

Losing Susan

BRAIN DISEASE,
THE PRIEST'S WIFE,
AND THE GOD WHO GIVES
AND TAKES AWAY

VICTOR LEE AUSTIN



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In Memoriam
†
SUSAN LANIER AUSTIN

Born Susan Lanier Gavahan * June 7, 1955
Las Vegas, New Mexico

Baptized * September 4, 1955
Our Lady of Sorrows, Las Vegas

Confirmed * December 8, 1974
Church of the Holy Faith, Santa Fe

Married Victor Lee * September 29, 1978
Church of the Holy Faith

Gave birth to Michael Lee * July 4, 1980
Santa Fe
and to Emily Parker * July 3, 1984
Las Vegas

Died * December 17, 2012
New York City

Requiem * December 22, 2012
Saint Thomas Church Fifth Avenue

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Preface

This is the story of an unusual woman. She was a wife, a mother, a Christian believer, a lover of children, a writer of stories, a foster mother to babies. She was nineteen years old when I first met her, thirty-eight years old when her brain tumor was diagnosed, fifty-seven years old when she died.

This is also my story, the story of an awkward boy who got to marry the first college girl to catch his eye, the story of a priest whose wife brought church truths home to the domestic reality of table and hearth, the story of a man who had to take increasing care of a woman whose mental state slowly declined over the last half of their marriage.

This is an unusual story, for the woman had unusual felicity with words and folk craft, and a heart with wise love for the good things for children. Unusual too, at least in the broader world, is to have a priest who is married; unusual, to be married to one spouse for thirty-four years; unusual, for the parties of the marriage to have entered it as virgins; and unusual, if trivial, for their home to have no television. This is not a story of statistically average people.

Yet for all that, it is, I have come to see, a universal story. Here was a woman who had much promise that was never fulfilled. But of whom can that not be said? Here was a man with hopes and projects for a theological career who found his life upended in order to care for the one to whom he had made a vow “for better for worse.” But who has not known unexpected, forced life changes? Rare would be the readers who see nothing of themselves in this story.

There is more. It is a universal story also because, although but a slight chapter in the great history, this story has as its main character a very strange being who is involved with every chapter of any history. In the story before you, this strange character is silent on nearly every page, although he is never absent. I can testify that he was with me with tangible strength at some particular moments of absolute need. He never left me. I can also testify that, in this story, he gave me what my heart most desired—he gave me my wife.

But it must also be said that he is an awful character. I have found him to take away what he gives. He has led me into wild, frightful places, and I have sometimes wished that I had never made his acquaintance. And it remains true that I do not know him, not really.

This, you see, is a story with three characters. Two of us have names: Susan and Victor. And the third character is the one everyone calls God.

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The Beginning

How We Met

I was valedictorian of my high school, which actually doesn't mean a lot—as exemplified by the fact that there was no tradition in my hometown of the valedictorian, notwithstanding the word, doing any speechifying at all, *vale* or otherwise. My town had ten thousand people in it, and we were the biggest thing for ninety miles. Think: cultural isolation. As a child with a strong intellectual bent, I had but a few friends, a small handful of people with whom there was a shared academic interest. Some of them were girls, but, alas, no girlfriends. Yet from early years I had a sense of the reality of God, of the importance of Bible stories, and of the importance of going to church.

So when I went to St. John's College in Santa Fe, it was with both excitement and fear. Excitement came from being within a small student body of about three hundred, all of whom were there to read the same books. Since St. John's had no electives,

it would be okay there (and not at all weird) to talk at any time about the things we were studying. We would talk over meals about Socrates or whether it made any sense to think of a point as, according to Euclid's definition, "that which has no part." We would talk about Odysseus while we sat on benches in the high New Mexican sun. We would talk in our dorm rooms about Greek words and what it might mean for a language to be rather indifferent about word order. We would take walks and watch sunsets and talk about many important things. This had never happened to me before. It was like being on drugs, without the chemicals. (Not that, innocent me, I knew anything about drugs.) Our minds were alive: excitement.

But I also came to St. John's with fear. What if, once I moved into this lively intellectual world, I found that Christian faith could not stand up to reason's scrutiny? Questions would be asked, and I might find no answers for them. Would I survive rigorous challenge to my faith?

So when I saw posted an announcement for a Bible study on Saturday morning, I eagerly went to the little common room where the group met, a half-dozen people as I recall. I don't remember what we studied that morning, nor can I positively recall that the group continued to meet thereafter. What was important to me occurred at the end of that meeting. I asked if anyone was going to church tomorrow.

A blonde junior girl said, "I am, but it's Episcopal."

"I don't care," I answered. At the time, I was a Presbyterian but without particularly strong ties to the denomination; my Christianity had been a matter of a sort of generic small-town evangelicalism. For the most part, I was innocent of theological difference, basically seeing the only important question as whether one was a Christian or not.

