

THE DEVIL'S ADVOCATE

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TRANSGRESSION

(117,391 words)

A Novel
by
Carl A. Peters

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PREFACE

“But mark this: There will be terrible times in the last days. Men will be ... lovers of pleasures rather than lovers of God – having a form of Godliness but denying its power. Have nothing to do with them. They are the kind who worm their way into homes and gain control over weak-willed women, who are loaded down with sins and are swayed by all kinds of evil desires”

(2 Timothy 3:1-7. NIV.)

ONE

Halloween, 1974

They had agreed to meet in the retired parsonage on the back end of the church lot after seven Friday evening. They had come together there secretly maybe half-a-dozen times over the past year to savor unthinkable moments of sweet intimacy. But that was dangerous, and they knew it.

The bungalow was not the only rendezvous spot for Daniel and Vivian, simply the most convenient for this particular Halloween night. But they'd already agreed – tonight had to be the last time on church property.

The pastor glanced up at the dimly-lit clock on the back wall of the church auditorium. 6:40. Like a grey curtain drawn slowly from the east, darkness had been pressing in for almost half an hour. Daniel stepped into the foyer, walked to the main front doors, and pushed against the handles once more, reassuring himself that they were, indeed, latched, locked, and secure. This was the second time he'd checked them in the past 15 minutes. Tonight he had to be certain.

He stepped backward into the darkness and watched the sidewalk and street out front, now partially lit by the two carriage lights mounted on either side of the church's main entranceway and by the two matching wrought-iron pole lamps at the juncture of the sidewalk and the main front walkway. The large backlit church sign on the southwest corner of the front lawn faced Fourth Avenue and the main highway beyond. The marquee rested on a three-foot-tall hand-laid moss-rock base and announced to all who passed by:

Parkway Baptist Church.
Independent, Fundamental
Rev. Daniel H. Sutterhall, Senior Pastor
Sunday School – 9:45am
Sunday Worship – 11:00am
Wednesday Prayer – 7:00pm
Phone 555-1236
“Only Jesus Saves”

Daniel had driven to the church earlier and parked the faded-maroon Plymouth Valiant wagon, the church errand vehicle, around back behind the education wing, in a semi-concealed spot between two of the older renovated Sunday-school buses. He then locked himself inside the dark church building and waited. His plan seemed foolproof. Why not? It had worked at other times, under similar circumstances.

He had polished his sermon a bit that evening in preparation for Sunday, as he'd told his wife he was going to do. He'd also prayed as he walked the inside perimeter of the main church building, checking to make certain that each of the church's entrance doors was locked. Now he stood hidden in the darkness of the foyer, staring out into the night, rehearsing his plan.

Chris Chandler, the church youth director, along with several kids from the senior-high youth group, were away visiting Mapleville Bible College until Saturday, noon. Mapleville was a small suburban community just minutes southeast of Akron, about an hour and a half from Oak Ridge.

Ruth Sutterhall, the pastor's wife, now a partial invalid, was home with Emily Snyder, a retired nurse from the church who'd become fast friends with Ruth. Emily often helped Mrs. Sutterhall during those times when the Pastor was busy with church work or was otherwise unable to be home.

From all outward appearance the church was deserted this Friday evening; shadowy ... silent ... still. Mysterious in the way darkened churches most often appear in

the hazy after-twilight hours. No cheery lights welcomed from the windows, no beaming faces beckoned with joy from open doors, no rapturous music floated on the breeze from choir, piano, organ, or soloist.

Silent this evening was the message of sin and salvation that had before plowed and seeded the fallow ground of hearts. Silent were the omnipotent words of hell fire and damnation that had, in times past, thundered like lightning bolts from the pulpit. Silent was the sweet promise of Divine mercy and grace, begging sinners to Jesus. An uneasy stillness stalked the night as demons danced in happy anticipation and angels turned away in shameful awareness, shielding their faces with their wings.

From his vantage point inside the dark foyer the pastor watched three mothers herd a gaggle of six or seven youngsters – the whole rag-tag army chattering their heads off like a flock of autumn starlings on a farm fence – past the church toward their next trick-or-treat conquest.

