

INFINITE JOY

Lane had just made a right onto Florida. And the feeling was no good. A crowd had gathered. They could smell blood. The local bully finally had a pliant victim. He had his shirt off. His sweaty body oozed with all the wrath of a rabid pit bull. And he felt a sense of deep justification. He left no doubt about his intent as he started pounding the air with these potent left jabs. Each punch sent shock waves that only prepared for the coming shakedown. Buster was all sparks flying.

Julius held his hands up to protect himself. He danced around as if he was trying to dodge his assailant.

Lane parked his car and worked his way through the crowd. He asked one of the passers-by what was happening.

“Junior has got a peeper. “

”What are you talking about?”

The bully kept moving in on his victim. He was inspired. He got close enough to push him. The crowd collectively moaned.

“See that guy there. He’s been looking into houses and spying on women as they been dressing.”

Julius had a look of total innocence.

Lane could hardly let this slaughter occur. He had a calling for moments like this.

He bellowed, “God has forgiven your sins, and you must forgive each other as Christ as forgiven you.”

The bully glared at Lane, “Are you talking to me?”

“We are all God’s children. He speaks to all of us.”

“Did I ask you to speak?”

The fighter punched in Lane’s direction. Lane held his ground.

“You can hurt me, but you cannot destroy the word of the Lord.”

The bully addressed the crowd, “Who is this guy?” He realized his time was running short.

One of the bystanders yelled out, “He is a man of God.”

“Well this man of God is going to finally feel the wrath of the Lord.”

Lane took one step towards the bully. Junior lunged at him, and Lane dodged his attack.

“I am going to kill you, mother fucker.”

“Are you now?”

The crowd were no longer mere bystanders. They were surrounding Buster. He no longer had a clear shot of either Julius or Lane. He was now ready to lash out at anyone. Lane was in the middle of the crowd.

“The righteous may fall and rise, but the wicked only stumble and fall.”

At that moment, someone in the crowd pushed his body against the crowd. He was only getting jostled by everyone.

Lane grabbed Julius’s hand, and led him towards his car.

“I don’t know what gave you the idea that you were going to risk your life for me, but I thank you.”

“That is my work.”

“I don’t know why you would do that for a stranger.”

“That guy was going to rip you apart.”

“I could have held my own.”

Lane smiled. Even he could have broken Julius down to the core with one look. How was Julius ever going to hold his own against a wild beast who had nothing to lose?

Julius was truly grateful. He knew Lane had saved his life. After this bonding experience, these two renegades were friends for life. Men like this could never settle into the fabric of normal life. Even if they could subdue their restlessness, someone would call them out for the simplest thing, and they would be off like a bolt of lightning in a summer's storm.

“Thanks for saving my life.”

Both men ploughed in the car. Lane's Cadillac bounced up and down as it glided through the meandering streets of Baton Rouge.

“You drive like a boat riding the waves.”

Julius exploded in laughter. He commented: “I need a beer.”

Julius looked at the back seat. It was piled with copies of the Bible.

“Are you a Bible salesman?”

“No, sir. I am a preacher spreading the word of the Lord to a country in need of spiritual healing.”

Julius felt as if he needed to be washed in the blood of the lamb. Surely Lane could help.

“I have done my share of preaching the good news of my main man, Jesus.”

Julius was doing his best to express his own righteousness.

“You can't really get intimate with Jesus Christ if you are not familiar with the wages of sin.”

Julius nodded, “I have drunken from the Prince of Darkness's cup many a time.”

“Let me tempt you with a beer before you give in at a moment of severe weakness.”

The two of them shared a six pack in a dark alley behind the convenience store.

Lane poured a couple of drops of a beer on Julius's head.

“I am baptizing you in the name of our Almighty God who made us a promise of eternal life.”

After they had cleaned out the six pack, the two just stared into the shadows as if they were catching something marvelous in the night time electricity.

“Do you live here?” Julius asked.

“I was on the way to Atlanta. If you want to tag along.”

Julius hardly had a pot to piss in. And he was pretty much a pariah in his old neighborhood. He may have survived his street trial. Now, he was essentially homeless. He was being offered the opportunity of a lifetime.

When the two of them woke to the humid air, they were both a mess. Their bodies smelled of alcohol, and they were sticky with sweat. Lane had just enough gas to get them to Meridian. At that point, Lane would have to do some tap dancing to make it any further.

