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Perilous Voyage

Going on in a Mismatched Marriage

People gently mock the Bard's proverb about love being blind and lovers not being able to see the sentimental foolishness that governs their behaviour. However, courtship days are so exhilarating that many fail to consider factors that might work against a fulfilling, long-term marriage. The story of Rob and Ana McAlister's is representative of matches that at first seem exciting and exotic but in the long run prove to be mundane and disappointing. All is not lost: good things can happen to people in bad marriages.

As Ana and her sisters approached marrying age, they heard two rules emphasized-don't marry an unbeliever, and don't have sex before your wedding. Guided by these two admonitions, Ana welcomed the attentions of Robert McAlister Jr., the son of a leading figure in their circle of fellowship. Rob, as the young people knew him, evidenced his Gaelic heritage from his ginger hair to his freckled feet. Other young men bowed to his status, while girls vied for his attention. To be associated with the McAlisters meant an automatic elevation in status.

No one quite understood why Ana became the object of Rob's attention, least of all herself. Her family came from a mix of European ethnic heritages, all of which surrendered to the influence of her Mexican maternal grandmother. María had come north to work as a maid in 1928 shortly after she'd turned 16. She fell in love with Ana's grandfather, Charles, who had just graduated from high school when she came to work for his family. A marriage soon became necessary, and the young dreamers were on their way to producing Ana's mother and seven loving, lovable aunts and uncles.

Long before Ana's time, Charles and María had a profound spiritual experience. Their love for each other and their children expanded to include Jesus, who touched their lives in an intense, personal way. His love reached through them into the next generation so that by the time Ana came along, Maria's love of life and family rippled through the gene pool. Her home drew everyone into laughter, stories, smothering abrazos (hugs), and more tortillas, rice, and beans than one could possibly consume. The profound influence of her great, generous heart opened her progeny to the sorrows, joys, loves, and hurts of life, all received with humility and gratitude.

When Rob invited Ana to his home, she experienced a shock. Calm dignity

graced every room along with heavy furniture and old photographs in wide picture frames. When Ana pointed to a photograph of two children in Sunday attire posed in an elegant back garden, Rob casually mentioned that his older sister, Hilary, had decided to return to the UK one summer, had gotten a job, and had never returned.

Robert McAlister, Sr., who immigrated shortly after WWII, had great success in business. He always credited the Lord with leading him to sell his company during a window of opportunity before the recession of the early 1980s. The proceeds of the sale allowed the family to live quite handsomely and him to devote himself to his growing influence among the churches that enjoyed his ministry.

Ana delighted in her times in the McAlister home, soaking up the quiet elegance that had been missing in her own up-bringing. Mr. McAlister's wit was sharp but not cruel, and Ana enjoyed the parry and thrust that characterized meal-time conversations. At her house, relatives all chattered around the table, seemingly aimlessly, often interrupting each other and with a generous helping of hilarity thrown in. Conversation at the McAlister's had a dignified air.

When Rob visited Ana's house, he struggled to keep track of various eddies of conversations as they ebbed and flowed around him. However, he entered in as best he could and appeared to appreciate the easy-going familiarity around their table as she did the quiet formality that characterized the McAlisters.

Ana believed she and Rob were deeply in love. They spent as much time together as they could. Rob had moved into an apartment downtown to make accessing his university classes more convenient, so getting time alone together wasn't a challenge. Most of their activities were church-related, but they also liked to explore the city's green spaces together as well.

The bringing together of their two families at their wedding made for a multicultural event. The absence of instrumental music at the wedding greatly amused Ana's family, as did the piper in full highland regalia who had been hired to pipe them into the reception. A few of Rob's relatives came from the UK, but Ana's family dominated in terms of sheer numbers and spilled over onto the groom's side of the church.

