

*Kyle Minor*

## **In a Distant Country**

### **I.**

*Rev. Samuel Tillotson, Baptist Mission, Koulèv-Ville, Haiti, to Mr. Leslie Ratliff, Principal, Good Shepherd Academy, West Palm Beach, Florida, June 11, 1983.*

Technically, Leslie, and in keeping with the practice we're supposed to maintain around here, I'm supposed to be writing to thank you for visiting last month with your graduating seniors, and for the gifts toward the 44 cubic ft. refrigerator for the mission and the new stone cistern for the village and especially the ionized oxygen allotrope gas (IAOG) water filtration system, which, I'll admit, this place has badly needed for as long as I can remember. I'm also supposed to make you aware of our other needs, among them the replacement diesel generator, the razor-wire project to replace the broken glass deterrent atop the mission walls, and 142 sponsorships for our planned expansion of the school-and-food project at the Angels of Mercy orphanage up the road.

In many ways, though, it pains me to make you aware of any of it, or to give you the missionary song and dance at all, really. The best thing about seeing you again was taking those long walks out into the village where we could be candid. Leslie, I'm lonely, and wanting for candidness these days. The mission board is threatening to yank thirteen percent of our funding, which means whoever first talks out of turn in front of someone else gets sent home without so much as a kiss goodbye, so here lately I'm silent as a monk. The Haitians are candid among themselves, but not with me. They look at me

and all they see is a walking cash machine, and who could blame them? Good people like you come to visit, and we're not to be candid with you, either, because you're *our* cash machine. We scam people, Leslie. The last two groups before you—the bonnetheads from Pennsylvania I told you about, and the Alabama rednecks whose minister kept sneaking off with his dip can—Brother Joe told Henri, our driver, to take the good tires off the truck before he picked them up from the airport, and put on the old worn-out set instead. Right there in the airport parking lot, he shows the tires to the group leaders, says, "Times are hard. I hope we make it to the mission on those things." Sure enough, on the way there, both times, one of the tires blows out, and Henri gets out to patch it, and up there in the back of the truck, the group leader is already calculating how much for each tire, and how quickly he can wire the money from the States.

I wouldn't let them do that to you, Leslie. I probably ought not let them do it to anyone at all, but you have to pick your battles. Remember Professor Phelps, our first year at old Apalachicola Bible College, talking equality this and justice that? He was right, and we all knew it, or ought to have known it: They should've been letting blacks into that college all along. But, thinking about it, if Phelps had just kept his mouth shut, say, four more years, history would have caught up to him, because they let the blacks into Apalachicola Bible College eventually anyway, didn't they? But they never let Phelps back in, ever. That's something I think about from time to time, when I'm thinking about opening my mouth. Wise as serpents, harmless as doves, the Scripture says.

Enough griping. Here's the real reason I'm writing you. It's obvious you are running a quality school up there in West Palm Beach. Your students were uniformly well-behaved, and more mature than many of the ones we get from the church groups or even the college groups. I found them to be highly intelligent, cooperative, and given to the highest standards of moral uprightness. No doubt you think of them as children, since you have seen them along their journey since they were children. But to a person like me, meeting them for the first time at the ages of seventeen and, mostly, eighteen, they didn't really seem like children so much as they seemed like the young adults they have become. They have graduated now, Leslie, and you have turned them loose into the world knowing that you've done your job well. It must be hard for you, to turn them loose, but every year you do it, and I imagine it brings you not a little sadness to go along with your hard-earned pride.

One of these students in particular, the young lady named Sheila Brocken, impressed me even more than most. From day one, it was clear that she was

not here to pal around with her girlfriends or have a Third World frolic or impress the boys. She was here to touch the lives of others. You should have seen her up there, Leslie, at Angels of Mercy, combing the little girls' hair, braiding it, placing beads. Or upstairs, where they keep the retarded kids, touching their faces, picking them up, spinning them around in circles until they were giddy with laughter.