Now I hear that odd answer—"but it's Episcopal"—as providential irony. God was going to draw me into a form of catholic religion through this junior with long, straight, blonde hair.

How We Went to Church

Susan (of course it was she) told me to meet her outside the dining hall at nine o'clock on Sunday and that we'd walk to church. This was new to me. Walking to church? It would take almost an hour to get there—the service was at ten—and then we would walk back and return to school in time for lunch. We'd miss breakfast, and we'd walk some five miles altogether (the return would be the uphill half, for the school was nestled up at the foot of Monte Sol and the church, Holy Faith, was literally downtown). We'd walk streets that were strange to me, a boy brought up in a town where everything was on a grid. Santa Fe streets in the 1970s (as, to a lesser extent, they remain today) were windy, barely paved, going past stucco walls and houses and galleries and restaurants that were hardly set back at all. Nothing here was ordinary to me. I had journeyed to a new world.

Dear reader, if you want to get to know someone well, try walking to church with her week in and week out. Make it a long walk, so that it takes the whole morning. When people stop to offer you a ride, wave them off with a friendly smile. Tell them, “We want to walk”; that’s what Susan and I would say.

Before long I was saturated with love for this new being. We had conversations at other times during the week. Being older, she knew a lot more than I about the Great Books. She also knew a lot of old folk songs. We went to waltz parties together and (amazingly on my part) won the waltz contest at the Fasching ball that fall. The prize was a dinner for two at a restaurant called the Compound.

I started to get to know her friends.

That Summer

One of Susan’s friends was named Mary. (Yes, for my Catholic readers, *that* Mary.) I didn’t know anything about her. While on a trip to New Mexico during high school, my church’s youth

group had stepped into a chapel. Afterwards I asked our minister about the statues. He told me that one of them was Mary, and that unfortunately Catholics sometimes put too much emphasis upon her. The important person for us Presbyterians was Jesus.

For Susan, there was not only Jesus; there was also Mary. Susan wrote me a few letters over the following summer, bulging fat envelopes with several half sheets covered in her small hand. She instructed me in how to say the rosary. She gave me the words for the Angelus. She copied hymns for me, listed the spiritual gifts, and wrote out a number of other traditional Catholic devotions. She wrote also about her love for God, her desire to be a priest, her questions about becoming Roman Catholic or Orthodox. She wrote about the monastic vows and whether it was better to be celibate or married. She would mention how she had been able to go to church on a Sunday, or not; she didn't drive back then, so whether she went to church depended on others in her family, others who didn't quite see the point of it but might be persuaded on her account.

The Previous Christmas

Susan had had a boyfriend during her first two years at St. John's. I learned that he had moved into her room, but that they had not, shall we say, consummated relations. This was considered unusual for him; there was something about Susan that solicited what in a more gallant age would have been called respect. He too was witty and brilliant, and was in addition strongly athletic. (Yes, when I learned of him, I was jealous.) But after two years, he had had enough of St. John's, so by the time I arrived he was not on the scene.

Their arrangement upon parting was for Susan to visit him at his parents' home at Christmas (which turned out to be the first Christmas after I met her). So she did, and the two of them went

to midnight mass at an Episcopal cathedral. Afterwards, he asked her to marry him.

She told me this about a month later. I held my breath. She had declined.

Her Brilliant Childhood

Susan taught herself how to read and, indeed, liked to relate that she invented multiplication by herself one day while lying on her bed, some time before she entered school. Her mother took her to the public education authorities and persuaded them to let her skip first grade. With a summer birthday, that meant she was barely six when she started school (second grade), and she was barely seventeen when she started St. John's. She graduated at the age of twenty. Her classmates recall a promise she made to her mother, that she wouldn't drink until she was twenty-one—which meant that, being true to her word, she stood out as a non-imbiber at many college parties.

I often resented her having skipped first grade. She was in fact just nine months older than I, but here I had come on the scene unnecessarily late in her life. If only she had been but a sophomore when I arrived at college! Then I would have had more time to be with her.

A Hug

I loved to visit Susan's room to talk about God and books and generally about everything, as is the way with Johnnies (St. John's students). One such visit ended with a hug—I have no idea how it ended with something so longed-for but unhopd-for—and then I became a bit embarrassed when I realized I was aroused. She said nothing; I said nothing; but months later she mentioned that she had felt it.

At another time she invited me to give her a backrub. In the course of it, she asked me to put my hands under her shirt on her skin. I muttered some hesitation, to which she said with exasperation: “I’m lying facedown!” So, with cheerful obedience and trepid joy, my hands rubbed her back. I noted silently that my months-long conjecture was true, that she wore no bra.

