

Foreword

This is a work of fiction, not a memoir. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead or real life events is purely coincidental and may be attributed to the writer's craft and attention to detail.

Any errors in historical accuracy may be attributed to the subjectivity of memory.

Chapter 1 *'and the sheep follow him for they know his voice'*

I was raised on scraps and scripture. The only stories I was told were from the Bible; for the tales of man are fanciful, inane and corruptive. Noah, Abraham, Job – these characters taught me life lessons of moral fortitude.

Having had no children of my own, I was never given to telling tales, but if you would care to listen, I will recount for you the narrative of Miriam Stokes.

Miriam's mother, Brenda, was a member of my congregation back in the days when I delivered my sermons from the modest pulpit of the converted prefab Scout hut on the corner of Slater Street. To call it a pulpit is indeed 'fanciful'; it was a stack of wooden crates donated by Jim Fowler, the local grocer, and tacked together by his son, Simon.

It was a wet Autumn afternoon when Brenda brought her burden to my door. I remember well the sound of the rain on the prefab roof, like electric shocks tapping out messages from God. I remember the light fading and the way the candles threw their ethereal shadows against the makeshift walls. I was arranging tins and packets from food parcels for the Harvest Festival service that Sunday.

Now this was at the beginning of my ministry, you understand. I was not yet schooled in the wayward proclivities of women like Brenda Stokes. Of course today, the story she told would barely stir me to raise an eyebrow. But back then, I was barely a man; outwardly appearing so, perhaps, but inwardly gauche and unprepared for such revelations.

"Minister John, you have to help me. My husband, Paul, he's threatening to leave me. It's been five years since you married us, you might remember?"

"I remember it well. You were wed in May, as I recall."

"It was September."

"The groom wore grey."

"He wore navy."

"The bridesmaids carried little posies of – of – of –that's it! Gypsophila!

"There was just one bridesmaid, Paul's sister, Dawn, she carried pink hydrangea. But, look, that's no matter. They all must be a bit of a blur in your line of work. Point is, after five years there's still no baby."

"Oh. I see. And have you –" I motioned in the general direction of her womb.

"I've seen Dr Dring. He says everything is in good working order, as far as he can tell." She bit her lip, "maybe I'm subconsciously stopping things."

"How d'you mean?" I asked. "Do you not want a family, Brenda? Is that what you're telling me? Because you know, Paul works very hard down that mine, to put food in your belly and a roof over your head and clothes on your back. Surely, you don't expect to be kept like that all your days with no – no return on his investment?"

"I know. I know it's my duty as a wife. I'm just not sure I'd be very good at it, is all. Could that – that doubt – could that prevent nature taking its course, do you think?"

"Stranger things have happened, I'm sure. Would you like me to pray with you, Brenda? For the Lord to take away that doubt?"

"Oh, would you, Minister? I'd be terribly grateful. I'm at my wits end that he'll go off and find someone else." She started to sob in a most pathetic way.

"Sh, sh," I wiped away the tears. "Come, kneel beside me," I patted the prayer mat next to mine and leaned forward against the front pew. "Dear God, we kneel here today, under your merciful gaze." I took a little a peak and her eyes were tight shut. She was clasping her hands together as if she had hold of a winning Littlewoods coupon. "Brenda, say a few words – don't be shy now – it's just you, me and the Good Lord."

"Please God," she kept her hands clasped, but moved them over her belly, "please make me fertile and bless us with a baby. We've been very patient. But it's been five years and I'm not sure how much longer Paul will–"

"Shall I take over?" I patted her hands and she bowed her head gratefully. "God in heaven, plant your seed in Brenda today. Open her womb as you did for Rachel and even Sarah, a ninety year old woman, who bore a most precious son, Isaac. Water her with the generous gift of life; the most precious gift of all. Amen." With this, I leapt to my feet.

"Is that it?" She looked up at me, imploringly. "Will that really be enough?"

"Well, who can say? The Lord works in mysterious ways. Look at Rachel –" Clearly she'd never heard of her. "You know, Jacob's wife? Book Of Genesis."

"Did she wait long?"

"She gave her maidservant to Jacob – a sort of surrogate, if you like?"

"Minister, you're not seriously suggesting-?"

"Listen," I sat beside her, up on the pew and she turned to face me, still kneeling. "Is it possible you're being punished in some way? Did you commit some sin that might be causing God to frown upon you, where he smiles on so many others? We're a fertile parish, you know? I christened 38 babies last year – almost one a week. Some of your sisters have had six babies while you've still had none."

She started sobbing again, "I-I try to be good. Really I do. But sometimes I do look in Dottie Fretwell's window and I imagine myself in one of those chiffon dresses. I imagine how pretty I might look. Maybe as pretty as on my wedding day. See, I've never felt so beautiful, and I don't think Paul has ever looked at me the same way since. It's like all the romance and magic – I tossed it away with my bouquet. And you know who caught it? Dottie herself."