I'm not the only one who noticed Sheila, either. The day after the field trip to our hospital, one of the nurses came over to see me. You met her, remember? Yvonne, from Gonaïves? Sheila's whole day, Yvonne told me, was spent down in the hospital basement, where we keep the pregnant girls, the ready-to-pop girls who don't have families, or whose families don't have a place for them. Haiti is a grim place for girls like these, Leslie. We can only keep them until the babies arrive, and then they're on their own, and they know it. But this girl of yours, this Sheila, she was only four days in country, and she had already learned the words for good, for beautiful. All day she was touching their faces, touching their swollen bellies, saying *bon, bèl, bon, bèl*, and even more than the words was the way she said them, her smile, which—I agree with what Yvonne said—it was like an angel had come down from heaven to lift us all a little closer to it for a little while.

That last day you were here, Leslie, in the morning—I hope you will forgive this small indiscretion—I went to see Sheila before breakfast. My motives were not ulterior, I assure you. It's just that I had observed in her these very special qualities of faith and goodness, and others had observed them in her as well, and I felt it was my duty, as host and representative of the mission, to praise and encourage these qualities, and to let her know, on behalf of the Baptist Mission, how much I appreciated the way she cared for the children and young women under our care.

That's all it was, Leslie. That's all I intended. I asked her to take an early morning walk with me through the village, the same route I walked with you, past the home of Yves and Prudeut Estimee, where we're building the stone cistern, and alongside the fields where the farmers from our co-op are doing their planting, and down the red dirt path toward Fermathe, where she could mingle some with the children walking to school in Pétiion-Ville, and the working men making their way toward the paved roads to meet the tap-tap.

Sometime on the way back toward the mission, we passed those fields again, and I told Sheila the same story I told you, about this carpenter Rene who has a co-op plot where he grows cabbage and lettuce. I told her how Rene had a little bit of money in his pocket because he was saving to pour a foundation for a new house. His wife knew about this money and asked him

to give her some, because her aunt had died, and she wanted to go to the beauty salon in Pétion-Ville and get her hair and nails done for the funeral. But Rene said no. He was firm. They had a child on the way, and he planned to build her a new house with a floor. He asked her, "Do you want our baby to sleep on dirt?" But his wife was angry anyway, and told all the women in her family that Rene had this money and he was keeping it from her, and many of these women went home and badmouthed Rene to their husbands. The next day, one of these husbands went to see Rene. He said, "I am family. I am the husband of your wife's cousin. I know you have some money in your pocket, and I need work. I am a good roofer. You should hire me to repair your roof." Now, Leslie, it's true that Rene's roof needed mending. It was one of those corrugated aluminum numbers you see all over the village, and the last few storms had loosened its moorings to the top of Rene's tiny old one-room house, the one he had been born in, dirt floor and all. But it's something Rene can fix himself. He needs the money for his foundation, and he's under no obligation to this husband of his wife's cousin. So Rene turns his back politely and replies, "I'm truly sorry, I can't hire you today." At this, the wife's cousin's husband becomes very angry. Later that day, he brings his cow down into Rene's field and lets him loose to graze on Rene's cabbage and Rene's lettuce.

I didn't even yet get to the end of the story, Leslie, where Rene asked me what to do, and I told him to do what the law allows and confiscate the cow and charge the offending man a fee for every day Rene kept him. It's a good story. I had a head of steam, and I wanted to finish it. But all of a sudden I look over at Sheila, and two lines of tears are rolling down her cheeks. She's not crying for attention, she's not making a sound, but the tears are just rolling down her cheeks, and she says, "Brother Samuel, your heart for these people is so beautiful to me."

When she said it, Leslie, I didn't know what to do with it. It was like she reached into my chest and clawed at the scab that had been covering over the wound of my loneliness. I reached both hands to her face, and I wiped the line of tears from each cheek. By then we had been gone too long, so we started the walk back to the mission. She was still crying some, and she leaned into me. I put my arm around her, to comfort her, that's all.

Ever since then, Leslie—ever since I brought her back to the mission in time for breakfast, ever since Henri and I took all of you to the airport, ever since I watched that American Airlines jet light out toward the water, and imagined her trajectory past La Gonave, past the eastern ridge of Cuba, past Turks and Caicos and the Bahamas, and wished her safely all the way toward Miami International—she has been with me, in my thoughts, in my prayers.

Forgive me this detail, but I can still smell her apple shampoo on the shirt I was wearing when she leaned against me as we walked together toward the mission.