“How are you doing this, mon frere?”

“My buddy has a church in the Queen City.”

Julius took his answer on faith.

“Are we going to be able to clean up there?”

When they crossed the state line, they hit a truck stop. Both men washed the lingering merriment from their bodies.

“Remember that he who drinks of this water will thirst again.”

“Are you telling me, Minister, not to drink from the bathroom tap?”

Lane stared at Julius.

Julius continued, “Are you good to Meridian?”

Lane bought them both some barbecue chicken. The sauce was dripping down their chins. Both men washed it all down with some Dr. Pepper. From that point on, Lane started to call him Doctor Julius, or just Doc.

“I am cashed out.”

“Are you going to do a miracle in Meridian?”

“Don't you know it?”

Lane motioned his hands all around. Julius was the perfect audience.

“When they doubted the Lord, he gave them signs to believe. But only the true believers knew how to interpret these signs.”

“I am getting it all down.”

“Lane left no doubt about his vocation. His silver tongue sermonizing could charmed rattlesnakes. Julius wondered if that was where he got his start.

Lane told his companion, “Terrible if I live through the whole week and I haven't done something that merits forgiveness on Sunday.”

They both had a belly laugh. How could Lane know the truth of his nature if he did not feel the full brunt of physical temptation?

Minister Luke Heywood welcome Lane and Julius into his house. He fed them and offered them a place to sleep.

“You are going to have to do your work if you are going to earn your money.”

Julius saw Lane leaning close to the bathroom door.

“There is a real woman in there.”

Julius gave a nasty look at Lane, “That's the wife of our host.”

“I am only lusting in my heart.”

The next morning Lane held the congregation transfixed with his sermon.

“And they were about to lower Apostle John into the boiling oil. But he was able to resist and escape an ignoble fate. The Lord was looking over him. God is looking over you even when you are overcome by the worst temptation.”

All the women in the congregation seemed entranced by Lane. They watched him speak, and they were all lulled by his magic.

“Can human beings do miracles?”

The faithful were each ready for their own personal miracles.

Minister Heywood thanked Lane for his fine work. He slipped him his payment. His wife, Rebecca, was so close to Lane that the preacher could feel his warm, moist breath against his face. He drank up her delicious perfume.

It was Sunday afternoon. The service was over. And the Heywoods were ready to feed their guests enough food for a year.

Rebecca had spent all Saturday cooking. Beside ham and barbecue, corn, squash and mashed potatoes, there were all kinds of pie and cake. Lane and Julius stuffed it in for the week ahead. They all ate until they could not move. The minister passed out in his lawn chair. Lane and the missus disappeared. Julius could only surmise what was going on.

About two hours later, Lane found Julius. The minister was still passed out.

“We are getting out of here.”

Julius packed some goodies for the road. And they hopped into Lane’s car.

“Why can’t we spend the night here?”

“Minister Heywood is going to wake up soon. He will wise up if we are still around.”

“If we leave as thieves, we will only confirm his suspicions.”

“He has nothing to be suspicious about.”

“Weren’t you playing footsie with his wife?”

“Fotsie doesn’t even half describe the kind of healing that I was doing. Her problems go deep.”

“And what do we have to worry about?”

“I didn’t want her going guilty on me. If we ain’t around, she can blame her husband for not helping her clean up.”

“It will only look as if we were leaving before the work had to get done.”

“She is going to tell him that we had to get to our next destination before dark.”

“We aren’t going to make it to Birmingham.”

“Didn’t you say that we could stay with your cousin in Tuscaloosa?”

“After that little performance, I don’t know if we’re going to be welcome much anywhere.”

“I am a gentleman. You will be proud of me, Julius.”

With that, Lane put his foot on the gas, and they were speeding away from the scene of the crime.

“What the fuck were you thinking? The minister welcomed you into his home, and you treated him like shit.”

“I wanted to thank the hostess. She did all the work.”

“You are going to the rest of your life trying to be forgiven for a sin like that.”

“Nothing ventured, nothing gained. You would have done just the same if you were in my place.”

“I guess that I have a lot to learn.”

“I am ready to teach you what you need to learn.”

They pulled off the highway to get some gas. Lane peeled off a twenty from the stash that he was now holding.

“Serving the Lord can be lucrative.”

“This isn’t going to last us all that long.”

“Where is your next performance?”

“I’ve got a gig just out of Birmingham.”

