

ASHBY HOUSE

"I am looking for a place to stay. I can pay a couple of hundred a month."

"If you are going to stay, there are rules."

"What kind of rules?"

"No sex, no alcohol, and no shirking."

Julius and Lane were ready to abide by the rules. If they were going to seek any adventures, they would take place outside of the house. And the stay would be temporary.

"What do we know, my children?"

"We know that we are sinners."

Lane resented the fact that the house mother was usurping his role. He was there to minister to the flock.

"You will have to carry on your mission elsewhere."

"That is not the point, Julius. I am the most adept at providing the message of the Lord. I am a trained minister."

"Every robin believes that he can chirp a song."

"They do not know a songbird."

"Sing away."

For the time being, they had a place to stay. They had a little money for food. And they were resting up the Cadillac for more fruitful endeavors. There was a lot more to come. The two men were scheming.

"This is not our flock."

"There are more roaches here than there are children of God."

"You can say prayers for the roaches."

"Are you laughing at me?"

"This place is ugly."

"Wait until it rains."

When it rained, the street flooded. It was impassable for the pedestrians. Lane danced through the waves in order to make his way back to the porch.

Julius asked, "Why have we been condemned to this place?"

Atlanta in August was a welcoming locale. Both men felt restless. They could feel the squeeze of poverty. One of the men in the house cut hair. He seemed a jolly sort who would blast old funk tunes. The Gap Band and Dazz were playing constantly.

There were a number of addicts who were doing the best to kick it. They were confined to the house. That meant that they were doing the chores most of the time. These men struggled to keep on. They realized that survival meant a very direct commitment to their betterment. There was little else available.

"Let's go to the library. We can use the time to educate our minds. Strong minds help to fortify the soul."

Julius spent all the time looking at car magazines.

"I thought that you wanted to study government."

"I am looking at the habits of consumers."

"That will only lead you astray."

Lane pointed out to Julius an academic study of American Government.

“I already read that book.”

“You are shitting me.”

“Ask me any question!”

Julius expounded on the fineries of bi-cameral legislatures.

“The upper house normally serves to stifle expression of democratic impulses. However, gerrymandering has made the lower houses more subject to manipulation by powerful lobbies.”

“I think that you have a calling.”

Julius maintained that the self-governance of the individual could serve for the development of a more representative government.

“When we see the state as an extension of the collective of individuals, then government provides in a more equitable way for the citizens.”

The two made it back to the house before a downpour. They found some food in the fridge and made a quick dinner.

Lane asserted, “We need to move before the roaches take over the kitchen.”

One of the addicts cornered Lane.

“I am running low on funds. I could use some help.”

The resources had been pooled to help these men with their meals. They were set for rent. What else did they need?

“I want to buy chips. I want to go to the convenience store for chips.”

The convenience store was a dangerous place for these men. Just to the north, dealers collected, and they promised paradise to whomever would listen. A little extra money, and that would be the end.

“I am sorry. I have no extra money.”

Julius convinced Lane to jump in the car. They drove to the doughnut store on Ralph David Abernathy.

“We are going to smell the doughnuts. But we don’t have the money to buy them.”

Both men smiled at the offer.

“What are you two doing here?”

“We are both students of the Lord. And we are learning our lessons slowly.”

“We are learning denial. We can smell the delicious wares. But we are not indulging our appetites.”

“We live on that indulgence. We are a doughnut store.”

“You have to understand our mission. We are experts at facing temptation. We recognize the power. But we do not give in.”

“Jesus became a man because he needed to understand why man was so given to temptation. It is built in our nature. That is the key to sin. We cannot control what we do. But we ask for grace.”

The clerk wondered if they would ever buy the doughnuts.

“I do not really understand. Most people cannot resist the smell.”

Lane pulled out the money that they had.

“We have money, but it is important that we accept these restrictions.”

“It wouldn’t hurt to have one doughnut.”

At that moment, a group of kids came in to get their doughnuts. Their parents watched as they satisfied their desires. When their teeth broke the glaze, the promise was realized.

“This is living.”

Lane and Julius preferred denial.

“It is a blessing if we can resist our other temptations.”

“The poor have few moral challenges.”

“Substance abuse. The lottery.”

“If you have no money, you can’t indulge.”

“That is the fine line.”

“How is that?”

