

The Secret

2438 words

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“**S**orry, Bill, if my sermon put you to sleep. If you haven’t noticed everybody’s gone home.

“No, I know, pastor.” Bill sighed as he looked up from the pew. “I just needed a little time to think.”

“I’ll leave you be, if you wish. You know you are welcome to stay here as long as you wish. A good place to think.”

“No, please stay, if you wish. No reason for me to rush home. Mary took Julianna to State College for one of her club matches.”

The pastor sat in the pew in front of Bill and leaned around, resting his arm on the back of the pew. “Anything I can help with?”

Bill sighed again. He paused. “I don’t know. It’s just everything lately.”

The pastor let the silence simmer.

Bill patted his knee. “It’s just a little bit of everything. Oh, Mary and I are okay. Work is okay. Julianna seems to be doing well. Bill paused again. He looked up. I just wonder if this is it. Good marriage, good kid, successful at work. You’d think I’d feel happier than I do.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’m sorry for bothering you with this. Feel stupid complaining. I should be grateful but I’m sounding like B.B. King: “The thrill is gone...”

“We all have these patches.”

“Do we? I look around and most people seem happier than I’m feeling these days.”

“Or they’re better at hiding it.”

"I think Mary is worried. She tries to make me happy. I try to make her happy. Like that trip we took to Costa Rica last year for our anniversary. It was fun, but then back to the routine." Bill rapped the pew with his knuckles. "How do you get happy in life?"

"I'm not sure if anyone can make anyone happy. It's like the young man I met along with his fiancé one day. I love the enthusiasm and earnestness of the young. When we were talking in my office about why they wanted to get married, he said how much he wanted to make her happy. He was surprised when I said I don't think he can. It's like being a Doctor, all you really can do is do your best to establish the conditions for the healing to take place."

"What do you mean?"

"Ultimately, his bride has to choose to be happy." The pastor turned around and faced the pulpit, then turned back to face Bill. "If you're willing to come with me, I think I can show you. If you'll trust me,"

A puzzled Bill and looked sidewise at his pastor.

"No funny business, I promise. Trust me."

Bill shrugged. "Oh, hell, why not?"

"Come on, follow me. There's a place here in the church that few people know about but it might help you answer your own question. I sure can't answer it for you. I'll show you this place and then I'll leave you be."

"What are you talking about? I've been everywhere in this building. What place is this?"

"You haven't been everywhere," the pastor replied with mischievous grin as he stood up and waved to Bill to follow him from the sanctuary into the Fellowship Hall and down the stairs to toward the Sunday school rooms. They stopped at the bottom of the stairs.

"Here, Bill, help me move some of this stuff we've stored here in the stairwell." They moved the walkers and portable commodes the Deacons would loan out to church members, then boxes of paper, tables, chairs, exposing a door in the wall. It was an ordinary wooden door, paneled, with an old fashioned door knob.

"I've never seen this," said a confused Bill. "I know the church building, this can't lead anywhere."

"Few have seen it. Few have. Now Bill, if you're game, I'm going to unlock this door and invite you to go through it alone. I can't go in with you. I won't lock it behind you. I promise I won't lock it until you come out and tell me if you've been able to answer your question, that is, if you really want to find out how to be happy. I'll wait out here. But first, you have to promise me you will return."

"Now you're making me nervous."

"I'm serious."

"Alright, I promise."

"Good, that's a good place to begin." The pastor selected from his key ring a brass skeleton key, inserted it in the keyhole beneath the knob, and turned the key. He stepped aside.

"Your turn, Bill, open it, enter, and find out what you will."

"You sure?"

"I'm sure. I said I'd wait."

Bill turned the knob and opened it a crack. Whatever the room was it was well lit.

"Go on," urged his pastor.

Bill opened the door wider and stepped inside. His pastor closed the door behind him, startling him. He looked into the room to discover it wasn't a room but a long corridor of white marble. Four doors lined both sides of the hallway. Before he stepped deeper into the marble corridor, he turned around and looked back at the door that led to the stairwell.