After the wedding, Rob and she settled into married life in a small downtown apartment. Their families refrained from getting involved with them financially-his on principle, and hers due to inability. The newlyweds were truly on their own, and both were grateful for that. It would have been easy for influence to have been exerted through material resources, but that didn't happen. The junior McAlisters were allowed

to develop their own tastes, have their own struggles, and make their own way in the world.

Within the first month of their marriage, Ana began to realize that Rob's way of looking at the world differed sharply from her own. While they shared a common faith, she soon learned that many things can cause a mismatch in marriage. Her early training had led her to believe that any two Christians could have a fulfilling marriage relationship. Her later experiences soon proved otherwise.

She often felt that Rob took advantage of her open, trusting nature. While it seemed he could read her mind, she found herself trying to figure out a cautious, silent man who carefully erected a protective barrier around himself. Instead of growing and maturing, their relationship slowly and silently deteriorated as Rob gradually shut Ana ever more completely out of his life. On the surface, everything looked fine-after all they were McAlisters-but intimacy eluded them. They talked but seldom communicated. When Ana would try to start a conversation about their relationship, Rob resorted to one of a few habitual responses.

Sometimes, he would just change the subject. On one memorable occasion, on a road trip as they drove through a quaint village, Ana took the opportunity of being alone with him for a few hours to talk about her loneliness, her sorrow at seeing him relating more warmly with others than he did with her, and her anger at being shut out of his life. After a few minutes of silence, during which Ana assumed he was processing what she had said, he turned to her and commented. "Have you noticed how beautifully the people here keep their front gardens?" That was it. The contrast startled her.

"I'm lonely; I'm hurt; I'm angry."

"Lovely flowers, don't you think?"

At other times when she would try to tell Rob how she felt about the distance between them and the injustice of him holding all of the power in the relationship, he'd laugh, give her a big hug, and offer to take her upstairs for a few minutes before he went off to work. Sometimes, hungry for attention and affection, she'd agree, though she hated them both afterward-him for being so casual about her hurt, and herself for being so desperate that she'd settle for what she saw as a sham expression of affection that which left her emptier than ever.

On very rare occasions, Rob would act as if he really had heard her. He would apologize for hurting her and promise that things would be different. He'd be more attentive, more sensitive, more demonstrative, more affectionate, more of whatever she needed. And he would be... for about 18 hours. Then everything would go right back to

the way it had been. Once again, Ana would be left with nothing but more broken promises to add to her collection.

After Rob worked for a few years, he started a web-design business. He did the creative work and marketing. She kept the books to save having to hire someone for that particular task. To get working capital, they arranged for a home equity line of credit. Ana took considerable satisfaction from the fact that they were able to grow the enterprise fast enough that in time the line of credit became dormant. Rather than cancelling it, they decided to keep it in case of emergency. That available money came in handy on a few occasions for the purchase of a vehicle and during a time of expansion when they added a couple of employees who needed fast computers and office space.

Early in their marriage, Rob and Ana had decided to use credit cards only as a convenience and faithfully paid off the monthly balance. Ana thought she and Rob were of one mind in the financial area. Then one day she observed a credit card statement she didn't recognize. When she asked Rob about it, he told her he had only got the card because of the promotional deal the retailer offered to new card holders. This scene repeated itself three more times. Rob became increasingly irritated with her questions and shut Ana down with a final angry retort.

One day, as Ana went through the mail, she noticed an envelope from the bank. It was addressed to both of them, so she opened it. The statement of their line of credit was showing that withdrawals had been being made from it to cover several credit card payments. She could think of only one explanation and confronted Rob. He responded with tight-lipped anger. He told her he had been working on a deal with a major client and would pay it all off when he got his commission. "In the meantime"-he turned the blame back on her-"you've been enjoying going out for dinner and shows as well as the things I've bought for the house."

When Ana tried to explain that her unhappiness wasn't so much due to his spending the money as to the fact that he had kept their growing indebtedness hidden, he accused her of trying to control him. He said that he had every right to make the financial decisions and grew increasingly angry. Ana feared he would punish her by spending even more money, so she didn't try to uncover what had changed his cooperative, collaborative approach during courtship to this new competitive, even selfish, one.