The next service wasn’t until Wednesday so they could lay low until Tuesday.

Denise seemed relieved that someone was looking out for her cousin. She had a bit of an idea what kind of man Lane was. But she also realized that Lane was troublemaker. He needed

someone who could balance his mischief.

“You haven’t seen anything like Lane.”

Julius hardly revealed anything about Lane. Denise could see it in his eyes. The two men had been stuffed to the gills in Meridian. But they also stuffed themselves while they were at Denise’s. The two men let their appetites do all the talking.

“I could use some repairs to the house. I need to put the two of you to work.”

The two men did not shirk. Denise had given herself freely. And they worked to spruce her house as best as they could.

“One day, I am going to have my own church. Until then, I wander the earth like Cain trying to expunge his dark sin.”

“These people around here are very industrious. It is going to rub off on us.”

Julius sat on the porch. He ate a piece of corn bread.

“This is the life. We could stay here forever.”

“We are God’s fugitives. We have to pay our debt.”

“I could see myself settling down.”

“You have a dark secret. If you settle down, you are going to be found out.”

“I could be cured.”

“Your only cure is to keep moving.”

“I am not like you.”

“What does that mean?”

While he was at his cousin’s, Julius seemed protected. He could proclaim his salvation. But his comfort would not last.

Covenant Baptist welcomed Lane’s wisdom. Lane acted as if he needed to lived down their time in Meridan. But Lane was not looking for forgiveness. He felt as if he should double down on his mischief.

“I am meant to serve the God.”

Julius always felt that they were on the verge of bigger things. But it hardly ever worked out that way. Lane had this urge to sabotage his own success. That only drove him to greater challenges.

“If you are such a devout worshiper, why are you drawn to sin?”

“Look at yourself. I rescued you from the lion’s den. Why did you deserve that fate?”

“I admit to no offenses.”

“They just picked you out of the crowd for persecution.”

“It’s the South.”

“I know it’s the South. But you contribute to your own demise.”

“This is from the man who will betray his host.”

“I did my best to bless my hostess.”

“How long is this going to continue?”

“I can only gain control of my errant nature if God grants me the strength. I can only find my strength if I discover what are the body’s capabilities.”

“What does that mean?”

“I have to explore. We have powers to resist which we know little about. We can only engage those energies if we discover all the facets of the body. If that is the source of our sin, so

be it.”

Julius had just run out of the convenience store.

“Floor it!”

“What is going on?”

“I just paid for a couple of Dr. Peppers. But the clerk was accusing me of stealing.”

“We gun it, and he is going to call the local sheriff.”

“I don’t want to hang around to find out.”

“Julius, I don’t want to get shot over a couple of soft drinks.”

“You are not going to get hurt.”

“You are telling me to race away from here. This is not Talladega.”

“I don’t want to find out. You have no idea.”

“What did you do?”

“I got into an argument with a redneck clerk. Let us get the fuck out of here.”

No one came after them. Julius felt vindicated.

“You can’t trust these good old boys!”

A police cruiser did pull them over outside of Birmingham.

The officer turned to Lane, “Are you okay?”

“Yes, officer.”

He sneered at Julius.

“What are all those bibles.”

“I preach the word of the Lord.”

The officer looked at Julius, “We could all use some healing.”

They drove off without being ticketed.

“Watch your speed, minister!”

Lane liked speed. It gave him the feeling that he was driving the Lord’s chariot.

“The Lord punishes with no delay!”

Lane pulled into a cheap motel. The two men hung out with the door of their room open as they cleaned out another six pack. Some of the other patrons would give them a look.

“Isn’t someone supposed to protect us against types like you?”

Julius was holding the hotel bible

“The Lord protects the righteous against the wicked.”

“I guess that leaves you out.”

“You as well. We are going to need some help being saved.”

“How so?”

“You got to sin pretty hard if the Lord is going to do anything to save you.”

Julius watched Lane fall asleep. He wanted that edge tonight.

After his powerhouse sermon, Lane was invited over to Grace’s house.

The minister told Lane, “She’s my cousin. I need you to take care of her.”

Grace welcomed Lane and Julius into her home. She had an organ in the front room.

Julius sat down and serenaded them as Julius helped Grace prepare dinner.

Julius told her, “I have to thank you for including me as well.”

Lane was playing, “The Lord Works in Mighty Mysterious Ways.” Julius starting to sing along with his big, booming voice.

