

One Step for Man

On Sunday morning, about midway on his cross-country trek, Keith tossed his backpack into the bed of a pickup truck. He introduced himself to the driver, who asked, "Where you headed?"

"I've been hitching across the country, getting a close look at the 'real America.'"

"Well, son, you better spend a little time in this next village. It's off the beaten path, but I guess it's still part of America," he said and chuckled.

Keith stepped out of the truck and saw a village that reminded him of the small town where he grew up. Near its center stood a large church building, the town's dominant feature. Keith strolled toward the building along with a steady stream of townspeople until he made out the church sign: Anabaptist.

A few cars dotted the parking lot, but most congregants were walking. Couples and families poured in through large open doors. An attractive young lady about Keith's age walked up the steps alone.

He thought she could have been a professional model with her strawberry blond hair and her figure. He quickened his pace to catch up with her but slowed when he noticed an older man and woman close behind her. The older woman was dabbing her eyes with a handkerchief she put away as she walked through the front door. Keith followed them inside and watched the girl sit, straight and erect, with her chin high, the older couple just behind her. The older woman again dabbed her eyes.

Into the pulpit strode a short, stout man, obviously, the pastor. He wore a tailored suit and had a gold cross hanging from his neck. He opened a Bible and read its majestic King James' English. Children sang, "I'll take my stand, where I know it's grand, on the B-i-b-l-e."

The sermon explained plainly to the congregation that they were sinners who needed salvation so their spirits may go to heaven when they die. Then, just before his benediction, the pastor reminded the people of a business meeting that evening.

At the close of the service, Keith strolled out to the church patio. A large coffee urn waited at the end of three long tables piled high with goodies, ranging from healthy snacks to some that might induce a diabetic shock. He watched the young lady get coffee and sit alone on a bench

under a purple wisteria vine. The light green dress she wore complemented her hair and ivory skin tone.

He spread creamed cheese on a bagel, got coffee, and approached her. "May I join you?"

She glanced at Keith and said, "At your own risk."

"Wow!" he laughed. "What does that mean? What risk?"

"You must be the only person who doesn't know," she said, "if you don't."

Keith asked, "What's to know?" He gave her his brightest grin. "I'm Keith, Keith Larsen."

"I'm Daisy Thompson. The risk is that you'll be seen with me. The special meeting tonight is about me. It seems I've caused a bit of trouble. The meeting tonight will decide what to do about it."

"It sounds like a trial of some sort. You didn't rob a bank or something, did you?"

"No," she said. "It's not a long story. My philosophy professor asked our class, 'What if Jesus never actually walked on water, as the book says?' I had heard that story countless times and never once considered whether it happened or not. When I asked the Pastor the same question, he turned red and was almost apoplectic.

"In our church, we're trained from an early age not to question our beliefs. If someone questions, the church decides what's to be done. The most common outcome is to be 'churched.'"

"Being 'churched' is a bad thing?"

"It should be called de-churching. It means that individuals are no longer a part of the community. They'll be shunned, including by their own family, and friendless. Eventually, those who are churched just sort of disappear, like my brother did."

"What happened to him?"

Daisy stood. "Look, let my parents explain. It's Sunday, so you won't find any place in town open today. If you'd like to have dinner with us, Mother will set an extra place. My dad calls inviting a person to share a meal^[L1]_[SEP] taking in the stranger within your gates."

"I'd love a home-cooked meal."

Keith fell into step beside Daisy. He glanced at the top of her head. She was only a few inches shorter than he was. When Keith saw their reflection in a store window, he thought, Not a bad-looking couple. This is a lady I'd like to know better.

Daisy's house, yellow with white trim, had a small front porch sporting a glider and a cushioned wrought iron chair. As they entered through a screened door, Daisy's father pushed old-fashioned horn-rimmed glasses up on his nose and rose to greet them. "Daisy, what have we here?"

"Dad, this is Keith Larsen. I invited him to eat with us. Keith, this is my dad."

"Glad to meet you, Mr. Thompson. Thanks for your hospitality."

"Think nothing of it. We like company. Dinner will be ready soon."

Mrs. Thompson, graying hair only slightly out of place, came into the adjoining dining room wearing an apron over her church clothes. In her hands, she carried a place setting for their guest.

