

A Majority of One

Robert Lamb

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For Margaret

**"Any man more right than his neighbors
constitutes a majority of one already."
~ Henry David Thoreau (*Civil Disobedience*)**

Prologue

Later she saw the connection, saw how she had first registered on their radar screen. Saw it with such clarity that it took her breath away. It was June. No, July. Mid-July. Mid-week. Mid-morning. About ten o'clock. The doorbell rang, surprising her. She wasn't expecting anyone, and callers in her neighborhood were few at this time of the year, this time of day, in mid-week.

Anne opened the door to a stranger, a woman who knew her name: Mrs. Brady.

Declining an invitation to come in, saying she had many more calls to make, the woman said cheerily in a voice twangy with a Southern rural accent, "We're calling on all our teachers to present this lovely framed parchment displaying The Ten Commandments." She raised the frame and held it in front of her with two hands to show it to Anne.

Yes?

"It's our way of getting God back into our classrooms," the woman said, going on to explain that she was a member of the Committee of Concerned Christian Parents and that the committee was sponsored by the Association of River's End Churches.

"It's nice," Anne said, reaching out to run a hand over the handsome wooden frame, "but what am I supposed to do with it?"

Hang it in your classroom, the woman said.

Anne pulled back her hand as if the frame had shocked her. She hoped the woman hadn't noticed how quickly she had withdrawn, but she could not comply with the woman's wish.

Carefully, she said, "All teachers, you say? Has your committee cleared this with the school board?"

The woman was genuinely puzzled. "I'm not sure—but why would they object?"

Anne wanted to say, almost did say, "Separation of Church and State, for one thing," but she had the presence of mind to say instead, "Well, they probably wouldn't," which was almost certainly the sad truth, she thought, "but this seems like the sort of project that should go through channels, don't you think?"

Now the woman was genuinely perplexed. "How could they possibly object to a campaign to promote the Ten Commandments?" Not waiting for an answer, she went on indignantly, "Why, I'd just like to see 'em try. They'd be run out of office quicker than you could say 'Jack Robinson.'" Then, as if that line of thought had triggered another, she added, "And, you know, three of the five members, including the chairman, come up for re-election this November. *Yes, siree*; I'd just like to see 'em try."

"I'm sure you're right," Anne said. "Thank you." She accepted the gift, and the woman went on her way. But Anne never mounted it in her classroom. She put it in her hall closet and soon forgot about it.

PART 1

Chapter One

Time: The Present

The first call came on Halloween. The caller, a woman, said without identifying herself, "You ought to be ashamed. You are a teacher, a mold of young people, but you are leading our children astray with evil books."

Anne Brady listened intently. The voice, or something about it, sounded vaguely familiar. "Who is this?"

The voice almost spat through the wire. "*Huckleberry Finn* is a godless work by a godless man."

Anne nearly gasped. The idea was preposterous. "You are mistaken," she said gently but firmly. "*Huckleberry Finn* is a great American novel." When the caller made no reply, she added, "Is this a prank? Do I know you?"

The line went dead.

Vexed, Anne hung up the phone as Theron, her husband, came into the house through the kitchen.

"Sorry I'm late," he said. "The meeting went on and on."

Theron was a teacher, too, but not at the high school, where Anne taught. He was a physics and chemistry professor on the faculty of Mount Brewster College, fifteen miles to the west, in neighboring Eden County.

Nodding toward the phone as he walked on, into the den, Theron said, "Hope that wasn't for me." He put down an armload of books, plopping them onto the coffee table, tossed his briefcase onto the couch, and walked back into the kitchen, where Anne stood at the stove, stirring a pot of simmering beans. Leaning over the stove from the rear, he said, "Kiss?"

She gave him a quick kiss. "It was an anonymous call, somebody who thinks *Huckleberry Finn* is an evil book. Said I ought to be ashamed for teaching it. Said I was leading our young people astray."

Theron looked surprised and then amused. "Male or female?" He unbuttoned his sport coat and slipped it off.

"Female. Adult."

She didn't look up. Still stirring, she seemed to be mulling it all over, but he could read no more than that. Finally, he said, "Well, it *is* Halloween."

She stirred some more, staring at the swirling beans. "I think this was more than that." Then she brightened and looked up. "But I'm not going to worry about it. Takes all kinds, I guess."

"That's the spirit," Theron said. He went to a hall closet and hung up his coat. Coming back into the kitchen, he said, "Perfect night for it, too—Halloween, I mean. Look out there." He pointed to double kitchen windows that overlooked the backyard. It was early dusk, overcast and blustery. "Nip in the air, too."

Anne looked and sighed. "I love autumn, its sweet melancholy," she said.

"Me and thee," he said absently. Then, catching himself, he looked at Anne and said tenderly, "Or, rather, me and thou."

She smiled.

"What's that poem about autumn we like so much?"

"'Spring and Fall: to a young child'," she said. "By Hopkins." She moved around the stove to stand near Theron and gaze out the window. Dried leaves, most of them yellow, but some gold, some red, blew here and there as if hurrying to get home before dark. "'Margaret, are you grieving Over Goldengrove unleaving...?'"

