's beauty was irresistible. A nylon Navy scarf, pressed on her by a sailor on the trip from Memphis, hugged her neck. She clumped along in the wooden shoes they were all wearing to save leather for the men overseas.

Drunks shambled up, eyeing her drab male college companions with a mixture of envy and distrust. In wartime, Galilee had only pimply, bookish juveniles to send into the godless city on Saturdays to "fish for men" among the derelicts. To Margaret, looking up from her Solid Geometry to hear about all this, Willaine remained an unsolved equation. Her own faith didn't reach that far. Vee went one time. Margaret asked her how it went.

"I felt I wasted my time," Vee said, shortly. "Those men just looked us over like we were prostitutes or something."

Not long after they arrived—just long enough for them to have learned the daytime schedules of the North Western—Vee and Margaret noticed that Willaine occasionally disappeared for an afternoon. Cal, traveling around the country by train raising money for Fun-with-Jesus, stopped over in Chicago regularly.

"Willaine's off to the city again?" Margaret asked Vee.

"Cal must be here again," Vee said. She bit one corner of her lip and shrugged.

"Oh, Vee, you can't think—?" Margaret was shocked.

"Let's ask her and find out," Vee responded with a flash of temper.

When they asked, Willaine opened right up. Her spiritual life was flagging at Galilee. "We pray together. At his hotel. He helps me a great deal."

Margaret didn't question this.

Later, Vee expressed continued doubt. "She's not concerned about our spiritual life.

Never asks us to come along to pray with Cal.” She pursed her pretty lips and shook her head. Margaret, aware that her own judgment might be clouded by jealousy for the extra attention, decided to hold her tongue. How could either Cal or Willaine sin?

Vee had to leave school abruptly a few days after the end of the semester. She’d come to realize how much her mother needed her at home. Margaret and Willaine moved together into a third floor room in one wing of the dorm. Willaine kept up her schedule of prayer meetings. As the remains of the original trio, Margaret was sorry the two of them weren’t closer, but in the end all they shared was a peerless view of campus and a home town.

Mid-afternoon, one early spring day, Margaret walked to the dorm, enjoying the burgeoning leaves and fresh-faced daffodils on her way. She stopped on the first floor to pick up their mail. Upstairs, her footsteps rang in the empty hall. Everyone was out enjoying the weather, it seemed. No one else was around. When she called, she heard her words echo. She dropped a load of books on her desk. Willaine had a letter from Cal. This was not unusual, but layers of sticky tape sealed this one, as if it had been opened and resealed. The weight of all the tape had pulled the flap loose. Had someone read Cal’s letter? It looked undisturbed, otherwise. A solicitation from one of the missions in Chicago was addressed to Willaine, too. Nothing for Margaret. She took the mail to Willaine’s desk, absentmindedly trying to seal Cal’s letter. She wouldn’t want her to think Margaret—or anyone downstairs—was snooping.

Then the devil rose up that sunny day in Galilee, and took her over. She dropped the solicitation and listened at the door of their room to make sure the wing was still empty. When she opened Cal’s letter, she found two pages. The first, crisp and white, was closely written, and, scanning it, Margaret could see numerous parenthetical references to the Bible. (I Cor. 6:9) caught her eye first. It was one of the verses they had learned at camp, about adulterers or fornicators not inheriting the Kingdom of God. It sharpened her idle curiosity. She breathed in as she began reading from the top: *My dearest girl*, it began. No, thought Margaret. She saw Vee’s face, her pursed lips. Still, he was very affectionate. Maybe he felt Willaine was an older daughter. Margaret shook off the tremor and read on.

Cal never preached sermons; he gave talks. The letter could have been one of his talks. *As you know, I try to judge my life and my walk by the Word of God. I’ve been dodging that terrible Sword where my closeness to you is concerned. Scripture tells us that no fornicators or adulterers enter the Kingdom of Heaven. The statement is unequivocal.*

Closeness. Margaret swallowed. A spiritual intimacy, perhaps? But there was no dodging the Scripture. He was calling himself a fornicator, an adulterer? Cal, the loving husband and father? Margaret knew she shouldn’t be reading this. But, the flow of ink across the page seduced her. She sank to the chair by Willaine’s desk and read.

He confessed his sin. And he judged himself, in Paul’s words again and again, that every one of us will give an account of himself to God. Willaine’s Bible lay open on her bed. She had risen from prayer to go to class. Margaret didn’t need to look up the verses. Cal had taught them to her at Fun-with-Jesus camp that August, instructing the campers in the need for purity which could be found only in Jesus. Her constricted throat burned with held-in air.

