

BATTLEGROUND

by

Ben Nightingale

Looking at both of them, I felt like saying—“In this corner weighing in at...,” but my mother would not want me making any comments about her weight. Now that she’d gained so much. Was back on her grapefruit diet. My mother was really going at Jane. Reminded me of that small dog that clamped its teeth into my dog’s neck. Wouldn’t let go. Had to light a newspaper and hold it under his neck to *make* him let go.

Oh so pleasantly, with sweetness and long-suffering in her voice, my mother continued... “You know Jane, you’re one of God’s Chosen People dear. Says so right here in my Bible.” She patted her Bible on the table beside her chair.

A kind of religious conversational parrying and thrusting had been going on for about half-an-hour. I had said very little. All I had to say had been said on the drive down. Mostly me warning Jane about my mother’s religious zeal.

They seemed to have been tolerating each other. Most of the time they both had slight smiles as they spouted their versions of religious “truth.” My mother—Fundamental Christianity. Jane—Judaism. Jane’s “truths” sounding so familiar, because the Baptist church my mother and I had belonged to, during my childhood, gave strong doses of the Old Testament.

But after my mother’s “Chosen” statement about Jane, Jane’s slight smile vanished. She stared at my mother, boring into her. “Mrs. Palmer—how can you thrust at me that I’m ‘Chosen?’” My mother looked startled, took a breath to reply...but Jane ploughed on. “I studied Comparative Religion in college—including Christianity. That’s when I discovered how your New Testament tells that we Jews were blinded...in effect cast out...like another kind of Holocaust...all designed to get rid of us so Christians could take over. Our Old Testament was grabbed and your whole Christian thing built on it.”

I sat staring at both of them, not believing Jane’s statements. “Jane don’t you think you’re going too far?”

“Too far Paul? I can never go as far as Christians have gone. I don’t want any part of that kind of “Choosing.”

After a long sigh, my mother regained her composure. “Oh my dear, if you only understood God’s love for you. How he sent his Son to die for your sins.”

Jane jumped up and said, “We have to go.” .

“But,” I started. I knew not to go on. I stood up and walked over to my mother. Bending down, I kissed her. “Yes mother, it’s getting late.” Displaying a made-up, nervous smile, I went on...“You two will have to settle all this on another visit.” As Jane and I walked slowly towards the front door, I heard my mother breathing heavily, as she raised herself from her chair. She walked over to us and opened the door, as though nothing had happened. A big grin lighting up her face. “Now drive carefully. And Jane, you think about what I’ve told you.” Jane softened her facial expression, bent down, and pecked my mother on a cheek. “Forgive me. I got carried...”

“No need to explain dear. All understandable.” I stood there hearing my mother’s bedrock, assured tone. And knew from experience how true...“No need to explain.” There would be no penetrating my mother’s beliefs.

I gave my mother a goodbye kiss. Jane and I walked to the car. Looking back, I saw my mother still standing in the doorway, waving at us. We got in the car. As I drove off, I saw the door close and the outside light go off.

Jane started—“You were awfully silent.”

“What was I to say?”

“I think you got some kind of satisfaction from the whole thing.”

“I didn’t do anything.”

“I know.”

We sat in silence for the next five miles. I thought about what Jane had said about me getting “satisfaction.” Yes! Dammit—it was good to hear my mother’s assured voice. An assurance that had existed all through my childhood. No second-guessing. No debating. My mother’s brand of truth all wrapped up in flawless packaging. And here was Jane trying to open that package and spill its contents on the debating floor. To

examine each piece...judging...tossing out what she didn't accept...didn't believe.

Jane coughed, then said, "Do you still believe any of those things she said? You did live with her all those years. And you two went to the same church."

"Don't be silly. I told you I wanted a Jewish home—just like you do. And I could ask you how much of what you grew up with still remains? You don't always go to Temple. No separate dishes, except once a year. Sometimes you and I light candles on a Friday night. At other times we go to a movie."

"Is this some kind of an attack Paul?"

"Of course not. I was only thinking, just like my mother, you've picked and chosen certain things to cling to. To practice."

"But I don't try and ram them down other people's throats."

"You never feel divided Jane?"

"No—no. There's nothing divided about me. I'm all of a piece religiously. You're the divided person. And maybe 'Never the twain shall meet' is how your life is. How you really are. I wonder...if...when we marry—will I be living with two of you. The Christianity that has a hold on you, and the other one who so often seems to be reaching out towards Judaism, but is never able to fully embrace it."

"So now you're questioning how much I mean it—my wanting to marry you. To have a Jewish home. Didn't I support you at my mother's?"

"Yes, if you call silence 'supporting.'"

"What did you expect me to do—tell my mother you were right, she was wrong?"

"Something like that would have helped."

"You must be insane Jane...I mean...sorry."

"No need for 'sorry.' I really feel sometimes you do think I should be out my mind and more in yours."

We didn't speak for another twenty minutes. Then Jane leaned over and kissed me on the cheek, almost whispering... "But I really knew it a long time ago."

"Knew what?"

“That I would be marrying the two of you.”

“Oh Jane, how can you say that? After all I’ve pledged. Our meeting with the Rabbi. The classes I took to understand Judaism more.” Even as I was saying these things to Jane, I was aware that many times I had to fight to maintain my hold on Judaism. How often strong hands of emotional memory had reached out from my past. It felt like they were pulling my fingers away from Judaism and back to Christianity. Like all those times in the apartment. Jane in another room. Me in private humming and singing Christian hymns. And those times I watched Billy Graham on TV. Never the whole program. Just enough for a momentary fix. I even had sung in Graham’s choir at a crusade in Madison Square Garden. But the strongest moments were when I was forcefully spiraled into the memory of the church I’d grown up in. How clearly I saw myself singing in the church’s choir. This vision faded and was replaced by my seeing and hearing the minister intoning, ‘Father, Son, Holy Ghost.’ Then I felt a sensation of drowning. My body sinking under the water in the baptismal pool. Completely covered.

Coming back to the present, I said, “But...”

“No ‘but.’ That’s the bargain I understood. The bargain I made.”

“Jane, do you ever think you’ve made a pact with the devil?”

“You a ‘devil?’ Never. But I do understand some of what we will experience when we’re married.”

“So the thing the Catholic Church said is true... ‘Give us a child until he’s seven and we’ve got him forever’...or something like that.”

Jane reached over and held my hand. “Forever is too long.”