

## I

## SOMETIME THE PEACOCK WISH TO BE THE SEAGULL

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“CAROL, I’M NOT SURE how long I’ll last. I know this must be scary for you. I’m sorry.” I was leaning against the counter, and Carol was sitting across the kitchen with her chair angled away from the table, her legs crossed, left elbow on the table behind her, facing me but not meeting my gaze.

She got up, turned her back to me, and began picking up the dinner dishes—quietly, deliberately, maybe a little more slowly than normal. Our twin ten-year-old sons, Corey and Trent, were at a birthday sleep-over (badly named—they stay up half the night and come home wired) at a friend’s house, so there had been only three of us at the table. Carol put the dishes in the sink and stood beside me. She crossed her arms as mine were, and we stared at the same spot on the kitchen floor for a couple of seconds. “Well, Dan,” she said, “if you quit, I’m sure we’ll make it somehow. But I don’t relish the thought of moving. I’d hate for the kids to have to change schools, especially Jess. But whatever damage moving would do would be a lot less than . . .”

“Than me being depressed all the time.”

“Well, that too, but I was going to say it would be better than you getting embroiled in some big deal at the church. You know, heresy stuff or division stuff or getting fired. Lord knows we don’t need that.”

“No, I won’t let that happen. I’ll quit before I let that happen. I’ll substitute-teach or something, maybe get certified. I wouldn’t mind having my summers off, and . . . the pay wouldn’t be that different.”

“You just did it again,” Carol said.

“What?”

“You sighed. You never used to sigh. In seventeen years of marriage, I never heard you sigh until these last few months.”

“Yeah.” We kept staring at that spot on the kitchen floor, not talking. Carol reached her arm around my waist and gave me a gentle squeeze. I said, “I keep thinking that there must be this ranch out in New Mexico somewhere. You know, we move out there, I get a horse . . .”

“And you ride the range all day and never have to talk to anybody. Cowboy Dan.”

“Yeah. The thought of the quiet and the dry air and the big sky—shoot, I’ve never even been to New Mexico, but I’m ready to move tomorrow. . . . I just sighed again, didn’t I?”

“You sure did. But look, if we have to move, let’s move back near my folks. Atlanta’s no Santa Fe, but the kids would love to be near their grandparents, and vice versa.”

“Somehow dreaming of hot, humid, crowded Atlanta doesn’t draw the same kind of sigh out of me,” I said.

“Whatever,” Carol replied. “Look, hon, it’s almost seven. I’ll get the dishes cleaned up if you’ll take Jess to her concert, OK? You’ve got to pick up a couple of her friends from the youth group too. You know where it is, right?”

“It’s at that rec center just off 95? Gosh, if it takes me forty-five minutes to get there and back, I might as well just stay.”

“Better you than me. I hate that kind of music.”

“OK. We’ll probably be back by 11:30 or so by the time I drop the other kids off. Thanks, honey.”

“For what?”

“For hanging in there with me. I wish I wasn’t putting you through this.”

“I wish you weren’t putting yourself through this. You’d better get moving. Jess hates being late.”

I think that conversation was the first time I’d put my plan into words. Not the New Mexico part—that was pure fantasy. The other part—about quitting my job as a pastor, becoming a high school teacher—I’d never put that into words before. I guess that’s why I went out of my way to meet Dr. Oliver at the concert that night.

It was a Saturday, midsummer, 1999. Jessica wasn’t yet sixteen, so even though she had her learner’s permit, she needed me to drive her and a few friends to a concert. Some boys from her high school had put together a rock band called the Amish Jellies. (Quite a name, eh?) They’d rented out a community center for their first big gig. I’d played in a bunch of garage bands as a high school kid myself, so I didn’t mind sticking around to hear them play. But they were a lot louder and worse than I thought they’d be, so about twenty minutes was all I could stand. I snuck out into the lobby, hoping it would be less painful out there.

Some parents of the boys in the band had put out some refreshments on an old blue card table (including coffee for the adults) so the kids could hang out and celebrate the band's debut after the concert. It turned out that a lot of the kids weren't interested in the music either, because the lobby was full of kids—all talking loud to be heard above the music. The other parents were holed up in the rec center's kitchen, so there I was, a thirty-nine-year-old guy trying to look coolly inconspicuous in a corner of a rec center lobby, a lone goose in a flock of animated ducks. I was just finishing a small Styrofoam cup of something vaguely resembling coffee when I heard Dr. Oliver's musical accent over the pulsing bass from the Jellies and the giggles and chatter of the kids.

