



## GOSPEL PRISM

by Gerald Weaver

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*Sample extract, not for retail or distribution*

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Little Philly Ray Sanchez would become my road dog. In the prison patois, a road dog is a very important and rare and precious type of inmate friend. A dog is loyal, above all. And a road dog is loyal on the road or in the road or in the most difficult and dire circumstances. In a place where everyone gives each other a great deal of personal space, physically and metaphysically, in a place where no one stands up from his meal without signaling those around him that he is about to get up and that such a movement is not to be misconstrued as a possibly aggressive act, men do not form a bond very easily or very quickly. But when they do it exceeds what might be expected, and loyalty becomes the sole virtue and true road dogs will stand up for one another when it is fruitless or when it is wrong.

I had planned to begin my work at the same London, Kentucky, church at which the pale white subject of Ray's passion was a volunteer and which was a regular customer of the prison work release program. There was a detail coming up which was fairly straightforward. It would present several opportunities for detours and free time as it was largely a matter of making certain deliveries for the church. The deliveries would require myself and one other person and would take only a few hours even though we would

be allotted a full work day. So there would be plenty of other time, time for my sacred mission.

Philly had seen Belinda only once before, for a few moments at a job site where he and other prisoners had been working to help renovate the inside rooms of the church shelter for women. She had brought them food for lunch. She was pleasant looking, slightly shorter than medium height, with fair skin that was smooth and full on her rounded face and on her rather full arms. What could be discerned from her body in her clothes was that it was at best a comfortable body, not particularly shapely and certainly not svelte. Her eyes were a cool gray-blue and had that same kind of glimmering paleness that every other part of her seemed to emanate, including her short blonde hair which was cut rather plainly to the length of her chin. She had worn loose blue jeans and a gray sweater. To every individual man she had ever encountered on the outside she had been unprepossessing but sweet and not a first choice but one not to be overlooked either. In short, to Little Philly she appeared to be a luminous goddess.

To any man suffering the deprivations of prison, she would had to have been a profusion of feminine delights, smiles and postures and scents and tones of voice that all would have been wonderful reminders of the women from whom each been separated. But to Philly Ray Sanchez she had been the first woman he had ever seen. There had been no other. Whatever he had known in the past had sloughed off of his impression of what was feminine as if it had been the water drops that fall from a wet umbrella that is shaken. There was something just so soft and yielding and open about her, something that he had never encountered in any of the women he had known. There was not the slightest hint of brass or of assertiveness or of some complicated connections to brothers or family or even to the church. She was an island of ultimate femininity over which a man could be a governor. And she was so unaccountably fair-skinned.

She had smiled at him. There was something extra in that smile. It was possibility. It was not sassy or flirty or dismissive, as had been the smiles he had known back in his neighborhood. Nor was it perfunctory or merely polite, as had been the smiles of women and other people that he had encountered when he had occasionally been in the society of middle-class white folks in America. It was a light and it was an opening. And it had lingered. Nor had she given that smile to any other man on that job. It had become for Philly one of Wordsworth's stops in time, which he kept inside of himself and from which he could draw spiritual sustenance simply by recalling it. And he recalled it often. He could have had no idea in the world what was on the other side of that smile at that moment.

What Belinda had seen and had thought at that moment could not possibly have been dreamed by Ray, even at his most outrageous reveries. She had been struck by the masculinity of the dark and kinetic stranger, by something about him that was mysterious and unknown. And she had lost most of her customary insecurity in looking at him because his status as a prisoner was the source of a kind of sympathy. She was not as afraid of him as she had always been with other men. She had allowed herself to be open. She had looked at him at first not as a man but as a poor inmate who was suffering from his incarceration. And when he had looked back at her with eyes that no man had ever focused on her, eyes that were neither haughty nor mean nor possessing of a kind of detached and common hunger, but that were admiring and humble and just the slightest bit surprised, she suddenly felt in the middle of her spine that he was a man and more than just an inmate. And all that mystery and dark and kinetic masculinity suddenly entered her heart through those eyes that were so direct and which seemed to be interested in her and not just in something about her. So she looked back at him with a look that itself was direct and open and then modest but receptive. And then, finally, there had been a flicker of something else, a kind of apprehensive yearning.

So at the moment their looks and her smile ended he was smitten and could not believe the possibility which had just seemed to present itself to him, one like no other he had ever had. He simply could not believe it. He could only hope. And for her it became a sort of gentle litany of questions, all aimed at herself. She wondered if he had been disappointed by her blankness and failure to react or if she had seemed to him not to be paying attention. She wondered why she had not been more friendly and engaging and whether would he think it was because she might be condescending to him because he was a convict. She hoped she had not offended him.