During the next few months, Ana routinely checked the balance on the line of credit. Rob didn't pay it off, but at least he stopped using it to clear the monthly balance

on their credit cards. During this time, Ana contacted a lawyer to ask about her responsibility for joint debt. The lawyer wouldn't make an appointment to answer her questions until formal work on a separation agreement had been started. Ana wasn't prepared to head down that road. For her, marriage was sacred. Marrying had been her choice, to be sure, but once the choice had been made, she considered commitment to be a given. She would learn what lessons she could from the relationship and be the best wife she could be. Part of that involved her seeking other employment so that she wasn't spending both work and home time with him. He seemed to value his private space.

Thinking that, in fairness, Rob may be as frustrated with her as she was with him, she broached the subject of their relationship. She mentioned that she had been thinking about herself as a person and her role as a wife and asked Rob what changes he would like to see her make. He laughed and said, "Nothing. You don't need to change anything." Yet in spite of this professed satisfaction with her, he exhibited no affection, little caring, and not even much interest in her as a person.

Ana concluded that Rob processed emotion differently than she did, though sometimes she wondered if he processed emotion at all. When she would describe her desire for mutual intimacy, passion, and vulnerability he would retort in a tone of exasperation, "What is it you want me to do?" It didn't seem to matter how many times she attempted to explain what she wanted, she couldn't make him understand that, for her, what she needed could not be turned into a list. He occasionally expresses sympathy-that he is sorry for her unhappiness, but doesn't grasp the depth of her feelings or even precisely what her feelings are. This leaves the possibility of his adjusting his behaviour in any way out of the question.

While Rob claims to appreciate his up-bringing, he often leans in the opposite direction. He didn't have pets as a child so he insists on their having a dog. His family had no interest in gardening, so he wants to grow vegetables. His family attended church meetings without fail, but Rob is casual in this regard. Frequently, when she is called on to fill a shift at work, she discovers that Rod found an excuse for not going. He can explain each of the individual instances, but the pattern unsettles Ana.

On one memorable occasion, Ana reached the breaking point. After weeks of superficial polite relating, she had had enough. "Rob, I need to talk to you," she said, as they finished their breakfast.

"You'll have to make it fast, Ana," he said. "I need to be getting to work."

"This may be more important than work," she said, and stiffened her spine both literally and figuratively as she prepared to go on. "I've thought a lot about the way you

treat me, and I have come down to two conclusions."

Rob looked at her impatiently.

"I've told you I feel ignored and disconnected from you, yet nothing changes," she continued. "So either you are thoughtless and just don't notice how sad you make me, or you are intentionally cruel."

Rob's face contorted with rage, and he slammed his coffee cup down on the table. The dregs flew into the air, splashing his clean clothes as well the table and floor. "You complaining b____," he shouted. "How dare you see everything about me in a negative light?"

He leapt to his feet and hurried to the bedroom to change. Ana heard him jerking doors and drawers open and slamming them shut. She couldn't believe what this oh-so-controlled man had just called her. Was that what he really thought of her? Did the word just slip out in this moment of anger?

Rob returned to the kitchen, buttoning his shirt. He had calmed down a little, but not much. "I am not thoughtless, and I am not cruel," he growled. "I take care of your needs. You always have more than enough, and I have never raised a hand against you, even when you deserved it."

Ana's words were slow and measured in comparison to his. "Then tell me, Rob, if you're not cruel or thoughtless, why do you shut me out of your life? You know I want nothing more than to be close to you. Why?"

"How do you think you make me feel?" The question came out like a croak and he didn't wait for an answer. "I never measure up. You've got some crazy ideal in your head. I can't help it that I don't love you the way you love me. I've always tried to meet you halfway, but that's never been enough for you."