“You learn to scrimp and cheat just to get that temporary edge. Others look for more constant rewards.”

The other residents were nodding off as they watched television. When they started watching for the evening, they had been lost in that mesmerized stare. Their eyes moved with each forsaken image. Now, their plight was worse. They were completely overwhelmed.

Julius and Lane shared a room. It held down the expenses.

Julius claimed., “I feel as I am a prisoner here.”

“We are prisoners here. This is preparation for our next stage in life.”

“What will that be?”

“We will be free men.”

“What a wonderful change.”

There seemed to be this promise for so much more.

“We have no expectation for winning the lottery.”

“There is a place out west where we can find land. We can live on our own toil.”

“That is ridiculous. We are condemned to our fate.”

“That is even more ridiculous. Fate is these guys nodding off while watching television.”

“There is a moment when every one of us shuts down.”

“That is not sufficient.”

“What are we hoping for?”

“The hell of our lives”

“We have to push ourselves for more enjoyment.”

“It is not going to come from watching television.”

Lane wanted the Lord to fill him with liberating images. He would find what he needed to escape his meager fate. He was meant for great things.

“Lane, if you want to be great in life, you have to do a few silly things.”

“What does great mean?”

“To redeem the world. That is your dream.”

“I think that I am like you. I just want to leave Ashby House.”

“What are we waiting for?”

“We have to be ready? We have a ways to go before we achieve true liberation.”

“By eating porridge all the time.”

“We eat healthy meals.”

“I feel like Goldilocks.”

Julius would talk about the great forces of history. He wanted to get in on these developments.

“You have something to learn.”

“We both do. That is the promise.”

Julius watched Lane study the Bible. Something amazing was awaiting them.

“It will all be clear after one of these great rain storms.”

“If you say so, Lane.”

You could cut the air. They both were wet after walking a few feet.

“And it is still not time to go.”

“Julius, where do you want to go.”

“I want to go to a place where they revere me for my ideas.”

“Talk to the barber. He sees it all!”

Lane feared that they did not know how to accept their blessings.

“We still need to read. We will soon need more money. Then we will leave this place.”

A disruptive storm shook the house. The water seeped everywhere. It was a constant mud. No one could move. They held to the porch.

“This should be a sign.”

“We have a long way to go.”

The rain was immense! As the waters dissipated, it seemed as if it was a time for celebration.

Julius maintained, “It is Saturday night. I am going to let go!”

“Lane, it’s morning. Isn’t it time to sleep it off.”

“It’s Sunday!:

“Sunday. What does that mean?”

“It means that I only have to do have the work, and God can do the rest.”

“You can’t be helped.”

“That is my intro line.”

“God must have more than enough forgiveness for you and your flock.”

“You are catching on to the doctrine.”

“I am catching on to the fool. Lane, I can have the answers for you, but that is not going to help either of us.”

“I am not ready to saved for all time. I am looking for a temporary remedy. The full program can wait until I am purged of all my corruption.”

“Lane, you love your sin too much for purging!”

“Why are you trying to embarrass me. You had your enjoyment. Now it is time for joy.”

“What does that mean?”

“You have to use the gifts which God has granted you.”

“We are coming to the end of our blessings! We are going to have to rely on sheer will!”

Lane was fortifying himself for this Sunday. He should have been preaching to a congregation. He pulled Julius aside for a lesson.

“I want to teach you about time. It promises us salvation. But we have to live for the future.”

“What are you trying to tell me?”

“You have to store up your blessing for the future!”

“I accept what I have for now. If I spend it all so be it.”

“We are planning for great things.”

“What are you talking about? What are you trying to teach me?”

“You need to learn how to be strong.”

“Who do you want from me?”

“I want you to be more confident. I want you to realize your dreams.”

“You have nothing but cliches. There are great changes in our economic system.”

“What do you really have to tell me but conspiracy theory?”

The next morning, Julius rushed to find Lane.

“I had this wild dream that we discovered a body on the street after the flood. And you ran to try to revive her. You were doing mouth-to-mouth, and she opened her eyes. She started kissing on you, and you jumped five feet in the air. It was hilarious. Your one miracle was ruined by your own perversity.”

“That never happened.”

“Sure it did. I dreamt it.”

“Do you really think that your dream means anything?”

“I think that it is our calling to pull bodies from the flood.”