It is a risk to tell you these things, Leslie. I don't have to tell you it is a risk. To a certain kind of person it might seem the slightest bit unseemly, a man of forty-two so taken with a young woman only eighteen years old, and that after only a week together. But you know me, Leslie. We are bosom friends and have been ever since we shared Room 23F in the Oldham-Betts dormitory at Apalachicola. And you know, too, that my life has borne out again and again how God's ways are not our own. I never planned to come to this place any more than I had planned to attend Bible College in my thirties. You've heard me preach plenty of times about how I was engaged to be married to Marisa Holden, how I had a thriving plumbing business with my brother Frank, how I had a whole happy life planned out in High Springs—good honest work Monday through Friday, dinner every evening with Marisa, six or seven kids, at least one of them a boy I was going to name Samuel Jr., weekends out at the cold springs, jumping off those cliffs, swimming in those shallow caves, picnic blankets, cold cuts, laying out there in the cool of the evening with Marisa and the kids . . .

But the Lord got a hold of me, Leslie, in a tent meeting of all places. They don't even have tent meetings in High Springs anymore. This might for all I know have been the last of the tent meetings. And that preacher laid his hands on my head and said, "The Lord is commissioning you to bring the good news to a faraway place," and I already knew it before he said it. Do you think it was easy, Leslie, to walk away from Marisa? To walk away from my business? To walk away from my brother? I didn't understand it at the time, but I had faith. I had trust. I believed in the things I had not seen, and it led me to Apalachicola, to Room 23F in the Oldham-Betts dormitory, to you, to the mission board, and eventually here, to Koulèv-Ville, Haiti. My home, Leslie.

What I'm trying to say is that God works in mysterious ways, which is a thing we all say but we hardly ever believe enough to let it happen to us. I'll admit, even here, even after everything I've seen and done since that tent meeting, even I am reluctant sometimes to do the strange things a person might have to do if that person is open to the word of the Lord. But, Leslie, here's what I'm trying to tell you, strange as you and me might find it to be, strange as it certainly is: When I was walking that dirt path with Sheila Brocken, I wasn't thinking for once about what all things I had given up for the Lord's work. I wasn't thinking about my loneliness. I wasn't thinking about my past or my present, not about the mission board or the thirteen

percent budget cut or money this or that. Leslie, I wasn't even thinking how she was eighteen and I was forty-two. All I was doing was just being present in the moment, being open to the Lord and all he has for us, and in that moment what I was hearing—clear as day—was the word from the Lord: This young woman, this Sheila Brocken, is the one I've been keeping aside for you. This young woman, this Sheila Brocken, is the one I've had you waiting for.

I'll tell you, Leslie, as you know from your own experience in the world of men and women, that this waiting has not been easy for me. Often it has been very difficult. Over the years, before Marisa and especially after, I've had a lot of chances to stray from the promises I've made to the Lord. I may not be the most handsome man in the world, Leslie, but I can't say I've not had my share of admirers. I am a man like you and like every other man, and I can't say I've not been tempted. But here's something I have going for me: I've kept my promises, Leslie. I can stand and proudly say that I've kept myself pure unto the Lord for such a day as today, a day when I can sure enough sit down and write you a letter to say that my history is true, my intentions are pure, my motives are noble, and when I say that I mean to pursue Sheila Brocken, what I mean to pursue is a lifelong kind of love, the honor and cherish kind, the in sickness and in health forsaking all others as long as you both shall live kind.

So what I'm asking, Leslie, is this: You know me. We go back many years. At one time you even said you considered me like an older brother to you. So in that spirit of love and family, I'm asking you to go to Sheila Brocken's father and tell him about me and what I have written you today. Explain to him that even though the circumstances are a little unusual, what with the geographic distance, the difference in age and everything, that this is a situation that seems to be coming from a source more powerful than our human minds can even contemplate, and that we all need to sit down here and try to listen to what God is telling us about his will for me and Sheila. And tell him he should listen to his daughter, too. It might be that I'm a fallible soul. I know I can be. I know I am. So we should see if Sheila is hearing the same thing from the Lord that I think I am hearing. And if it is so, that would seem to me to be a confirmation. We may not understand it, Leslie. Not you or me or Sheila's father or Sheila herself. But it might be right, and we'd be wrong to miss it.