"Okay, what now?" he asked himself. "It's crazy. This doesn't make sense."

He knocked on the first door to his left. No answer. He tested the doorknob, turned it and opened the door.

"He's here!" a voice shouted excitedly from inside the room. A crowd rushed toward him to greet him. Mirrors all along the walls magnified the size of the crowd. "He's here, he's here!" the crowd began to chant. Dozens of photographers surrounded him taking his picture. Another group held out baseball caps and placards for him to sign. "Sign this, sign this," they clamored, drowning out the pleas of a soldier in a wheelchair. Others pushed each other aside as they rushed to him and thrust microphones into his face. They shouted their questions: "Tell us your opinion, we need to know. Who do you support in this election? How do you feel

about your recent award? Could you explain your recent Twitter? When did you realize how famous and important you are? What did you have for breakfast today, we need to know?"

Bill stammered and backed up against the door. The door opened and a man walked inside. Again a voice shouted: "He's here! He's here!" As the crowd rushed toward the new fellow, Bill slipped back into the corridor and slammed the door shut.

"What the hell was that?" exclaimed an incredulous Bill. "I should get the hell out of here." Bill paused and took a few deep breaths. "Pastor said I'd find my answer to my question. All I want is to be happy. I'll try another door."

This door opened to sunrise over a vast savannah. The orange glow outlined the acacia trees scattered about the countryside. A giraffe lazily nibbled on leaves. A small pond surrounded by elephant grass mirrored the sunrise, stirred only antelope bending and lapping up the water. "Okay, this is happiness," said Bill, soaking in the beauty of the scene. "I can stay here a while." He gazed from the pond toward the red rocks far off to see a Land Rover heading in his direction. "Well," Bill sighed, "as much as I'd like to join the safari, I think my presence might confuse them. Let's try another door."

The third door brought Bill into a huge auditorium filled with worshippers praising God with hands upraised or clapping along with the band on stage. Welcomed by several people, Bill folded down a seat and sat down when the enthusiastic congregation did. To his left, a few seats away, sat a woman. She wiped her eyes. In front of him, a young man and woman followed along on their phones with one of the preachers as she read scripture. After the reading, more singing took place, the congregation standing and following the lyrics on the big screen, the congregation enjoying the band singing lots of chorus repetitions of "God will be mine."

"Sure, religion is a way of being happy," remarked Bill, "but this type isn't exactly my cup of tea."

The fourth door Bill found himself back in Costa Rica, the land thick with pineapples, plantains. Songbirds flitted about, trilling the sky with music. A macaw swooped from a Ceiba tree. An ill fed dog limped down the path toward the hotel where they stayed for their anniversary. "Yes, I could go back. I just love an adventure. Need another road-trip. I wonder where Mary would like to go. Somewhere exotic again? What wonderful photographs we took. That was a happy time. Just too bad the thrill doesn't last. So what's next?" Bill was beginning to enjoy himself, exploring these doors. "Let's make a deal. What's behind door number...? Well, this will be door number five."

Door number five proved to be similar to Let's Make a Deal. When he entered he was greeted by a well-dressed woman who rose up from behind her bank desk and greeted him by handing him receipts and bank statements. "Welcome, we've been waiting for you. Here's

your mortgage, paid off. Same with your credit cards. Now you have unlimited credit. Here's your bank balance. Forget worrying about how to pay off your daughter's college expenses. Already taken care of."

"What?" doubted Bill. "I'm rich?"

"Of course you are, not like that couple over there," she said pointing to a middle-aged couple. "Silly them, hoping to remortgage their house."

"I'm really rich?" Bill asked again. "Can I stay here?"

"As long as you like. Didn't they tell you? You own several corporations. You are so rich you don't even have to pay taxes."

"That sure makes me happy." Bill paused and added: "Sure would be nice. But I promised someone I'd return." Reluctantly, Bill exited, stepped into the marble hallway, and approached the next door.

