

Excerpt from
LITTLE LAMB, WHO MADE
THEE?

Walter Wangerin Jr.

*A Preface to
“Little Lamb, Who Made Thee?”*

I sat with the daughter and her father in the lounge of the youth and children psych ward in Wellborne Hospital. We occupied a corner, the father and I side-by-side on a short sofa, his daughter's chair at right-angles to ours.

The girl, however, could scarcely keep her seat, wriggling, wreathing her arms, tucking her legs up under her. She was a sophomore in high school, plain, roundish, with a Victorian abundance of Brunette hair. I will call her Sharon here, though any other name but her own seems strange to me, and somewhat sad. It should not be that in public places I cannot call her by the name she knows for herself and herself inhabits.

Sharon dropped from her chair as if suddenly falling out of it. I made a spontaneous reach. Her father sat impassively. But Sharon had dropped to her knees, in fact, and was shuffling toward her father smiling brightly: all is well! All is well, and the daughter loves her daddy very much.

The man beside me did not move as she approached him. He wore a full beard. He sat like Lincoln, staring forward—staring still when Sharon lay her chin upon his knee and gazed up at him. In a moment she giggled and twisted around to sit on the floor with her back against his shins.

The lightness of her manner and the sweet persistence of her chatter—altogether as if they were cuddling of an evening in the living room—hardly fit the circumstances, unless of course she had recovered with wondrous speed and the cause of admission to the hospital were truly an aberration.

Sharon's father moved. He leaned slightly down to his daughter and reminded her that they were in a public place.

"Sit in your own seat," he said.

The man had eyes so intensely blue, they seemed to flame like gas jets. Sharon jumped up, twirled on one toe and dropped hard into her seat.

These were almost the only words this father had for his daughter. He leaned back into his Lincoln stare, and I wondered whether he were profoundly disappointed in the child for her wretched carelessness. Sharon herself showed no disappointment whatever, neither in herself nor in her father's silence.

But she had only this morning, in the bathroom of Basse High School, tried to kill herself.

The family had moved to Evansville only a few years earlier. Sharon's attempted suicide suggested to me that there may be certain interior stresses for which they may one day be willing to receive some help. So Thanne and I made a point to befriend them all, the parents and their two children.

But at that particular crisis, it was explained to me that Sharon was by nature high-strung and troubled. (Hence, I supposed, the serenity with which the father visited his daughter in the hospital.) She had, they said, been undone by the move from one state to another at about the worst time in her adolescence. She felt alien among the students at Bosse, bedeviled, belittled, terrifically unhappy.

Thanne's relationship with Sharon's mother took a true root; friendship bloomed between the two of them then.

My relationship with Sharon's father, although warm, remained rather formal. He was the pastor of a small congregation. It was perfectly natural for us to discuss professional issues; it gave me good cause to be near him, offering support without seeming to demean his own independence. The weight, the difficulties of his ministry presented themselves as complaints and criticism rather than as problems seeking thoughtful solutions or as weakness seeking companionship. Colleagues I think we were, or so I characterized the relationship. We never did, however, relax into the honesty of friendship. We never did become friends.

And then, when his daughter was a junior, the man announced to his wife and to his congregation that he was filing for divorce. Within a week he had moved out of the house into an apartment. I still met with him, but only in the pastoral office at his church. And Thanne, who in those days managed my writing and speaking affairs, offered his wife work in the office on the second floor of our home. It granted the woman a communal shelter and some money of her own.

And then, bare months after her father's departure, Sharon tried in bloody earnest to kill herself a second time.

Again the father and I met his child in the hospital. In no lounge, however. Beside her bed. And the girl bore bandages of comic thickness. But there was no coquetry in her face or in her manner. There was, rather, a pleading and a piteous sorrow.

And still the man was no more to her than a stone-white monument of the dead cerulean gaze. I bent to take the child's hand. I knelt to put my presence on a level with hers. And so it was that someone took her hand, but it was not the one she wanted, and it did not brighten her eye with life.

*I left the hospital with a throat-full of suspicions.
That night I told Thanne what I was fearing.
And Thanne confirmed the worst.*

Sharon's father had abused his daughter sexually. The move to Evansville had been the family's effort at a new beginning. The results of that effort were now sadly manifest. All these things Thanne had learned from Sharon's mother—because Thanne had recognized the symptoms long before I did, and had questioned kindly, softly.