"Mom, this is Keith. Keith, my mom."

"Hi, Mrs. Thompson."

"Hello, Keith. We're glad to have you."

Daisy sat beside her father on a sofa upholstered with a print of large yellow and blue blossoms. Keith sank into a matching overstuffed chair.

"Daisy has me going, talking about being 'churched' and about your son. I'd like to hear more if you feel like talking about it."

"I wished someone would talk about it," he replied, pushing his glasses up on his nose. "People in our little town don't discuss this sort of thing." He leaned forward. "It's been hard on our family. When they churched our son Ricky we handed over to the church all traces of him. We still have his junior high yearbook photo we found later beneath some other papers in the bureau drawer. We look at it and wonder where he might be today. Ricky and Daisy's cases are pretty much the same. Rick began asking a question here, a question there, back when he was Daisy's age. Then he was gone like a whirlwind."

"That just doesn't seem right," said Keith softly.

“It shouldn’t have caught me off guard, but it did. I didn’t know what to do. I felt sort of paralyzed,” said Mr. Thompson. “It still hurts. Probably always will. We just hope he’s okay.”

Keith glanced up to see Mrs. Thompson staring at her husband with a look Keith could not quite make out. *Was it contempt? Or disdain? Or even revulsion?*

The dinner was the best Keith had eaten in a long time: fried chicken, creamed gravy, mashed potatoes, his favorites. When the meal ended with cherry pie, Daisy began clearing the table. Mr. and Mrs. Thompson sat down in the living room. Keith remained standing.

“Mr. Thompson, thanks for your hospitality, and to you, Mrs. Thompson, fantastic food! Reminds me of Mom’s cooking. However, if I’m not being too rude,” he said, “I think I’ll stroll up to the church and meet your pastor. My curiosity is getting the better of me.”

Mr. Thompson looked up at Keith and said, “You’re a stranger, but if there’s any chance it might help, we’ll appreciate it.”

“At first glance, the situation seems unfair and unreasonable. I’d like to hear what the Pastor has to say about it.”

Mrs. Thompson said, “The Pastor spends Sunday in his study, so you won’t have trouble finding him. He tells us to rest on the Sabbath, but he doesn’t.”

The short walk back to the church brought Keith to a door marked “Office.” A voice answered promptly: “Enter!”

Books lined the walls of the small office. The Pastor offered Keith a chair. “What can we do for you, young man? Keith, isn’t it? I saw your visitor’s card.”

“Yes, sir, it’s Keith. I had dinner with the Thompsons. They told me they had an older son whose case was similar to Daisy’s. I’ve never heard of someone being ‘churched.’ What’s that all about?”

“What’s your interest in the matter, may I ask?”

“I think it boils down to curiosity. The Thompsons seem to me like the salt of the earth.”

“Indeed, they are,” said the Pastor. “And in times of crisis, our church’s task is to preserve the salt. It’s important to protect the community from outside influences. Daisy, sadly, appears to have slipped over the line. Nowadays, nothing is so insidious as the influence of college professors who seem determined to destroy their students’ faith. We’ve been losing more and more of our young people.”

Keith replied, "I still don't get it. Exactly what did Daisy do?"

"What she did was to question the Bible," he said.

"You mean about Jesus walking on water?" Keith said.

"Right. A strict belief in what the Bible says is essential. Any question with an uncertain answer discredits the entire book."

Keith thought for a minute. "So, your entire community hinges on a book? And more specifically, on your interpretation of the book?"

"There is only one interpretation. We cannot sustain ourselves if there are two possible answers. Questions would raise doubt." He paused. "May I offer you some cold water?" He poured two glasses and continued. "Let me guess, Keith. Our church is not like the church in your hometown."

"It looks the same on the outside, but I've never heard of churching. I don't know what to make of it."

"Any question must be followed by its answer. It's a threat unless it is followed promptly by 'Yes, a real human being can walk on real water.' Daisy's question, you see, raises more questions. And to question the Bible is the same as questioning God." The Pastor concluded, "The outcome of our meeting tonight is almost a foregone conclusion."

Keith left, trying to make sense of what he had heard. A very pretty girl who seems sensible, a good family about to have major surgery performed on it, and a church and its leader who live in a cocoon devoid of thought and feelings. None of it makes sense.