Reader, you may think I was unbelievably young and insufferably hung up about things physical. You are likely right. But I was indeed drawn to God and to Susan at the same time. Drawn to God, I held the traditional Christian belief that sexual relations were reserved by his design for marriage. All that this meant to me at the time was the negative prohibition of sex prior to and in any way outside of marriage. I did not know the goodness of the human body; I knew only that it could be easily misused. But as I was drawn to Susan, I was discovering the goodness of a body. What made it wonderful—and indeed, I think it was the unknown heart of her attraction—was that in being drawn to Susan I was discovering the unified physical and spiritual goodness of a person who was herself most drawn to God.

The Second-Best Book in the Bible

There is a clue to the union of human and divine love in the Bible itself, but it’s in a book that I had never paid attention to. In this I was unlike, say, Garrison Keillor, the inventor of Lake Wobegon, who tells (at least in my memory) of being a boy sitting in church, bored. When this happened (and it was not infrequent), he would pick up the Bible and make a pretense of turning to the Psalms. But he was really aiming at the Song of Songs.

Let’s look at this little book. It is entirely about the erotic longing of a bride and a groom for each other. It opens with desire, boldly stated: “May he smother me with kisses” (1:2). Throughout we find vivid love-making language. The bride says, for example,

“My beloved is for me a sachet of myrrh lying between my breasts” (1:13), while the bridegroom answers, “How beautiful you are, my dearest, ah, how beautiful, your eyes are like doves! . . . Our couch is shaded with branches” (1:15–16). The lovers are not bashful about describing each other’s body. The groom speaks to his bride: “How beautiful you are, my dearest, how beautiful! Your eyes are doves behind your veil, your hair like a flock of goats streaming down Mount Gilead. Your teeth are like a flock of ewes newly shorn. . . . Your lips are like a scarlet thread, and your mouth is lovely; your parted lips. . . . Your neck. . . . Your two breasts are like two fawns, twin fawns of a gazelle grazing among the lilies” (4:1–5). Then she speaks of him: “My beloved is fair and desirable. . . . His head is gold, finest gold. His locks are like palm-fronds, black as the raven. His eyes are like doves beside pools of water. . . . His cheeks are like beds of spices, terraces full of perfumes; his lips are lilies, they drop liquid myrrh. His arms are golden rods set with topaz, his belly a plaque of ivory adorned with sapphires. His legs are pillars of marble set on bases of finest gold; his aspect is like Lebanon, noble as cedars. His mouth is sweetness itself, wholly desirable” (5:10–16). Although these speech-figures are not in every instance the sort of thing we might say to someone we love—has any boy you know ever told a girl that her teeth are “a flock of ewes”?—still the romantic import is clear. The poetry is in service of human erotic passion. It is bold, unashamed, and frank.

Not only bored boys in church wonder what the Song of Songs is doing in the Bible. Saints and scholars have wondered too. To begin with: Why doesn’t the book ever mention God? He seems absent, the book entirely a collection of love poems of a man and a woman for each other. And what is going on in the book? We find a wee bit of drama. He comes to the door; she is slow to answer; when she opens, he is not there. They are separated; they find each other. She runs to look for him; he is looking for her; and so forth. But the book lacks an overall plot. There are also textual questions: Who is speaking? Some of the lines are clearly

in the voice of one or the other person, but others are not. If you compare contemporary translations, you will find particular verses ascribed variously.

In sum, the problematic is that God is not mentioned, some of the metaphors are culturally odd, and the principle of organization is not clear, while nonetheless the passion and the beauty of the Song come through. What sense are we to make of these sexy poems as part of Holy Scripture?

One answer—and I think it is a true answer, if not the whole truth—is that the poems of the Song of Songs are allegorical poems that speak of the love between God and Israel, which by extension we may take to be the love between God and the church. Although contemporary biblical scholars tend to view allegorical interpretations as external impositions upon a biblical text, which therefore ought to be eschewed, it seems likely to me that *the original intent* of the text is for some such allegory to be read. We could say, for example, that God comes knocking for Israel to open up her home and receive him, but she is slow to respond, and when she does respond, it is too late. This could be read as a commentary on the period of the kings, which ends with the exile to Babylon; it is furthermore, as Robert Jenson says, “a pattern of Israel’s history as the prophets sometimes proclaimed it.” Indeed, Jenson shows that this intended allegory makes sense of many of the poems in this book that otherwise lack narrative coherence.

Yet for our purposes here we need not dig so deep. We could answer that the Song of Songs is nestled amongst the books of the Bible *in order that we will not think of erotic human love as essentially antithetical to holiness*. That is to say, it might not be that the Song of Songs gives us an answer so much as it gives us a question; or rather, it answers a simple question and thereby raises a larger one. If the question is, “Can the erotic love of a man and a woman be holy?” then the Song, just by its presence within what is called Holy Writ, says yes. The Song vividly makes the claim

that there need be no antithesis between human and divine love. Yet it makes that claim without explaining it. We know, through painful experience, that a lot of human love runs contrary to God. A lot of human love is wayward, inconstant, and even adulterous, leading sometimes to physical violence and mental cruelty and a multitude of social ills. The Song of Songs tells us it need not be so. It says to us that somehow—even when we know not how—these two loves are intertwined with one another. And thereby it leaves us with the question.

