

The front of the ship heaved up as another huge wave rolled by.

“You have to look under the surface,” said Justin, taking a bite of his apple, as he stared at the watery horizon.

The preacher felt a bit queasy. He grabbed the railing to steady himself. Considering how rough the water was, he was handling it quite well. He was glad that he no longer needed to take those seasick pills.

“Take, for instance, Christianity and Buddhism,” continued Justin. “On the surface, they are as different as night and day. But if you look deep enough, there are some really interesting parallels between primitive Christianity and Buddhism.”

“Yeah, I know, I know,” said the preacher. “You mentioned that last Saturday night as part of your feeble attempt to impress Phoenix. You’ve been carrying on about that Buddha feller for the past two months. Because of you, I’ve had dreams where I keep runnin’ into this bald-headed fat feller with a dopey grin on his face.”

“Really? That is so auspicious! The Buddha was the master of detachment. He knew how to see the truth hidden by maya.”

“Who is Maya?”

Justin laughed. “Maya isn’t a who. Maya is illusion. We see through it by becoming detached. Detachment is how we overcome suffering.”

“Detachment, you say?” The preacher stared at Justin. “I’ve been around you long enough to know that when you carry on about detachment, it means you’re sittin’ on a pile of fertilizer.”

Justin looked down at the water. He tossed his apple core overboard. “You’re a perceptive fellow.”

“Nah. You’re just easy to read.”

“I’ll get over it. It’s just that I thought Barbara and I would one day get married and live happily ever after.”

“I know how you feel,” said the preacher.

“I guess I was in a hurry. I figured since Julie got married, I should get married, too. After all, we *are* twins.”

“That’s an unfair comparison. Julie is a woman, which makes her more emotionally mature than you.”

“Thanks for the encouraging words.”

The preacher slapped Justin on the shoulder and chuckled. “To paraphrase your grandfather, you best get off that high horse, or you’re just goin’ to get thrown again.”

Justin nodded. “You’re right. Truth is I just wasn’t happy with myself. I thought getting married would change that.”

“Well, first off, if you’re unhappy and get married to become happy, you’ll probably end up even more unhappy.”

Justin looked down at the foamy water flowing past the side of the ship. “That actually makes sense to me. I think the sea is making me demented.”

“Relax. Marriage will just happen. Right now, just do what you feel like doin’.”

“I was in the midst of doing that, as per my grandfather’s suggestion, when I got this crazy idea to join you on your journey to the frozen north.”

“Do you regret endin’ your exploration of the red light district?”

“No. I was getting tired of looking at all those shelves filled with erotic magazines, videos, battery-powered vaginas, giant dildos, and other such novelties. It was all becoming rather

mundane and monotonous. Though, I must say, the anatomically correct inflatable sheep was definitely over the edge.”

“So you gave up feasting on smut and started reading about Buddhism. You call that an improvement?”

“No, certainly not,” said Justin. “The Buddha would agree on that one.”

“That Buddha sounds like he might be an agreeable feller.”

They stared across the water. Through the corner of his eye, the preacher watched as Justin’s expression become progressively more somber.

Justin slowly shook his head. “I don’t know what the heck I’m doing with my life, Roy.”

“Do you regret comin’ up here?”

“No. It’s just that I’m still angry with Barbara. I’m even angrier at that slime ball who seduced her. Maybe I should have stayed in San Francisco and confronted them. The more I think about it, the more I realize they had planned this whole thing out. I was such a sap! She used my knowledge and resources to make contacts inside the psychology department. I’m almost certain that she gave him my research material, which he’s probably using for his thesis. She used me and then discarded me. I just didn’t know her.”

The preacher’s mind wandered back to Tamara. He was tempted to identify with Justin. It would have been nice if he could blame his misfortune on the evil doings of unscrupulous people. However, he realized that Tamara and Ron Russell had both conducted themselves honorably. Any lingering anger he had toward them seemed to dissolve into the ocean as he continued listening to Justin’s horror story. For the first time, he felt genuinely thankful that Tamara called it off. Remembering that Tamara’s birthday was coming up, he made a mental note to send her a card and thank her for doing the right thing.

“She used to tell me that I was so sensitive and sweet,” said Justin. “I was spineless and gullible; that’s what I was. I was used!” He kicked the railing. “It’s taken me four whole months to really feel that. Son of a bitch, I was used!” He folded his arms and spat over the side. “I hope they live happily ever after in hell.”

The preacher whistled and shook his head slowly. “Mercy!” He had never seen Justin spit and swear before. For the first time, he noticed that Justin had put on some weight since they had been in Alaska.

“Now you’re going to tell me that I should try harder to be forgiving, right?”

“No,” said the preacher casually, as he leaned his forearms on the railing. “In fact, I think a big part of the problem was that you tried *too* hard to forgive and act noble. Any attempt to display forgiveness from where you were standin’ is just a sneaky form of attack”

“What do you mean?”

“You were tellin’ the world, ‘Look how bad they are and look how good I am’.”

Justin looked out across the rough waters of the Bering Sea. “Damn!” he said, leaning his forearms on the railing, next to the preacher. “I didn’t realize I was capable of being so slimy.”

“Well, I wouldn’t say you were bein’ slimy,” said the preacher. “But your strategy was off. As a method of attack, forgiveness is not particularly effective. You think you’re gettin’ back at them by actin’ noble, but the anger just continues to seethe and it tears you up from your inside.”

“Maybe that’s why I was getting so apathetic and depressed.”

“That’s the price one pays for bein’ a spiritual jackass.” The preacher was surprised by his own words. He didn’t know where they came from, but he thought he detected Jake’s influence. “You see, Justin, what you wanted to do was punch him out and expose him for the thief that he

was. Meanwhile, you were tellin' yourself that you should forgive both of them. So, your twisted mind combined the two by usin' forgiveness as a way of punishin' them. You would have been better off if you had dragged him out into the street and punched him out. Instead, you acted sensitive and sweet, tryin' to punish them by your display of forgiveness. And that's why you're still sufferin'."

They were silent for a while. Justin rubbed his chin and looked out across the water. "What a concept!" he exclaimed.

"Don't tell me," said the preacher. "You just got a great idea for your new thesis."

Justin nodded. "Thanks to you, Reverend."

They looked out across the water.

"Roy, I don't understand why you quit your job as Pastor. Seems to me that with your keen insights and gift of oratory, you could have been quite successful and maybe even graduated to a bigger church."

The preacher shrugged. "That's life."

"I guess it's true what they say. A prophet is never recognized in his own land."

"Yeah," the preacher nodded. "Especially when he's an asshole."

They looked toward the stern of the ship as several ropes guided by a winch pulled in the huge net. "You know, Roy, now that we've had this conversation, I realize that I'm glad I'm here. Alaska, I mean."

"I guess I am, too."

"But once in a while, I get this funny feeling. Obviously, I came up here of my own free will."

"Yeah, as far as I can tell."

"You didn't talk me into it."

"No. I was a mite surprised when you told me that you had applied too."

They stared silently at the water.

"It sure wasn't my mom," said Justin. "She was flat against it. And Grandpa certainly didn't talk me into it. He was rather quiet about it."

"So?"

"It was my decision all the way."

"So?"

Justin removed his elbows from the railing and folded his arms. "So, why do I feel like I've been shanghaied?"

The preacher rubbed his jaw through his short stubbly beard. "I don't know," he said, glancing at the net as it slowly emerged from the water with a load of Alaskan Pollock. "But, now that you mention it, sometimes I feel that way, too."

They silently looked at each other. Then, they burst out laughing, as they put on their work gloves and walked toward the net.