“Are you kidding me?”

“I am completely serious. I know what I am seeing.”

Julius kept telling himself that his dream was prophetic. This was his call to action. Julius envisioned a row of bodies. Lane touched each one and she came back to life.

“I was born to do something special.”

Julius wanted to believe that he was traveling with a visionary. He welcomed the wonders which awaited them.

“Lane, when will you perform a miracle?”

“You’ve done some wild things up to now.”

“And I will do even wilder things.”

“So there will be a raising of the dead en masse.”

“That would require a catastrophe of immense proportions. I hope that we never see it.”

Lane found Julius at the grocery store.

“What the hell are you doing?”

“Something you would be doing if you had arrived here earlier.”

“You can’t just follow women around the grocery store.”

“I wasn’t following. She smile at me, and I was helping her with her shopping.”

“That isn’t what it looked like to me.”

“Lane, you end up seeing what you want to see. That is your style.”

“Are you questioning my religious commitment?”

“I am not sure what to say about your behavior.”

“Behavior? That suggest that I am doing something unusual. I don’t do strange things to get close to women.”

“Lane, you are a strange character just like me. Did you even see her? She fits your theory.”

“What are you talking about?”

“You maintain that you have to fall if you are ever going to find redemption. And she seems like the woman you would fall over.”

“I am not going to do something so obvious.”

“No, you are going to gush all over her at a church social. You are going to show a side of yourself that you don’t want anyone else to see. And you are going to try to devise an image where you seem above board. You are the worst sinner of us all.”

“You are accusing me of being a hypocrite. I follow through with my beliefs. I know that I am not perfect.”

“So you hide your perversity until there are no witnesses except your victim.”

“I don’t think that she would see it that way.”

“No one has the kind of perspective which you have.”

“Let’s just get out groceries.”

When they were back at the house, Lane wanted to continue his criticism.

“I want to eat. Then I want to drink a beer and watch the game. I am not looking forward to a moral discourse.”

“If you don’t want me to say things about you, you have to be more conscientious when you are around me.”

“Lane, I don’t need a second father. I had enough problems with my first.”

“Maybe, that is the source of your problems. You think that you can get away with anything.”

“You challenge the bounds of decency yourself. You are no different.”

“I am not going to risk arrest in a grocery store.”

“If the woman likes it, it is all okay.”

“That is no standard for morality. You figure that you can do whatever you want.”

“I do whatever I want. What is your problem? What is this standard for morality? We do not work like this.”

“You have very little self-consciousness.”

“I know what I like. I am not denying myself and getting into worse problems when I cannot satisfy my desires.”

“What do you want me to say to you to make you see?”

“I don’t need a brash moral judge. I want to eat. And I want you to leave me alone.”

Julius sat in the comfortable chair and ate.

“Do you have advice on my eating habits?”

“That sandwich looks tasty.”

“I don’t want to have to talk with food in my mouth.”

“You are such an example of decorum.”

“What more can I say to you? Leave me be.”

“If I had left you to your own devices, you would be dead.”

“I thank you for that. But you cannot follow me around all the time.”

“I will be there when you need me.”

“This is not one of those moments.”

“Take it as a blessing that I am watching out for you.”

“We are too much on top of each other in this place. We need to go on the road.”

“We are waiting for a sign.”

“The flood is the sign.”

“You were the one with the dream, not me.”

Julius needed some relief. He stopped talking and ate. Lane was leaning over him as if he wanted to tell him something.

“What is the world coming to?”

“Shut up, Lane. Get something to eat, and come watch the game.”

“I am going to meditate in the room.”

Julius was left to eat his lunch. He started to miss the banter with Lane. He needed someone to challenge him the game hardly interested him.

Clara moved into the house. She change the dynamic of life there.

One of the residents screamed, “Can anyone make that baby stop crying.”

Clara was defensive, “No one is going to mess with my baby. If he wants to cry, he’s going to cry.”

“He’s doing this just to get on my nerves.”

The baby was making it more difficult to live in the house. The cries would interrupt Lane while he was meditating.

“Can’t you deal with the noise? The baby is a messenger of God.

“I don’t think that I want that kind of message.”

“Lane, you are supposed to be able to deal with that kind of interference. IT makes you a more powerful representative of the Lord.

