

Excerpt from
SAINT JULIAN

Walter Wangerin Jr.

Chapter Twenty-one

Concerning the Wife of a Saint

Neither does she have a name—none that I could find even in my most persistent researches: Julian's gentle lady, I mean; she whom I sought and chased and wooed (as it were) down a warren of historical tunnels. Well, and you, my more durable reader, shall already have noted that none but the Saint has been named thus far. And I assure you that the rest of his tale shall be no different from the former part: only Julian's name will be remembered and recorded. Julian's, that is, and one other's.

Ah, but this one, this particular woman: how I have longed to call her by name! For it is not a false figure, to say that I have danced with her. A teller of such tales as this must learn its characters not by fact and analysis alone, for then he could neither know their hearts nor grant them life. But if he can dance with one, that character may willingly *grant* him her heart; and having that, he has the means for granting her life in return, in the realm of his tale. I have danced with Julian's wife. I have the means to bring her to life. But I cannot call her name. Her life must therefore be bound to the tale and to the husband that knows how to name her.

For without that precious, most personal word, I cannot take the woman's life and make it *mine*.

And as concerning *your* reception of this tale: O dear my reader, I fear that her namelessness might reduce the woman to a mere type in your mind. But I will show you how fully fleshed she is. And I entreat you to love her even as I do, on account of the sacred solemnity and the ineffable grace of this woman's suffering: for Julian's wife is like another woman who walks unnamed through a story which is named for the man she loves. She is like Jephthah's daughter, who choose to bewail her virginity for two months on the mountains, after which she returned to her father and bade him do what he swore to do. For *I have opened my mouth unto the Lord*, her father said. Jephthah had vowed a treacherous vow: just before he entered a battle, he swore that, should God give him victory, he would thank the Lord by sacrificed the first one who came out to greet him. Indeed, the Lord made Jephthah victorious. And who was first—with timbrels and

gladness—to meet him at home? Jephtha said to his daughter, *I have opened my mouth unto the Lord, and I cannot go back*, and he did what she swore to do: he sacrificed her life and her name forever.

There is no more magnificent a suffering than this: to suffer willingly; to suffer in the full knowledge of one's innocence; to suffer because of the sin of another, and yet to do so for love of that other.

From the beginning this woman loved by serving. And since it was a genuine love, it was genuine service as well, and she took joy in the joy it gave.

Likewise, she knew work ere she was twelve years old, and hard work too. For her father, the youngest brother to the king, was rich neither in servants nor in sons, and therefore his daughter became, among other things, the keeper of his vineyard. She labored with a hoe and with a pruning blade five years and six, with harvesters and with the treaders, and in the end was altogether her own vintner, for she learned well from her teachers, the monks. The king himself took notice of his brother's daughter's produce, and so it was he remembered her when a sought to express his gratitude to the Red Knight.

By the eighteenth year of her age, the woman's complexion had grown richly dark, as dark as a Barbary maid's; yet she had a smile that curled tightly into her cheeks, revealing but two of her front teeth. And the nail of the first finger on her right hand was slightly rippled—and this Julian sometimes ran his own nail over, making a mutual vibration. And she laughed with something like a squealing in her nose, and during the first year of their marriage, each time her husband heard that little music, he jumped up, his frame filled with something like astonishment; and next he, Julian, would move toward her and look into her face; and she knew that he saw the sheen of tears that her laughing caused, but that *he* could not tell what caused them, whether it might be some hurt that he had given her. So then the husband would go down on his knees wherever the two of them happened to be, down on his knees asking wordlessly what she was feeling; and she would straightway kneel down too, directly in front of him, her blood grown warm with so much loving; and then she would place the flat of one hand upon his breast and the flat of the other upon her own, and she would let spill the words of her gladness and all her hunger:

"O that thou wouldst kiss me with the kisses of thy mouth," she murmured, sending her breath as a warm wave over his eyes and his nostrils, "for thy love is sweeter than wine."

And she knew what her words would accomplish. For then her darling would gather her into his arms, and bear her to some private place, and lay her gently down, and grant her the kisses she had requested; and her warrior (she knew by his breathing) would almost die from the suffocation of his own increasing love. Then inevitably, by a brutish touch, Julian would find the ties and the fastenings with which she kept her clothing close to her body; and he would begin to undo these; but she was more complicit than he knew, for she herself now slowly

unsheathed her shoulders, *she* stripped the cloth from legs, she revealed her chilly torso all bare beneath his seeing. *O my dear!* he would not say, for the water had left his mouth; but *O my dear!* she heard in her heart, watching her husband steadfastly as he kneeled above her, allowing his eyes to brush each part of her tenderer self: her temples, her eyelashes, her chin; her breasts ascending under his sight, her girlish breasts, their nipples as solemn as two small peas; her stomach, brown as a wheatfield; her thighs, by a handsbreadth separated; and that central pelt protecting her womanhood which, when the deer-eyed Julian gazed upon it, shivered, spilling honey. Immediately she reached her hands to the back of his neck. Swiftly she drew him down, his mouth and whiskers down to her throat. "Look not upon me," she murmured, "for I am swarthy, for the sun it was first looked upon me, long, with a changing heat."

And so it was by kissing, then, that her husband sought that tenderest part. And so she invited him inside herself, and when he accepted, and when he arrived, his nautical presence drove such joy through her that she laughed: such loving as this caused Julian's wife to make that high sweet squealing in her nose--and so Julian raised up his head and roared with laughter too; and she, so softly that she knew not whether she had spoken at all, said:

Oh, linger within me, my love!

This was the plea of her laughing, Yes! But then it became the plea of her weeping. For as the marriage grew older, her husband grew ever more restless; then she, whose love never did diminish, suffered the loss of joy.

Oh, linger within me this night, my love! she wept in the third year of their marriage, when the thing was done and Julian made motion to withdraw: *Grant me one night when nothing divides us. For I have begun to fear the mornings and thy terrible awakenings....*

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