I had surmised all of these things in an instant because I had been there. But neither of them could ever have had any idea what the other might have been thinking. So it was all left to me as a set of tools with which to recruit Philly Ray on my blessed mission. And I took up that task not long after our discussion of the failure of prison or threat of death to be deterrents to truly lucrative criminal activity. I was in the prison yard on a weekend afternoon when there was no one else walking about. I had just seen him walking toward his building and I stopped him and greeted him. Without too many preliminaries, I asked him, "How would you like to go on another work release job to that church?"

"When?" he said. I was getting used to answers that were questions.

"It will be in a few weeks. My plan is to do some things that are a bit off of the prescribed duties of the detail, and I will require your complicity and assistance. There will be that much freedom in the job. And it will be a two-man detail, just you and I."

"I don't know about breaking no rules. I don't want to stay here no longer than I got to."

"Wait until you have heard what I am planning. I can not only get you to see the lovely Ms. Belinda Hahner, I can help you to get her to fall in love with you. I can get you fifty Belindas."

"I don't know about fifty. Two might be nice, but one is probably enough."

“Better than that, I can do. Even better than having her merely fall in love with you, I can teach you how to get her to let you be her governor, how to get her to completely surrender to you.”

With this my new friend became quiet and contemplative. No such idea had ever occurred to him, not even as a possibility. Yet when I uttered it he became convinced that such a thing might be possible, that I might be able to help deliver to him what he desired most and in a way that he had never imagined possessing any woman. He was running over in his mind those few moments in her presence that he had contemplated before, many times before. And this time he was subjecting the whole episode to a new possible interpretation. He was coming under the grip of a different kind of feeling, one that would give him the courage to risk a great deal more than an extended stay on the inside. His wonder and his dreaming had in those minutes of listening to me turned into something that had quite a much stronger hold on his imagination. He had begun to anticipate. He was in for the duration and in for the detours I was planning.

“I will need your full cooperation in this matter,” I began. “It is a mission of critical importance to the entire world. I have had a divine visitation, and such a thing cannot be meaningful if I hold it merely to myself. I must begin to spread the new gospel and I cannot fail. We cannot fail. There will be times when we will be assailed and there will be obstacles. But on the other side of those obstacles will be a new world. There are so many wrongs to be righted, grievances to be redressed, abuses to be done away with, and duties to be performed. The beautiful female Christ has personally and directly talked to me, and I must not keep her words to myself. You must help me to spread this new gospel.”

“I just hope when we are on this so-called sacred mission that your holy vision includes the memory of your promise to me that you will help me to get this woman to surrender to me,” he said.

“It is all part and parcel of the same thing, I believe. If you will be my acolyte in all things, you will learn this as well as some other truths.”

“I’d like something a little more certain.”

“And I shall produce it.”

At that moment we were interrupted by toilet paper man. He had just walked up to us. Toilet paper man was a slightly built, Caucasian, soft-spoken man of around fifty years old and slightly taller than average height. He was bald on the top of his head and he compensated for that by growing the hair on one side of his head very long and combing it over his bald pate, which is a practice far more common outside of prison than inside. He had a slow drawling way of speaking that in America is known as country. His combed-over hair was neither gray nor brown but in between. There was something about him that was spectral. He could often be around the premises, and no one would have noticed him. He could also often be found in the yard, walking around, talking to himself and reading very obscure small publications of the far right wing of American politics. And often but not always, a small tailing of toilet paper could be seen trailing out of one or the other of his pant legs.

All of this is to say that he was the one inmate of whom every single other prisoner was rightly afraid, which made it a rather tense moment when Little Philly Ray, agitated by his contemplation of my promises and insights and by the meditation upon his moments, past and prospective, with the lovely Belinda, suddenly blurted out, “Toilet paper man, what the hell is up with the goddamn toilet paper?”

I quickly contemplated a premature end to my nascent evangelical career, when surprisingly toilet paper man calmly answered in his country voice, “I wrap it around my body every morning to protect me from thermonuclear waves.”

“Can you believe that Ray?” I responded, with alacrity and no small degree of relief, “not knowing about the thermonuclear waves? What a knucklehead.”

As both that moment and toilet paper man passed beyond us, I shot Philly a remonstrative glance, and he reminded me that I had promised him something more certain. So I produced for him a bit of doggerel I had once written. And I told him that what had been true four hundred years ago was still true, that the romantic heart of a woman was susceptible to poetry. In any other place on the outside or at any other time within this baleful enclosure, handing this young man a poem of love for the object of his affection would have met with a scoff or something worse. As it was, Little Philly was rapt as he read the poem.

