

Growing Up in the Sixties (Chapter 2: My Conversion)

All of a sudden, without warning, my parents became religious. I don't know if it was the deterioration of my life under the tutelage of Brad Bullah, or their own attempt to rescue their marriage, but just after I started eighth grade we started attending Hillside Presbyterian Church. My reputation suffered.

Brad said that he would have protested, that he would have refused to go. I considered this, and was about to take his advice, until something happened that changed my life: Susan Simms began attending services. Susan was the college girlfriend of Jay Murkowski's brother, Sam. She became the focus of much of my attention during church services.

Brad said Sam Murkowski was an idiot, that the only thing worse than being a wuss was being a stupid wuss. That made me feel better. And yet, Sam had Susan, and I couldn't understand that.

During church I spent most of my time casting long and longing looks in Susan's direction. Let me be frank: Susan was tall, blonde, and shapely, and wore revealing dresses that guaranteed looks. I couldn't help myself. If Susan sat on the right side of the church, most of the men leaned to the right; if on the left, to the left. We were all captivated. On occasion my mother would jab her elbow in my Dad's side to break his focus as well. In all practical respects, Susan *became* the sermon during those church services. Brad said at least there was some good reason for me to be in church, what with Susan Simms being there.

At this point my knowledge of women was quite limited. After all, unlike most of my friends, I had no sister. What I knew of the other sex was deduced from bits of information gleaned from other guys (a not so trustworthy source), ads from Redbook and Good Housekeeping (which my mother assiduously removed as soon as possible), and my roaming imagination.

Come early August it was time once again for Hillside's annual revival week. Now I had not been through this process before, but it seemed daunting: church services every night for the entire week? But I was offered no choice about it:

"Boy, get your good pants on. We're going to church tonight and you're gonna be there with us.

"But Dad, I wanna watch the Smothers Brothers on TV.

"Those commies? They're making a mockery of this country. No way. You're coming with us."

So, you see, I had no choice. I went.

My disposition toward the service soon changed. As Dad pulled our Olds into the gravel lot beside the church, I caught a glimpse of Susan Simms entering the door of the church. I figured if Susan could be at church, I could.

After taking our seats and singing a couple of hymns, Rev. Whitt introduced our revival speaker, Rev. George Belew, a traveling evangelist with the Southeastern Presbyterian Evangelistic Front. I realized as soon as he began to speak that Rev. Belew was nothing like our mild-mannered pastor. Whereas Rev. Whitt almost apologized for those portions of scripture which were particularly nasty (he'd even substitute the word "chest" for "breast"), Rev. Belew was loud, emotional, and unapologetic. After 10 minutes into what became a one and one-half hour sermon, I was perspiring heavily, suffering severe guilt every time I looked at Susan Simms, and clenching the pencil I was holding (to take notes with) to the point at which it was about to break.

That's when it happened. Susan Simms just stood up at her pew. From my vantage point, I could see that her eyes were red, that she had been crying. At Rev. Belew's insistence ("Come

on down, sister”), she moved down the pew past Mr. and Mrs. Harvey to the aisle and began heading to the front where she stopped and conferred out of earshot with Rev. Belew.

That’s when I found myself walking down the aisle toward Rev. Belew as well. I guess just seeing Susan made me want to go up there with her, to share the moment, or whatever. I don’t even remember getting up and was clueless about what I was going to do when I got up there. I could feel the eyes on me as I walked. Then, about a yard from Susan, John Lewis, a deacon in the church, jumped up from his seat on the front row and pulled me into the choir room that was off to the side. That’s when I started wondering what it was I had done.

Mr. Lewis sat me down in a straightback chair and knelt on the floor in front of me. He was sweating profusely as he began to talk and his hands, which were on my knees, were shaking.

“Charles, you know why you’re here, don’t you?”

“Um. . . well. . .”

“That’s right. You need to get right with God and so here you are.” Mr. Lewis paused, as if he was unsure what to say next.

“Well, sir, I think. . .”

“Now, no need to explain Charles. Just bow your head and repeat the sinner’s prayer after me.”

Holy cow. This is serious. What have I done? Somehow, I made it through the prayer, though I can’t remember it, and Mr. Lewis gave me a Bible, shook my hand, and ushered me back to my seat.

After church, several folks came up and shook my hand and congratulated me, as if I had won a contest or something. Many other folks avoided me. On the way home, neither my Dad nor Mom said anything to me about what happened. I’m not sure what happened.

All I know is that two things changed: My Dad stopped cursing around me and now called on me to say the blessing at all family meals and gatherings. And Susan Simms started wearing a bra.