One youngster, outfitted as a smiling rubber-faced President Nixon, came tripping over his older brother's rolled-up pants and suite jacket, borrowed for the evening. Another, a Cinderella princess followed, pulling the hand of her little sister who was tonight a newspaper-stuffed pumpkin. A fourth little one was dressed as a tiny baseball player in a striped uniform. Mother carried Babe Ruth's plastic bat because he'd been using it to whack and poke every other goblin and princess he passed in his rounds of the bases.

One more-mature kid, a six-year-old, broke away and ran up the wide walkway to the front doors of the church. He pressed his nose against the glass, cupped his hands on either side of his face, and strained to see into the darkness through his own mirrored reflection. He was hoping to get some treat here. He remembered the small white box of red and green sugar-coated gumdrops, cream-filled chocolate drops, and colorful hard candies and canes he'd received here the Christmas before when he was an angel in the church pageant. Tonight he was dressed, more appropriately, as a devil.

"A suitable caricature of his true nature," or words to that effect, his mother had told the other moms.

“Goodbye, David,” she called. “Hope the goblins don’t get you.” This nonchalant warning was working well on Davie this ghostly moonlit night.

The pastor was invisible to the youngster, who turned away and swooped in exaggerated, demon-like steps back to catch up with the gang, Little Satan’s cape fluttering behind. The preacher smiled as a twinge of melancholy swept over him in the darkness. He imagined the hauntingly impossible dream of his very own son or daughter trick or treating tonight, filling bags with goodies to share with Daddy at home later.

But Pastor Dan’s thoughts were soon drawn away to the Halloween treat he had planned for himself that evening. A shiver tickled up his spine. He turned and stepped back into the dim gray night of the main auditorium. The center doors swished closed behind him, sending a soft echo reverberating through the cavernous room. He sat in the rear of the sanctuary, cloaked in the black silence, contemplating how he had gotten to this place in his life.

Daniel Sutterhall was a man of grating contradictions. He truly loved his wife, Ruth. That was certain. He also loved each and every member of his congregation and would, without hesitation, have given the shirt off his back, or his very life, if necessary, for any one of them. He loved the folks in his town and longed for them to come to his Jesus. He honestly loved their children and more than that he loved all of the children on earth, referring to them as “God’s kids.”

“Danny Sutterhall, *The People’s Pastor*,” as his business card read, loved sinners wherever he found them.

“I love the drunkard in the bar as though he is a wayward brother. I love the prostitute, as though she is a fallen sister. I love the dope-head, as though he is my own prodigal son,” Daniel had preached once. “I love the bank presidents, the businessmen, the doctors, and lawyers who live in the mini mansions over in Oak Ridge estates. I love them all. Why? Because Jesus loves them.”

Pastor Dan was no respecter of persons. “Red and yellow, black and white, all are precious in his sight,” he had sung many times.

But he also *loved* Vivian White, the church secretary.

Caustic shame-filled thoughts seared his heart. *I'm no better than several other ministers I've known personally. One big-time evangelist and two, no three, lowly pastors who fell in disgrace.* Daniel flogged his soul over this crippling sickness but was unable, in his own power, to stop his sin with Vivian.

A light breeze toyed with the late-October leaves on the trees which stood as guardians along Maple street to the east. Tonight they whispered promises of the return of a misty rain which had visited that afternoon. The halcyon glow from the streetlight half a block away romped among the fluttering red-yellow-and-orange leaves, filtering in nymph-like kaleidoscopic patterns through the tall stained-glass windows on that side of the building. It filled the eerie emptiness of the sanctuary with an angular muted light-show, softly illuminating the colorful fairy-dust images who sailed and tumbled in hushed laughter across the velvet silence.

The Pastor turned and looked up again at the clock. 6:53. He rose and walked down the center aisle, savoring the familiar smell of a church auditorium. That unique aroma – perhaps the mingling of scents from the wooden pews, along with the red-cloth cushioned seats and the faint lingering fragrances of perfumes from Sundays past – seemed to be the same here as in every other church auditorium he'd been in during his 15 years in the ministry. He loved it.

Moreover he loved the thought of the room overflowing with people, hanging on his every God-given word. The unchallenged spiritual leader of his congregation – a preacher's preacher, studied in the Biblical languages, articulate, zealous, the beloved under-shepherd of his flock. He was in his element here and his considerable oratorical skills and true compassion had led numerous souls to the Lord, both from the pulpit during the Sunday-morning-and-evening sermons as well as in homes all over town on weekdays.