I recognized his lilting voice from back-to-school nights. He was originally from Jamaica, I had been told, but his ethnic identity was mysterious for an American like me, used to two basic categories, black and white. He didn't seem to fit either of my standard categories. Part of his differentness was his style of dress, almost always a gray suit, a tie—more formal than American styles, yet the man himself was warm, engaging, enthusiastic, hardly a gray-suit kind of guy in my opinion. His features, his movement, his posture also defied easy categorization; I guess to me he looked African, but not African American. He was a science teacher, but I knew him more because he was the girls' soccer coach. Although he cut Jess her freshman year, he put her on first-string junior varsity as a sophomore. I'd missed most of her games though. Too many night meetings.

I'd heard lots of stories about Dr. Oliver over the years, even before Jess made the soccer team. Tall, articulate, and outspoken, the only Ph.D. on the Franklin Roosevelt High faculty, popular with the kids, survivor of a few controversies including a big textbook fight that had been in all the papers and on TV (that's how I originally heard about him)—he stood out in a lot of ways.

At first I couldn't see him because he was seated and surrounded by standing kids. After a few minutes, they left en masse, laughing and saying, "See you Monday, Dr. Oliver," and "Thanks for coming, Dr. Oliver." The crowd of teenagers parted like a motley curtain, and there he was, seated, smiling, shaking hands, giving high-fives, even in midsummer looking like it was any school day with his gray suit on. I went right over to say hello. He stood up as I approached. He made me think of Ed Bradley from *60 Minutes*—tall, bearded, salt-and-pepper hair, but thinner, darker-skinned, and a bit farther along in the receding hairline department. One other difference—where Bradley exudes TV newsmagazine seriousness, Dr. Oliver's whole face seemed wired to a smile that could appear at any moment, and his whole face seemed part of that smile—eyes, brows, cheeks. That's the smile I saw as I approached.

He shook my hand, with his peculiar mixture of formality and enthusiasm: “Ah, Mr. Poole—Daniel, isn’t it? Father of the late-blooming soccer star? So *good* to see you, sir!” We exchanged a few flattering observations about Jess and then some complaints about the coffee, typical small-talk stuff, and then he asked how my summer was going. I didn’t want to get into it, so I said, “Well, that’s a long story.” I was wondering how I could get some information on high school teaching from him without revealing that I was thinking about quitting my job at Potomac Community Church. That’s not the kind of rumor I wanted my board to hear.

“And you, Dr. Oliver,” I continued, “what brings you to an Amish Jellies concert?” He explained that the lead singer and drummer were students of his, and he liked to be supportive of his kids. “But listen, Dan,” he said, “please don’t call me Dr. Oliver. Only my students call me that. To my friends, I’m Neo. It’s been my nickname since my freshmen year of college.”

I cocked my head slightly, and that’s all the cue he needed to continue with the story: “When I joined a fraternity at Rutgers, my roommate said I had three first names—Neil, Edward, and Oliver—and that confused him terribly. So he just started calling me by my initials, NEO. To tell you the truth, I think behind my back some of the others actually called me ‘Negro.’ They weren’t used to having people of color around—especially ones like me with odd accents. But good friends we became anyway, and the nickname stuck. Now, if I recall correctly, I remember hearing that you are a minister. So how are things in the wonderful world of religion?”

Obviously, I didn’t want to get into that either. I fumbled with my coffee cup and said, probably a little too quickly and cheerfully, “Well, I’m hanging in there. How’s science?”

“Science,” he said, finishing his last sip of coffee, “is a piece of cake compared to what you do. Our subject matter is mathematically definable, we’re encouraged to experiment, and we’re paid to be honest about our data. Somehow I don’t think your cohort has any of those advantages. . . . Here, let me take your cup.”

While he walked over to the trash can, I remember this strange feeling coming over me. The best word I can use for it was safety: *this guy is safe to talk to—he understands*, I thought. When he came back, I was surprised to hear myself saying, “Actually, Neo, things in church work are pretty rough sometimes. Pardon the pun, but it’s not always a Sunday school picnic.”

He rearranged the folding chairs and motioned for me to sit down, facing him, our knees only about two feet apart. He leaned forward, his forearms resting just above the knees. He looked a lot like a basketball coach

I had seen on TV, maybe conferring with a point guard in foul trouble. “Well, Reverend, it sounds like you could use a friend.”

