

## **JANNEY'S STORY**

*As she worked to make her marriage more satisfying,  
Janney gradually came to the sickening awareness that  
Bob was gay and would never be able to love her the way she needed him to.*

### **False Promises, Real Pain**

As I looked over the class of slim, almost anorexic-looking 18-year-old students, I marveled that most of them weighed over 120 pounds. The realization of what I must have looked like in college struck me. At 118 pounds, I had an hourglass figure. Guys were attracted to me, but I always thought it was my outgoing, happy-go-lucky personality, or my high moral standards and Christian rhetoric that fascinated them. None of those relationships had lasted very long because I was afraid of committing a sin such as kissing; everyone knew what that could lead to. I was determined to keep myself "pure."

Reflecting on my past, I can finally begin to see my life events and choices with some perspective. I constantly struggled with the desperate need to be loved and cared for by somebody. Raised in a Seventh-day Adventist home, I attended Adventist schools and tried to align my life goals with the beliefs I had been taught. At the time I did not realize that mine was a dysfunctional family, with an angry, domineering father and an emotionally abusive mother. I thought that was the way good, God-fearing Adventist families were supposed to be.

I didn't understand how the molding of my self-esteem and my interactions with others influenced my future life choices. As the oldest child, I was told to "take care of your mother." Her emotional needs, and the need of both my parents to be constantly assured that they were wonderful, reflected the lack of love and acceptance they had experienced as children. I longed for someone to love me just for myself, and yet I was afraid to get involved with guys who might take advantage of my neediness.

In college, my roommate introduced me to Bob. He was a good Christian who was preparing for a professional career and wanted to be a missionary. We got along well together and our life goals were similar. He fulfilled the biblical counsel about not being "yoked together with an unbeliever" and I soon fell in love with him. In hindsight, I also realize that my choice of a husband was colored by my subconscious avoidance of someone like my father.

A year after we began dating, I consented to be Bob's wife. I believed that remaining a virgin until my wedding night was what any good Christian woman did. Although my desires were overwhelming at times, and I was usually the one who initiated the snuggling, hugging and kissing, I remained firm about not going any farther. I would be reminded by Bob that he had to be careful about not showing up on campus with wrinkled clothes or any other telltale signs that he had been in a compromising situation because he had a job that required high standards and setting a good example.

Bob's parents adored me. They told me about other women he had dated who weren't up to their standards. It felt wonderful to be accepted and loved and made part of the family. Our wedding was a happy event. Bob had just graduated from college and I took a two-week vacation from my job. One of my fellow employees had just returned from her honeymoon and complained about how her husband couldn't keep his hands off her. I couldn't wait for my wedding night and was looking forward to play, romance and plenty of sex, because now it would be allowed in the sight of God.

The honeymoon was okay, considering how inexperienced we were. The intimacy was wonderful as we lay naked and close together. But the more I wanted sex, the more Bob withdrew, telling me he needed to rest. I wondered what was wrong with me. Intercourse wasn't as satisfying as I expected, which drove me to want more. Bob tried to oblige, but there was no chasing me around the house or wanting me desperately. I didn't have to worry about him not being able to keep his hands off me. Instead, it was more that I couldn't keep my hands off him. He would laugh and joke about it, but it didn't stimulate his pursuit of me.

In the early years of our marriage, we flirted with each other and laughed a lot. To our friends and family, we appeared to be a happily married young couple. But I often found that I was the one who had to initiate sex. Bob usually had complaints about being tired from graduate school studies. The closeness and love that I lacked from my younger years, plus my husband's sexual disinterest, only fueled my deep desire for more intimacy.

The busy routines of work and school were relieved by vacations, when I expected we could spend time together, experience closeness, and replenish our intimate contact. Instead, this was when I heard, "I'm exhausted. I need to catch up on my rest." Disappointed, I would involve myself in other activities. Because of Bob's complaints of weariness and needing rest on the weekends, I took on more and more home responsibilities in addition to my job. I felt I should make his life as easy as possible so he would be successful. I learned to substitute shopping and eating out for sex. I tried to fill the empty place inside with food. Other women envied me because my husband loved to shop and decorate the house. Entertaining friends was a common enjoyment for both of us. I cleaned and cooked, while Bob set the table just so.