How furious I felt that night! How dear to me was Sharon's broken self. With what tenderness I yearned to protect her deep, submerged and sacred beauty—to raise it up and praise it and persuade her of its truth.

All my life I've wished I were less passionate. Perhaps New York would not have dismissed me as a babbler then, or San Francisco as merely "emotional." Writers as uncontrolled as I lack the distancing irony that saves them from the world's contempt. Compulsively we do, and then we're forced to suffer what we did.

On the night of Sharon's second attempt, my passions governed me, and I wrote the letter printed below. I meant to give it to Sharon as soon as she was healthy enough to read it, and then I would offer myself as flesh and spirit to stand by the words, to stand by her.

Come the morning, however, and I repented of my plans. On the one hand, the letter seemed too brazen, too direct; on the other, it seemed too complex for a teenage mind. So I put it on Thanne's desk upstairs, hoping for her cooler opinion. If she feared its effect, I'd trash it.

Thanne did not read it. I mean, she was not the first to read it.

Having come in for work that afternoon, Sharon's mother found it. And though I had neither named her daughter nor specified the letter's intended recipient, as she read it the woman knew. She knew it belonged to Sharon. Without a word, then, and without my knowledge, she took the letter to her daughter.

Who read it herself.

And who, through her mother, sent serious thanks back to me. Sharon hadn't the words, yet. Abuse steals the most personal languages, and someone has to learn how to speak truth and truths and truly all over again. But Sharon had the experience, the effect, of an epistle that brings the better Shepherd to that one lost lamb; and of that experience she knew thanks, and these she sent to me.

In less than three months, while Sharon was still a teenager, but when she began to reveal signs of an uncommon maturity, she herself suggested that I publish the letter. Except for that it would have remained Sharon's own forever.

*But I did. I published it in the regular column which I wrote in those days, for *The Lutheran* magazine, which had a circulation then of some three quarters of a million readers.*

I published it thus:

Little Lamb, Who Made Thee?

Secretly beaten.

Sexually abused—

O child, it's not your fault. You do not have to earn the approval of your tormentor—no, nor his forgiveness either!

Is it strange that a victim thinks she caused the wrong and must right it again? Well, not so strange when we consider her helplessness. She's looking for leverage. She needs some principle by which to control her horror. And if her sin caused the punishment, then she might prevent it by a confession. See?

So the victim seeks her own iniquity—and the Christian faith is made grotesque thereby, allowing the guiltless to suffer guilt. And the abuser's become a Destroyer therefore, both of the body and the soul.

No, child—it was his act.

He was its cause. He was its doer. He took the wretched benefit. He must own it now, not you, not you.

He did it!

But because of your native innocence (which your tormentor encourages, since it shifts his guilt to you), and because you crave order in dangerous chaos (some ethical order anyway), you see a connection between one's behavior and one's fate. The good get goodness back again; and the bad get hurt—and look what a mess you're in; therefore you must be bad. Is that how you think? It saves the world from absurdity, doesn't it? It argues a certain rationality in human affairs. Good is rewarded, evil is punished, right? And your punishment proves evil in yourself, right? WRONG! Absolutely, unequivocally wrong.

If you've suffered abuse, the one who abused you sinned.

Sin is an uncaused evil. Responsibility sticks with the sinner. The sin came from him. He is the source. He bears the blame. His is the shame. Not you! Not yours! Do you hear me?

You, my child; you, dear lamb—you are beautiful and clean.

This sin occurred because a fool considered himself superior to you. He considered his whim superior to your health, his desire superior to your body, his mood superior to your peace. But you were made in the image of God, so his action condemns him: he demeans the creature whom God exalted; he attacks the child whom heaven loves. Listen: such spiritual blindness, such bestial selfishness, such a pitiful lack of self-control, declares this fool your inferior after all. You needn't seek kindness from him. No, no, and you need not forgive him either! For the Church that tells you you must forgive has burdened you with your sinner's sin, has laid a more terrible law on you, for you are not God, and you need not prove your Christianity now. You need prove nothing, not now when healing is the holy thing.

Let this fool seek forgiveness where it may be found; let him confess to the One against who he sinned most and most wickedly; let him confess unto Almighty

God, for it is God who speaks for you now, child. And it is there that he can no longer excuse himself or compromise the force of his sin. It is there—and only there, finally—where he must strip his spirit bare and fall utterly on heaven's mercy and so be deeply and radically converted.