"Brenda Stokes, you should be ashamed." I sprang back to my feet. "The sin of envy and the sin of pride. Two of the worst. There's no wonder you find yourself in this barren state. You know, I was just preparing Sunday's sermon and the passage I have chosen is more than a little pertinent here,

a man reaps what he sows. The one who sows to please his sinful nature, from that nature will reap destruction; the one who sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life.

There is nothing spiritual in the window of Dottie Fretwell's shop, Brenda."

"Oh, Minister, please," she seized me by my ankles – and my, what a grip! "Please don't abandon me in my hour of need. I've come to you for guidance. What must I do to get back into His graces?"

I sat back down and taking her chin, lifted her head up to look at me. "Stop that crying," I told her, "God has no need of your tears and they're no good to you either. There might be a way-"

"What? Tell me, please? I'll do anything," now there was the note of desperation I'd been waiting for – music to my ears.

"Sometimes God can work through his disciples, have you heard that said?" She nodded, an invitation for me to continue, "yes, it's possible that what you need is a conduit. Like when Gabrielle visited Mary." Finally, a Biblical reference she recognised.

"You mean, I'll be sent an angel? And the angel will – bless me?"

"Not quite," I smiled. "Have you heard of a metaphor, Brenda?"

"Oh, I was never that good in English."

"No matter." I waved this inadequacy aside, "there are aspects of the good book," I motioned to my leather bound, gilt edged tome, which was open to Sunday's passage, Galatians 6:8, on the pulpit. "Aspects that are not meant to be taken literally. Of course Mary didn't get impregnated by an Angel, or by God for that matter."

"Really? But I thought it was a miracle – the divine inception, isn't that what they call it?"

"They might call it that – or something like that – but come on now Brenda, you're a woman of the world, you know how these things work." I placed my foot between her legs. The penny dropped.

"You mean – we should –" She looked around. "Here?"

"Don't be afraid. It's just the three of us. God will watch over the whole thing, to make sure it's a Spiritual coupling. This way you'll know – after all – it could be Paul who has the problem. That's a terrible thing for a man to face, you know? You wouldn't want to put him through that humiliation unnecessarily, would you?"

"I'm – I'm not sure it would be right. I mean, I'm a married woman. I made sacred vows."

"And what better way to honour your husband, than to give him the child he so desperately deserves? After all these years." She was starting to think about it. Time to play my ace. "Do you think you are alone in this dilemma? Do you think you are the first wretched wife to turn up at the Parish door in this state? 38 babies in one year, Brenda. That's my track record."

Anyway, needless to say, she acquiesced; didn't need too much persuading either. And hey presto! 9 months later, I was anointing the head of Miriam Stokes.

"Isn't she a darling?... Just adorable... Looks so peaceful... Mother's smile... Father's eyes," I could barely contain the ear-to-ear grin that comment deserved.

As I made the cross upon the babe's forehead, a look passed between her mother and I: a look of understanding, a look that said we both knew how important my role had been in the creation of this life, a look that all the same must remain forever unspoken. So many families had been blessed by my holy seed. I never fail. God's gift, you might say. But I never allowed myself to become proud. The newborns – they were all the reward I ever needed. And of course – a healthy, blossoming congregation.

But Brenda struggled with the unspoken forever part of our agreement from the start. She was constantly turning up, Miriam in tow, howling about our secret finding her out and reciting Bible passages at me (never has a woman undergone such a Godly transformation as Brenda Stokes after that one, innocent act of adultery.) It was all, "*wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord,*" and "*for the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the church,*" and, "*the heart of the husband trusts in her*", and of course, "*marriage should be honoured by all, and the marriage bed kept pure, for God will judge the adulterer and all the sexually immoral.*"

"He's going to find out, I know he is." By this point Miriam was almost three. I had sat her at the organ and I have to admit, there was a touch of the Toccata and Fugue about her impromptu performance.

"How many times, Brenda? He is not going to find out. The Holy Spirit was there to witness and facilitate our union and the Holy Spirit will keep the whole thing sacred. If ever there was the slightest chance of someone whispering or murmuring, the Holy Spirit would fill up his ears with the word of God. But who on earth would do such a thing? Since it was a sacred act between us and I would never defile what is sacred before the Lord." It's not that it wasn't a weight for me to bear as well. There were times when I had to stop myself from standing behind that pulpit and exposing myself as a wife-stealing devil. But I had my flock to think about. What would they do without me?

"Me? Of course not. Cross one Stokes and you might as well sign your own death warrant." Some assurance this was.