Lane was resentful of such experiences. If he was going to deal with a baby, he wanted on his terms.

“I wonder about Clara’s baby. She is not good representative of God’s love.”

“Whatever can that mean?”

“I really don’t know. But there is an imbalance. And I can’t figure out what it is.”

Clara was becoming upset with the way that Lane looked at her. This seemed to create further tension in the house. Julius seemed to be the only person who was tolerant of the baby. He and the baby seemed to share a similar view of the world. Lane thought of himself as a fool of God. So he and the baby were blessed by their sheer lack of guile. Lane felt that made him dangerous. A baby can be excused for his wildness. But Julius risked getting them both in trouble.

Lane decided to move them to a rundown motel for the night. He needed a good night’s sleep.

“It was a good thing we got out of that rooming house. It was no good.”

Julius nodded.

When they returned a couple of nights later, there were fire trucks surrounding the house next door.

“The Lord just lit a spark and the whole place went up. He held all their lives in his hand. And he flinched.”

“There was no God going on there. It was a house of sinners.”

“Lane, I thought that you were going to save them one and all.”

“I would have to damn them first.

Clara has a frightened look on her face.

“You know what they say. When your time is up., your time is up.”

“Julius, this is the smartest thing that we ever did. I could taste their decadence.

“You never know who you touch.”

“Julius, let’s get the fuck out of here.”

“What are you afraid?”

“I can’t put it into words. It will make more sense when I get out of here.”

The two watched fireworks flare across the sky.

“Is that a sign?”

“That we’re not wanted around here.”

Julius reminded him, “The only people who were wanted are now

“If you have too much fun, you are going to end up having to pay for it.

“Lane, how do you keep this piece of shit on the road.”

“Prayer, Julius. A lot of prayer. It’s what we could us right.”

“Are you asking me to pray? I was in the middle of a dirty thought.”

“You were on the verge of a revelation from the Lord. Just let me push you a little further.”

Julius laughed.

“No one is truly spiritual anymore.”

“Lane, no one takes you seriously.”

Lane just stared at Julius. He truly felt the presence of the Lord pass through him.

“Julius, I need a drink. Something to help me forget all this bull shit.”

The next day, Lane’s convertible was the only car parked in front of the bar in the middle of the afternoon.

“You’re paying for this Julius.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“I saw you go through that guy’s wallet back the way. You can steal if you want. But you’re going to have to make your peace to me.”

Lane took a sip of his whiskey.

“Are you going to forgive me”

“Do you forgive yourself?”

“I don’t think that I am really ready to confess my misdeeds. Let me just enjoy the spoils of fruits of my sins.”

“What are you doing?”

“I am taking in the view.”

“There is no one in here. You have one hell of an imagination.”

“My imagination is the only way that I am ever going to get what I want.”

“You are tainted.”

“You need me!”

“Why? Because you hate to admit how really twisted you are.”

“My twists are part of my curse of being in the world.”

“So there is place where your nature can be realized in a more constant manner.”

“I should hope so.”

Atlanta was getting old. They had faced floods and fire. What else was there to disrupt their placid lifestyle?

“Are we all packed up?”

“Lane, everything was already in the trunk before we came back.”

Julius remembered something that had been left in the room. He went back to do one last check. The burnt wood from next door filled the air.

“It is only a matter of time.”

“What does that mean, Lane?”

“You know just as well as I do.”

“You can be so cryptic.”

On the road, the two men worked to make sense of their layover.

“Why did we do it?”

“I needed to reset. I was getting too out of control. Now I have a clearer picture of my mission.”

They stopped at a rest stop near Tennessee. Lane pulled out one of his bibles and read silently to himself. He could feel himself preparing. And Julius worked to size him up. He wanted that same kind of zeal which he saw in his friend. He could not sustain that kind of belief. He lived for the moment. He was still young. But he could sense it all slipping from him. Lane had a vision. That is what he wanted. He felt that he had been abandoned. He had never been touched in the same way.

“Julius, you hold on too much. If you really want something, you have to let go.”

Julius hated these generalizations. Lane was holding life at arm’s length.

“I look at you, Julius, and I realize who not to be. I do not want to be destroyed by my own appetites.”

“Be honest: that is all that you want. We were almost arrested in Mobile because of you. This woman wakes up in the middle of the night, and you were on top of her.”