Paintings adorned all the walls from all the Western masters. Renoir, Turner, Picasso, da Vinci, Van Gogh, Monet, Cassatt, Michelangelo, Sargent, Gauguin, Homer, Hopper, Kahlo, Matisse, O'Keefe, and more. A different type of riches. Even if he could have imagined visiting the Louvre, this was far better because he was all alone to take in the finest paintings in the world. It was a smorgasbord of beauty and excellence. Just to be a part of this was enough to heighten and buoy his languishing spirit.

Door number seven was a different and far noisier form of happy: reserved seating on the fifty yard line for the Superbowl. A frosty beer. Nachos. Life is good. Fans cheering their teams. Fans applauding out of respect when a rookie linebacker is carried off with a knee injury. Ecstasy when the receiver brings the ball down with one hand in the end zone to put his team up by four points with 1:23 to go in the fourth quarter. He had to stay till the final whistle was whistled.

Outside door number eight, the last door, he could hear the music and the party without opening the door. "Come on in, buddy," he was greeted. "What can we get you? We have it all. No charge, no limit."

Bill scouted the room. The band was on the dais playing all the best, from swing to slow dance to rock and roll. His music, though he never was much a dancer, to Mary's frustration. They even took dance lessons with the church adult group but it didn't improve his style much. The drinks were plentiful and the women hot, supple, and eager. He smiled as he saw one young woman pulled toward the back of the ballroom behind the dais. Bill laughed thinking how this was going on under his church. Madness. Temptation. "God, I haven't had this much

fun in years. Talk about your thrills.” Remembering Mary and Julianna, he forced himself to slam the door behind him.

He leaned against the door and looked down the corridor to where he assumed his pastor was waiting on the other side of the entrance. He walked slowly toward the door trying to remember his question.

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“Welcome back, Bill.” His pastor reminded him of his question as he pulled out the skeleton key and locked the door: ‘How do you get happy in life?’ “Any thoughts, any insights?

“I’m all at sea, pastor. Not sure.”

“What did you experience? Did it make you happy?”

Who wouldn’t enjoy the fame behind the first door? The view of the savannah was breathtaking. I could have done without the religion, but everyone there seemed filled by the spirit. How it took me back to Costa Rica, I don’t understand. But it was wonderful to return there. And the wealth, wow! The art was uplifting. So too the Superbowl in a very different way. You know I enjoy football. And the party, the drinks, the women. Come on, what fun.

“Hmmm,” hummed the pastor. “Those things didn’t make you happy?”

“Well, sure they could. When I was there they did. I guess it’s a matter of balance, isn’t it?”

“Perhaps.”

“Come on, pastor, out with it. What am I missing?”

“You’re on the right track. It is what you missed. I’ve found compassion more important. You were so busy looking to be made happy you missed a few things. Did you see the soldier in the wheelchair shoved aside? Out in the savannah, those weren’t tourists on safari. They had just killed an elephant for the ivory. The woman at church near you crying was crying because she was alone, her husband had recently died, and everyone else was praising God. Didn’t you notice the limping dog, unable to survive. Survival of the fittest. That couple in the bank will lose their home. The artwork? Sure it’s all beautiful, but did you notice Van Gogh’s painting of the “Night Café in Arles, with the foreboding colors, listless waiter, and the men drinking their sorrows away. Did you look at Rembrandt’s “The Return of the Prodigal Son” and see the son’s sorrow and grief and the father’s compassion? Amidst all the cheering at the Superbowl, that rookie linebacker was carried off with a knee injury, his

hopes and dreams finished. Last, in the midst of the party, that young girl didn't want to go with that young man."

Bill stared at his pastor.

"Yes, all this can be good, wonderful even, but wanting to be happy those ways is all about you. The secret to happiness? I've discovered it begins with not being concerned about being happy."

Bill nodded.

"You go home, Bill. I'll put all this stuff back."