My Lord tells me, when I turn from your sweet face, Willaine, to look into His face, that I must never see you again except in the company of others. (Those five words looked stuck in as an afterthought.) Paul’s first epistle to the Corinthians, chapter six, verse eighteen, tells us to flee fornication. This is the only way I can do it. Our Savior taught His disciples if their right hand offended, to cut it off, if their right eye, to pluck it out.

Some ink had collected in the period after that sentence, as though the pen had rested there a while. Margaret paused too, and began to grieve. Her attempts to be a Christian were to be like Cal. She felt her respect and admiration for him shattering, the pieces collecting under the letter. And Willaine—what could this be doing to her faith? How much more had he meant to her?

I must beg your forgiveness, dear one, as well as the Lord's. I am the one who brought you to the Lord, and I have led you into sin. I have guided you in your growth in the Lord, and as it says in Hebrews, I am one who has rule over you—has spoken the Word of God to you, (See chapter 12, verse 4)—and I have failed you, and failed the Lord. In moments of passion I may even have led you to think we had a future together.

What gall! What kind of life would they have together, slunk away somewhere, their identity hidden? How could such a man preach? What would this do to her devotion for him, or for the Lord? Margaret became Willaine's advocate.

I cannot stop with my own repentance. I have led you into sin, and you must seek your own forgiveness. I only trust that our Savior will be merciful to you, as he was to the woman taken in adultery, and forbear condemning you, saying only go and sin no more.

More gall. More verses he taught them. Did his own needs determine what he laid out so carefully before high school kids at his camps? Margaret saw Cal's scorn describing to Fun-with-Jesus campers the Pharisees dropping their stones and slinking away from the woman caught in adultery.

No "Love" concluded the letter. The signature read, "Yours in Christ, Cal." Margaret reread the page, releasing the breath that she had been holding all this time. Astounded, she let the implications of this letter sink in. What would this do to Willaine? But, just think, if he tried to keep his promise of a future with her, what it would do to his family, to the beginning nationwide string of Fun-with-Jesus clubs, to his adoring staff? Then, what about Willaine, so happy, smiling, humming, as if she had a hidden treasure? Margaret shoved away how this related to the divine truths she had followed Vee in accepting. Numb with shock, Margaret unfolded the second page. What more could he say?

This letter was not eloquent, the ink did not flow. It had been wadded up and then smoothed out again. These letters were written large, and in places the pen had slashed with such vigor she could see where the nibs had separated. Stains dotted the page. Sweat, or tears?

Willaine: My faith wrote the first letter. My heart is writing this one, and my heart says I cannot do it. I have been reading Paul in the seventh chapter of Romans: the evil that I would not, I do—Forgive me—Write me—Tell me if you want to keep on meeting—Burn this.

And across the bottom, printed in rough capital letters: *FOR OUR GOD IS A CONSUMING FIRE.*

Again, Margaret thought of Willaine's laughter, her beauty, her devotion at prayer meetings. She shuddered at the image of Outer Darkness, read again, "Our God is a consuming fire."

Carefully, she folded Cal's first letter. With some of Willaine's tape she sealed it in the envelope and left it for her to find. Margaret knew the girl across the hall smoked. Moving resolutely, she carried matches and the other, crumpled piece of paper into a bathroom cubicle. Locking herself in, without hesitation she followed Cal's instructions. She flushed the ashes into oblivion.

Since hearing Willaine would be back, burning Cal's letter had begun to wear on Margaret's conscience. Punching in the gate code, parking on the shady side of Vee's building, she wondered, did Galilee brainwash her with narrow rules of conduct? Had she learned to ignore larger issues—motivation and its wellsprings, character? Was her action that of a Christian—or of a small-minded prig? She searched her mind for the right Bible verse, but somehow nothing came. It'd been a while.

Of course at the time Willaine never said a word about Cal's letter, just quietly packed up and went home in the middle of the semester. The next fall she came back and eventually graduated a year late. She married a Marine veteran. Later Margaret heard they divorced. Drink, she thought it was. Since then, Willaine's church in California had been her life. Every once in a while, Margaret reflected on Cal's weakness, his susceptibility to Willaine's beauty and her trust in him. She heard people's shock and pleasure when an evangelist sins. She had kept Cal and Willaine's affair strictly to herself.

This afternoon, looking at Willaine chatting with old friends at Vee's tea party, it washed over Margaret that her own meddling was possibly as great a sin as their behavior. The right answer for Cal and Willaine was—what? Her own life had seen its share of blind alleys and unexplored by-ways.

Cal and Fun-with-Jesus prospered for a time. No one was particularly surprised, however, at his early death. Her secret burned, but Margaret told herself the years had blunted any effect telling Willaine would have. The two of them had never been close. Keeping what she knew hidden was easy.