Theron sighed. "Yes. That's the one."

"... It is Margaret you mourn for."

"Yeah," he said, sighing again, more deeply this time. Then, stretching, smiling, he said, "When's supper?"

"Five minutes. Meatloaf, beans, carrots, salad. Wine?"

"You bet." He moved to a cabinet near the sink and got out two glasses. "I'll pour."

Anne went to the stove, picked up a potholder and opened the oven door. Heat and the smell of meatloaf billowed out.

Over his shoulder as he poured the wine, Theron said, "Did your anonymous caller say what was so bad about *Huck Finn*? I mean, isn't that the Great American Novel?"

Anne checked the meatloaf, found it done, and turned off the oven. "Many critics say so. It's certainly a great American novel—at least for two-thirds of its length." She looked around for another potholder and found it. "After that, it turns to parody and sort of falls apart." Lifting the meatloaf to the top of the stove, she added, "She—the caller—said it was a godless book by a godless man."

Theron sipped the wine. "*Mmmm*, good. Sounds like a religious nut. This is the rural South, you know. Small town and all that."

"Set the table, please. Here; I'll take my wine." She took a quick taste and then got down a bowl for the beans. "Still, it's unsettling to think that somebody in my own community, somebody I perhaps see often, would harbor such thoughts about me. She could

have talked to me about this in an open, civil manner. There was no need for anonymity, for such . . . hatefulness."

"Religious nuts are not known for their temperance, Anne." Theron carried the plates and utensils to the kitchen table, near the windows. "Thank God, I don't have to worry about that sort of thing in teaching physics and chemistry. Can't imagine a parent calling me up to complain that my lecture on the law of gravity or spontaneous combustion is corrupting her little Suzy."

"So you think it was a parent who called?" Anne put the bowl of beans on the table, next to the meatloaf, and went back to the kitchen counter for the carrots. "Salads are in the fridge," she told Theron. "Get the dressing, too."

"Well, yeah; don't you? She knew what you were teaching."

"There," Anne said, looking over the meal. She pulled out a chair. "Ready?"

"No bread?"

"No bread," she said firmly. "Your weight, remember?" She smiled and sat.

He patted his stomach. "One-sixty-five," he said proudly. "Weighed this morning."

"Good. Let's keep it there. No bread." He sat and she passed him the salad dressing. "I just can't imagine that a parent of one of my students would behave that way—hissing, practically. And so hateful. I believe that if one of my students had a parent like that, I would have seen some sign of it in the classroom. Children bring their parents' attitudes to school, don't you think?"

"I suppose you're right. Especially teenagers. Pepper, please."

"Besides, at one time or another I've met most of the parents. They were just, well, parents. No. This was someone else."

"Tell you what," Theron said, picking up his wine glass; "any way you look at it, our crank caller is a troubled soul. Let's chalk it up to All Hallows Eve and forget about it. The trick-or-treaters will be coming by soon, and I want to be in the proper spirit for it—no pun intended."

Anne smiled and raised her glass. "Agreed."

They touched glasses and drank.

"Got plenty of treats?" he asked.

"Plenty. And don't you go sampling."

"Me?" He assumed a look of wounded innocence, but quickly changed to one of sly wickedness. "I'm more into tricks. How'd you like to turn one later?"

She blushed. Exaggerating her Southern drawl, she said, "Why, suh, what do you take me for?"

"A ravishing temptress."

"At forty-two? That wine has gone straight to your head."

"At twenty-two, at forty-two, at eighty-two," he said with an extravagant sweep of a hand. "But, actually, the wine went the other way. Now what do you say?"

She smiled. "A trick with you would be a treat. More wine, please."

The doorbell rang as they were clearing the table. "You go," Anne said. "The candy is in a bowl in the foyer."

"Trick or treat," the first caller sang out as the door swung open.

Theron recoiled in mock horror. A three-foot-tall Count Dracula stood in the doorway looking as menacing as a poodle. He was Billy Sims, who lived down the block, and he wore a black cape at least a foot too long, and a Lone Ranger mask that had slipped so far down on his nose that he had to peer over the top to see.

"Oh, please," Theron cried; "no tricks. I'll gladly treat—if you'll accept candy instead of blood."

The boy nodded solemnly and held out a big paper sack. Theron got the bowl and dropped several goodies into the bag—a miniature Hershey bar, a Tootsie Pop, and a couple of Reese's Peanut Buttercups.

After that, children in all kinds of costumes came in a steady stream, sometimes in ones and twos, at other times in bunches. At Halloween's high tide, around eight o'clock, clutches of youngsters of all sizes and ages stood at every front door in Theron's view, and the street was lined with the cars of parents waiting at the curb as their little monsters trooped from house to house on the court. Now it was misting rain, and fog was moving stealthily out of the shadows, hunkering down, it seemed, to slip in under the wind. Leaves, some of them turning cartwheels, others whirling like dervishes, skidded and skirred across lawns, and rattled over pavement to be swallowed up by darkness in the deeper reaches of the night.