They all sat down at the table, and Lane started a rambling blessing.

Grace followed by saying, "Let's dig in!"

Grace had cooked a whole chicken with mashed potatoes, corn, and green beans. She got up from the table to get some sweet tea.

"What more can you say about chicken?"

Lane had a big smile on his face

"I wasn't thinking about food."

"Don't even ask me?"

Julius had a startled look on his face."

"You don't want me asking about the chicken. I have to ask."

Lane still looked smug. He was not going to react.

"Eat up. She gave us everything that means something special."

"I am sure that there is something extra special for you."

"I asked you not to ask me about the chicken."

Julius used his knife to scarp the meat off the bone."

He maintained, "It not as good as just getting a big juicy hunk between the teeth."

He bit in to a wing that he had squarely in his hands. The grease dripped to the plate.

"This is juicy chicken."

They both smiled.

"You have to keep it in there for a while."

Grace had understood just how long to cook that bird to make it delectable. Lane scraped some mashed potatoes on his fork. Then he opened his mouth wide.

Grace had her eye on Lane. She smiled at his bravado.

Everyone present thanked the Lord for their blessings. When she offered the men more food, they both welcomed the offer.

Julius was easily filled up. But Lane ate ravenously. And Grace watched him display his revved up appetite.

"You are a real eater. You know there is a price for eating up all my food."

Lane gave her a humorous sneer.

"You are going to have to come upstairs and bang me."

He practically choked on his food. And Julius let out a marvelous belly laugh.

During dessert, Lane sat in the living room eating some peach cobbler.

"Mam, you really have gone all out for us."

Julius muttered, "I think that you are going to have to go all out her."

After they had helped clean up, Grace went up to her room. Both Julius and Lane had beds downstairs.

"Are you going to go upstairs?"

"Do you think that it will be okay?"

"Do you have to ask? Admit it. You are a lot stranger than I am."

"Do I look that weird?"

Julius seemed to be daring Lane to slip up those stairs. Lane could sense that nudge becoming more insistent.

"What is wrong with you?"

As soon as Julius fell asleep, Lane made his way upstairs. He saw Grace naked on her bed reciting bible verses. He couldn't go any further. He bounced back down the stairs, and he pulled the covers over his head.

In the morning, he told Julius, "I can't wait for the pancakes."

"The chicken wasn't enough for you."

Julius chuckled.

Grace seemed preoccupied when she came down the stairs.

"So my cousin told you about my flapjacks."

Julius indicated, "He told us something about your tender chicken, but I don't think that we all appreciated it equally."

Grace rejoindered, "What are you saying? Lane ate it all up, and he even sucked up the grease."

"The Grace?"

Lane gave everyone an innocent look.

"I'm a dog for maple syrup."

Breakfast could not have been more of a treat.

After eating, Lane promised to return another day.

"Tell your cousin that we could not have been taken care of any better."

"I second that testimonial."

Julius could not have been more gleeful.

In the car, Julius asked, "What happened?"

Lane told him about the scene of her reciting bible verses.

"I think that she wanted another one of your sermons."

They both laughed.

Julius asked, "Do you have a heart, or is life just one big joke to you?"

"I need my energy to drive to Atlanta."

The road gave both of them the sense of independence that they needed.

Lane asserted, "If we are going to find the Lord, we are going to have to try harder."

They were bearing down on I-20 with everything that they had.

"How do we do that? We are both terrible examples for the world."

"We are both the saintly sort. We understand the magnificence of the Lord's blessings. We both understand the meaning of forgiveness."

"Lane, it's not much of a forgiveness if we keep doing the same thing over and over again to mess up with our welcome to heaven."

"The gates of heaven are always open to the believer."

"Do we really have the strength to believe?"

Lane would not let up.

"We both have the faith to keep going."

"That is hardly enough."

"God grants us the gifts to overcome our weaknesses."

"That may not be sufficient."

Lane turned towards a gas station.

"The Lord gives us the gas to get us from one place to another."

“Are we very good representatives of our beliefs?”

“We are constantly moving towards salvation even if we get distracted now and then.”

“I feel drained even as we are drifting along on our journey.”

“We just ate. What are you lacking?”

“Emotional fulfillment.”

“You are not truly happy.”

“When will we ever be happy?”

“There are moments of incredible power where God reveals his full nature to us. But we are too afraid of that burden. We deny our own perfection.”