Nothing in town was open except a small 7-Eleven. The clerk, a young man about 20 years of age, greeted Keith with a friendly smile. "May I help you find something?"

"I'll take this soda and candy. By the way, how does it happen that you're open for business today?"

"So, travelers that need gas can get it and be on their way."

"I'm Keith."

"Fred. Most people call me Freddie."

Keith said, “Freddie, the thing that’s happening at the church—Daisy about to come under fire. What do you make of it?”

Freddie had a ready answer: “The church teaches us eternal truths. We never ask questions. Why question truth? There’s no point in it, is there? Daisy stepped over the line, and the church can’t ignore it.”

Keith replied, “You’re okay with what’s going on?”

Freddie said, “Well, it bothers me, Daisy’s getting cut out. I like Daisy and her family. We churched her older brother years ago.” He shrugged. “Maybe there’s something wrong with the whole family.”

“Is it fair for her to lose everything in her life, her family, the community, and her friends, just for asking a simple question?”

Freddie said, “It depends on the question. If it questions the Bible, that’s forbidden, so I’d have a hard time with that. But even so, you’re right. That’s a big loss just for asking a question.”

“Freddie, tonight, shouldn’t someone ask a question, not about the Bible, but about fairness, justice? What I’m saying is, shouldn’t someone defend Daisy?”

Freddie frowned. “No one being churched has ever had a defense.” His forehead creased as if he were trying to get it straight in his head. “My feelings for Daisy can’t muddy my thinking, but I see your point. To be fair, someone should speak.”

“Right,” Keith said. “I feel like I’ve stepped into some sort of time warp.” He looked out the front window of the store and said, “I think I’ll take my soda and candy over to the park.”

A short distance away, picnic tables lined the back edge of a grassy area. Keith sat in one of the swings, resting in full shade near a slide and a sandbox. By the time he had finished his candy and half the soda, he spied Daisy’s mother, coming straight toward him.

“Mrs. Thompson,” he greeted her.

“Emma, please,” she said. “I came to thank you for being interested in Daisy and our family. At times, I feel like no one cares. The rules are plain, and I don’t think Daisy is sorry one minute that she’s broken one. I can’t think what to do. We’ve lost our son. I can’t lose Daisy. I’ve grown tired of believing truth that has no heart.”

Keith said, “Interesting phrase—‘truth with no heart.’ Is that what you’re going to say tonight in Daisy’s defense? I understand if no one speaks, whatever you decide will go down without question.”

Emma said, “That’s the way it’s always been. No one in town wants change. Mr. Thompson should speak up, but he’s so busy being a Christian, if a tractor ran over him, he’d get up and apologize to the tractor.”

“Why subject yourself to this? Why doesn’t Daisy leave? We live in a big country.”

“She hasn’t said anything to us, but Daisy would never leave us voluntarily. We’re her parents, and family is everything. But in our community, the church comes before family,” Emma explained.

Keith looked at Emma and thought, *This little lady is no more than five feet tall, but I think that’s no measure of her stature. I’m seeing the adage in the flesh: “Don’t get between a mother bear and her cub.”*

He said, “Do you think there might be others who have doubts but lack the courage to speak up?”

She said, “There must be. Other families have lost sons and daughters, or even a parent. Surely, we’re not all unfeeling creatures.”

Keith watched Emma walk away while he wondered what, if anything, he could achieve by getting mixed up in a matter that was none of his business. That evening as he approached the church, the people gathered, most walking as they had in the morning. The pastor stood near the entrance, greeting those who arrived early.

“Keith, my boy,” he said, “all this must be a bit strange to you. I hope you’re not disappointed this evening. It’s all for the good of the community.”

They entered together, Keith turning to take a seat halfway to the front and the Pastor continuing up to the podium. Keith spotted Daisy and the Thompsons. Freddie sat alone.

“We’ll come to order and declare ourselves to be in session. We have only one item to consider tonight. Sam, chairman of our Board of Deacons, will read the charge.”

A tall, lean man dressed in a gray suit rose slowly, holding a paper in his hand. Keith suspected the Pastor may have written the note. Sam read, “As the Bible tells us, ‘There is one faith, one baptism, and one body.’ Daisy Thompson has questioned the Bible. We must declare her out of fellowship with this body.”