Because human love can so easily be ungodly, should we fear it? Should we surround it with fences? Should we understand it in terms of negative prohibitions? As a boy, I had learned that sex outside of marriage was bad. And that knowledge, I am sure, saved me from many misfortunes.

But then, here came Susan into my life. Here was a person who was herself full of God's love who at the same time filled me with erotic love. I was loving her and God at once. I was not loving her as a means to God; I was longing for her precisely in her flesh as she was. And at the same time, through and with her my love for God was also newly aroused. I was being drawn closer to her and closer to God at once; and I had never before had any idea that such attractions could happen together, with each other.

I suppose I had never tried to understand the Song of Songs. Nowadays—on the far side of my marriage to Susan—I like to call it the second-best book in the Bible (the title of “best book” being reserved for more painful things to come). The Song puts the fully erotic passion of bride and groom in the midst of the sacred things. From within that wonder we ask, *how can this be?*

Rejection and Reversal

After her graduation Susan moved out of state to help an older sister with child care, but by the beginning of my senior year she

had returned to Santa Fe and was living downtown with a couple of former Johnnies. She had landed a job as a bookkeeper for a glass company whose manager was also a Johnnie. So I got to see her often, spending many Sundays (afternoons as well as mornings) with her.

My interest in marrying her must have become obvious during that year. I remember talking about it once as we sat in my little Audi Fox. She held my hand and, stroking my palm, noted how it had no callouses. I was a skinny guy with near-zero athletic aptitude, and I didn't know anything about working with my hands. In other words: nice mind, maybe even nice soul, but not a body she was drawn to marry.

Sadness. I compared myself to T. S. Eliot's Prufrock, who sees and hears lovely beings singing and is almost carried away—and then reality cuts in: "I do not think that they will sing to me." During spring break of my senior year, not knowing what to do, I visited Nick, an old high school friend in Oklahoma, and persuaded him to move with me to Santa Fe. He came out to my graduation, and we found a couple of rooms to rent; then at the end of the month he drove with me from Oklahoma to Santa Fe. That was May 31, 1978, which on the church calendar is the feast of the Visitation of Mary to Elizabeth.

By prearrangement, I left Nick at our rooms and visited Susan at the glass shop, taking her for a hamburger after work. Sometime that evening, perhaps in the restaurant, perhaps afterwards as we sat in the car parked at her apartment, she took my uncalloused hand and said, "I've decided to accept your offer of marriage."

I couldn't believe it. It was as if all the lights in the universe had gone dark and then come back on, all new, just for me.

For years later, whenever I told this story I maintained that my first response was somehow to suppress the question, "What offer of marriage?" But in telling the story that way, I had in fact blotted out of memory her earlier rejection—something Nick has since been able to bring back to my mind. The truth is that I didn't

understand my offer of marriage to be still “on the table.” But of course it was, as she knew.

My summer plans were immediately upended. I had previously arranged to spend the month of June as a guest at the austere Monastery of Christ in the Desert; instead, that got cut back to just over a week. And Nick’s plans too would be changed. I returned to our rooms late in the evening of that May 31 and told him that I had drawn him out to Santa Fe only to abandon him: that Susan would be marrying me.

Susan and I saw no reason to delay marriage—and we were not going to move in together beforehand. Since there were many important people in our lives named Michael (a priest at the monastery; my brother; and a personally influential Russian Orthodox priest and St. John’s tutor, Michael Ossorgin), we chose to marry on September 29, the feast of Saint Michael and All Angels.

Susan wrote to her parents. The report we heard was that her mother read the letter and immediately, taking a bottle of Harvey’s Bristol Cream sherry, retired to her bedroom and closed the door. I wrote to my parents, who still have my letter. No permissions were asked. We went to the Church of the Holy Faith and said we wanted to be married there on the evening of Friday, September 29. Father Campbell was pleased. With his permission, we asked the rector of the other Episcopal church in town also to be part of the wedding. He grinned and turned to me: “What took you so long, Victor?” Little did he know that the delay wasn’t mine.

And so it happened that I was married after much longing, and what seemed to me like interminable waiting, to the dream of my eyes: a beautiful, thin, unusual, God-loving friend of Mary who was intellectually brilliant and a continual surprise to me. I was exactly twenty-two and a half years old when we were married. Susan was a bit over twenty-three. It would be fifteen years before her tumor was found.