Out of nowhere, a wave of emotion rushed up my spine and caught in my throat. I’m a pretty “smooth” guy in public, not prone to extravagant expressions of emotion. But that simple sentence caused me to choke up. I tried to hide it, but I’ll bet he saw my eyes brim. Without taking off my glasses, I quickly reached up under the rims and wiped my eyes and said, “Oh, you know, I guess every profession has some ups and downs.”

“Yours more downs than many, I’m sure,” he said. “Even with God’s help it can still be brutal at times—or so Father Scott tells me. I’m an Episcopalian. Do you know St. Timothy’s?”

I smiled politely and said, “Yes, over in Rockville,” but I was afraid inside, thinking, “Don’t do it! You can’t pour out your heart to someone you hardly know.” I forced a more cheerful look and said, “Thanks, Dr.—I mean Neo—for your concern.” A polite put-off, gracefully done. I wanted to get the spotlight off me. I was comfortable in the role of listener, counselor, not revealer, counselee.

I perked up and said, “My daughter constantly tells stories about you, like about the time you brought a wild raccoon into class and he escaped in the storage room. Or the time your chemistry experiment caught fire and the whole school had to be evacuated. And then there was something about a tarantula having baby spiders that spread around the school. Did those legends really happen?”

He laughed: “Ah yes, I’m embarrassed to say yes, on all three counts, but it was an Amazonian bird-eating spider, which is actually much bigger than a tarantula. And I still have nightmares about that poor raccoon. . . . And the fire—Mr. Reedman at FDR will never let me forget about the fire. Actually, it was mostly smoke. . . .”

I said, “Well, you certainly make learning exciting—and memorable—for the kids, and I really respect that. The spider thing really gives me the creeps, though. I’ve never been much of an outdoors person. Well—I guess nobody will accuse you of being boring, which probably can’t be said about that many science teachers . . . or pastors either.” He smiled and shook his head, looking down, as if remembering something. Then I added, “I also remember admiring how you handled yourself in that big controversy about the textbooks a few years back. For a while you were a regular in the Howard County section of the *Sun*. I was really impressed how you handled the science-faith thing.”

He made a whistling sound and then wiped his forehead with his hand, faking a sweaty brow: “Ah, 1996—don’t make me think about 1996. A terrible year in my life, one I’d rather forget. I was caught between the

fundamentalists, who didn't want me to teach about evolution, and the atheists, who didn't want me to admit that I believed in God! Nobody could accept that I would do both, so I became everybody's enemy. Mr. Reedman told me that the hard thing about being a bridge is that you get walked on from both ends. He was right about that!"

"Well," I said, "you certainly earned my respect through all that. I remember thinking that you were smarter and braver and more articulate than I would have been. When Channel 5 did that feature on you, you were brilliant. I never dreamed I'd actually get to meet you. Wow, some of those parents were ruthless, though. . . ."

"Indeed, ruthless is a good word for it, on both sides actually. But to me," he said, smiling, holding out his hands and shrugging his shoulders, "it was a simple matter of intellectual honesty. My faith has plenty of room for science, and my science only strengthens my faith—and I guess that just flows out of who I am."

I smiled and responded, "Well, I find that pretty remarkable."

He shook his head, and said, "No, no, no, I'm just . . ."

"You're not 'just' anything! Here you are, a Ph.D. scientist on the one hand, and on the other hand you come to an Amish Jellies concert—more for your love of your students than for love of their music, I'm sure!"

He replied, "Well, I think the auditory nerve damage will be temporary. . . ."

I joked back, "What's that? I can't quite hear you!" It was a dumb line, but we both laughed anyway.

Then he held up a finger and said, "One thing, Dan. My doctorate is not actually in science. It's in the philosophy of science. My undergraduate degree was in history. I came into high school science teaching completely by accident, only because Mr. Reedman couldn't find a real science teacher and because I couldn't find a college or university with an opening in philosophy of science. Actually, even though history and philosophy are my first loves, I've learned a lot of science these last few years. In fact, as a boy, I was incurably curious about the natural world—plants, animals, weather patterns. Jamaica's a great place for that, you know. So I love teaching science. And high school students are . . . the best. So I have no complaints. Say, would you like a cookie?"

I said sure, and we walked over to the blue card table and grabbed a few Oreos. "Would you like to step outside? A little quiet might help my nerve damage."

"Sure," I said, "although I imagine it's still pretty hot outside." By this time my daughter had left the auditorium too and was huddled with a few

friends across the lobby. I caught her eye and motioned to her that I would be outside. She gave me a subtle wave and went back to her huddle.