"But Rob, before we were married we talked about biblical love, laying down our lives for each other, 1 Corinthians 13 love"

"Don't quote the Bible to me!" he interrupted. "Maybe I've changed. You're stuck in the past. People need room to grow." He slammed the chair he had been sitting on under the table and made the dishes jump. "It's stifling in here," he said over his shoulder. "Good bye." The window rattled when he closed the door.

Ana sat alone at the table for a long time. Her fingertip traced patterns in the spilled coffee that still dotted the table. So the old ideals don't apply any more, she thought. They aren't his ideals anymore anyway. Had they ever been? Had he ever loved her? Or had she just been an interesting, exotic artifact to move him up his social ladder. She had never thought of that before. Everyone used to comment on her beauty. Maybe

she was just another asset Rob had added to his portfolio along with his influential family, excellent education, business smarts, and enviable reputation.

That night when Rob returned from work, his anger had dissipated. Neither of them referred to his outburst-he didn't apologize; she didn't confront him. It never came up again, though Ana would never forget what he had called her and the violence that broke the peace of their home. Life continued as if the outburst had never happened, yet it would never be the same.

Ana entered a time of personal reflection that lasted for several months. She startled herself with the realization that, other than family, she had gradually lost all of her friendships. She began intentionally restoring some of these so that she could observe other women and hear how they talked about their family relationships.

In addition to broadening her world with friendships, she did some research, specifically on marriage dynamics. She learned that regardless of what the differences are between husband and wife and the spin given to them, they are differences-and they go far deeper than one liking potato salad and the other hating it. These are differences that produce friction, that build walls, that kill intimacy, and that foster negative rather than positive regard.

In fact, Ana has observed three main areas where mismatches occur:

- 1) Cultural background and personal preferences,
- 2) Spiritual issues, including basic understandings of God and His expectations of His people as individuals, in marriage, and in the church.
- 3) Pathologies like mental illness and personality disorders.

Regardless of the area in which the seed was sown, the fruit was always the same: imbalance of power. Often the person who ends up being oppressed doesn't recognize it until years-sometimes many years-have passed. Ana speculates that this is why she has observed an unusually high proportion of divorces after 30 or 40 years of marriage. People finally wake up and think to themselves, I've been robbed! Desperate to reclaim a little dignity and autonomy before they leave this earth, they make a break for it.

As for her relationship with Rob, Ana identifies specific issues in their marriage in the first two areas and suspects some issues in the third. However, those could only be diagnosed with the help of a professional, and the very thought of Rob submitting to a counsellor is laughable. He sees people who seek counselling as weak, contemptible, and disposable. These are the opposite of traits he sees in himself-strong, exemplary, and indispensable.

Rob was never willing to admit his weaknesses, faults, or flaws. Of course, "never" is a word that never should be applied in such cases and, in fact, Rob makes a point of loudly proclaiming his culpability over insignificant things. Reference to these can be hauled out to demonstrate what an open and honest man he is about his faults.

Ana has observed that he uses this technique frequently, though whether consciously or unconsciously she cannot tell. He occasionally does things out of character, out of the normal routine, such as: cleaning up after a meal, buying a little unexpected and unexplained gift for her, spending an evening alone with her, and the like. These acts typically come back to haunt Ana if she ever raises an issue. He always has a "one off" to undermine her case and justify himself to himself.

This behaviour has resulted in Ana seldom, if ever, asking him to do anything for her. She knows if he complies, that incident will come back to either as a manipulation tool to justify his usually not cooperating with her or as a way to draw compliments from her. For example, when he cooks a meal, he often sets up at least two, sometimes three, opportunities for her to tell him how good it is and thank him for doing it.

This highlights one of the most profound differences between them. Rob seeks affirmation regularly and avoids criticism of any and all kinds. Ana is the next thing to embarrassed by the gratitude of others and often seeks out comments from others about how they see her, what she is missing, how she could improve, and so on.