The Pastor turned toward Daisy.

“Daisy, our sister, you have heard the report. Do you have anything to add, or is there any error in what Brother Sam has read?”

Daisy shook her head.

A pause followed, then the Pastor said, “All we need now is a motion and a second.”

Sam said, “I so move.”

For a while, no one spoke. Finally, the Pastor raised an eyebrow, and his eyes scanned the congregation.

Finally came a voice, “I second the motion.”

“We have a motion and a second. All in favor . . .”

Out of nowhere came a young voice. “Aren’t we supposed to have a discussion before a vote?”

Like the crack of a whip, every head in the room turned, searching for the source of the statement. The Pastor’s gaze swept the congregation. His scowl fell on Freddie. “Freddie, of course, you’re right,” he conceded. “Is there anyone who would like to speak?”

For a few seconds, no one rose. Then slowly and deliberately, Emma Thompson stood to her full height, her face like stone, determined, angry. She clutched the pew in front of her. “Everyone here knows our family, Mr. Thompson, me, Daisy, and our son Ricky who was church-ed years ago. Not a person here can accuse us of being bad people. Yet the church is about to do something bad to us. Now, it’s my turn. I have a question. Why are you doing this to us?” She waited. “And I’m not going anywhere until I have an answer.”

A murmur passed through the room. “The explanation is simple, Emma,” the Pastor said.

A young voice interrupted. It was Freddie again. “Can a moderator take sides? He has to see that each side has its say, doesn’t he?”

“Correct again, Freddie,” the Pastor grudgingly admitted. “Thank you. Perhaps the Chairman of the Board can explain. Sam?”

Sam, looking befuddled, stood, and said, “We’ve never had a divided congregation before. There’s never been a discussion,” and sat back down.

Freddie stood slowly and raised his right hand. The pastor said, “Yes, Freddie. You have something to say?”

Freddie turned, making eye contact with the group. “We all know the Thompsons are good people, not troublemakers. Daisy never said that she didn’t believe. She only asked a simple question. Why can’t she have an answer, and we all get on with our lives?”

Across the room, a middle-aged man stood abruptly and spoke in clipped tones. “When my son was churched, there was no discussion. Nobody had to figure out anything—and we took it. He broke the rules. End of discussion. How’s this any different? Why are we dickering about this now?”

Sounds of approval hummed across the room.

Emma rose again, turned to the man, and said, “Frank, have you completely forgotten Brian?”

Frank’s face twisted in pain at the mention of his son’s name.

Emma continued, “Have you erased all traces of Brian from your memory? What a good boy he was, loved by everyone in this room. And when he was wrenched from your arms, do you remember how you felt, seeing him walk out of this hall for the last time?”

Frank’s shoulders began to shake, and he sobbed. “I’ll never forget it! Day or night! God, forgive me!” Frank crumpled back into his seat, and the woman next to him put her arms around his shoulders. Several people around the room moved as if ready to stand and speak. The pastor dashed to the pulpit and grabbed the microphone. “Folks! Folks! Let’s not let this get out of hand. We must come to order!”

The chatter continued unabated, so he finally shouted, “This meeting is adjourned! We’ll come back Wednesday night and discuss this in an orderly fashion. You’re dismissed.” He darted out through a door behind the pulpit, and in a few seconds, the lights in the room began to go out one by one.

Freddie came up to Keith in the parking lot. “Keith, there’s no place in town for you to stay. You can crash on my sofa if you like.”

The light Freddie switched on in a small apartment a short distance away revealed a sparsely furnished living room. Leading the way in, Freddie said, “I’m gonna make some coffee. You want some?”

“Sounds good,” answered Keith.

Freddie measured water in a carafe and spooned ground coffee into the machine. A red light indicated the brewing was in progress. “How do you take your coffee?”

“Black, thanks,” said Keith. “It smells good.”

He said, “Freddie, when you spoke up tonight, you set all this in motion. Is that what you expected?”

“I had no idea. I just felt like Daisy was getting railroaded. No one else would have said a word,” Freddie said. “I wasn’t even sure her folks would speak, but her mother said just the right things. I sometimes think women have more guts than men.”