As we walked down the rec center's front steps, Neo said, "I could be wrong, Dan, but I had the feeling in there that you really wanted to talk to me about something, and you were too polite to bother me with your problems."

"What? No. Well. No." He had caught me completely off guard.

"Dan, I'm not a pastor like you, but I am a Christian. I don't mean to sound too mystical, but I think I felt the Holy Spirit telling me that you need to talk about something." He sat down on the bottom step. I remained standing, leaning against a wrought-iron stair rail, staring across the parking lot, bouncing two Oreos in my hand.

"This is pretty weird. I really would like to talk, but . . ."

"But you're not sure I'm safe?" he asked.

"Actually, I feel you *are* safe. It's just that . . . well," I looked at my watch, "about an hour ago I was telling my wife that I'm thinking about quitting the pastorate. The reason I came over to talk to you in there was that I was thinking maybe I could get a job as a high school teacher—you know, when I leave. I was hoping you could give me some information about . . . about pay, getting certified, that sort of thing."

Then I sat down on the step next to Neo. He had his elbows on his knees again, and he turned toward me and said, "We had a saying in Jamaica: 'Sometime the peacock wish to be the seagull.' I guess it's a way of saying that sometimes important people, public people, wish they could just be regular people. It sounds like you could use a friend who will let you down off the pedestal, to just be a regular chap."

My eyes brimmed up again. I couldn't talk, even though now I wanted to.

Finally Neo spoke. Maybe he felt a little self-revelation of his own would make it easier for me. He wasn't speaking directly to me; he could have been talking to the parking lot. "I was born in a little town on the north coast, Port Maria. When I was ten, we moved to Kingston, where my daddy worked on the ships loading coffee, bananas, mangoes, all going to Miami and New York City. When my daddy's company wanted him to be a foreman in New York Harbor, we were so excited and proud! It was 1956; I was twelve. My parents rented an apartment in Elizabeth, New Jersey, where there were no other Jamaicans—mostly American blacks, Italian immigrants, and a few Puerto Ricans. All through school I felt that I was so different—I didn't really fit in anywhere; I could never just be one of the fellows. I still feel that way, I suppose—it's the curse of being an island person. But one thing I've learned: we're all the same, all

men, all people, even you ministers.” Then he turned toward me. “You don’t have to tell me anything, but if you want to. . . .”

“No, I want to. It’s just a little hard to get used to . . . being the one with the problem.”

He quickly lightened up, almost joking, playing with me: “What is it? Do you have some fundamentalists after you? I’ve been there, in the ‘text-book battles of ’96.’ If you’ve got some fundies after you, I can sympathize!” He made me smile, almost laugh, and after that it felt easier to talk.

“That’s not my problem, Neo,” I said. “I think I have the opposite problem. I think I *am* a fundamentalist, or was, or something.” I was joking, but only half-joking.

“Oh, that’s even worse!” he said, with such drama in his voice that we both laughed.

In spite of my laugh, I was still controlling—barely—an intense internal conflict. I wanted and needed to open up to someone, but I felt like a kid holding a balloon that he’s blown up but hasn’t tied yet. I was holding on, because if I let out all that was bursting inside me, I didn’t know where things would go. So I held on.

“It’s not so bad,” I said. “Maybe we can talk about it some time.” Not full disclosure—but a concession in that direction. It was all I could handle.

“No, don’t minimize it. Just consider me someone you can talk to . . . anytime at all,” Neo said. And then we just sat there for a full minute, neither of us talking.

It was hot outside, and humid, typical for a Maryland summer. But it was a quiet night, just crickets and the occasional swoosh of a passing car and the muffled bass guitar from the Jellies inside. I started eating another cookie.

Finally Neo said, “You know, I used to be a fundamentalist myself.”

I couldn’t tell if he was joking or serious. “Yeah? You? Right.”

“No, in Port Maria, we belonged to the Brethren. You’ve heard of them? Wonderful people. Then, in Kingston my father joined a storefront Pentecostal church. My mother couldn’t stand it; she would walk to a Presbyterian church in our neighborhood, but my brother and I would go with my dad. Ah, Dan, how those Pentecostal preachers could shout! They’d shout and we’d yell *amen, amen!* and they’d sweat and we’d sweat too, and they’d tell us we were *sinner*s and that we needed to *repent* and we’d say *yes Lord, yes Lord*, and we’d wave our fans to cool ourselves off—those were the days before air conditioners—and when we’d leave, we all felt *wonderful*.”

