Plasma Cars, Combustible Bras, and Other Such Happenings

The note I left on her table, paper hastily ripped from my notebook and covered in ill-constructed stick figures depicting last night’s practical joke, picked up some grease. My breakfast, some of her left-over carrot cake, was apparently oilier than I previously thought. She was not at home. Since she had started temping at Harvard Medical School to try and break into some classes, I actually left for school after her. Of course I was in clothes borrowed from her boarder, whom we played the joke on the night before, but the fact that she was out of the house and moving before me was a miracle. By the next week the note had moved only from the table to the counter, collecting what smelled like Asian food. Her other boarder was Korean and must have been cooking again.

Stephanie Green was born Stephanie Campbell on September 4, 1975 in Irving, Texas, near an airport. Her house was mowed down and turned into a runway, a sad event that would be enchantingly symbolic if only this were a narrative, rather than words trying to be historical. Stephanie and her younger brother, Nathanael, grew up in Churchlife, a non-denominational Christian group rarely heard of but whose cultural and spiritual impact cannot be denied by anyone who has ever experienced it. Stephanie grew up going to school on weekdays, to YP meetings on Saturday nights, to table meetings on Sunday mornings, to blending conferences on holidays, to home meetings on Fridays, to children’s meetings on Sunday mornings, and to prayer meetings on Tuesday nights. Like many little girls, she enjoyed art projects, but she really loved books. She ruined her eyes by reading under the covers with a flashlight and compromised
her hygiene by reading on the toilet as water fell into an empty shower. Her musicality, however, was greatly enhanced by listening to hymns written to the tune of “Yellow Submarine,” and her use of language was strikingly sophisticated, thanks to Churchlife and its emphasis on the seven-fold intensified Spirit, being blent and mingled into oneness, the Triune God and our tripartite being, a living that expresses the divine reality, and a consummation in the New Jerusalem.

Stephanie took the faith of her parents as her own and, like most group members, developed a frustrating bilingualism between the language of Churchlife and that spoken by the rest of the world.

One Thursday Night Dinner at her house, I told Stephanie that her subtext was a mystery to me. I was just dying, I said, to write out her internal contradictions. She is half-Chinese, but her distinctly Pennsylvania-Dutch, vaguely German-speaking husband Jedediah, calls her his “Hawaiian Bride.” While she did not wear flowers in her hair (and poked fun at me for doing so), she did spend a considerable amount of her childhood in Hawaii with her grandparents. This experience made her a rather stylish American, which balanced her unfortunate insistence on being associated with Texas. The only problem with this image is that she also spent a good deal of time in Oklahoma, a pasty part of life she rarely highlighted, y’all know what I mean?

Stephanie did not know what I meant when I started spouting about subtext. I spouted about too many things—the development of Middle English, the reoccurring patterns in Salinger’s short stories, the fabric of the cosmos—at dinner, and when I did, out came her big, Texas laugh, her coy, warm-hearted look. “Y’all such academically minded people, you New Englanders. So dorkily lovable.”

Stephanie was a popular gal in Texas, the secret to which she has, sadly, never divulged to me. Maybe it’s just a Texas thing. Regardless, when she said “Don’t cuss,” her classmates
ceased cussing. Not only did she have popularity lassoed and prancing, but she had the genius required for a Chinese-American family, ranking tenth in her class. Of course she humbly purports a lack of smarts, but maybe that’s just a “being in New England” thing. One matter, however, can be of little doubt. Her popularity stems from a personality that makes stereotypical adjectives like *bubbly* and *witty* grovel. I had thought this the very first time I met her, at a home meeting, which is, if you can possibly recall, a Friday night Churchlife event. I think she was discussing her love of butter in cooking with another popular person, and this somehow translated into inviting me to Thursday night dinners. *Politeness just thrives,* I remember thinking. *This woman is way too cool for me.*

Perhaps this was Stephanie’s dilemma when she moved to Oklahoma in the summer of 1993. Perhaps she ate lunch in the bathroom stalls alone because she was far too popular for Oklahoma. I don’t know, nor does she, but at any rate, on the first day of school the kingpin of popularity, the football quarterback, asked her out on a date. Stephanie, not realizing what she was doing, rejected him with her usual aplomb and to the toilets she went. She discovered quickly that high schoolers in Oklahoma swallow the class goldfish for attention; she also found out that high school males in Oklahoma had what she calls Yellow Fever. Despite her lack of popularity, she was hugged and not let go, flirted with, and spectacularly obsessed over; she was an Asian woman and was, therefore, *exotic.* So Stephanie spent her later years of high school in the embrace of prejudice, the stalls of unpopularity, or out of school altogether—her teachers told her skip exams because her scores would throw off the grading curve. She spent her junior year at the University of Oklahoma, and by her senior year, she was already in the honors program. Now recall, y’all, this is a woman who don’t have no smarts.
On that first Thursday Night Dinner we had breakfast. (Thursday Night Dinners would come to include Korean, Chinese, Texan, and traditional Thanksgiving food, and if it was particularly snowy, entire courses attempting to evoke summer.) Stephanie’s older, five-year-old son, Fisher, spent most of his time hanging off a heating pipe by the side of the table. I spent most of my time watching him, and everyone else spent most of their time actually enjoying food and conversation. My knack for children saved me from my various forms of social inability, and Fisher and I fought with light sabers while the two, older college girls washed dishes and kept on talking. Stephanie has made Thursday Night Dinners for the college “sisters” (a Churchlife term) for the three years she has been in Boston, and Fisher and I have developed the strongest relationship you ever did see between a padawain learner and Jedi knight—played by Fisher, of course.

