Sex Talks to Girls

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Published by University of Wisconsin Press

Seaton, Maureen.
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Soon after Sophie was born, Harper’s father, Jack, came down with cancer and started his decline, ascent, or transition, depending on your faith base. I’d been a live and let live kind of Catholic on the whole, even while involved in the Charismatic Renewal. Proselytizing never sat well with me, but seeing Jack suffer was absolutely beyond my endurance, and I thought, just maybe, it might help if he got religion.

The day we arrived in Rhinebeck, Jack was sitting in his favorite chair. He was overjoyed that we’d come to visit, and we tried not to notice that the cancer was coming out of his head in egg-shaped lumps. He was buoyant, asking us questions about our trip up, holding his granddaughters, grinning around at us as if he was the luckiest man in the world.

After Clio and Sophie had been put to bed in their daddy’s old bedroom and Harper’s Mom was tidying the kitchen, I sat down on the floor by Jack’s feet.
Hello, dear, he said.

I thought to myself, how am I going to say what I have to say to a man who has so much at stake, who will be dead soon and has yet to accept God? I said: I’d like to ask you a personal question, Poppy. Would that be okay?

Ask away.

Jack had never been a churchgoer, but neither had he flaunted his agnosticism. Too tired on Sunday mornings, he’d say with that same silly smile of Harper’s. He and Eileen had raised four biological, one adopted, and a dozen or more foster kids on a milkman’s salary. He loved them fiercely, as he loved his granddaughters and me, his middle son’s young wife.

Would you like to ask Jesus to come into your heart? I asked.

Sure.

He closed his eyes and waited.

That was the moment I had hoped for. The moment when I would have forged ahead and sincerely said my prayer of intercession for Jack, that his path home be made clear, his pain lessened, that he be transformed and open to being saved. That was the very moment. And it was a thousand years long.

There I was at the feet of a man who had been incredibly ill for two years, who’d lived with such reverence for his own life and ours that he had accomplished that trick of the dying you hear families and friends talk about: unconditional acceptance, something I believed only possible of saints.

I look back now and I know what it means to be changed by a Spirit so holy it has no name. No lineage. No affiliation. No provisos. There I was at the feet of a man who was closer to light than I had ever come in my well-meaning arrogance, my fear-clutched faith; who, right before he stepped off the planet, turned around and showed me God.