“Daisy hasn’t said a word in her defense,” said Keith. “Why do you think she hasn’t?”

“Daisy needs no defense in my book. She’s the prettiest, smartest girl in town. Most of the guys are afraid to go after her. I would, but I don’t have much to offer. Why would she give a second thought to a clerk? Plus, she’s a year older than me.”

“Maybe you’re underestimating yourself,” Keith said. “What you did tonight ought to earn you a few points. I like her self-confidence. She warned me not to speak to her after church this morning. She said I’d be taking a risk like she was contagious. What do you think, Freddie? Are you in trouble, speaking up as you did? I think you upset the pastor. I’m guessing you may now be a target.”

Freddie reached into a small closet and tossed a sheet and blanket to Keith. “Not necessarily. I didn’t question what we believe—just how we were dealing with it.” A yawn and a smile and Freddie was off to bed. After struggling to get comfortable on the tiny sofa, Keith finally dozed off and slept soundly.

When he awoke, he could smell coffee. Freddie had left a spoon and bowl beside a box of cereal, clearly inviting Keith to have breakfast on him.

Sitting at the table downing his cereal, Keith scanned the apartment. Freddie was right. He didn’t have much to offer a girl like Daisy. On the other hand, he had supported her publicly.

Keith walked to the 7-Eleven store to thank Freddie, but he was busy with customers, so Keith continued toward the church across the empty parking lot. He entered the unlocked building and continued to the office in the rear.

He heard the pastor’s voice and paused. Whether the Pastor was praying, on the phone, or not alone in the study, Keith didn’t want to eavesdrop. When the sound stopped, Keith knocked on the door.

“Enter,” came the same friendly voice and tone as before. Keith greeted the pastor and took the offered seat. “Sir, I still don’t know what to make of this church and this town.”

The pastor responded, “This little problem is just a bump in the road. Our community is too deeply committed to entertain any possibility of change.” He paused and frowned. “Make no mistake, anything less than churching Daisy would constitute a monumental shift.” The pastor’s pursed lips and his creased brow suggested he was not so sure of the outcome as he sounded.

Keith decided to stay through Wednesday. He had to know whether the people would vote to throw Daisy out. He returned to the 7-Eleven, where Freddie was idle for the moment. “Freddie, I need a place to crash for a couple of nights. How about using your sofa, and I’ll buy a few groceries?”

“Great,” Freddie said, “I’d enjoy the company if you can stand the sofa.”

When Freddie came home that night, Keith said, “Freddie, what’s the history of this little town? Has it always been like it is now?”

“Here’s the short version of what I learned when I was a kid,” said Freddie. “In the late 1800s, because of persecution, a small group of our ancestors emigrated from what is now western Russia and established this village. They set up this town off the beaten path to be free of worldly influences. Every time any outside thought or idea comes this way, we quash it. Most of our members would choose to send Daisy away rather than risk contamination from a sinful world where doubt is acceptable. The pastor has told us numerous times that the words ‘question’ and ‘heretic’ have the same root meanings. And both lead to evil ends.”

When Freddie left for work Wednesday morning, he told Keith, “I’m going straight to the church after work. You entertain yourself, and I’ll see you there.”

When Keith neared the church, he noticed Freddie at the entrance, as if he were waiting for someone. Soon the Thompsons arrived with Daisy lagging behind. Keith guessed when Daisy saw Freddie she would speak to him. Keith arrived at the entrance in time to hear the end of her sentence, “. . . if it hadn’t been for you.” She placed her hand on Freddie’s arm.

Freddie blushed. He placed his hand over hers. “I think a lot of you, Daisy.” He seemed unable to continue.

Keith followed them inside and stood at the back. He felt like he was observing a battleground just as a great struggle was about to begin. Those huddled on his left spoke in somber tones, heads nodding. Those on his right were quiet as if they had no leader, no one to rally them.

Daisy was alone in the second row from the pulpit, apart from everyone else. The pastor's eyes swept the room as if looking for potential hot spots.

Keith wondered, *Who will stand up for Daisy? She can't defend herself. Emma already spoke. Freddie might, but it would be the voice of a boy, not yet a man.*

Keith saw no one who might be Daisy's champion. He wondered, Should I speak? I'm not even a member.