The preacher recognized his weakness with women, hid it well, prayed about it daily, but had been unable, actually unwilling, to take appropriate action to corral his lust. Nor was he inclined to leave the ministry over it. But after the problems his fleshly desires had caused in previous churches, he'd promised himself, and the Lord, that he would

never become involved in another extramarital affair. Nevertheless, he had been infatuated with Vivian from practically his first day at Parkway Baptist.

What would he do, he thought, if the truth were, shall we say, uncovered? Surely he would be banished from the pulpit for the remainder of his life. He listened as his own sermons, like ghosts from the past, seemed to resurrect and mock him with whispering taunts. Crying out from the silent walls of this, his spiritual Coliseum, they echoed their haunting incriminating dirge in the night:

“Look what happened to King David during the remaining years of his life after he took Bathsheba, another man’s wife,” Daniel had preached. “Tragedy, loss of his family, his good name smeared, his kingdom ruined. Is a night’s pleasure worth it, friend? In the High and Holy name of our Lord, give up that affair,” Daniel pleaded to the rafters. “Turn from that wicked sin, oh man. From that woman who is not yours to hold. Flee from that man who tempts your purity, oh woman.

“Repent, confess your sin to the Lord, and cleanse your hands and hearts, you sinners. Husbands, wives, ‘Drink water from your own wells.’ ‘Flee fornication,’ ‘The marriage bed is undefiled,’ The sin of adultery is close to the unpardonable sin.

“Teenagers, young adults, what price must be paid for the sin of your youth? What a horrible burden of memories you will be forced to bear all of your life because of even one night of fleshly pleasure. ‘Flee youthful lusts!’ Keep yourself pure for your future mate.”

Daniel smiled at the remembrance of his own cleverness with words.

The church auditorium seated roughly 300 adults, that is if everyone squeezed together. The Sunday morning services had been witnessing that figure easily of late, give or take a dozen or two. Attendance was up considerably from when Daniel had first arrived almost two and a half years earlier to take the position as pastor. Not bad for Oak Ridge, Ohio, a town of almost 6,000 and a second-cousin southern suburb of Warren.

You could also count an additional 90 to 100 kids of all shapes, sizes, colors, and ages riding the Sunday-school buses Sunday mornings. Normally these “bus kids,” as they were called, were sheltered in the new Sunday-school wing for their own “Junior Church”

service. On special occasions, however, say at Easter and Christmas, Pastor Dan would arrange to bring these youngsters in to join the regular congregation in the main auditorium. Then the place would overflow and many of the children would have to sit on the floor down front.

A few of the older regular members of the church had been known to grumble over these kids running all over the property, smudging up the walls with their dirty little hands, stopping up the toilets, and generally acting like hellions.

“They don’t contribute to church upkeep and they’re a nuisance,” Roy Hogland, one of the staunch older members of the congregation, had said once in a church business meeting.

With deep compassion and substantial oratorical skill Pastor Danny gently bludgeoned the grumblers into submission, showing them from Scripture how much Jesus loved the little children.

“How can we, as Christians, do anything less?” The preacher had pleaded.

Daniel walked to the left, across the front of the dark auditorium, around the piano, then through the door into the choir room. From there he stepped into the blackness of the narrow hallway behind the baptistery, bumping into an empty mop bucket and dry mop which waited there for the next splash-over from the next baptism. The clamorous metallic clatter and squeaking of wheels reverberated through the narrow walkway, rumbling off of the cement-block wall and out through the sanctuary, creating much more of a ruckus than was deserved.

He inched his way along the wall to the door leading to the newly-finished Sunday-school wing on the back end of the church auditorium, then stepped into the wide hallway on the other side. His nostrils filled with the thin piquant odor of freshly painted walls. That task had been accomplished by several volunteers from the church little more than a week earlier.

He quietly closed the door behind him, then made his way even further to the far back of the new wing where he could view the north parking lot through the half-closed Venetian blinds.

Parked outside, nosed up to the building, were the five church buses – older renovated school buses – that were used to haul the bus kids to Sunday school from around the community. Most of these children were gathered from the two trailer parks situated on the west side of town. The bus program was a great success, reaching many families who would not otherwise bother to bring their children to church or Sunday school on Sunday mornings.