The name-calling crisis was the point at which Ana realized that things had deteriorated past the point of no return. As they grew older, their earlier tendencies were becoming more and more entrenched. The likelihood of change in Rob grew ever more remote. Her own attempts to accommodate him had been swallowed up, leaving her feeling used and pathetic. Her sense of self-worth was beginning to crumble and, with it, her acceptance of the incontrovertible fact that God loves and cherishes her.

Though she has expressed her concern for Rob, he invariably laughs it off. He seems to be content with who he is and how he lives his life. He mostly doesn't want his boat rocked or to admit that there are other approaches to life, let alone change! As the permanence of her reality settled in, Ana began to regret not trying harder sooner. Perhaps if she had stood up for herself earlier Maybe she should have gotten a church elder or counsellor involved What if she had stood her ground when he broke his wedding vows to love and cherish her?

These alternate scenarios plagued her until she realized that she could never know the answer to them and that she was wasting her time thinking about them-better

to accept things as they were and move on.

Ana believes that she passed through a grieving process for the loss of the relationship that she expected to have. It took time to accept that there would be no "living happily ever after" in this life. While getting to that point was painful, once there she found some peace. She even thinks that Rob is happier since she has accepted things as they are. He doesn't understand where she's at, but then he never did.

Ana has been careful to guard her heart from inappropriate attachments. It would have been so easy to violate her promises to God and to Rob, but early on she determined never to do that. While Rob has left a hole at her emotional core, she has filled it with deep relationships with her siblings and a handful of good friends who are willing to let her rant, cry, lament, laugh, grieve, or express whatever she needs to get out at the time.

Above all, she has found solace in God. Some days, she keeps up a running conversation with Him-in the dark moments begging Him to take either Rob or herself home to heaven. She really wouldn't care which as long as she could be free of the pain of living in a non-relationship. Then, as she recognizes the selfishness of this attitude, she confesses it for what it is and asks God to use her pain to make her more like Jesus and to minister effectively to others in similar pain.

Ana has been learning that she is not alone. Certainly not everyone clicks "like" on those Facebook anniversary photos with captions such as: "Celebrating 30 years with the love of my life," or "35 years ago today I married my best friend," or "After 40 years together, we're more in love than ever." She confesses that something about posts like these makes her want to throw up.

At the same time, she doesn't want to be jaded and cynical about love, relationships, and marriage. She accepts that, though it lies outside of her experience, the kind of deep, ongoing intimacy she reads and hears about really does exist. One by one she has identified a few others who are in situations similar to her own-all among Christians. The reason for that, she believes, is that those who don't know Christ and what God intends marriage to be and represent, simply walk away.

She has learned that there is a long, careful skirting of the issue before people struggling to go on in a mismatched marriage will talk about it, even in the most circumspect way. After all, it's not supposed to be like this!

Ana has found comfort talking through her predicament with her fellow-sufferers, experiencing what Paul wrote about in 2 Corinthians 1:3-5: "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all

comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. For as we share abundantly in Christ's sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too." (ESV)

Tough as it is to follow through on her faith, Ana believes that marriage exists for more than "happiness." She is glad to know that others have found happiness, but not surprised to learn that it is not a given-that sin and selfishness infect marriages as they do the lives of the individuals who embark on the perilous voyage across the matrimonial sea.

Ana now finds herself waiting on God. Whether or not marrying Rob was the right thing to do is inconsequential. She is married to him. She intends to live by her vows whether or not he fulfils his. She believes that by waiting on God she puts herself deliberately in God's will. By refusing to take action on her own, she makes space for God to do his work. Maybe that work centres on refining her in this less than happy circumstance. Maybe it is being a witness to angels and demons alike (and the few humans who know the situation) that some people do really cast themselves on God.

One thing she doesn't want to do is cause harm to her family or her church by taking unilateral action that may set her free but cause pain or confusion in the lives of others and, worse yet, mar the part of the picture of Christ and the church for which she is responsible.

These days, Ana has a life verse that speaks to her reality. She frequently reminds herself that "momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison." (2 Corinthians 4:17 ESV)