"Let's come to order," said the pastor. "Let's be in order," he repeated. "We have one item to consider tonight. There has already been a motion and a second. We will give time for discussion, then we'll vote. Does anyone wish to speak?"

From the group, on Keith's left, a man stood. Keith recognized Brian's father, who had broken down weeping Sunday night. With a small note in his right hand, he composed himself and began to speak to the other side of the auditorium.

"I fell apart last Sunday when Emma Thompson mentioned my boy's name. I apologize. According to our rules, he was treated fairly, just like others before him. To hold together as a unit, we've got to stop all speculation and questions. If someone leaves, we weep for them, but we go on. We don't change. I'm sorry Daisy is taking the path that leads away from us. If she must leave, it's her choice. No one's forcing her to question the Bible. This is a bitter pill we've taken before, and we must do it again."

With a relieved look on his face, the pastor spoke, "Is there anyone else who would like to speak?"

To Keith, the silence seemed to go on forever. Then he noticed some movement among those on his right. Rising slowly, pushing his horn-rimmed glasses back in place, Mr. Thompson stood. Emma's eyes swept up to his countenance.

Of all people, thought Keith, he's no knight in shining armor. He looks more like Oliver Twist with his hands outstretched begging, 'Could I have more, please?'

At first, Mr. Thompson spoke so softly, people leaned forward to catch what he was saying. "Friends," he said, "all of you know me. I'm not much of a talker. Standing up here is about the hardest thing I've ever done."

After a long pause, he continued in a louder voice, "You know I love our church. I would gladly suffer for you if need be. If I've offended anyone, speak now so I can beg forgiveness before I go on." He paused again.

“I love every person in this room, but above all, I love my family. When our son Ricky vanished, I felt like a wrecking ball flattened me. I still haven’t recovered. Some of you have suffered in the same way. I don’t think I can bear losing our Daisy. For what? What’s she done? Has she hurt one of us? No. Has she said something that’s untrue? No. Has she been unfaithful to our church and community? No.

“All she did was ask a question. In the Bible, people asked the Master questions. He didn’t cast out a single one of them. Should asking a question bring down punishment on someone’s head? Isn’t it time for us to examine our practice of churching?”

“Sorry, Mr. Thompson,” interrupted the Pastor firmly. “The motion is only about Daisy and her questioning the Bible. I have to rule you out of order.”

From the other side of the room came a man’s strong voice, “Let him speak!” followed by soft “yes” from the people across the room.

And from the same voice, “We want to hear what he’s got to say!” The pastor sat down almost as if he had been pushed.

Mr. Thompson went on. “I don’t want us to fight, but we’re already split, not by a bolt of lightning from heaven, but because our Daisy asked a question. Isn’t the way we are treating Daisy as bad as the way outsiders behave? Isn’t it time we make a change, put an end to it? I say we should stop it—now.”

Mrs. Thompson looked up at her husband. Struggling to hold back tears, she stood and embraced him. People around the room nodded in agreement.

The pastor almost leaped to the podium and reached below the rostrum. The microphone volume rose dramatically, and he shouted, “This meeting is out of order! I declare us adjourned till we can go home and consider the gravity of what Mr. Thompson’s suggesting! Are we willing to risk all we have for one person? We’ll settle this quietly and with dignity at our next meeting.”

With that he turned off the microphone and headed for the back where Keith knew the light switches must be.

Freddie fell in beside Daisy as the people disbursed. The pastor re-entered the darkened auditorium, heading for the exit.

“Pastor,” Keith called out.

The Pastor squinted in the near darkness. “Keith? I never thought I’d see the day. I guess you know you witnessed something tonight that’s never happened before in our community.”

“Discussion and dissent?” asked Keith.

“Right,” said the Pastor.

“Good luck,” Keith said. “I’m taking off in the morning.”

Surprised, the Pastor said, “Surely, you want some closure.”

Keith smiled a gentle smile. “I’ll admit I’m curious about the church, the Thompsons, Daisy, and even Freddie. But now, whatever happens, the people know they can speak freely. They can disagree, without fearing they’ve done something wrong. I think everyone grew a little tonight, including you, Pastor. It’s a small step, but it’s a step.”