Paul Stokes belonged to that breed of men who are predisposed with a guard dog mentality. Before he settled down with Brenda he had faced at least two ABH charges that I was aware of: one for belting a schoolyard bully who had dared to turn his new catapult on little Dawn; and the other, on the Christmas Eve of 1965, for head-butting the landlord of the Black Bull when he tried to kiss his mother under the mistletoe. At one point he seemed destined to join the forces; one of the arresting officers suggested he channel his aggression into serving his country and there was that old protectionist appeal. But Brenda and the pit were a safer bet. Despite Brenda's relative dedication to The Lord, Paul was not a God fearing man. He rarely attended services; in fact, with the exception of weddings and funerals, Miriam's christening was the last time I had seen him amongst the congregation.

"He already suspects. When I told him the good news, he pretended to joke that I'd hooked up with an old flame. Because just after we – you know – did what we did – I

had to go back down south to make arrangements after Dad passed on. I was there for a week. Away from him. He was dead jealous about it."

"It really is a shame you didn't mention this 'jealous' streak before we--"

"Well, I was desperate wasn't I? I thought I was losing him. It seemed the only way. Now it's all I think about. I'm actually scared I might let something slip in my sleep, you know. They say, don't they, that's when the subconscious takes over?"

"That's just psychoanalytical clap-trap. You know, instead of wasting all your energy on this paranoid fixation, why don't you focus on saving his soul? I mean, you claim to love him so and yet, after nearly ten years together, you have not managed to bring him into the fold."

"Oh, I ask him sometimes, but he works so hard all week. He likes his lie ins of a Sunday morning. I can hardly rob him of that."

"You would rather see him burn in hell?"

"Minister! Please don't."

"What about Sunday evenings? He doesn't seem the early night type to me."

"He plays darts down the Welfare. I went with him a couple of times, but the smoke in that tap room stings my eyes something cruel."

"It seems to me the two of you are on quite different paths, Brenda. That is never a good sign in a marriage. Not good at all." You see it all too often in our calling: one spouse committed to the Lord's work; the other committed to their Worldly pursuits. I shook my head and looked over to Miriam. Still seated at the organ. Thankfully she had abandoned the ominous overture and was now walking her little fingers up and down the scales.

Brenda followed my gaze, "she's happy enough. Look, you can see that."

"What I see is a very troubled soul. What normal three year old demonstrates that level of focus? She ought to be running around, investigating her environment, stacking up the hymn books, building dens with the prayer cushions. She hasn't budged from that stool since I put her there."

"That's because she's learned to respect the House Of God. Surely that can't be a bad thing?"

"But can't you see? She's not the one needs saving! Don't you want the three of you to be together for eternity? Will you be happy to tell her where her daddy is each time she asks?" I could see the message beginning to sink in.

She promised to pray for his soul and to suggest they attend service together at least every other week. He came just once. During the course of their marriage, her virtuousness, the very thing that had drawn him to her in the first place, began to irritate him. Meeting her had been such a breath of fresh air. He loved his family and would stand by them through thick and thin, but they were an abrasive bunch – as were most that hailed from Nether Boonhill. There was little in the way of gentleness or comfort amongst the caterwauls, knuckles and steel-toe-caps of the Stokes clan. They all said he'd gone soft the first time he brought her home. This plain little thing who wouldn't say shoo to a mouse. They accepted her somewhat reluctantly as a wild animal will sometimes find and raise the abandoned young of another. But blood, to the Stokes of this world, is always and always will be, thicker than water.

I could see that she looked increasingly unhappy. One evening, after Sunday service, as I was counting the tithe into bank bags, I came across a folded piece of note paper. It was not unusual for the less well off in our number to occasionally write me an IOU. But when I unfolded it, I immediately recognised Brenda's script - the woman would calligraph a shopping list in the most onerous, ornate fashion.

They all hate me now. The whole family. I'm not sure I can go on. Perhaps I should just leave. Start afresh somewhere new. But the thought of leaving Miriam with no spiritual guide...

I could see now just how much she relied on me for direction. I could also see how this could be used for the Lord's work. With Paul out of the picture, I could secure her unconditional faithfulness. Of course I couldn't counsel for divorce: you wouldn't so much as utter the word in the House of God back then. So, I laid my burden at His feet and entrusted it to His will.

Time passed and I was preoccupied with tending to my flock. Almost daily I received one or other of them: visitors come bearing gifts, but parishioners always come empty handed; albeit their hearts and minds full of woe.

I ministered to Irene Renshaw, who was beside herself over her father's angina; Betty Moore, who widowed tragically young, was at a loss when it came to sorting the family finances; Val Humble, who needed a mediator to intervene in a dispute with her neighbours that had gotten out of hand; something to do with an allegedly stolen jug of milk and pound of lard, that the milkman eventually admitted he had never delivered in the first place. Such is the lot of a parish Minister.

Eventually, He presented me with the perfect opportunity to extricate myself from the whole - affair. Sorry, no pun intended.