“So it worked for you?” I asked. “Then how, or why, did you become an Episcopalian? That’s quite a change.”

“Let’s just say I’ve been through quite a few changes along the way.”

“Apparently,” I responded. “You even attend Amish Jellies concerts!” He laughed and said, “Well, believe me, the Jellies aren’t typical storefront church material—or Episcopal concert material either.” I half-joked, “You liberal Episcopalians prefer soft jazz, right?”

Neo looked over at me—I couldn’t tell if he grew suddenly a little more serious or if he was playing with me: “Dan, may I ask what makes you so sure I’m *liberal*?” With his accent, that was a three-syllable word.

I noticed his change in tone and felt apologetic as I said, “Well, I guess I just assumed . . .”

“Because I’m Episcopalian or because I’m black?” he interrupted.

I wanted to say, “It was because of the textbook thing and the fact that you believe in evolution,” but he continued before I could say anything: “Either way, Dan, I’ve found that liberals can be fundamentalists too. Liberals are often just fundamentalists with a different set of beliefs. Not all of them, but many. Anyway, I don’t dislike fundamentalists, taken individually—they tend to be pretty nice folks. Get them together in a group though, and I get nervous. I start to twitch and break out in a rash.”

I was still trying to mention the textbook controversy, but I was so struck by what he’d said about liberals being fundamentalists sometimes too that I sort of interrupted myself and said, “No, it was . . . wow . . . that’s well put. I’ve felt the same way. Not bad taken individually, but as a group. . . . And I guess you’re right, there could be fundamentalist liberals too. I never really heard it said that way before.”

Neo said, “My pastor at Saint Tim’s tells me that I have the spiritual gift of putting into words things people already know but didn’t know they know—or didn’t want to know. On several occasions I’ve offered to return the gift to the Lord. . . . It’s not always a pleasant job. People often don’t thank you for it.”

“I can’t imagine why they wouldn’t appreciate it,” I said. “I think you have a wonderful gift.” We sat there for a few minutes, listening to crickets, watching the occasional car go by. I guess it was obvious that I didn’t really want to talk about my situation any more than I had, so Neo changed the subject himself, quite graciously, really. He stood up and pointed out Orion and Cassiopeia, visible even through the wash of the parking lot lights. He told me how many light-years away they were (I’ve forgotten the number) and began telling me about the speed at which they were moving away from us but then stopped abruptly and apologized for giving me a science lecture. I told him I was interested, and so he went back to the science lesson. (He was obviously comfortable in the teaching mode. If he wasn’t so interesting, it could have been annoying.) He talked

about the red shift and cosmic background radiation and then something about muons, which I'd never heard of before.

After a few minutes, I interrupted and said, "You're better than one of those nature shows on cable TV."

He laughed and apologized again. "Those are my favorite shows! I watch them all! Ah, but I guess summers are hard on us extroverted teachers," he said. "By mid-July we'll walk up to people on the street and give them a lecture, we're so desperate to hear ourselves talk!"

I again said that I was intrigued, and meant it. But it was getting late and I had three kids to drop off and my sermon needed a bit more work, so I looked at my watch and said, "Tomorrow's a workday for me, so I need to find my daughter and hit the road. But I'm wondering, Neo . . . I don't know if you'd have time for this, but as I said, I'd like to find out a bit more about the teaching profession, you know, practicalities like certification and pay and benefits, that sort of thing. Might you have some time in the next couple of weeks to get together?"

He answered, still appearing embarrassed about being so talkative: "Well, my loquaciousness tonight suggests I am starved for human contact, so I would be most honored to get together."

I pulled out my pocket schedule book to write it down, and he pulled out his Palm Pilot. Like most PDA users, he couldn't resist showing his unit to me and telling me how wonderful it was. He entered my name and phone number, and we agreed to meet the following Saturday at a bagel place in Greenbelt, where he assured me the coffee was pretty good. He made me promise to say hello to Jess as we parted. I thanked him for the time, and when I shook his hand, he added some gesture with the fingers and a kind of knuckle-to-knuckle punch—something that I'd seen high school students do. I remember thinking, *Odd, he must look at me like one of the kids.*

I woke up Carol when I got home and told her the whole story about meeting Neo. She said, "Thank God. Maybe he can help you look into teaching." I lay in bed a long time without falling asleep. I think Carol was awake too.