To move away from Star Wars and to use, for a brief moment, Churchlife terminology: Stephanie and Jed migrated from Austin, Texas in 2009 to serve the Lord in Boston and, inadvertently, to rescue me. And so I have spent more than Thursday nights with Stephanie. We have shared trips to the beach, misadventures with empty gasoline tanks, birthday parties, excursions to batting cages, hot dog roasts, phone calls, sewing machine lessons, trips to HMart, graduation parties, hours on plasma cars, tears of the happy and sad assortment, movie dates, and a sleepover bed in the basement with my name hung over it. Next to my bed there is always some laundry, settled into a happy, mountainous topography along the floor. I often help Stephanie navigate these piles because, on many days, her back hurts too much for her to do much of anything.

On September 6, 1994, a few days shy of her 19th birthday, Stephanie was in a car accident that left her disabled. For seven years she spent her weeks at physical and occupational
therapy and in medical buildings; for seven years she took seven pills a day for pain, and for seven years she was depressed, a fact she never would have admitted to, and a statement she still qualifies with probably. But being Stephanie—and this probably a Texan thing, too—she ended up attending the prestigious business school at the University of Texas, Austin. A finalist for their commencement speech, she was recruited for a job which was only offered to two other people. And, as I will tell you (and please try to ignore the sense of Hollywood that is about to follow), she garnered these triumphs while being told that she would surely fail because of her disability.

Stephanie would hate my rendition of this. Not only would she call it clichéd, which she calls my writing on occasion, but if she knew I was touting her accomplishments under the heading willpower, it might trigger what she refers to as “the alarm clock.” She has never struggled with the idea of force. If today were Thursday, and we were discussing this over homemade smoothies, she would begin singing, a hallmark of the Churchlife: “Oh Lord breathe Thy Spirit on me; / Teach me how to breath Thee in, / Help me pour into the bosom all my life of self and sin” and “I’m so happy in this lovely place! / He is full of rich enjoyment to His saints in one accord!” Although explained in a profusion of Churchlife terms, the change in Stephanie was fundamentally real. As she now says, being part of the Body of Christ—being in the Church—is not merely about taking care of others; it is letting others minister their enjoyment and love of Christ, to you. This is what we talk about sometimes, holding her guinea pigs and trying not to laugh too loud, because Fisher is trying to sleep.

Stephanie knows how to make quilts out of jeans, and she designs the most delightful of terrariums. She kicks butt in Monopoly Deal—the primary reason I no longer play the game, and she is quietly revising the fashion statements of one of her boarders. She laughs more than anyone
I know. She is Texan. She is a living example of the consummate Churchlife phrase *yet more glorious*. Once, driving home from a Thursday Night Dinner at which we had outlined the differences between her husband’s corny humor and corny humor *with butter*, she discussed the invention of a combustible bra, analyzed the differences between gesticulating and flailing, and explained that nothing in her life had turned out the way she expected. She had not wanted to be a business major, but a car accident limited her career options; she had wanted a big wedding, but there were scores of familial resentments; she had wanted her parents to stand up for her in the midst of particular difficulties, but they remained silent; she had wanted the Churchlife to always be perfect, but it never was; she had wanted to stay in Texas, but the Lord called her and Jed to Boston. Her life had failed all her expectations, *and yet Melissa*—I can still hear her saying—*with Christ in all these things, my life has been yet more glorious*. When I heard these words, I started to cry because my short, limited life had failed my expectations too. It was a good thing it was dark and she couldn’t see me; she always wanted there to be more humor in everything.

Stephanie laughed when I told her I thought her subtext was *yet more glorious*. In fact, she flatly refused to let me title anything I wrote about her with such pompous, New England dorkdom, even though I’m 99% sure that it is a Churchlife term. But I am not certain whether I’ve really captured anything about her; perhaps I’ve simply barfed up my own subtext and packaged it as hers—minus the whole popularity bit, of course—just as I rehash our practical jokes in stick figures and leave them for her in greasy notes the next morning. Perhaps biography is, in essence, an angsty, silly, egocentric form. I am in little doubt that Stephanie would agree with me. Once, amidst chatter about my desperate attempts to copy the *Downton Abbey* hairstyles, she pointed out what being built up in the Body of Christ really means, in typical
Churchlife style: “Deep calls out to deep at the noise of Thy cataracts; all Thy breakers and Thy billows are gone over me” (Psalm 42:7).