You need not, because you cannot, transfigure this fool.

God will, if the sinner wills. And the sinner must will! For somewhere the sin must stop!

The sinner tells me that it was his parents' fault in the first place. His father did him the same way. His mother was silent and critical. He didn't (he tells me) have a chance. He can't help his breeding and his personal shaping.

But if this is true, then we're all a cosmic landfill for every sin that ever occurred; they fall on us from the past generations, all the way back to Cain. Such a weight of sin (everyone else's fault except our own) must crush our innocent souls. Such an undeserved history must kill us.

But it hasn't killed us. In other words, there must be some break in this chain of responsibility, sinners causing sinner to sin—abusive parents turning their children into abusive parents.

And there is: it is the acceptance of responsibility by the sinner, by none other than the sinner himself, so that when divine forgiveness transfigures that one, the sin and the sinning are canceled together, and the chain breaks.

No, sir, it doesn't do to blame another, neither the parents before you nor the child behind you. You, sir, as perpetrator of a vile abuse, must with a contrite heart confess.

And you, the child whom he ravaged, must not call yourself ugly. You aren't. His action does not define you.

You, child: you are as soft as the blue sky. Touch your cheek. Do you feel the weft of life there? Yes: God wove you more lovely than wool of the clouds, smoother than petals of lily, sweeter than amber honey, brighter than morning, kinder than daylight, as gentle as the eve. Listen to me! You are beautiful. You are beautiful. If you think you're ugly, you've let a fool define you. Don't! Touch your throat. It is a column of wind and words. Stroke your forehead. Thought moves through its caverns. Imagination lives in there. You are the handiwork of the Creator. You are his best art, his poem, his portrait, his image, his face—and his child.

And if the Lord God took thought to create you, why would you let a sinner define you?

God caused the stars to be, and then bent low to make you.

God wrapped himself in space as in an apron, then contemplated the intricacy of your hands: he troweled the curve of your brow; he fashioned the tug of your mouth and the turn of your tongue; he jeweled your eye; he carved your bones as surely as he did the mountains.

God conceived of time and in that instant considered the purposeful thump of your heart—and the blink of your eyelid.

God made galaxies and metagalaxies, the dusty infinitude of the universe—then filled your mind with dreams as with stars.

You are not an accident. You were planned. You are the cunning intention of Almighty God. Well, then, shall you think ill of yourself? NO! You shall think as well of yourself as you do of any marvel of the Deity.

Please, my sister, do not allow a sinner to steal you from yourself. You are too rare. No matter what filth has befouled you, your soul is unique in the cosmos. There is none like you. Whatever thing you admire—a leaf, a little cup, a sunset—you are more beautiful.

Sleep peacefully, you. God loves you. And so do I. And so ought you in the morning light, when the dew is a haze of blue innocence. But sleep now, child, in perfect peace. You are God's, who spreads wide, holy wings above you now.

A Postscript to "Little Lamb, Who Made Thee?"

Within days of the publication of this letter, I began to receive mail from readers. I had never received so many responses to a single piece before. A rule of thumb is that one angry letter represents three angry readers; but one letter of agreement represents 10, nine of whom did not write.

Evening after evening, Thanne and I stood in our kitchen while I read the letters aloud. And we wept.

For there were more than a hundred letters in the space of three weeks.

And all but one were from women; and only one of those took issue with the column. They told their stories, these women did in letters addressed to me. Handwritten, typed, printed from a computer. Countless stories of personal grief, the willful destruction of their persons and their personalities. They had BEEN the nameless. Yes, and it was their stories that made us cry.

But more than that, it was their courage.

For not one letter was sent nameless to me!

Woman after woman poured forth her terrible secret, then signed her name to it and did no longer hide. That gesture, so fearless, overwhelmed me with the sense of their resurrections.

No, I am not nor ever shall be ironic. Objective. A mind above the mass of human entoilment and experience.

Still, therefore, even now as I recount the deep entrenchment of this sin and its sorrow among us, I am borne down by the weight of it all.

And still I am dumbfounded by the valor of those who did not die.

My dear, dear friends: I take my own hope and courage from you.

From Sharon, too, who lives her life today in the company of her husband and their three children.

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