“That is not at all what happened.”

“If I hadn’t have pulled the car around, you would have really been fucked.”

“Julius, you always seem to have an answer to what is happening to us.”

Indeed, he did believe that he was informed by a higher power.

In a small town in middle Tennessee, the men found a short-term home. The pastor was willing to give the world to Lane.

Lane had convinced the pastor to let him give the sermon. Lane definitely had that power. He could speak the Good News of his Savior.

After the service, they all gathered around Lane.

“You can give us food the soul. But I can make a mean dinner to fill up your body.”

Minister Perkins spoke up: “Brother Lane and Brother Julius are bringing the Word around the country. They could most assuredly use a place to lay their weary heads.”

Mrs. Jennings was excited that she could have these two pilgrims staying under her roof.

“Lisha and I would love to have your bringing the light to our humble home.”

Julius was already leering at Lisha. But Lane wasted no time to jump in and talk to Mrs. Jennings.

“It is going to be real joy to have holy men bless my lonely night.”

Lane gave her that look that said that his only concern was her immortal soul. Her smile only got wider. Lisha was doing everything that she could to avoid Julius’s gaze. He wasn’t about to stop. Lane signaled him by tapping on his shoulder. But he simply ignored him.

Lane interrupted the action: “My associate, Julius, is even more of a righteous man than I am.”

“You both have your crosses to bear. I will be glad to lighten your burden.

“I’ve got this one. But I need you to keep the mother busy.”

“How am I supposed to do that?”

“Get on your knees with her. Get her to pray.”

“Lane, you are having all the fun.”

“I am a fun-loving guy.”

“I want to have some fun.”

“She told me that you creep her out a bit. It’d be like forcing yourself on her.”

“How are you different?”

“I am a true man of the Lord.”

Julius had been watch Lane during this excursion. And Lane had recognized an opening for his behavior.

“Lane, the mother is getting wise to my actions.”

“It is not time to wheel the car around. The daughter has almost submitted.”

“Am I supposed to find comfort in that. She looks all of seventeen.”

“She is well over twenty-one. She has a young disposition.”

“She has never seen the world. I don’t think that she has been out of this town.”

“She wants to learn about God’s magnificence.”

“She can learn about that on her own. This is beautiful country.”

“That isn’t what she really needs. She needs an education.”

“With that kind of education, she is going to need therapy for the rest of her life.”

“You are so judgmental.”

“Keep the mother busy!”

“I am doing what I can!”

“That is not enough. She is going to catch us if you don’t watch out.”

Lane could feel the inspiration of the Lord grip him. He communicated this intensity to Lisha.

She told him, “The Lord will not mind if we kiss.”

“We can do whatever we want. Whatever you want.”

“Maybe you could read me a bedtime story. Something which stirs the spirit.”

“I can read the Psalms. What do you want to hear?”

“I want to understand how the Lord shakes me from head to toe. I want to know that this energy is flowing through me. I have many questions.”

“Ask away?”

“My heart beat so quickly. I don’t think that I can contain myself.”

Julius was getting bored. He wanted to look in on Lane. Lane had already succeeded beyond his wildest imagination. The bible now lay underneath the bed. Lane wished that the

door had been closed all the way.

“Julius, what are you doing there?”

Mrs. Jennings was watching Julius in the hallway.

“I am looking for the bathroom.”

“It is further down the hallway. Let me help you.”

Julius needed to think quickly. Things had already progressed too far. Julius walked over to the open bedroom.

“I think that we are disturbing your daughter. Let me close the door.”

He pulled the door closed before Mrs. Jennings could get a look. She suspected nothing. Julius had seen it all. Now he was being led by the hand to the bathroom.

“You were almost a dead man. That town would have lynched you, no questions asked.”

“I got out of there with my life.”

“That was our first miracle!”

“Are you counting, Julius? I think that we are already at thirty-five or so.”

Julius actually wished that he had a log which chronicled their adventures.

“A writer actually exaggerates everything that he sees.”

“Were the miracles of Jesus exaggerated by the Evangelists?”

“They were witnesses of God’s handiwork on earth.”

“Can we be sure?”

“What are you asking? Do you not believe?”

“You have shown me a great deal. I am fascinated by the journey.”

“You still don’t think that I am a charlatan.”

“Of course, you are. You are very much!”