“Lane, that sounds like nonsense.”

“We have nowhere else to go.”

“That only confirms our weakness. It is folly to expect that we can be rescued from our hell.”

“Out hell is the sovereign announcement of our coming rescue.”

“You are telling me that something like rescue is awaiting us.”

“I am telling you the solemn truth.”

“You are believing what you want to believe.”

“I am believing.”

Lane needed to swerve to avoid a semi. The car almost pulled off the road. Lane had to do some real driving to keep on the highway.”

“Was that our sign?”

Lane just smiled. A while later, he had his reply.

“The darkness cannot overcome the light.”

“You believe what you want to believe.”

The men found a restaurant on the western suburbs of Atlanta.

“How’s the money?”

Lane admitted, “I’m holding up.”

“I need to pull my weight somehow.”

“You are keeping me company. That is good for now.”

When they went back to start the car, it wouldn’t start.

“Pop the hood.”

Lane asked, “What are you talking about?”

“Give me a chance to have a look.”

He got Lane to try to start the car. It turned around for a second and stopped completely

“I see what it is.”

He pulled on some hoses. He made a small adjustment.

“Try it again.”

Lane had the car running.

“Now, turn it off. I have to check on something.”

Soon, they were again on the road.

“Where to next?”

“You are a pretty good mechanic.”

“I know how things work.”

“I can do some things here and there.”

“I know. You’re the miracle worker.”

They both laughed.

“I need a beer after that!”

“I will buy the mechanic a beer.”

It was still early. And there was no one else in the bar.

“You got a job in Atlanta.”

“I have a place to stay. We’ll see where it goes from there.”

Lane wondered what would have happened if he wasn’t traveling with Julius. It wasn’t as if he had loads of money for the car. This rolling revival needed the help of a holy man like Julius.

Julius was thinking about Grace. The beer made him more libidinal. He was giving in to his fantasy.

“Where are you, Julius?”

“I am sitting right next to you.”

Julius wondered what verses Grace had been reciting. He looked closely at Lane. It seemed unlikely that he would have left Grace untouched. Was there another side to Lane that he did not know?

Julius thought about the angel of the Lord who passed over the house so that vengeance would not be realized. Julius told himself that he showed no mercy.

“Are we going to stay in here all day?” Julius asked.

“Where do you want to go?”

“I want to go to a store. I want to go where there is some action.”

“There’s action where you look for it.”

“Don’t tell me that you’re not a little bored.”

“Boredom is part of redemption. If you want to find the Lord, you have to deal with all your emotions. You seem restless.”

“I am restless. I’ve spent all that time cooped up in a car.”

Julius realized that the car was his home.

“You need the comfort of a good woman.”

“How are we going to do that in a empty bar.”

“Maybe, we have to go looking for trouble.”

“Are you telling me what I think?”

Lane suddenly felt as if he was giving in.

“I am not sure what I said.”

“People give us an excuse to surrender to darkness.”

“Julius, do you really think that.”

“I am just trying to go along with your way of thinking.”

Lane told himself that the drinking was making him dizzy. That only contributed to his bad energy.

“Maybe we could go get a massage.”

Lane’s suggestion was too much of a temptation to Julius. He was again dreaming about Grace’s offer. He wanted to interrogate Lane about what had happened. Lane was already off on

another adventure.

Lane sat at the car and stared at the road.

“Are you good to drive?”

“I think that I am.”

But he could feel that he was passing out while sitting in the car.

“Let’s sit here for a while.”

Julius was exhausted. He contemplated what would have happened if he couldn’t have figured out what was going on with the car.

Julius started to nod out. He was dreaming about being in Grace’s bedroom. He wished that Lane had said something.

Lane was somewhere else. He imagined that the angels of the Lord were leading to his final resting place. Judgment had been in his favor. And he found favor among these angels.

Julius muttered, “Are we supposed to find pleasure in this world?”

“We are not meant to suffer.”

Suffering was essential to God’s glory. Lane was not taking full advantage of opportunity that he was offered. Julius had a great deal to learn.

Lane was too close to tranquility. He had forgotten about the significance of God’s challenge to him. He would never realize his vocation if he did not seek a greater revelation. Why had he closed his eyes to God’s creation. He was facing his fear. His sensuality was there to make him risk his eternal soul. He loved that risk because it was the only way that God could truly manifest himself for man.

Lane wanted to know God’s glory.