Daniel walked through the darkness to the electrical panel, located in the janitor's room in the far corner of the new addition. He swung open the large metal door and located the breaker for the area light. The carbon-arc light on a pole at the back corner of the L-shaped parking lot lit the west side, along Elm-street, as well as the entire north end of the church property, where the buses were parked. It also lit the front of the small house that backed up to the alley running along the northern edge of the church lot.

Since the church had built the new parsonage up across the river three years earlier, the cottage was no longer used as the pastor's residence. It had now been taken over by the young-married-couples group on Sunday mornings for their coffee-and-donut Bible class. It was also used as a temporary residence by visiting missionaries or a guest speaker from time to time. The basement was used for storage, otherwise the house sat empty, almost forgotten.

Pastor Dan snapped off the area-light breaker and the entire north and west sides of the church property fell innocently into the waiting arms of the night. He then walked back to the exit door by the buses and peered through the blinds, permitting his eyes to become accustomed to the darkness.

A three-quarter egg-yoke moon hung by a black thread inches above the horizon to the north east and was veiled in fits by the fleeting flocks of grey clouds which, like squadrons of southbound geese, skimmed the carbon sky.

The pastor waited.

By five after seven the clouds had piled on sufficiently to smother the night globe and a light rain had again begun to fall. Daniel was about to step outside when a car turned the corner from Fourth Avenue, drove slowly up Elm street, then turned its headlights off and swung into the north lot, easing to a stop behind the buses. The doors

opened, the dome light came to life, and Daniel could see four teenagers from the local high school, two young men and their dates. They unloaded empty beer bottles onto the parking lot, then closed the doors. They sat there for perhaps four or five minutes more as the young man in the back seat lit a cigarette. Soon afterward the driver spun his tires in the gravel and sped off. He didn't turn his headlights on again until he was half a block away.

Normally Pastor Dan would have walked out and jokingly lectured the boys about their actions. Then, before sending them off with a warm blessing, he'd have goodheartedly blackmailed them into visiting his church the following Sunday. But this evening Daniel wasn't here. And Vivian was in Toledo for the weekend.

The preacher stepped into the chilly October night and strolled across the rain-wet gravel, through the blackness, toward the cottage. He looked around the parking lot once more, then eased through the squeaky gate into the secluded courtyard and walked the cracked and crumbling cement walkway to the front porch. Inside the cottage he waited in the putty-thick darkness, testing every sound. Finally he heard his name, spoken so softly he might have dreamed it.

"Daniel?"

He smiled as he leaned against the wall and removed his western boots, standing them side by side to the right of the doorway. Secretly Daniel loved the risk – flirting with the odds of being caught. During these times of indiscretion his every sense would tingle with an adrenalin high, as though riding the bow of a ship in a storm, disaster imminent.

The patriarchal forced-air furnace in the basement came to life, adding its mature mellow voice to the stillness with a soft whoosh of warm air. Vivian had set the thermostat to 75 degrees when she'd slipped in earlier through the back door, unseen. She had parked in front of the home of an elderly widow she knew on Pearl Street, two blocks north of the church property, then walked to the cottage in the drizzle, her umbrella drawn shroud like, low overhead.

Daniel picked his way slowly through the front room, among the three rows of steel folding chairs, and found Vivian standing in the doorway to one of the back

bedrooms. He wrapped her gently in his arms, rubbing her shoulders and back as he kissed her.

Their passions flowed, gently at first, warm and welcome, like wading a shallow summer's stream together. Then it overflowed from deep fountains of desire into a torrential river of forbidden pleasure. They felt no shame at their sharing. The guilt would come later, as it always had. Now they were together, for several hours if they wanted. Hours which would seem like an eternity folded into mere minutes.

The only sound in the house, other than the light rain and the rustling of the wet October leaves on the roof, was the labored breath of the gray old furnace in the basement.

End - Chapter One

Hello. If you were intrigued by this first chapter we would very much like to hear your comments, for better or worse. (Please email me at: carlpeters@verizon.net)

And when you write please tell us a little about yourself. IE: Your name? Where (in the world) do you live? What is your age group? Are you an author, agent, editor, publisher, teacher, or simply an occasional or avid reader of Christian books? I look forward to hearing from you soon,

Note: When a publishing date is set for Advocate, I will inform all of our readers on this website. Books two and three to follow.

Thanks much and Lord bless,

Carl Peters