

# J.B. ROANE AND THE CASE OF THE BELATED APOLOGY

Short story by LARRY PARSLEY

Thornton bought me a cup of coffee at the same Dairy Queen where he found my business card the previous day, pinned up a little crooked on a bulletin board next to the men's room.

**J.B. Roane – Pastor for Hire.**  
**Available for odd jobs of a spiritual nature.**

Thornton's coveralls looked like they'd seen more than a few errant drips of coffee and splashes of ketchup. The small talk we tried to make was awkward. He struck me as a direct man, momentarily at a loss for words.

"So Rev. Roane, you're some kind of pastor, is that right?"

"Yes sir," I said, "some kind. I had my own church up till a few months ago."

"Did they fire you?"

"Not in so many words," I said.

"Immorality? Not that I'm judging—"

"No, much more mundane than that."

"I'd like to hire you for a job. It's a little out of the ordinary. I should be able to do it myself, but dang it, I just can't." When I asked how I could help, he said he didn't want to talk about it here, nodding his head slightly in the direction of the teenage girl refolding the one-dollar bills into their slot in the cash register.

We agreed on a fee and he made a quick trip to the men's room. He waved at the cashier on the way out, and we climbed into his ancient Dodge pickup. A potted bouquet of carnations sat between us, and they looked to be recently assembled. As his tires threw a handful of gravel wheeling out of the parking lot, he commenced his story.

"I have loved Maureen since she first moved to my high school in 10th grade. I asked her to wait for me

before I shipped off to Korea, and she did. We married three days after I got back. Her father-in-law set me up at his small engine repair shop, and I took the whole outfit over 10 years later when he died. That little business did pretty well in this small town, and I ended up hiring a woman named Janelle to help me keep the books. It was Maureen's idea. She had met Janelle at church and felt sorry for her, being a single mom and all. She thought Janelle could use the money and that the business could use the help."

Thornton never looked over at me, even when we were stopped at a red light. He seemed determined to get through it.



"Now, I don't like to talk this way, but you probably need to know that Janelle was quite attractive. Not that it matters, but so was Maureen, and I would have told anybody who asked that I was a one-woman man. I've replayed it a thousand times in my mind, and I can tell you I don't think anything would have ever happened if I had not unexpectedly walked in on Janelle one day in the office and seen her crying. She said her boy Lucas had tried out for Little League, but he didn't know which hand to put his baseball glove on. None of the coaches wanted him on their team, and she was heartbroken."

Thornton's pickup was of a vintage where, if you didn't turn the blinker off, it would keep going until Jesus returned to earth.

"Maureen and I never had kids, though Lord knows we tried. And with her permission, I began to go over to Janelle's house a couple nights a week, so I could teach Lucas a thing or two about baseball. That's all it was. Sometimes Maureen would come with me, and she and Janelle would sip ice tea on

the front porch while Lucas and I played catch in the front yard. I'm telling you, Preacher, in my heart of hearts I truly only wanted to help that boy."

I nodded my head once in firm agreement.

"One night we played catch till past dark, and Lucas asked if I'd come in and watch a movie with him. It was Janelle, then Lucas, then me, sitting on her sofa, watching some old Disney movie. Lucas fell asleep 20 minutes into it, I mean dead asleep, so I carried him up to his bed. When I got back to the family room Janelle asked me to sit back down so I could finish my lemonade—"

Thornton finally looked over at me. "Preacher, that was the worst decision I ever made. We both found ourselves in a weak moment and did what we should've never done. All that next week at the office we could barely look at one another. The week after that, she gave her two weeks' notice and ended up working at Rayburn's Grocery in their produce department. I lied to Maureen and said that Janelle just wanted to work at a place where there were more people she could talk to on a daily basis."

Thornton's right blinker was still flashing, but I wasn't about to stop his story. "Every time Maureen and I would go to church after that, every Sunday, I'd be laid up with guilt, as much over withholding the truth from Maureen all these years as for my indiscretion. But how could I break her heart by telling her? Selfishly, I knew I couldn't afford to lose her. So I kept my dang mouth shut."

Ours was now the only vehicle at a four-way stop. But Thornton didn't seem in any hurry to push on the gas pedal. "I can't take it no more. I knew I had to do something, and when I saw your business card at the Dairy Queen I took it as a sign from the Lord."

"Look Thornton," I told him, "I'm here to help. If you feel like God wants you to spill the beans, then I'll do whatever I can to help you tell it." After that, he was quiet for a good five minutes, as if he'd just run a mile and needed to catch his breath. He pulled the Dodge off a farm-to-market road and, without any sort of explanation, pulled into a cemetery called BeulahLand. Thornton navigated what looked to me like a maze of little unmarked streets, then put the truck in park. He grabbed the pot of fresh carnations and led me out toward a lonely looking tombstone:

**Maureen Douglas McAlister  
Beloved Wife of Thornton  
March 18, 1931–May 17, 2016**

He doffed his hat and leaned down slowly to place the carnations next to the headstone, fussing with a couple of the blooms that had fallen over. Then, more slowly, he plopped down on both knees, and I reached over to steady him on the trip down. "Baby," he said, and then shook his head. After the longest minute, he looked up at me and said, "You talk to her."

I cleared my throat, mainly to buy some time to figure out what in the world to say on an occasion like this one. Then, before I totally figured it out, I started talking: "Mrs. McAlister,

I'm not exactly sure how news gets around up there in heaven, but there's a good chance you already know this story we're here to share today. In fact, you may have known it for a good long while. Your beloved Thornton is the sorriest he can be to have to share it with you. And I'm sure he would want you to know that it is absolutely no reflection on you." Thornton, eyes shut tight, nodded vigorously.

I then relayed the story of that regrettable night at Janelle's, as tastefully and truthfully as I could, with as few words as were absolutely necessary. And with that confession out of the way, I added this little postscript. "Ma'am, I trust you now reside in a place that was built, brick by brick, by forgiveness. I don't know you, but hearing Thornton talk about you makes me assume that you're the kind of person that would not want for Thornton to bear this terrible burden of guilt for one more minute than he has to. Please receive his apology, in Jesus name, Amen."

Thornton was way too old to be down on his knees for that long. I quickly reached down to grab him by the arm and help him to his feet. But as I turned to climb back into the truck, he grabbed my arm. "We got one more apology to go," he said. I should have seen that one coming, I guess, as we plodded four rows over, to Janelle's freshly dug grave. □

*Larry Parsely first posted a version of this story at Mockingbird Ministries blog (mbird.com).*