

A story by Jack Sparacino

"Suppose you could gain everything in the whole world, and lost your soul. Was it worth it?" – Billy Graham□□□□

Justin Wilbur Johnson felt trapped. At thirty-seven, still a handsome dark haired construction worker with a gorgeous girlfriend, he had bought a modest yet cozy two room house in Beaufort, South Carolina. He often wore a Clemson sweatshirt to work. It featured a Tigers paw print front and center. He liked hoodies and the signature orange and grey colors. "Willy," as his friends and co-workers called him, had never been to college but he liked the aura of college football and watched every game he could. His girlfriend Sally Hughes Jackson watched a quarter or two here and there, but only to humor her poor Willy, who could easily drain a six-pack of Heineken with a bag of Fritos over the course of a game. She wondered how he stayed so trim.

Sally was a drop dead man killer and she damn well knew it, had since she was a freshman in high school and later as captain of the cheerleading squad for Beaufort High School. Five feet nine, a hundred and thirty two pounds. Mesmerizing fluorescent green eyes, gorgeous legs seemingly up to her neck, swimsuit model figure. Willy had long admired her from afar along with nearly every other boy in his class of 1988. Ronald Reagan's presidency, the Calgary Winter Olympics, the resumption of NASA's Space Shuttle program, and the upcoming invasion of Panama were far from their minds whenever Sally breezed by. Heaven forbid she was in one of their classes. That shoulder length tropical bird golden blond hair, the matching hoop earrings all spelled Houdini to them. Forget the fact that she could sing and dance like Ginger Rogers. It was lights out.

Willy and Sally met at a birthday party hosted by a scrawny mutual friend from their class, Beth Hanson. Poor Beth. Plain looking with only two fancy outfits she bought from Macy's, on sale by necessity, she longed for more friends and maybe even a special boy she could confide in. Someone to share in her dreams and apprehensions, someone to *listento* her and offer his feelings in complete privacy. Someone who would
get

her. The embers of that hope would remain smoldering for many years.

While Beth mixed drinks and passed out mugs of draft Budweiser and glasses of Chardonnay, Willy approached Sally and shyly introduced himself as Wil. She knew everyone called him Willy and at that moment jumped a step ahead of him.

“Nice to meet you, Mr. Wil. Or may I call you Willy? You do sort of remind me of Willy Wonka.”

Holy crap, he thought. Willy Wonka from that chocolate factory was kind of an eccentric weirdo with funny clothes. What’s wrong with my Clemson sweatshirt? I sure don’t look like Gene Wilder. His hair was curly blond and his nose wasn’t straight like mine. At least Mom always said I had my dad’s good nose.

“Gee thanks, I guess, you mean I come across like a celebrity or something?”

“No, not really. It’s more like you come across as a nice guy. A good looking one, if you don’t mind my saying.”

Willy’s amygdala blew a few circuits thorough the side of his brain and he had to force himself not to completely lose his composure. Was this knock down beauty actually complimenting him? Or was she just stringing him along. He quickly assumed the former and went ahead full steam. Complete with heavy perspiration and a hint of a stammer.

“W-well you’re the m-most beautiful woman I’ve ever s-seen. Gosh it’s like I can’t talk right. What have you been up to since we graduated high school? I think I r-remember you being near the head of our class or something. Like class validictorian maybe.”

“Ha ha, you’re funny. Actually I was class valedictorian. First in our class. I had to deliver a speech at our commencement.”

“What’s that?” Willy instantly felt like an idiot. He stole a glance at his fly and saw that it was zipped. Thank you Jesus, he thought.

“Graduation, silly. You were there, right”

“Oh yeah, that.” More idiocy. He must be registering a minus five by now.

In reality, Sally had taken a shine to Willy. She had already grown of corporate guys in their fancy suits and their high end dinner invitations. Same old shtick, same come on lines, same lame-ass grins. Enough already. There must be somebody real out there. Maybe Willy was that guy.

Their seemingly unlikely romance began with a night of bowling at House Community lanes on Ribaut Road in Beaufort, followed by ping pong and a Coors Light that they shared in his basement. It was stuffy but they laughed each other into pitiful faults and double bounces. They were starving after an hour and went out for burgers. Willy had never had such a good time. He could only hope she might feel the same.

And so she did.

Over the next twelve years, Sally went from close friend to love interest to lover. The passageways were bathed in fog. Willy never really sensed the transitions, he just knew he could not possibly live without her affection, support, brains and beauty. He quickly became addicted to their relationship. She tended to like him like the brother she never had. Romance was elusive. Sally wanted her Wil to take better care of himself and create a comfortable life for themselves. With her incessant goading, Wil worked his construction jobs until he was numb with fatigue. He could never seem to earn enough money for his bride to be.

Sally found them bigger homes in Savannah, then St. Petersburg, and finally Key West. She brokered and bartered her stunning physical assets into increasingly impressive homes and

mortgages. They adopted two rescue dogs, both Rottweilers. Sam and Dave. They got them when they were nine and eleven months old. Both had been badly neglected and abused and became extremely protective of their owners. Both needed muzzles in public. Both could be vicious.

Not unlike all too pretty Sally. She goaded her Wil into risky real estate deals and then even more risky stock purchases. Sometimes over a late dinner he could feel those piercing green eyes boring holes in his soul. It pained him endlessly, though never enough to spur him to tap the brakes or avoid careening off the road of their lives. He lost ten pounds, then ten more, then another five before she said anything about it. Not in a caring, loving way, but more like an attack on his manhood.

By the time they hit KeyWest, not far from Ernest Hemingway's home – which still drew tourists from around the country – Willy was despondent. He could never live up to Sally's relentlessly accelerating expectations. He knew he was letting her down. And himself. He secretly and reluctantly bought a Glock 19 Gen 4 9mm pistol at the local gun show. He had a single purpose in mind.

Two nights later, Sally caught him on the back porch under a full hazy moon with the pistol aimed at his aching heart. She screamed out to him.