I never doubted that my husband loved me. Even today, I still believe he did. But a new employee at my workplace brought me a real challenge. Charles had a stronger financial and social future than Bob. He was out of school, had a family well known in the community, was handsome and, it soon became clear, was very interested in me. I realized I had to make a choice between Charles, who wanted me desperately, and my often-exhausted husband.

*Maybe all couples are met with such challenges during their marriages,* I thought, as I contemplated my choices. I had made a commitment to Bob in my wedding vows. How would my life turn out if I committed adultery? How would doing so affect my family, his family, and our friends? Further, I had made a promise before God to be faithful, and adultery would be a horrible sin. I prayed about the choice, knowing there really

was no choice if I followed God's laws. My decision made, I immediately cooled any signals that might encourage Charles.

Following graduate school, we started our family. Bob loved the children and his job but was often overwhelmed with stress from work. He saw a therapist at work, who became a friend of the family and we often ate together. He was a very kind person. This therapist lived with a male housemate, but I was rather naïve and felt that this was no concern of mine. The fact that my husband was very close to him as a friend had no particular meaning to me either. I still assume that the relationship was strictly professional and that the therapist recognized Bob's sexual orientation and had real concerns for our relationship. He also seemed to help Bob deal with the pressures of school.

Several times over the years frustrations boiled over into hurtful comments. I sometimes wanted to just get up and leave him stuck with the children so he could experience the overwhelming feelings of responsibility I had with home and my own job. Bob once admitted, "I came close to just walking away from everything and moving to San Francisco ." Why San Francisco? I never asked. I was afraid of abandonment. My mother had often threatened to kill herself if we didn't give her the attention she wanted.

So I tried harder to be a good wife. I read books on how to keep your marriage alive. I even tried some of the playful ideas suggested, like meeting my husband at the door wearing nothing but an apron. Bob would laugh and say, "Not in the middle of the day, Janney. I have to go back to work."

In the early years of our marriage, I finally sought counseling for our sexual concerns. We saw a wonderful Adventist marriage and family therapist. He gave us assignments to increase our sexual satisfaction and Bob and I were committed to trying all the techniques he suggested. We could talk like two old friends, but sex was sparse and frustrating. Our growth in insight culminated with attending a Marriage Encounter weekend. We felt that divorce would never be an option because we believed counseling could make our marriage work.

We tried to incorporate what we had learned. It appeared that our sexual relationship was fairly normal, but our sex drives were badly mismatched. I enjoyed the closeness of sex and often asked for more. Then Bob would grumble as if sex was too much work or just another chore to be done. Bob said it hurt his feelings when I asked for more because I never seemed to be satisfied. He intimated that there was something wrong with me. Being criticized over such a sensitive issue left me feeling defective, vulnerable and utterly confused. I thought it was men who were supposed to have big sexual appetites.

We moved several times as my husband obtained better jobs. After our second child, I became a stay-at-home mom. I felt very isolated and depressed. We had few friends, attended an unfriendly church and lived around people who were not of our faith. Bob had a lot of frustration with his new job and we clung to each other for support. Bob's need must have been great because, for the first time, he woke me up in the middle of the night wanting sex. It was the best sex we ever had. I was thrilled, and Bob seemed

to experience a great sense of accomplishment. I didn't realize then how important it was to feel wanted sexually in order to fully enjoy sex.

Meanwhile, I began to deal with my own childhood traumas through counseling. As I explored these early life experiences, pain flooded to the surface. Bob was very supportive of me. However, as he experienced some losses at his job he became very angry at God and decided he wanted nothing to do with Him. I felt completely overwhelmed. How was I supposed to deal with this? I had a leadership role in our church and two children that needed a parent to attend Sabbath School with them. I had followed the advice to marry someone with the same commitment to God that I had. There was nothing in my upbringing that told me what I was supposed to do when my spouse changed his mind. Now, not only did I have housework, childcare and my part-time job to take care of, but the church and spiritual leadership in our home as well.

Bob immersed himself in his work and spent his evenings on our new computer. He loved electronic stuff and read computer magazines for enjoyment. He could work all night but had a difficult time getting up in the morning. Night after night, I would go to bed by myself. After putting the children to bed I would try to entice him away from his computer by wearing a sexy nightgown and lighting candles in the bedroom. But Bob was always too busy. "I have to get this done, Janney." I would go to bed disappointed. *Maybe it's because I've put on some weight*, I would think. I didn't feel as attractive as in my younger days.