**BELINDA**

*She shines before me  
Like the first love of youth,  
Brilliant as rain, and smoother  
Than moonlight on snow.*

*I lean forward to give  
A weeping kiss upon the light;  
And the sound of the morning,  
My heart now returning.*

*My eyes can hardly see her  
And my mind has always known  
That I cannot catch the shining  
Of her small and winning moon.*

*I burn with fire to touch an angel,  
Thick with desire to reach a star,  
So close upon the flying dream  
To grasp with hands of smoke and tar.*

*How to take the kind perfection  
And hold it to my dusky breast?*

“Do you think this will work?” he asked, then he added, “Never mind; I know it will. What else you got for me?”

“All in good time, my young squire, all in good time,” I said, knowing well that he now saw me as some kind of magician who truly might be able to help him to become the governor of his Belinda.

He was also more strangely at home now in prison. I had thought before at quite some length that this enterprise on which I was about to embark required that I have an acolyte or a votary but that it was essential that he possess a name equal to the import of the mission. I wanted him to have an appellation that at once would indicate the profound significance of this sublime undertaking, one that suited the new order of my life since my divine visitation. And certainly none of the many combinations of my new friend’s current name would suffice. This new revelation about the heart of my young companion settled the question for me.

“I shall call you Fabrizio del Dongo,” I pronounced, “after the Stendahl hero who fell in love with a beautiful young woman whom he chanced to see while he was imprisoned and then for whom prison had become transformed to the one place he most wanted to be. And I like the name. I like its appropriately Latinate derivation. What say you, Fabrizio?”

“You can call me anything you want. Not so sure about the ‘del Dongo’ part. You just be sure that you help me get what you promised.”

“I will do much more than that.”

Now that I had brought my powers of persuasion to bear on my Fabrizio and had convinced him to ride forth with me and to assist me, all I had to do was to inform him of the day and hour when we were to take to the road. And I told him to make whatever arrangements for this adventure that he saw fit, while I made my own preparations. Apparently, Fabrizio decided

that one provision he had needed to make in the interim was to get a jail-house tattoo of a cartoon parrot on his upper arm in order to impress his intended. I was not so sure that it made sense for an assistant to a prophet to be adorned by such a thing or even that it would have the effect he desired. But I decided that it must be a sign, the meaning of which would become clear to me at the appropriate time.

And so we set forth on the appointed day and thus would begin the story of the ingenuity that was displayed in pursuing our quest and other events as outlandish as they are true. We took ourselves to the administrative office in order to be processed out of the prison for the work day and I was given the keys to the van. Once on the road, I began to tell Fabrizio in depth about my celestial visitation and exactly what had been divinely revealed to me and how I had been deeply affected by it all and how I was planning to spread the new good word. I cannot say if I was surprised or not surprised at the acceptance with which my votary took all this startling and dramatic and original revelation. He was even amenable to my restrictions.

“We may plunge our arms up to the elbow in religious discussions and disputations and theological discussions of the most sublime nature. But I must warn you, Fabrizio, to remember that you are not the one who has received the divine visitation, nor are you well versed in the nuances of theology. In all the other matters of our interaction with the great unwashed masses you may take your part. But you must not involve yourself directly in my evangelical pursuits or in the matters of high spirituality.”

“You can count on that, Christian. I ain’t interested in these picky discussions of what is holy or what is not. I never even thought about it. I was raised Catholic. Just tell me one more thing about how to get Belinda to want me,” he added.

“Kiss them on their scars, I always say.”

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

“Every woman in the world has some mark upon her that she does not like,” I said. “Many times it is actually a scar or a stretch mark or a wart. Other times it is a crooked nose or an odd laugh or a thick waist or a skinny neck or a squeaky voice. It can be almost anything. But it plagues her. It becomes a focus of all her insecurity about how she appears to men. But you and I have the advantage of being in prison and knowing that for us all women are beautiful and they are all beautiful all over. We would no longer turn away a woman for having a lisp or an overbite or a scar than we would turn down a beer or a steak or a vacation with our children or any of the other things of which we are currently deprived. So we have no problem kissing a woman on her scar, so to speak. What I am telling you is that which you must do, and that it will pay a large dividend if you love her exactly where she is most insecure.”

“But what if she really is perfect?” Fabrizio asked, half in a reverie.

“There is not a single woman in the world who is completely satisfied with her posterior, even the perfect ones.”

This took a while to sink in. But as with any other truth, my statement allowed Fabrizio to realize what he had already always known but could not have seen unless and until I had told him.

“Genius,” he muttered under his breath.