In a brief lull of activity, Theron glanced anxiously at the candy bowl and then hurried to the couch in the den. Opening his briefcase, he pulled out two big bags of candy. To Anne, watching him from the kitchen, he smiled and said, "Need more provisions," and hurried back to the foyer, ripping open the packages as he went.

"I think you've entered your second childhood," Anne called after him.

"Never left the first," he said, flashing a grin as the doorbell rang again.

An hour later, dealing now only with stragglers, he began to hold out the bowl of candy and let the callers take what they wanted. When so few pieces were left that he could see the bottom of the bowl, he saw the note, half hidden under two or three miniature chocolate bars. It was a full sheet of plain paper, letter-size, folded four times and stapled shut. He opened it and found a simple typewritten message, unsigned:

"DEAR TEACHER, SEKULAR HUMANISM IS SIN. IT POISONS THE MIND OF THE YOUNG. THINK! BEFORE YOU TEACH. LET JESUS INTO YOU LIFE. HE WILL SHOW YOU THE WAY."

Theron folded the note and slipped it into his pocket. He wouldn't show it to Anne just now. It might be too upsetting. It was upsetting, he decided: a crank call was one thing, but sneaking a message into the house was another. It smacked of penetration, of violation, in a way that the phone call didn't. And using a youngster to do it! This was the work of a mind in

precarious balance. Still, he told himself, the message was only an admonition, not a threat. Its only real harm was to grammar and reason.

He rifled his memory for the images of those who had come to the door in the last wave of trick-or-treaters, after he had stopped parceling out the candy and begun simply offering them the bowl. But it was no use. The costumes, the masks, the voices all ran together and he could single out no child he knew. In any case, none was old enough to be in Anne's classes—she taught high school juniors and seniors. On the other hand, he thought, one might easily have a brother or sister who was one of her students. He shook his head and put the matter out of mind, deciding to sleep on it.

Later, however, after they had made love, Anne brought up the subject again. Lying quietly beside her husband, adrift on the last eddies of orgasm, she said out of nowhere, "Poor Mark Twain."

Still half drugged by sex, Theron said, "Huh?"

"I was just thinking how times have changed. Mark Twain is a national treasure, enormously popular in his time and a literary icon for nearly a hundred years—and not just for *Huck Finn*. He was that unique author who was able to capture both the good and bad in a society, as Dickens did of the English, and make us laugh at ourselves one minute and, in the next, swell with patriotic pride."

Theron yawned. "Should I be taking notes, Teacher?"

"No." She gave him a playful poke in the ribs with an elbow. "But pay attention. Now some religious kook—of the very kind he skewered so effectively with his pen—wants him banned from the classroom as a bad influence on young people. So it's as if he labored in vain. No wonder men can't live in peace; from one generation to the next, they fight the same battles over and over." She sighed. "I sometimes think of teaching as tending a very small fire against the great darkness of ignorance. Do you?"

"I never thought of it that way—but, then, I deal in facts, while you deal in ideas. If I tell my students that all objects, regardless of weight, fall at the same rate of speed in a vacuum, I can prove it with a single lab experiment. Needless to say, value statements are a different kettle of fish."

He shifted, turning toward her. "But that gives me an idea. For the sake of argument, let's assume that our crank caller has a point. What could it be? You'll have to say; it's been thirty years since I read *Huck Finn*."

"I've been thinking about that. *Huck Finn*, like many American classics, has come under fire lately from the Politically Correct—"

"For its depiction of blacks."

"Yes. And, beginning long before the advent of PC, various classics have been the target of fundamentalist religion groups—Of *Mice and Men*, for instance, and *Catcher in the Rye*. The list goes on and on. But I don't recall that the religious sects ever mentioned *Huck Finn*."

"Nevertheless, I'm sure this is a religious thing," Theron said, remembering the note.

"So am I—but that's what makes no sense to me. There's no sex in *Huck Finn*—and sex is what usually sets these people off. And Huck himself, though mischievous, is good-hearted and honest."

"Well, if you rule out the reasonable—relatively speaking, of course—then you're left with the unreasonable," Theron said. "Our caller is a crackpot with a lunatic notion all her own. But wait a minute: Didn't Twain write something else, something that was irreverent, if not irreligious?"

"*Letters From the Earth*, an out-and-out satire. If that were the book in question, this would make more sense. But the caller said specifically that *Huck Finn* was a godless book. No, I just don't get it."

"Me, neither," Theron said. "Ask around at school tomorrow. Maybe some of the other teachers have heard something we haven't. But now I'm sleepy." He found her in the dark, kissed her on the cheek, said, "Good night," and turned back over.

"Just like a man," Anne said. "Now that you've had your way with me, you're ready to go to sleep." But her teasing was lost on Theron. Deep, regular breathing told her that Theron was already sinking into slumber.

Anne turned over, too, but it was a long time before she slept.