Frustrated, I went back to the counselor. I knew I must not be doing something right in order to keep my marriage alive. I remember telling the counselor, with much embarrassment, about all my attempts to interest Bob. I asked her how I could expect sex from my husband since I was overweight.

"It doesn't have to be *your* fault," she responded. That was a new idea. Yes, maybe the problem was that he had become a workaholic.

Bob reached an emotional breaking point at work and finally went into therapy. We spent hours comparing notes and analyzing what the therapist had said, as we tried to heal. We vowed to make our lives better than what we had experienced as children and not to repeat the abuse with our own children.

Bob began talking about his childhood sexual abuse by a neighbor. He said the counselor told him he needed to be retrained in what a heterosexual relationship was supposed to be like. Because his father had worked two jobs in order to pay for Bob's Adventist education, he was not there for him as a father figure. The therapist said it would take time, but he could eventually be reconditioned to have a sexual relationship with me. The words *gay* or *homosexual* were never used to describe his feelings or desires.

I had once worked with a gay person but never connected him with Bob. So when Bob talked about being reconditioned I was eager to help him and do whatever the therapist suggested. Bob was my husband and I loved him. I didn't consider the real meaning of reconditioning.

We moved again, this time to a very religiously conservative area of the country. It was difficult finding friends, a church, and a new counselor we could trust. Soon after our move, I received a sad phone call from my best friend, Ann. She told me that her ex-boyfriend had just been diagnosed with AIDS. He was dying and had finally come out to his family. She said she had asked him about his sexual orientation when they first started dating and he had told her he was straight. Although she had not become infected with HIV, she was angry that he had lied to her, and at the same time saddened by his impending death.

I immediately called Bob at work and told him the terrible news, because he had always been very close to Ann. His voice suddenly sounded very flat, as he said that we needed to talk when he got home. *Yes, I thought, we need to talk about Ann and how she feels.*

Instead, that night Bob began crying and told me that a couple of years earlier his counselor had encouraged him to tell me that he'd had a couple of one-night stands with men during graduate school. He said he wanted to come clean and that he was going to be tested for HIV. I just sat there, not knowing what to say or feel. I was angry because he had cheated on me. He could have given me a sexually transmitted disease, even HIV, and I could have passed it on to our unborn children. But at the same time, Bob was begging me to forgive him, and I still loved him.

The realization that Bob was gay did not fully dawn on me. I forgave him, but I felt so overwhelmed. Who could I talk to about this? I was so alone, with no one to confide in. Thankfully, the HIV test, repeated six months later, was negative. But Bob told me the urge to have sex with a man was so strong at times that he thought we shouldn't have sex at all so he wouldn't be tempted. He thought it would be best if he became celibate. So there went what little sex life we still had left!

I encouraged Bob to come with me for joint counseling so we could improve our marriage. After spending a few solo sessions with the counselor, he announced that he didn't need to go anymore. I became more and more frustrated. I reminded him that we needed to start the reconditioning process, which had been put off for a couple of years by our latest move. Bob said, "Janney, I've been on the internet looking for a place to receive reconditioning instructions. There is a place right here in our city, but it is run by a very conservative, fundamentalist, right-wing religious group with very poor statistical results."

Did that mean there was no hope? Would we never have a sexual relationship again? Here I was in my prime years and celibate, not by my choice, but by my husband's decision made for both of us. I grieved this loss, but I was still uncertain about what was happening to us. Our children were now older and sometimes went on sleepovers with their friends. Once again we had the house to ourselves at times, but we weren't taking advantage of this opportunity to rekindle our intimacy.

Angry and depressed, I thought, *I have every right to have an affair!* I thought of the opportunity I had had years before with Charles and walked away from. But even though my husband had broken our marriage vows, I reminded myself, that didn't mean I should break them too. I had made a promise before God. The seventh commandment was still

there, no matter how much I had been hurt. No matter what Bob's choices were, God would judge me on *my* choices.

This internal struggle went on for several years. I was afraid to divorce. I had heard too many horror stories of divorced women who could barely survive financially. Also, I might lose the large extended family I finally had. I bought a book, *Celibate Wives* by Joan Avna and Diana Waltz (1994), hoping I could figure out how to survive without sex. The authors told of wives whose husbands had medical problems, low sex drives, were adulterous, had suffered past abuse or had some perversion, such as being a peeping tom. Basically, the book's suggestion was that I had to decide if I was better off with him or without him, and make my choice.

About this time, Bob sat down with his parents and me and confessed his adultery to them. My mother-in-law thanked me for not divorcing him. *What a tragedy that would be for the children and the family*, I thought. *My situation could be worse*, I rationalized. *Bob isn't physically abusive. We can talk about most things. He supports my decision to go back to grad school. He loves our children.*

I didn't want our sons to grow up in a broken home. They were teenagers now and their friends were constantly at our home. Many of them came from broken homes and couldn't talk to their parents or invite their friends over. One of their friends called our family the "Brady Bunch home" because everything appeared so calm and peaceful and safe.

I still hadn't heard the words, "I am gay," from Bob. I was in denial and couldn't comprehend that this was the true problem. To my counselor, I described our relationship as being married to my brother. We could talk and share, but there was no sex. The counselor suggested more hugging, but it was a poor substitute for intimacy. I tried to quiet my turmoil with grad school, church, and work. I began thinking that once the children finished college I would consider a divorce. *Me? Divorce?* Our marriage had seemed so perfect. . . My confused thoughts continued to grasp for direction.

Bob refused to go to counseling anymore, but I sought my own support as I tried to survive my marriage and continued to work for healing from childhood issues. I asked Bob, "Just once in a while, like maybe once a month, couldn't we have sex?" He said he didn't know; maybe someday he would want to, but not now. Five or six years before we actually divorced, I finally pressed him to tell me if we would ever have sex again. I had been celibate for so long. At last, he clearly told me, "Janney, I'm gay." Did that mean that having sex with me made him feel disgusted? How could I expect sex from someone who found me disgusting just because of my gender? Why should I ever push the idea of having sex with him? If I knew he was disgusted, I probably wouldn't enjoy it either.

Bob said he loved me and didn't want a divorce. He was afraid to reveal his secret to anyone, and so was I. How would our family and friends react to this information? What about his job? What about mine? What would happen to our children if this information got out? Would their friends think that since their father was gay our sons were gay, too? Would people be afraid to associate with us? What kind of cruelty might our family

experience in this conservative community? I loved my husband and was afraid for his life because of the bigotry in our area.

A big news story at the time was about the beating death of a man whose only fault was being gay. Sermons were preached about the evils of homosexuality, which was said to be a choice. On all sides, I began hearing stories about families who disowned loved ones because of their sexual orientation. My husband could lose his job teaching children. People would think he was a pedophile because of his sexual orientation.

I buckled down to the task of keeping this secret safe. I would *make* this marriage work. Other women had been married in worse scenarios, such as domestic violence or a terminally ill spouse, so how could I complain? I joined P-FLAG (Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays) on the web, and after reading many stories similar to mine realized I wasn't alone. That was comforting. There were stories of couples who remained married by having a special arrangement, such as having a live-in "friend" in the home, or by the gay spouse taking a yearly vacation to meet his male friends.

I finally began to realize that no matter what I did I couldn't compete with another man for Bob's affections. Sex with my husband would forever be out of the question. I continued reading books, since talking to anyone about this problem could put my whole family in danger of being ostracized. Parents probably wouldn't let their teenagers come to our house anymore, and we might experience violence against one or all of us in this extremely conservative community.

Our eldest son went off to college and Bob decided to move out of our bedroom so he could have his own space and privacy. Now we were simply housemates. We talked about getting a divorce in the future but wanted to protect and support our children during their college years. Parents often think they can hide their problems from their children and prevent their worry and stress. But our son at college became clinically depressed and had to return home. Our younger son was caught up in teenage struggles. Their depression and struggles reflected our own problems.

Bob and I decided we did need to divorce, both for our individual happiness and to relieve our children's questions about what was going on in our family. He decided to tell our oldest son about his sexual orientation first and see how he took it. He explained that we would be divorcing. Being gay was not an issue; it was the idea of divorce that upset our son. Almost a month went by before we decided our younger son also needed to hear the truth, so we sat down together as a family to explain. Our children understood what being gay was. They had been raised to be tolerant of people different from themselves. Again, the issue they were most concerned about was not their father's sexual orientation, but our decision to divorce. With many tears, we explained that we still loved each other and that we would both find homes with a bedroom for each of them, so they would always have their own space in either of our houses.

For their own safety, we encouraged the boys not to confide in their friends or anyone else about their father's sexual orientation. But shortly thereafter, Bob decided he was tired of keeping this secret and felt it was time to come out of the closet. He came out to his parents and told them we were divorcing. They went through their own turmoil

and fears but said they still loved him. Bob's mother went into counseling, while his father withdrew into himself and refused to talk about it.

The next person to tell was Bob's boss. Many of Bob's new gay friends had been immediately fired from jobs they had held for years when their sexual orientation became known. Surprisingly, Bob's boss was sympathetic and supportive. Slowly, Bob continued letting other workers know the truth. He frequently came home at night exclaiming how relieved he was after telling another person. None of his fellow workers seemed to mind.

Several months earlier Bob had stopped attending church; now he eagerly attended a church known for its gay membership. As he slowly embraced his new-found freedom in being true to himself, he also found healing in a church where he was loved and accepted. He felt more alive and happy than he had in years.

On the other hand, I was depressed and complied with whatever Bob needed in order to feel happy about himself. I was embarrassed to tell my friends about Bob. What if they blamed me? Would they think I should have done something different to keep our marriage together? Would I have to endure lectures on the evils of homosexuality and divorce? Would family and friends shun my children and me? What if they became angry about Bob's "choice" to be gay? I understood it wasn't a choice, so I would have to defend him. But how could I keep on doing that when what I really needed was to be comforted about my own losses – my stable home, my extended family and my financial security?

Finally, haltingly, I began telling trusted friends, one at a time. They were horrified and saddened. Many were angry at Bob for what he'd put me through. Why hadn't he been honest from the beginning? Why did he make this choice? Then I'd have to defend Bob and explain the situation. My friends seemed amazed at how strong, forgiving and long-suffering I appeared to be. The children began telling their friends, and again we were surprised to find they were not bothered that Bob was gay, only sad about our divorce.

Bob found an apartment and moved out, but promised to take care of me financially since I was in graduate school. We very logically and calmly sorted our belongings, and our life of 25 years began to unravel. I was left by myself in a big, empty house full of memories and pain, while Bob was excited about his new place and the freedom to explore long-suppressed feelings of homosexuality. He made new friends in the local gay community and church. Since we were still friends, he eagerly shared his feelings.

Neither of us had separated emotionally from each other's lives. I tried hard to make the transition peaceful and easy for Bob and the children. When he asked my permission to start dating, I consented, even though he had not yet filed for divorce. I suggested to the children that someday they might have three fathers and that would be okay because that would mean more people to love them. I was so concerned for everyone else's feelings but totally numb to mine.

A year after we separated, I finally had to be one to file for divorce. Suddenly money and the custody of our youngest son became hot issues. *Teenage boys need their fathers*, I thought. Not wanting him to be forced to choose between us, I gave up primary custody.

Although Bob earned four times as much as I did, this meant I would have to pay child support. Friends and lawyers urged me to make Bob's sexual orientation an issue, which would have helped my case in this prejudiced area, but I did not share the ignorant fears of others in our community.

I consented to a closed courtroom to protect Bob's reputation. When he was on the stand I learned that he'd had more than the two affairs he'd confessed to me. "More than six, less than ten," he acknowledged. I left the courthouse divorced, numb and exhausted.

So where are we today? Bob and Mike had a commitment ceremony shortly after the divorce. They are now members of a Catholic church where they have found acceptance. Both of their parents include them as a couple in their homes, but not all family members have been so accepting. Some refuse to have any contact with them.

Our sons have received counseling to help them deal with the family break-up. Bob and I have ongoing input into their lives. On holidays we are often together with Bob's parents, Bob and Mike and the children and their significant others. Sometimes it feels awkward and tense. Bob's parents seem torn between supporting him and having a relationship with me.

I've finished graduate school and am working where I want to live. I've continued with counseling to deal with depression, losses, and change. I'm proud of my career accomplishments and also of the choices I made during our court battle. I may have lost some things, but my son still loves me, and I have nothing to be ashamed of before God, my ultimate judge.

Two years after the divorce, I'm just beginning to get interested in dating. But I have fears about dating and remarriage and will proceed very cautiously. I am no longer a member of the Adventist church but have joined another religious organization where I feel loved and accepted. With time, I have come to realize that there are cruel, judgmental people in every church, as well as those who are loving and accepting, like Christ. My counseling led me to a new appreciation of my Savior. He loves and accepts me in spite of my mistakes and struggles. He understands my fears and knows about my losses. Overall, my future is bright and with my life in God's hands, the possibilities are endless.